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Made Reservations More Dangerous for Women

ADRIAN JAWORT | December 20, 2012

Early on the morning of January 7, Sherry Arnold, a popular schoolteacher from Sidney, Montana (population 5,436) was jogging down a road when she was abducted. News of the incident shook the rural community. Sixty-year-old Helen

Bighorn was in a supermarket when she first heard of Arnold's disappearance. "I cried; I didn't care where I was at," she said. "I prayed for the family and prayed they'd find her, because I knew they'd need some kind of resolution."

Six days later, two drifters lured to the area by potential employment in the Bakken Oil Shale boom area were arrested and charged with kidnapping. (They were later charged with her murder; they have pled not guilty.) Arnold's body wasn't found until mid-March.

Prior to the murder, a cloud of apprehension had already been hanging over the area, as the oil fields have drawn more and more itinerant workers and other strangers into the close-knit community. The majority of the oil wells live just an hour's drive from the Fort Peck Reservation, and Adrian Spotted Bird Jr., the Fort Peck tribal injury prevention specialist, said crimes like disorderly conduct, driving under the influence and violent crimes—including homicide—have quadrupled in the Roosevelt County area since 2008. "Everybody knows everybody in this area, and [the oil fields are] bringing in a lot more people than we can handle," Spotted Bird Jr. said.

In towns like Brockton, Montana (population 258), the only store is continually flooded with oil field workers. In the next few years, another 30,000 are expected to arrive.

The infrastructure in eastern Montana—roads, housing, sewers—is stretched

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periously thin, and goods and services are getting scarce as well. With the flood of workers and oil money has also come an influx of undesirables. "The people who are coming in have no respect for womenfolk here," Spotted Bird Jr. said. "They're very rude, very belligerent. They have no qualms about walking up to our young girls and soliciting them, and they don't care how old they are."



Self-defense classes are increasingly popular—and necessary. (Kerry Huller/Casper Star-Tribune)

Spotted Bird Jr. said the number of registered sex and violent offenders living in the area has risen sharply. Before the oil boom, locals could for the most part avoid convicted offenders because they knew who they were, but not anymore. Women and young people are now advised to travel in groups, even when running simple errands.

With law enforcement spread thin throughout the vast rural area, local residents and Roosevelt County Sheriff Freedom Crawford realized people would have to take matters into their own hands. In a letter to the residents of his county, Crawford wrote, "We have seen quite an increase in the number of concealed weapons permits at the office. We have also received a lot of reports at the office for request of some self-defense classes."

As a result, gun safety and self-defense classes were organized at Brockton and the tribal Fort Peck Community College in Poplar, Montana. Veteran Bureau of Indian Affairs police officer Jay Brugh Sr. and National Guardsman



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Barry Bighorn, who was recently deployed to Afghanistan, helped teach the courses this spring. The classes in Brocton drew 15 eager adult women participants, and dozens of others attended the classes offered at the tribal college. All participants received training, as well as a whistle and a can of mace. "One of the main things we're teaching is the palm strike," Brugh said, explaining that a blow delivered with the palm is less likely to injure your hand than a punch delivered with a fist. He advised the women to aim for the chin or nose area in an upward motion, and follow that up with a kick to the groin. He says a choke from behind can be countered by quickly lowering one's head while turning inward and pulling away.

He said the biggest value of the classes is the psychological benefit, giving women enough confidence so that they don't feel powerless. He hopes to have more in-depth classes in the near future for younger participants.

His advice, and that of many others, is for women to constantly be aware of their surroundings. "The most important defense that the classes teach is that it will help them to be aware to always watch their back," Bighorn said. "Take precaution, never travel alone. Always let your family know when you're going somewhere, and when you've arrived. Keep that cellphone on you."

Spotted Bird Jr. cautions that problems related to the oil field explosion will only grow: "It's not going to get any better; it's going to get worse. We already have plenty of our own problems; it's really going to devastate the community. It's like the gold rush and Black Hills all over again."

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