

Junior Ninjas, the New Kick

Martial Arts Schools Are Filled as Parents Look to Boost Children's Confidence, Self-Discipline

By Beth Kaiman
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The mysterious moves of kung fu and the broken two-by-fours of karate have long beckoned adults in search of that macho edge. But with the following of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles rivaling that of Bruce Lee, martial arts have become child's play.

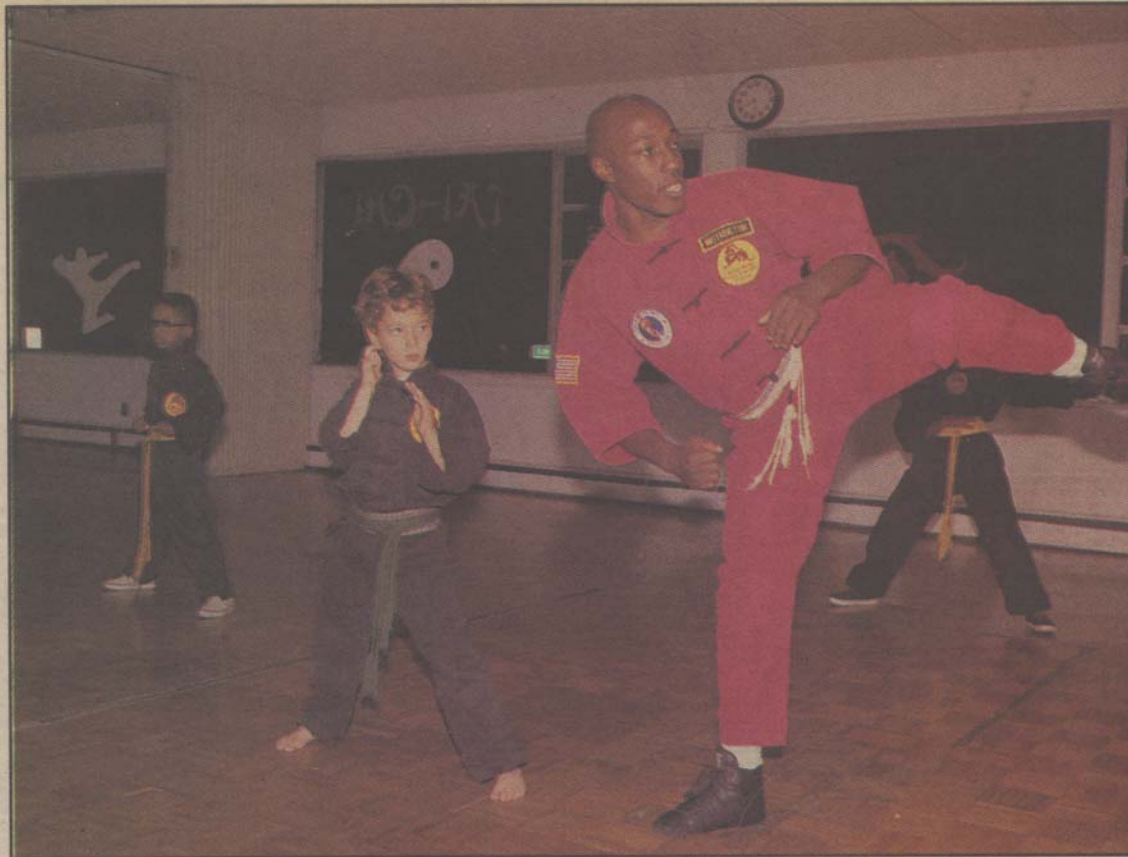
Ariel Barrientos, a 12-year-old green belt, rides the bus from Hyattsville five or six times a week to kung fu class in Silver Spring. Friends call him the Karate Kid.

Tynisha Blake, at 7, is a brown belt and an unlikely sight as she waves her silver sword like a grim-faced warrior.

And at ages 15 and 10, black-belt brothers Eric and Michael Dunn, of Ellicott City, have studied ninjutsu for a combined total of 11 years—an example to those who say youngsters never stick with anything.

Lured by a Far East mystique unattainable in Little League, an estimated 10,000 youngsters are enrolled in the region's 51 professional martial arts schools, compared with about 1,500 adults and children 10 years ago. Hundreds more are signed up in local recreation programs.

But the rage that could be the soccer of the 1990s reflects more than children's age-old desire to mimic superheroes. With parents eager to teach their children respect, discipline and the confidence to ward off assault, the current interest in martial arts for children is a sign of the times.



PHOTOS BY HARRY NALTCHAYAN—THE WASHINGTON POST
Jeremy Tuchman watches Willie "The Bam" Johnson at the Dennis Brown Shaolin Wu-Shu Academy.

"It's explosive," said Nicholas Cokinos, chairman of the U.S. Martial Arts Association, whose group acts as consultant to 600 schools nationwide. "Parents are delighted with someone else keeping these kids in line."

Denise Canton Byden's son, Darren, 6, takes kung fu in Silver Spring. "I wanted him to develop skills, manners and respect," said Byden, who lives in the District. As a result of the training, she said, "he is very alert and more motivated."

In the 1970s, about 20 percent of martial arts students were children, according to Cokinos. Now, in the nation's 7,000 professional martial arts schools, children are the majority, he said, making up 70 percent of the enrollment.

Brian Parker, the new owner of Kim's Karate studio in Landover Mall, said about 80 percent of his 700 students are children, some as young as 4. He runs five classes each weekday evening and a full day of classes on Saturdays.

"I like the technique, the forms, the weapons, the kicks," said Tynisha, the 7-year-old. Martial arts students are taught never to look for a fight and learn early the tenets of restraint and self-discipline.

Most of the parents are looking to improve their children's self-confidence, give them a more positive attitude and develop self-discipline, according to Dennis Brown, who operates kung fu academies in Silver Spring and Greenbelt.

"They want a program where the child can take what they learn here about concentration and motivation into their lives outside martial arts," Brown said. "There is a certain individual pride that doesn't come in football and basketball."

"I like that you learn to defend yourself," said Tristan Blake, 11, Tynisha's brother and one of Brown's students.

On any weeknight or weekend, proud parents gather at martial arts studios, watching their children try a new butterfly kick or recite a martial arts creed extolling mental and spiritual fitness, humility and lawfulness. Some bring the newspaper, but most absorb themselves in learning the language.

They know the Chinese terms of kung fu, the Japanese ways of karate and the Korean traditions of taekwondo. Most of all, they



Instructor Marcia Chisholm leads a children's class through kung fu paces at the Dennis Brown

