



### **Karate teacher had stint in Hollywood**

By Tiffany Green The Cullman Times [The Cullman Times](#) Fri Apr 02, 2010, 05:00 PM CDT

Sick of being bullied, Johnny Lee Smith showed up on the steps of a judo school at the age of 10 wanting to learn.

“Getting beat up and bullied all the time made me want to take Judo,” he said. “I didn’t even know what karate was at the time.” Since he was turned away because of his age, Smith went across town to a karate school and has been interested in it since.

“I didn’t get to start what I wanted to when I was a kid, but now I am doing it all,” he said. “I guess I came full circle.”

In January of 1989, Smith was attending the University of North Alabama, working three jobs and running out of money. His karate instructor, Jimmy Webster, who taught at the Cullman Athletic Club, approached him about taking over the school. On May 15, 1991, Smith moved out of the athletic club and rented a building on Hwy. 31 in Cullman where he taught for the next 11 years.

“When I started I had 15 students and within months, there were 70 students,” he said. Smith received his 1st Dan Black Belt in Tang Soo Do from Jimmy Webster. He later earned his 2nd and 3rd Dan Black Belts from him also.

In 1993, Smith began training in Brazilian Jui-jitsu (BJJ). He has trained with Marcio Simas, Rigan Machado, Carlos Machado and the great Rickson Gracie. He received his BJJ Black Belt in June of 2002 from Machado. In 2005 Johnny was promoted to 2nd Degree Black Belt in BJJ by Machado. He was the first person from the State of Alabama to be promoted to Black Belt, 2nd degree black belt, and 3rd degree black belt in BJJ.

Triad Martial Arts, Smith’s school, was the first martial arts school in the State of Alabama to be home to multiple BJJ Black Belts. In October of 2009 Johnny was promoted to 3rd degree black belt in BJJ by Machado.

Smith had the opportunity to star in a television series in 1995-1996, after winning the Battle of Atlanta, the largest tournament in the United States.



### **Karate teacher had stint in Hollywood**

By Tiffany Green The Cullman Times [The Cullman Times](#) Fri Apr 02, 2010, 05:00 PM CDT

After Smith caught the eye of director/fight choreographer Pat Johnson. Johnson was the fight choreographer for all three Karate Kid films, all Ninja Turtle films, worked with Jacky Chan and Bruce Lee.

Johnson chose Johnny to star in the television series “WMAC MASTERS”. Johnny played himself Johnny Lee Smith “Tiger Claw” with a twist of make-believe. The show was about martial arts champions competing for the top prize, the “Dragon Star”.

In 1996, Smith was brought back to LA and worked on the Batman and Robin film. During that same time, he went independent and opened his own school, Triad Martial Arts Academy. Triad Martial Arts is Smith’s own style of martial arts. It is a culmination of his lifetime dedication to and study of Tang Soo Do, Shorin Ryu, Ryukyu Kobudo and Brazilian Jiu-jitsu. The word Triad means a collection of three things. Triad Martial Arts is Karate-do, Kobudo, and Jiu-jitsu. “The whole Hollywood lifestyle was not conducive to having a family. It just wasn’t for us,” he said. “I like where I live. Family first.” Smith said he wanted to be a family man instead of a Hollywood actor. “I wanted to be a husband and dad more than I wanted to be in the business.”

Smith and his wife Barbara are the parents of three daughters, Lillian, 10, Isabelle, 7 and Ella, 6. Smith has decided to make his daughters participate in karate. “In our home, it’s mandatory because I am not raising victims. I want them to have confidence. There is also exercising benefits to it.” Since their dad is so often traveling and training, the girls are home-schooled so they can travel with him. “I wanted them to be able to go with me.”

Out of all the accolades, Smith said he is most proud of the law enforcement self defense program. “In May 2003, my law enforcement self defense program became a mandate for all state and regional academies,” he said. “It was a lot of hard work. It has really set a standard.” Of all the things he is most proud of that has come out of the training, the day he received a phone call from the Trooper Academy, was one of the most memorable of his career.

## Karate teacher had stint in Hollywood

By Tiffany Green The Cullman Times [The Cullman Times](#) Fri Apr 02, 2010, 05:00 PM CDT

“I got a phone call from the Trooper academy that former Alabama State Trooper Ryan Bradford was attacked by a felon who later said he intended to kill him,” he said. “He used my program and he said it saved his life. As far as teaching self defense, that phone call stands out. No amount of fame can bring the feeling I had that day, knowing he was going home to his family.”

Smith has recently begun letting his men train and fight in the Mixed Marital Arts (MMA) fighting. “I believe that if your going to teach people how to fight, you have a moral obligation to make sure they are good, responsible people and that they are the kind of people that would never misuse what you are teaching them. “I’m not just training fighters, I’m training young men how to be respectful and responsible adults. I’m not going to train guys who may go pick a fight or bully someone. I just don’t put up with that.”

He said right now, the MMA has such a bad reputation, and he is hoping to change that, at least locally.

“In the MMA community, you pay me your money and I teach you to fight,” he said. “That’s not me. If I don’t like a guys attitude, I will not train him.” Smith believes it is his responsibility to not only train his students in marital arts, but to make good citizens out of them. “While I have them here, I talk about how to be successful citizens with confidence and discipline. “I have this position where people will listen to me and I can use that in a positive way. Desire is the number one key to success.”

*\* Tiffany Green can be reached by e-mail at [tgreen@cullmantimes.com](mailto:tgreen@cullmantimes.com)*

