

DAVID  
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## Instructor's life imitates martial arts

Don Niam could probably kill you barehanded.

There's nothing in his piercing blue eyes and easy smile that says he would want to.

But watch him teach kung fu.

Watch as he demonstrates for a class of students in his West Akron studio, moving half-speed through a graceful and complex series of maneuvers, his body turning, arms and legs moving, his voice calling out the routine as if he were the choreographer for a deadly dance:

"Cat stance - block - step - punch. Now turn - block - grab - step - go back - and punch."

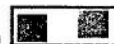
Watch his hands flit like hummingbirds, his powerful arms moving gracefully through the motions his body has known for more than half his 46 years.

Niam is a "sifu" - a teacher. He opened his studio three months ago, the latest in a series of turns in a life as calculated and unpredictable as the moves of kung fu.

He is one of the sons of Eddie and Gerry Niam, the owners of the popular diner that was, until a few years ago, a fixture near downtown. Since his boyhood fascination with the *Kung Fu* TV show, his path has taken him through stints as a private investigator, a trainer for the Cleveland Browns' defensive line, a Hollywood actor and a bodyguard for the Saudi royal family.

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And now, back from Los Angeles, he is teaching again, hoping to bring greater recognition to the relatively rare "hung fut" system of kung fu. He teaches the martial art along with "Nitro Kick" aerobic kickboxing in a wide-open storefront studio nestled between a fine art gallery and an insurance office on West Market Street.

The 10 kung fu students who gathered before him Saturday ranged from age 9 to middle age, including two women, all in matching black sweat pants and T-shirts. Niam, in a sleeveless kung fu shirt and a black sash around his waist, walked them through the maneuvers they've been learning for weeks.

"On one, inhale; on two, exhale - heah! Exhale through your stomach - heah!" he said, demonstrating the sharp utterance of the ancient art.

Soon, the students were practicing wide leg kicks with their arms outstretched, the heat of their activity condensing on the storefront glass.

Niam began his study of martial arts at 19. Like a lot of boys his age, his interest began with the old David Carradine television series. But he quickly became a serious student, drawn to the philosophy of mental and physical discipline. He discovered the grand master of the hung fut style, Yim Tai Loi, in Maryland, and went to study under him.

He began teaching in Akron in the 1980s and became a trainer for the University of Akron football team's defensive line, showing them how to employ martial arts moves to outwit and overpower their opponents. In 1988, he approached the Browns and they brought him in as a trainer. Nose tackle Bob Golic even began traveling to Akron for private lessons.

But he had always dreamed of breaking into the movie business. So in 1991, at age 36, he decided it was time to try. He packed his car and drove to Los Angeles, with little more awaiting him than a friend's spare bed. He picked up work in fitness clubs, ran a nightclub, and, for a month, guarded the Saudi royal family.

Slowly, he began to pick up acting jobs on television and in martial arts movies. He landed the lead in a B-movie called *Undefeatable*, which remains in rotation on late night cable, and showed as recently as Sunday night on Cinemax.

But the struggle was hard, and after six years, he was burnt out.

So it was back to Akron, and relative sanity. Niam is intent on building his business, but where his life will take him remains anyone's guess.

The study of martial arts is, in part, internal. A study of oneself. So if Niam's path seems fragmented, don't be fooled.

He knows his heart, and he has followed it.

David Giffels' column appears Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. He can be reached at 330-996-3572 or at dgiffels@thebeaconjournal.com.