

Parents & Martial Arts Instructors

The Perfect Role Models

By Nancy Musick

Any kid will tell you that growing up today is hard. "You can pick up any newspaper and read about bullies, gangs, alcohol, drugs, drive-by shootings and children with guns and knives," says 12-year-old Marco Johnson, son of world-champion *wushu* star Willie Johnson.

"When my grandmother was little, children could walk to school or the movie theater and play outside with their friends," he continues. "Boy, is it different today!"

Marco used to live in a Baltimore neighborhood filled with violence, drugs, alcohol and poverty. "Listening to gun shots at night was normal," he says.

Now he's a rising martial artist who competes on the tournament circuit. One of the keys that helped him avoid falling into the traps of life in the inner city was the presence of his father, Willie Johnson, the kung fu expert who plays "Bam" on the popular *WMAC Masters* TV series. "He was my hero," Marco says.

Early Start

Marco's martial arts training began when he was a toddler. His father would stretch his legs and take his hands through striking motions. After that came basic instruction in kicking and punching. Much of the son's motivation



came from watching his father compete in—and win—the most prestigious martial arts tournaments in the United States. "I would take classes all day long on weekends, then stay in my room after school and practice," Marco says. "I wanted my dad to be proud of me like I was proud of him."

And Marco had lots to be proud of. After his father established himself as a tournament champ, he opened a successful kung fu school where kids are forbidden to use alcohol or drugs, or join gangs. "It is a safe place for them to be children and learn how to take care of themselves if a tough situ-

ation ever comes up," Willie says.

Marco claims his dad is harder on him than the other kids—both in class and outside. "But that's OK," he says. "My dad calls it tough love because as he was growing up, he had it hard and he made some bad choices. He says he doesn't want me to make the same choices and wants me to have the courage to do what's right.

"Sometimes I don't do the right thing," Marco admits. "Still he pushes me. I love martial arts and learning from my dad though. He is a single parent, and it's hard to balance everything—like going to

market, washing clothes, making dinner, running the school and his television career—but he's doing a great job."

Marco is a busy guy, too. After he finishes his homework, he helps teach other kids. As if that's not enough, the junior black belt also gets good grades in school, belongs to the Stronger Than Drugs Club and helps his father give self-defense seminars and lectures.

WMAC's Youngest Star

Marco recently became the first kid to join the cast of *WMAC Masters*, where he plays "Little Bam."

"My character represents the next generation of masters," Marco says. On the show, he wears the same hairpiece his father's character wore last season—an extra long ponytail that



OPPOSITE: WILLIE JOHNSON (LEFT) STARS AS "BAM" ON *WMAC MASTERS*, AND HIS SON, MARCO, PLAYS "LITTLE BAM." LEFT: WILLIE AND MARCO USE THEIR REAL-LIFE WUSHU SKILLS TO PLAY KUNG FU EXPERTS ON THE SERIES. BELOW: TWELVE-YEAR-OLD MARCO IS ALSO A RISING STAR ON THE TOURNAMENT CIRCUIT.

can be used as a weapon.

While filming the hit TV show, Marco gets to hang with *WMAC* regulars, including Hien Nguyen (Tsunami), Hakim Alston (Machine), Carmichael Simon (Kid

Carmichael) and Jamie Webster (Great Wolf).

It seems that having a role model who is dedicated to martial arts training and living a "clean" life really can pay off.

Marco Johnson's Self-Defense Tips for Kids

You should always think about safety when you're practicing martial arts. Likewise, you should think about it when you're walking to school, playing or just hanging out. If you get into trouble, remember that the best thing to do usually is to shout and run to get help. However, if you do have to fight to escape from a bad situation, remember these tips:

- Kick to the knee cap.
- Poke the eyes.
- Strike the groin.
- Stomp on the feet.

Of course, avoiding trouble is always better than fighting. To keep trouble at bay, remember these:

- Don't accept rides from anyone without your parents' OK.
- Know your telephone



number and the number of a close relative or friend.

- Don't take money, candy or other gifts from anyone unless your parents say it's OK.
- Don't talk to people you don't know.
- Don't answer the door when you're home alone.
- When you get lost in a store, find a clerk and ask for help. Do not walk outside.
- Always tell your parents whom you are playing with and where you will be.
- When you are home by yourself and answer the telephone, never say that you are home alone.
- Don't hang out with friends who use drugs or carry a gun.
- If you have any problems, go to your parents. They are your best friends and want to help you make the best choices in life.

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About the author: Nancy Musick is a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C.