



STAFF PHOTO BY J.M. EDDINS JR

Darnell Henson, 7, gives a high-five to martial arts champion Willie "Bam" Johnson Friday during the first session of Johnson's "Stronger than Drugs" campaign at Kimberly Gardens. Seated at rear is Robert Stephens, whose Genesis Group helped initiate the campaign.

Martial arts teacher kicks off anti-drug effort

BY CHET DEMBECK

A karate kick may not seem a likely weapon in the war on drugs, but a group of children at the Kimberly Gardens community center found out differently Friday when Willie "The Bam" Johnson brought them his "Stronger than Drugs" program.

Johnson, a nationally ranked martial arts champion with a studio on Cherry Lane, is being sponsored by the Genesis Group.

"The program is based on using the discipline and philosophy of the martial arts to promote self esteem, confidence and principles—emphasizing drug prevention directed at children ages 4 to 17," said Robert Stephens, president of the Genesis Group.

Stephens formed the organization recently to consult with governments on moving welfare clients into jobs. Kimberly Gardens is a public housing community owned by Prince George's County.

Johnson came into the communi-

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'Bam' Johnson

ty center carrying a television on his shoulder, to be used for part of the demonstration.

Accompanying him were two assistants, Marco, his 12-year-old son, and Craig, his 10-year-old nephew.

"They will be giving a martial arts demonstration soon," Johnson told the group of 38 youngsters, whose ages ranged from 5 to 12.

Johnson, 33, got involved in the martial arts when he was 6 years

old, after seeing a Bruce Lee film at a neighborhood theater.

Living in Baltimore's Lafayette Housing Project exposed Johnson to the mean streets at an early age. As a teenager, Johnson drifted away from the philosophy of martial arts briefly, only to return to it with the fervor of a prodigal son, going on to become a national champion and even studying martial arts at Beijing Physical Fitness Institute of China.

He also appears regularly on a syndicated TV program about martial artists.

"Always treat people with respect," Johnson said, as he surveyed the smiling faces of the children sitting on the floor around him.

Johnson's son and nephew—dressed in black pants and blue shirts—responded to his barked commands as they put on a display of karate kicks and moves.

Afterwards, Johnson asked the children if they had any questions.

When one young man raised his hand and spoke, Johnson barked at

him:

"Say sir."

The boy smiled and looked down at the floor.

Johnson's voice softened.

"Say sir."

"Sir," the boy replied.

"Everybody say it. Say sir," Johnson commanded.

"Sir," shouted the group in unison.

Next, Johnson asked the children why they wanted to learn martial arts?

"Sir, I want to use it in case some—especially boys—mess with me," said a young woman, as she stood up.

"Young lady, marshal arts will teach you how to avoid a fight," Johnson said.

Another hand shot up.

"Question?" Johnson asked a young man who stood nodding.

"Sir, will it help me with my temper?" he asked.

Johnson smiled and told the boy it would.

"If you really want to do well in

this club, you must listen to the instructor, make your beds at home and show respect," Johnson told his enthusiastic audience. If he received a report otherwise, they could no longer participate, he said.

According to Johnson, the program will be ongoing at Kimberly Gardens as long as there is an interest.

The next session will be July 11, the time to be announced.

Johnson said he hoped to have "Stronger than Drugs" T-shirts to give the children at the next session.

Correction

A story in the June 19 issue of the Leader incorrectly stated that Main Street from Seventh Street to Route 1 is to be repaved. That is incorrect. Only the 700 and 800 blocks of Main Street are included in the project.