

—the dragon spirit

Bruce Lee's Legacy Is a Generation of Inspired Martial Artists

by Willie Johnson

When he competed on the tournament circuit, Willie Johnson was one of the most successful kung fu stylists in the world. When you consider that he often competed in the forms, sparring and weapons divisions—and frequently brought home the gold in all three—it's even more impressive. From the competitive arena, Johnson moved into show business, landing a role on the syndicated children's series *WMAC Masters*. Now he keeps busy running a successful kung fu school in Laurel, Maryland. In the following essay, Johnson reflects on his early days in the martial arts and his reason for starting it all. —Editor

Like thousands of other martial artists around the world, I was influenced by Bruce Lee. I actually started training because of him. To me, he was more than a role model; he represented a way out.

Growing up in the community in which I grew up—the Lafayette Projects in Baltimore, Maryland—was very difficult. The streets were full of drug dealers, pimps and other criminals. It was hard for anyone to find a hero. One day I went to see a movie called *Chinese Connection*, and the moment I saw that giant figure of Bruce up on the screen, I knew that's what I wanted to be: a martial artist. To me, Bruce was like Superman.

From that time on, I did everything I could do to become like Bruce Lee. He was the only person that most of us in the projects could relate to. That's because he was a real person; unlike other movie stars, he didn't seem that far away.

Watching *Chinese Connection* changed me. Within a week or so of the time the movie opened at the theater, I was taking my mom's broomsticks and cutting a dog chain in half to make my own *nunchaku*. From watching the movie, I learned how to use that traditional weapon in a very basic way. At that time my parents couldn't afford to pay for martial arts lessons for me, so I learned a lot from the Bruce Lee mov-



Willie Johnson (right, posing with Richard Branden) says he is one of a whole generation of martial artists who owe their success to Bruce Lee.

ies. I would actually go into the theater with a Polaroid camera and try to take pictures of the action scenes so I could take them home and paste them on my wall. Every morning I would wake up and see Bruce Lee, and every night I would see him before I went to sleep.

I watched all Bruce's films—many times over. I saw *Enter the Dragon* about 30 times, *Chinese Connection* about 50 times, and the others a similar number of times. As a kid, I believe I had more Bruce Lee pictures than anyone. I even had posters of him on the walls and ceiling.

Bruce was obviously my hero. Everything I do today in the martial arts has been influenced by his philosophy, his way of life, his style of fighting and his approach to the martial arts. Without him, I don't think I would be as seriously into the arts as I am today. I even owe my experiences on the *WMAC Masters* television series to him.

The legacy of Bruce Lee is still influencing martial artists—including me. In

certain ways, I think Bruce's wisdom allowed me to move beyond what he was doing. I'm not saying that I'm better than he was, but he intended his philosophy to show all martial artists the way to progress. He always said that once he got you from point A to point B, it was time to let go and try to find your own way.

By listening to his interviews, reading his books and watching so many of his movies, modern martial artists are able to absorb much of Bruce Lee's philosophy. Once they become comfortable with that and start feeling confident, it's time for them to develop their own approach, their own method. That's how my system of martial arts, called *wushudo*, came about. *Wushudo* means "to flow in harmony with the universe"; I think it's similar to what Bruce Lee was trying to say with *jeet kune do*. ✕

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