

WILLIE "THE BAM" JOHNSON:

## Karate Star Teaches Youth To Be "Stronger Than Drugs"

by Alice Cherbonnier

**B**ACK IN 1981, a young man from East Baltimore visited the *Chronicle* offices to offer a story for publication. The topic was martial arts, a skill the 17-year-old had been learning at a community center near the Lafayette Courts housing project, where he lived.

His story was published, with his photo in karate garb. It was the first of several reports about Willie "The Bam" Johnson that have appeared in this newspaper.

Now 29, Mr. Johnson operates a martial arts studio in Silver Spring, teaching over 500 students. He also continues making stage and screen appearances that showcase his skills in karate, kung fu, and wu shu.

It's not enough for him to just make a living with his skills, however. Willie "The Bam" Johnson wants to reach out to as many young people as he can, to acquaint them with a lifestyle of discipline, and a philosophy based on basic principles.

He recalls the sense of accomplishment he enjoyed as a teenager, when he learned karate. It gave him a foundation that helped him later, when he got in trouble.

"When my mother passed away," he says, "I had to live on the streets. I stole to get something to eat. I became addicted to the lifestyle that sidetracks young men now—drugs, alcohol, shooting, robbing. You don't know any other way out."

When he was 25, he was arrested for stealing, and sent to jail. "That was the greatest thing that ever happened to me," he smiles. "I read the Bible, I read the Koran, I prayed five times a day, and I practiced martial



**Willie "Little Bam" Johnson, of West Baltimore, practices martial arts moves at the side of his father, Willie "The Bam" Johnson. "Little Bam," 8, recently won his first national title in martial arts.**

arts. I learned to keep God first, however you believe in God. The truth about everything in society is in the Bible and the Koran."

After his release, he set out to re-establish himself as a champion martial arts practitioner, as he had been in his late teens. Friends tried to convince him that his dreams were impossible, but he says, "I let my own opinion of myself become my reality, not someone else's." His determination paid off: in 1991, he was named America's first nationally-ranked Triple Crown WuShu Champion, and in 1992 he became the International Forms Champion.

Mr. Johnson's mission is not to become wealthy, or to see his name become a household word. Instead, he wants to make people, especially

inner city youngsters, aware that there are alternative lifestyles to what they usually see in their lives. "I want to help those who know only one way out," he explains. To that end, he has established his own anti-drug initiative called "Stronger Than Drugs."

Mr. Johnson believes in "tough love," where a person is not coddled, but instead taught to be responsible for his or her own actions. "I may be hard, but I smile at kids and hug 'em," he says. "You've got to come down on their level." He practices encouragement, rather than criticism: "They get enough abuse at home. They use drugs to get away," because they have no other means of escape.

Because of his many personal appearances and demonstrations, Mr. Johnson reports that children often seek his autograph. "I ask them for *their* autograph," he says. "If it weren't for the kids, I wouldn't be where I am."

One of his biggest admirers is his eight-year-old son, Marco "Little Bam" Johnson, a third grader at Highland Park Community School in West Baltimore.

Under his dad's tutelage, Marco has already become skilled enough at martial arts to win national awards.

Though Marco is aware that drug dealing goes on in his community, and he has friends in their early teens who have tried drugs, and younger friends whose parents have drug problems, he says he has no intention of turning to drugs. "It's a no-no," he says. "I don't want it to mess my brains up."

Is he scared of the violence he sees? Marco grins. "Sometimes I'm scared," he says, "but I'm a tough kid."

One of Marco's big concerns is finding a safe place to play outdoors. "We need a clean playground, where there's no drug using or bad people hanging around," he says.

Mr. Johnson, who also has a

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young daughter, says, "I came from a dysfunctional family. What I'm trying to do with my kids is break the cycle. I look at this article [the reporter is writing] as a form of therapy, to plant a seed for him."

Beaming at his handsome son, he shakes his head. "Kids are born so pure, and they come into a destructive, materialistic environment. Parents have to bring their children into a secure environment with a spiritual basis."

He knows that people change only when they're ready to do so. "We can plant the seeds, but we can't expect immediate results," he says. "We're just here to plant the seed."

*Mr. Johnson gives lectures, seminars, demonstrations, and private instruction, not only on martial arts, but on becoming "Stronger Than Drugs." For information, call (410) 204-1134 or (301) 589-8079.*