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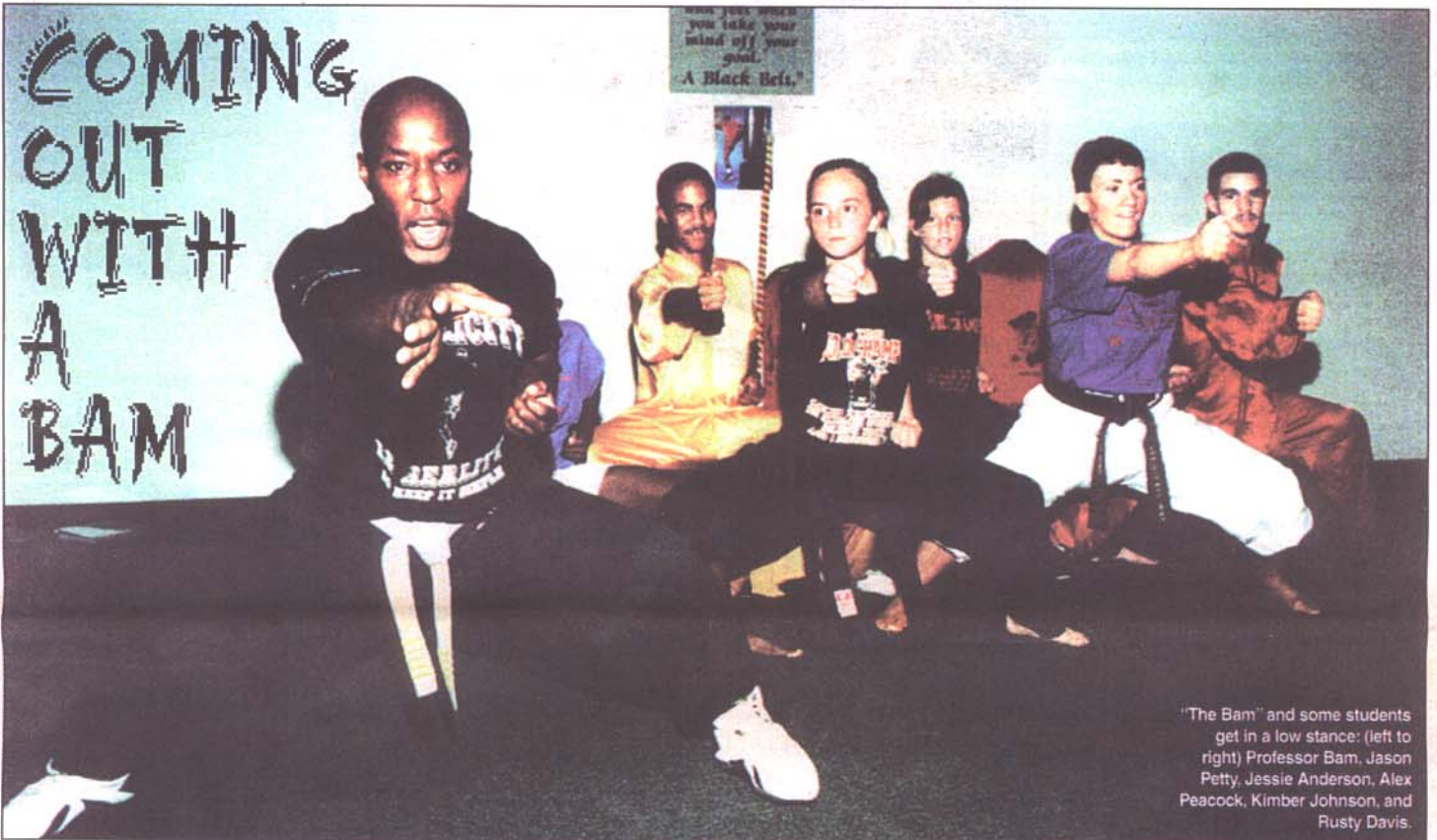
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"The Bam" and some students get in a low stance: (left to right) Professor Bam, Jason Petty, Jessie Anderson, Alex Peacock, Kimber Johnson, and Rusty Davis.

PHOTO BY MARKETA EBERT • COVER DESIGN BY TIFFANY TALLUTO BUCK

By Eric Hartley Special to the Sentinel

When Willie Johnson's mother died, the teenaged boy turned more and more to crime, becoming a big-time drug dealer on the streets of Baltimore. For a while he was able to stay ahead of the law, but finally he was arrested and spent a year in prison.

Now, at age 34, Willie "The Bam" Johnson is a sixth-degree black belt martial arts master who runs his own school, the Universal Martial Arts Concepts Academy, Laurel.

Johnson gives much of the credit for turning his life around to the martial arts. Although he had been interested in martial arts since seeing Bruce Lee's "Chinese Connection" at age six, and though he had spent untold hours practicing, it was during that year in prison that he realized how important it was in his life.

On June 5 at St. Vincent Pallotti

High School in Laurel, he and about 20 of his students presented the fourth annual Martha Johnson Memorial, a mixture of martial arts and autobiography which honors Johnson's mother and raises money for different charities each year. This year the beneficiaries were Pallotti Day Care and the McKims Community Center.

Jim Epstein, the evening's master of ceremonies and a father of one of Johnson's students, tried to get the crowd excited before the show. "This is going to be high energy," he promised.

He also encouraged the audience to get involved in the show, not just sit back and watch: "This is not just a performance. This is going to be a collaborative event."

Dressed in a black t-shirt and black sweatpants with the slogan "KEEP IT SIMPLE" on the leg, Johnson handled the music for the night himself. The music was an eclectic mix, befitting the unusual nature of the show. It included every-

thing from Genesis and Steve Winwood to DMX and Tupac Shakur.

Dennis Brown, a martial arts master who helped the young Johnson learn, was the show's narrator.

The first scene established the culture of crime in which Johnson grew up, with drug dealers and prostitutes a part of the landscape. The play seemed to highlight the contrast between Johnson's feelings for his mother and his rough surroundings. A tender scene of the boy and his mother talking and embracing was soon followed by the image of his drunk father coming home and beating the young boy.

The second act, taking place after his mother's death, showed Johnson leading "three lifestyles," as Brown said. The one in which he was a successful drug dealer finally caught up with him, as shown in a scene of the young man being captured by police.

While in prison, Brown said, Johnson had to make a choice about what to stand for. Recognizing mar-

tial arts was his "gift from God," he prayed, meditated, and worked out during his incarceration.

Next Johnson, now played by his son Marco, was shown being released from prison. The rest of the show was a celebration of how Johnson turned his life around and, he said, that any obstacle can be overcome. Looking back on how incarceration changed his life, he calls his year in prison "the best year of my life."

One of the last scenes was an extensive demonstration called "Step into the Millennium," in which all the participants were on the stage at once, and took turns showing various skills.

After the show, there were some other presentations. About \$2,000 was raised for charity, and checks were presented to the beneficiaries. Johnson presented several students with their first-degree black belts. In an emotional moment, he

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