

So She Would Not Die in Vain



When a close friend was murdered, Erin Weed got angry. Then she realized she had to learn how to fight back. Now she's encouraging other women to do the same

BY NANCY COLASURDO

"When I get an idea to help someone in trouble," says Weed, "I feel overwhelming confidence"

Erin Weed stands in front of a packed gymnasium at County Prep High School in Jersey City, New Jersey, and starts her speech with a sentence that takes the audience's breath away. "My friend, Shannon McNamara, was murdered while fighting off an attacker," says Weed, 25. On June 12, 2001, she explains, the man broke into McNamara's home and strangled her. Weed launches into what has become her personal crusade—encouraging women to learn how to fight back. She tells of the dreaded call from a mutual friend about McNamara, 21, a popular student and fellow Alpha Phi at Eastern Illinois University. When Weed held

a bonfire at her parents' Schaumburg, Illinois, home in McNamara's honor, she was jolted by the fear she saw on the faces of her sorority sisters. "They were saying, 'I hate walking to my car,' and 'I'm afraid to take a shower,'" she says.

But Weed was angry. Two months later, she enrolled at the SigArms Academy in New Hampshire, where she studied self-defense with Marines, police officers and third-degree black belts; she started her one-woman organization, Girls Fight Back (www.girlsfightback.com) in 2001. She has since visited businesses, high schools and colleges with a presentation—part inspirational, part self-defense

lesson—showing that "average" women, just like herself, can save their own lives.

Weed has the support of McNamara's mother, Cindy: "They knew each other for less than two years, but they bonded so quickly. I said to Erin, 'I truly believe Shannon hired you for this job.'" It wasn't the first time Weed has shown a special brand of loyalty. As a high school freshman she shaved her head to raise money for a neighbor with cancer. That such a gesture never would have occurred to most girls in gawky adolescence didn't faze Weed: "It's a strange theme in my life. Once I'm on a mission to help someone, I have this overwhelming feeling of confidence."

This day in Jersey City, with an English teacher playing the role of attacker, Weed demonstrates to some 200 students how to throw a man off balance with a palm to the forehead, nose or chin. She knees his groin and, as he falls forward, delivers a knee to his face. Applause mixes with hoots of approval. Afterward, girls try the moves on each other as they file out. "What they begin to learn today could save their lives," Weed says. "It's a powerful thought." 