

# Breaking Through

A Baltimore black belt finds purpose mentoring troubled teenagers beyond martial arts.

**T**

he students of Hampden's School of the Way, nearly all teenagers, file into the *dojo*, pausing to bow deeply to John Starling, the school's founder. Clad in black save their belts, they line up in order of rank before their instructors. They are Latino, Asian, white, and black: youthful diversity rarely found in the same room in Baltimore. Some have had trouble in school or with the law. A few are former gang members—a life they've had to give up to be here. "These kids have a code, and I get it," says Starling. "I used to fight." As he moves through the room, he takes a moment with each of the students, who have come to the

« **Pictured:** From left to right: Colin Haller, Brandon Jones, Aaron Sellman, John Starling, and Thomas Lawson.

South Baltimore Recreation Center to put on a demonstration. Starling carries himself with a fighter's confidence, but there's also a peace and patience about him. Standing board-straight in a jet-black karate *gi* (uniform) emblazoned with foot-high Korean characters, his voice is low, just loud enough to be heard. He uses words like mastery and dharma with the students.

As they begin their warm-ups, the students' rigid *katas* (choreographed movements) fill the room as the smell of sweat pushes out the scent of school lunches. For the climax of the demonstration, the students will attempt, for the first time, to break wooden boards, which represent more than just half an inch of pine.

At the School of the Way, students must earn their uniforms, school patches, and belts, not only through martial skill, but also by meeting goals outside of the *dojo*, the martial-arts term for the gathering place for training. As part of their first crack at breaking boards, the students have written a life goal on one side of the pine—and something holding them back on the other.

Colin Haller, a short young man with sinewy arms and a buzz cut steps up first. "My goal is to become a police officer," he says, presenting his board to Starling who sets Haller's target. "What's holding me back is getting my G.E.D." THWACK! His ferocious straight punch splits the board cleanly. Next is Brittney Scudder, a 19-year-old with a long ponytail. "I want to go to college in Essex," she says. "What's holding me back is transportation." CRACK! She leaps over a boy in the class and shatters the board with a flying side kick. Then, Sheldon Lopez, a heavy-set Hispanic youth steps up. On the back of his board is written, "Laziness." WHACK! A powerful front snap kick sunder the barrier.

Two dozen students step forward and each announces a goal—maintain an A average, get a job, graduate—each punctuated with the sound of shattered wood.

For many growing up in Baltimore City, breaking through barriers—which can be considerable—and moving toward a better future remains a daunting task. While Maryland, at 13 percent, has one of the lowest child-poverty rates in the country, 34 percent of Baltimore City children live in poverty. While approximately a third of America's kids live in a single-parent household, 65 percent of Baltimore City kids live with one parent. At any given moment, nearly half of Baltimore's kids have a father or mother in jail and nearly 12 percent will be arrested while teens themselves. Not surprisingly, one-third of all city teenagers fail to graduate even when given five years to matriculate.

Colin never got into serious trouble, but he quit school in ninth grade after one public charter school cut him loose and another didn't work out much better. Although just 5-foot-4 in sneakers, he liked to scrap, considering himself the best fighter for his age in his Hampden neighborhood. He never saw much past the few blocks where he lived and hung out.

Colin first met the 42-year-old Starling at a neighborhood soccer game with a few buddies at Hampden's Roosevelt Recreation Center. He wore a 5950 snap-back ball cap and a puffy black North Face-style coat big enough to swallow him. Starling, dressed in a Joseph A. Bank topcoat and slacks, walked up the bleachers and asked the boys if they'd heard of the free karate school in the rec center's auditorium. "You learn martial arts, and we help you develop a life plan," Starling recalls pitching.

Naturally, Colin threw a smirk to the other boys. Starling singled him out. "What do you do?"

"I'm out a school, I don't really do nothing, 'cept be a Hampden boy."

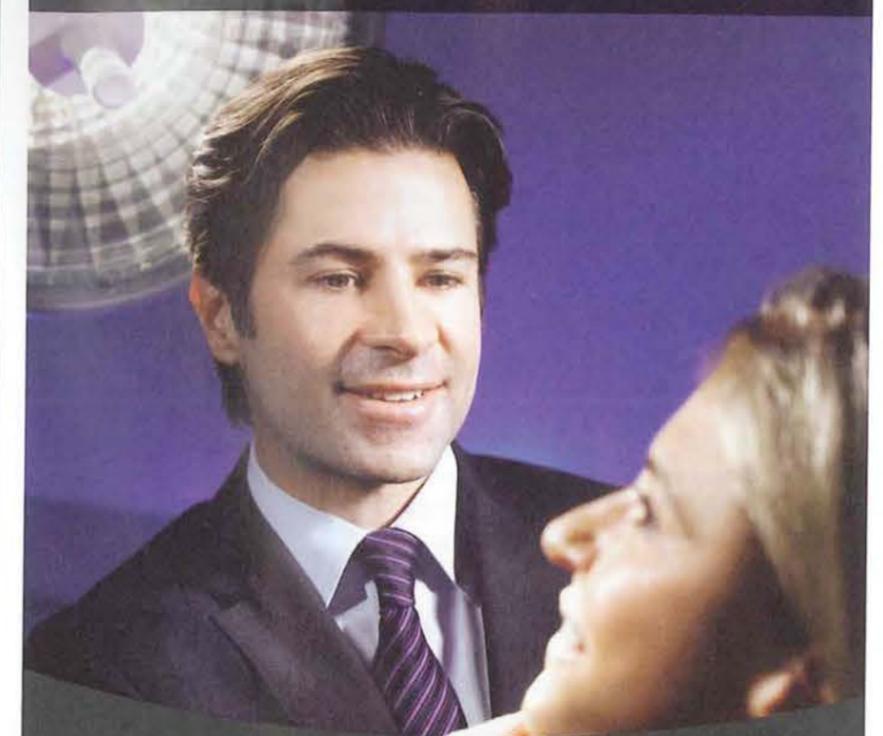
Starling shot back. "How's that working for you?"

Colin couldn't find an answer written on his shoes, and Starling asked him if he'd ever been in a fight.

"Lots. And I've never lost."

Starling told him that was because he'd never fought anybody who knew

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**Patrick J. Byrne, MD, FACS**, is director of the Division of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, Johns Hopkins Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery



how to fight. "We're MMA, mentoring and marital arts, and it's every Monday." The boys laughed as Starling walked away. Colin couldn't talk about it on the corner, but the thought of having a plan tugged at him.

When he's not rounding up students for his martial-arts school, Starling runs his own consulting business, Smith Growth Partners, from one of Hampden's historic mill buildings. He works with corporations to develop growth plans and, when they get stuck, provides business coaching. It's essentially similar to the service he and his black belts offer the students that they mentor. When Starling talks about his company, his words are smooth. Rehearsed. When the conversation turns to his school, which began in his backyard, his tone is less practiced, more personal and heartfelt. Over the past two years, he's recruited a handful of jiu jitsu, Tae Kwon Do, Korean kickboxing, and hapkido instructors to donate time, found corporate sponsors to pay for the uniforms and equipment, and recruited politicians to provide student scholarships. "You can tell John doesn't just want to help them with martial arts," says Todd Clary, a city recreation director. "He respects them first, and then they respect him in return and respond. What they do is fabulous."

Starling relates to the local kids he trains because he has shared some of their struggles. His dad, Starling says, was career Army and a career drinker. By the time John was three, his mom divorced his father and moved from Baltimore County to Howard County. They couldn't afford much on her hairdresser's salary, and Starling remembers his mom begging for child support to keep the landlord at bay. Yet, somehow, she pulled money together to send him to martial-arts classes.

Starling loved those classes, but they didn't translate into discipline and success as a teenager. He struggled in school like many of his mentees. Lonely and depressed, he'd come home and play board games by himself to pass the time. Then, the summer before high school, Starling visited his dad, who was stationed in Ger-

many, and he began drinking regularly with his father and his stepmother. When he came home to start school, the routine had been set. He and a pal started hitting his mom's liquor cabinet. They started smoking pot and, eventually, school only got in the way of partying. Starling focused for his Tae Kwon Do classes, but failed ninth grade. He scraped by the rest of high school and joined the Air Force.

Three months of supplemental training with the Army Rangers ultimately provided the challenge that began to hone his character. He realized he couldn't skate though

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the exercises; it took commitment. After the service, Starling earned a degree from the University of Baltimore, but decided to leave for Korea to further develop his karate, eventually working for a school there. It was in Korea that he met his future wife and began to gain a larger sense of responsibility. However, he admittedly still struggled with binge drinking upon returning to Baltimore. Five years ago, he says, he finally committed to stop getting drunk and found a greater purpose through karate instruction and mentoring.

"I can tell you every one of our students' stories and, man, they have been through things that aren't fit for print," he says. "And they're unstoppable, that's why they're even alive to make it to the doors of our school. I tell the kids a black belt is a white belt who never quit. And that's not just martial arts, that's education, or a job, or a better relationship with your family, or cleaning up your name in the neighborhood."

They just need a guide, Starling says, and a purpose, noting he got his own

life and drinking under control when he decided to focus on helping others. "Four years ago, I saw my 'dharma'—my purpose in life. It's to ease the suffering of others, and that's my only battle since."

Eighteen months ago, when Colin first left his house on a cold Monday night for the rec center, he was supposed to meet his buddies like always. With each step that night he wondered if he'd really go through with it. It wasn't until he passed the corner where he usually hung out that he was sure. Still, Colin only watched classes for several weeks before he finally ceded to practicing with the other students. After fighting numerous bloody battles on Hampden's streets, Colin now has a hard time recalling what they were about. A street crossed the wrong way, or something stupid said, and a brawl ensued where the winner got nothing more than bruises.

Colin says he'd always admired the cops he watched patrol his neighborhood. They were tough guys who took a stand for Hampden and helped turn the neighborhood into a place residents could be proud of. But he always thought he had more in common with the "Hampden boys" those cops swept away. A cop needs discipline and drive. A diploma.

Colin thought he was the toughest kid in the neighborhood; he thought he knew all he needed to win a fight. Now he comes to the *dojo* early each week, before Starling and the other black-belt instructors, sweeping the floor and setting up the gear. Today, he's the senior belt in the school, having earned his orange belt (the final rank for novices before proceeding to the intermediate level belt qualifications), and recently completed a Maryland high-school equivalency program. There were more than 30 students in the diploma class when he started, most two decades his senior; he was one of six who finished. When Starling's students talk about their future they don't talk about "if," but rather, "when," building self-esteem through their training, discipline, and goal-setting.

Brittney, an athletic, slim blonde, has been with the School of the Way even longer, since near the beginning, arriving

as an admittedly angry young woman. She fought with her teachers and her immediate goal was to graduate from high school—far from a sure thing. However, she also recognized she was stuck in a pattern that wasn't working for her, and she began to make the changes with help from Starling, whom she invited to her graduation. Since the demonstration at the South Baltimore Recreation Center, Brittney has started her college career at the Community College of Baltimore County, as planned.

Her next goal was a job, and she now works at a printing company that gave her a raise in her first month. On her own time and her own dime, she printed T-shirts that read, "Baltimore, Murderland—What Are You Doing About It?," selling the whole run in the neighborhood and donating all \$250 of the proceeds to the School of the Way.

Sheldon, who has been with the School of the Way from the beginning, used to think of himself as inherently lazy, partly because he was overweight and partly because it was a Latino stereotype others threw at him. Powerfully-built, but with a ready smile, he's lost 40 pounds and has moved closer to his goal of becoming an electrician by landing an apprenticeship this summer.

Colin, too, says he knows he will become a cop, and breaking the board was the moment his hope turned into belief. "When I broke the board, I was kinda nervous, but once you do it, there's a reason you do it," Colin says. "Teacher John [Starling] says, 'Once you break this board, there's no more excuses. This is your excuse that you broke.'"

Starling, Colin continues, has shown him how to become a fighter, not on the streets, or even in the *dojo*, but in his life. "I'm a fighter 'cause I fight for my GED, I fight for my education," Colin says. "I fight for my goals." ■

**JIM MEYER** is a first-time contributor to *Baltimore*.

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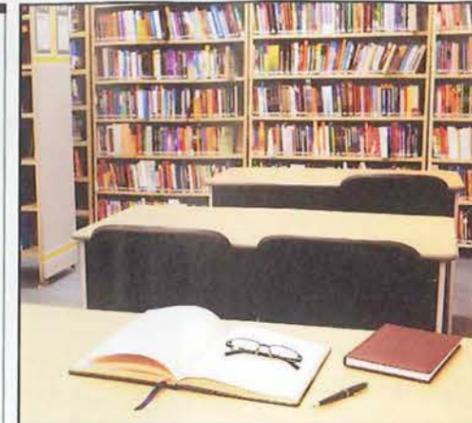
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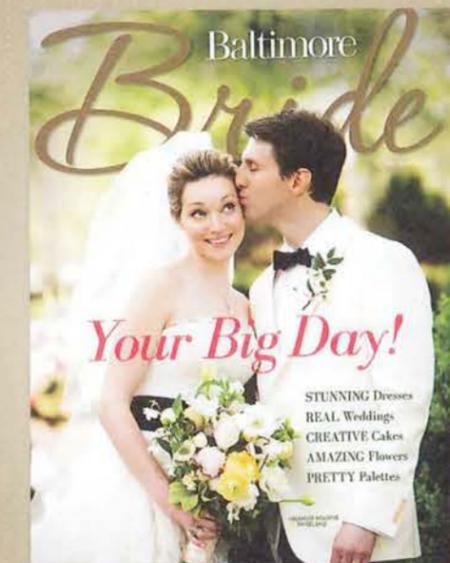


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