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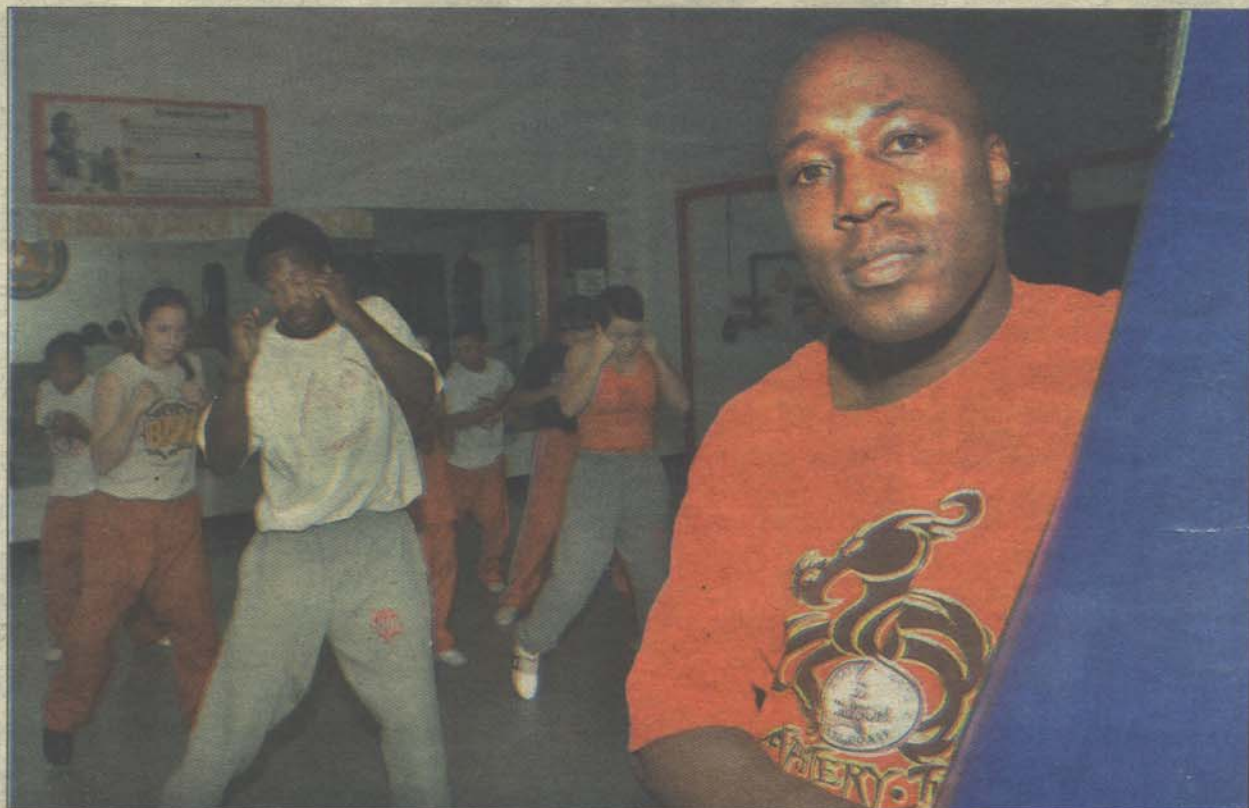
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Lawrence Jackson Jr./The Gazette

Willie 'The Bam' Johnson, a martial arts expert and instructor, comes from the tough streets of Baltimore and has become a role model for local students at his World Champion Kung Fu School in Laurel.

Instructor teaches more than martial arts

by Ryan Quick

Staff Writer

While growing up in Baltimore, Kung Fu champion Willie "The Bam" Johnson saw martial arts as an escape from drugs and crime.

The 39-year-old Columbia resident hopes to be a positive role model for area youth through his own martial arts school in Laurel.

Although Willie Johnson began Kung Fu at age 6, it didn't prevent him from ending up in jail 15 years ago, but he strives to help others from having brushes with the law.

"For me, the greatest thing that happened was to get in trouble and go to jail because it gave me time to evaluate myself," he said.

Willie Johnson said he prayed for another chance and used that time to come up with a plan for his own martial arts school.

He pursued that goal and opened The Bam's Kung Fu Academy nearly 10 years ago in Laurel. Willie Johnson, better known to his students as Professor Bam, has another location in Baltimore.

Teaching martial arts helped Willie Johnson to avoid the fate of friends who have died or gotten long-term prison sentences, he said, adding he has also helped others do the same.

He got started in Kung Fu after seeing the Bruce Lee movie "Chinese Connection" and imagining himself performing the same moves as the famous movie star.

Since then, he has won seven world championships and starred as himself in the martial arts television series "WMAC Masters."

But even though he has gained national recognition, he said guiding students is his most important work.

"I do this for [my students]," he said. "My mission is to teach martial arts because it is a way to save people's lives."

His wife, Kimber Johnson, 29, who helps run the academy, described him as "the most selfless person I've met."

Watching her husband work with his students has motivated Kimber Johnson, who said she enjoys teaching children who are not as athletically in-

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