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Self-Defense with Fashion Sense

By Kelsea Gurksi

Sandy Richardson has kept a small canister of pepper spray in her car for about 10 years.

She's never had to use it, and has only carried it with her a few times when visiting a big city.

It was her husband's idea to buy it, she said.

"He just wants to make sure I have something in my vehicle," said the mother of two who lives in rural Cantrall, Ill. "It's probably about 4 inches tall. It would fit in one's pocket, (but) I don't carry it like that. I just have it between my seats, just in case."

Richardson doesn't know many others in the area who carry pepper spray. Most seem to feel safe enough without it, she said.



"I feel relatively safe going anywhere – that's the reason I don't carry it on me," she said. "I'm glad that we live in a society here where I'm pretty much comfortable going places without it."

Women always are at risk for assault, however. What often prevents many of them from carrying something to protect themselves, experts say, is the lack of a convenient product.

A Chicago businessman wants to make carrying self-defense spray not only convenient, but a must-have accessory.

SELF DEFENSE FASHION

Mladen Djankovic, 29, launched the grass-roots company Pepperface in December. His product, a 1.8-ounce sleek, "fashionable" canister carrying three one-half second bursts of non-lethal pepper spray, is small enough – and is intended – to hang on a woman's key chain.

The heat cartridge is replaceable – the first of its kind in the world, the Pepperface Web site claims – and tester cartridges also are available so the owner feels prepared to use it. Owners also will receive an annual e-mail reminder from the company to replace the cartridge.

Djankovic doesn't want Pepperface to be considered just a pepper spray company, however. It's

bigger than that, he said. He hopes this product becomes a positive symbol for violence prevention and helps curb the occurrence of violence.

“For some reason, violence against women doesn’t have that mainstream attention, and we’re trying to change that,” he said. “We’ll never have a cure for rape. The only other thing we can do is work on awareness and prevention. And it’s everyone’s responsibility.”

Djankovic partnered with the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence in November. For every product purchased, Pepperface will donate \$1 to the center.

Executive Director Debby Tucker said Djankovic’s determination to provide women with an additional tool to protect themselves was a wake-up call. Too often, she said, prevention centers expend most of their energies trying to respond to people who already have been harmed.

“It felt like sort of a wake-up call to remind me that our purpose, and part of why we’re here, is to stop it from happening in the first place,” she said.

Existing products on the market are “really clunky,” Tucker said, and typically range in size from a perfume spritzer to a hairspray can. Finding such products can be difficult as well; most pepper sprays are sold at gun shops and other places where firearms are sold.

She said she is encouraged that smaller, more convenient products like Pepperface will entice more women to carry protection. And the more women who do so, the more who will be aware of the potential dangers that exist.

“I think teaching self-defense is very important but the most important thing is increasing awareness,” she said. “It’s amazing how so many of us are unaware of how frequent domestic and sexual violence occurs, and we’re not prepared for it.”

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