

KUNG FU INSTRUCTOR of the Year

Kung fu stylist Willie "The Bam" Johnson is no stranger to hardship. Raised in Baltimore, Maryland, Johnson turned to the martial arts as a way to break out of the cycle of poverty and violence that was all around him.

"[The] only positive thing I'd seen was Bruce Lee on the movie screen," Johnson recalls.

Johnson, who took up the arts at the tender age of 6, studied independently by reading books and magazines before hooking up with black belts such as Kenneth Parker, Tony Lin and *Black Belt* magazine's 1998 Kung Fu Instructor of the Year, Dennis Brown. Johnson, who has studied *wushu*, *kang duk kwon* (which is a combination of *wing chun*, *aikido*, *judo* and *taekwondo*), *shorin-ryu* karate, *kempo*, *taekwondo*, boxing and *taenshanpai* kung fu. Now retired from the tournament circuit, the former forms, sparring and weapons champion focuses his energy on teaching the martial arts and steering youngsters away from drugs and weapons.

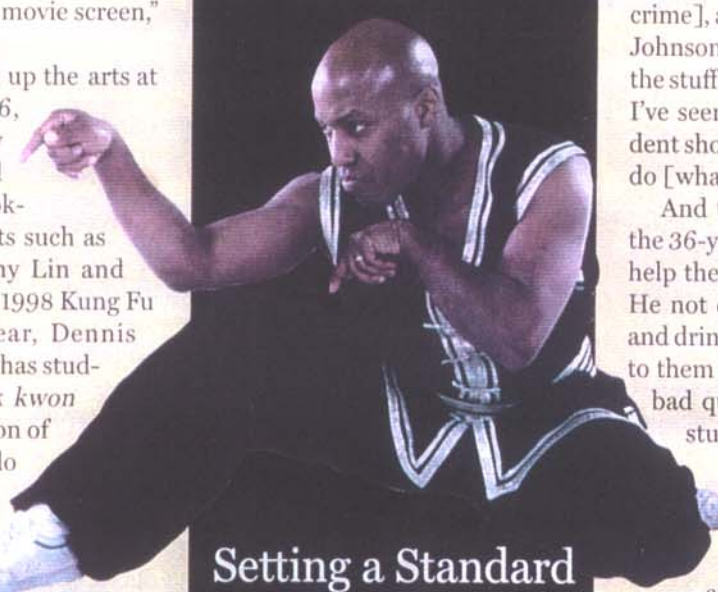
"[That's] one of the things that my heart is truly into," Johnson enthuses.

Incredibly, some of the children from the inner city are swearing and toting guns as young as 4, Johnson explains.

"They're just so tough to turn around," he says. "They don't care about anybody. Their main focus is using and selling drugs, or being slick and cool and hurting people."

While most martial arts schools actually turn away inner-city kids because they are hard to teach, Johnson targets this group to spread his anti-drugs and anti-violence messages. And he uses his championship sport-karate team, the BAMs (Bet-

Willie
"The Bam"
Johnson



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by Sara Fogan

ter Attitude Makers), as a role model for his anti-drug organization, the Baltimore-based Stronger Than Drugs program.

"These kids come from all walks of life—different races, religions and creeds—and they serve as an example of what other kids could become at such a young age," he says of the BAMs. "My goal is to use the Stronger Than Drugs program as an example of what [kids] can turn into if they just try to change their lives."

To help create positive changes in these children's lives, Johnson takes these messages directly to the communities, setting up clubs and giving lectures and seminars. He also shares candid anecdotes about his

own forays into crime—and his subsequent turnaround from that lifestyle—to really send his anti-drug and anti-crime messages home. Sometimes his pep talks become emotional.

"I'll be explaining to a student [why he should stay away from crime], and I might burst out crying," Johnson says. "When I share some of the stuff that I went through and that I've seen, there's no way that a student should want to go out there and do [what I did]."

And those are not the only ways the 36-year-old martial artist tries to help the kids realize their potential. He not only refrains from smoking and drinking himself, but he explains to them that everyone has good and bad qualities. He also praises his students when they do a good job—emphasizing their own role in realizing their accomplishments—and provides constructive criticism when necessary. Most important, Johnson gives his students unconditional love and support while he helps them to nurture their own self-development as martial artists and people.

"The bottom line is [that] all people want to be respected and treated as an equal," says Johnson, adding that it's important to be supportive of a student whether he's struggling or succeeding. "[The] student still might fall short, but I still have to be there like my instructor [Dennis Brown] was for me."

In recognition of Willie "The Bam" Johnson's tireless work with Baltimore's inner-city children and his efforts to improve their lives, we are proud to recognize him as *Black Belt* magazine's 2000 Kung Fu Instructor of the Year. ✕

About the author: Sara Fogan is the managing editor of *Black Belt* magazine.