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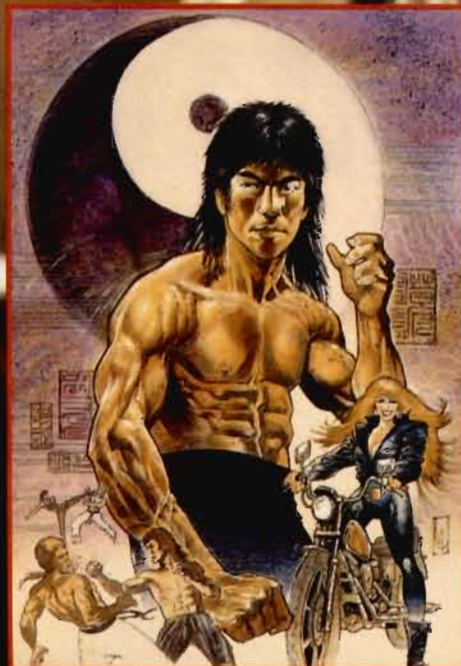


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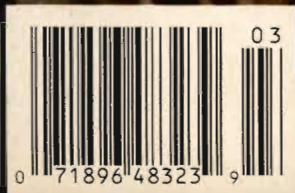
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# A Dragon's Special Fight

**Lou Illar has spent his martial arts life fighting for others. Now he's fighting to save himself from the ravages of Epstein-Barr Virus.**

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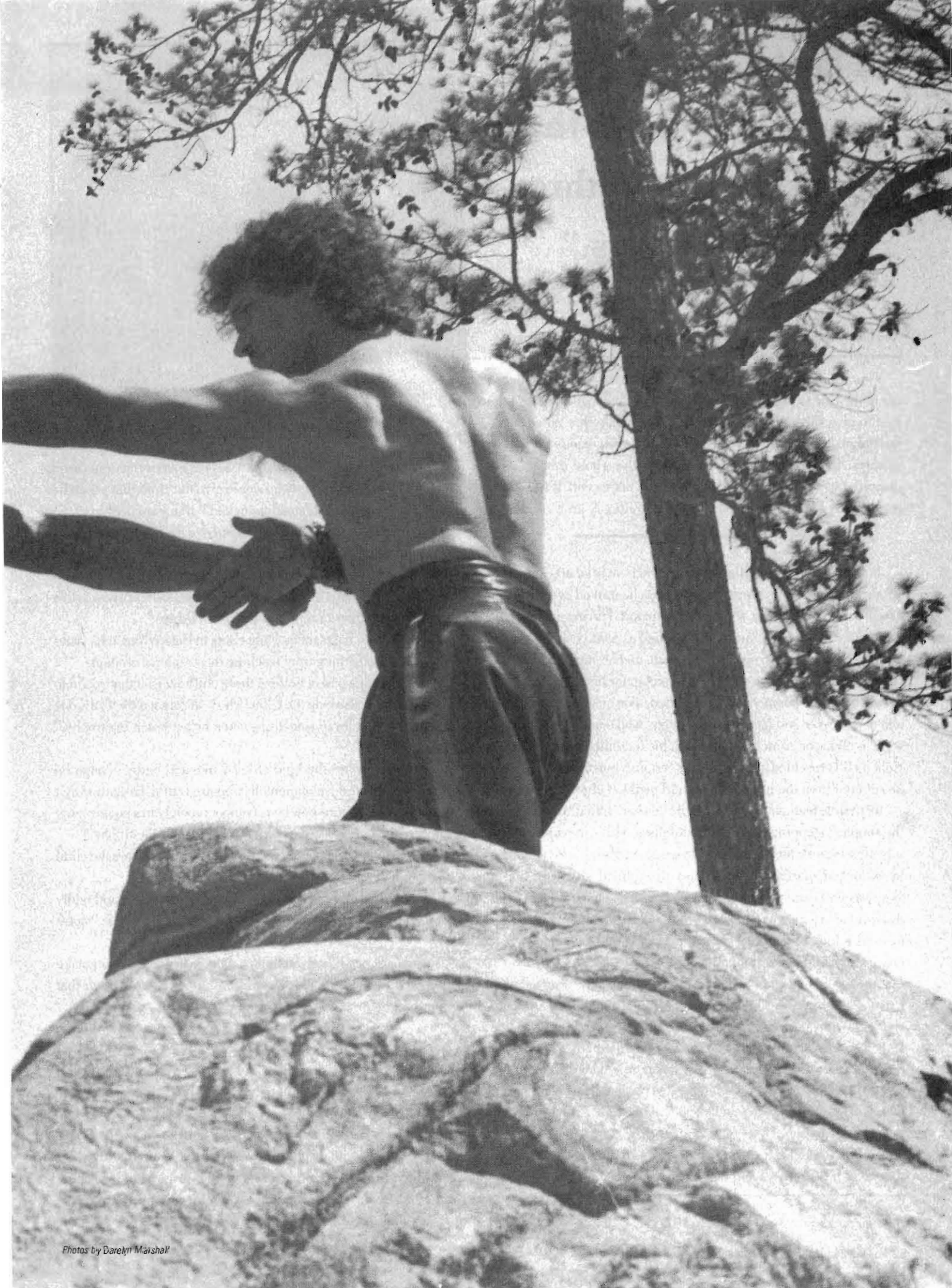
**BY RON SCHULINGKAMP**

**I**n 1986 *Inside Kung-Fu* magazine printed an article called, "The Legacy of the Special Dragon". It was one of the first martial arts articles that featured the developmentally impaired practicing kung-fu. The theme was primordial: a man can only be judged by his spirit and character. It is the assiduous and ascetic spirit of the impaired that can only be described as that of a "special" dragon.

The article may have been printed by a new, young *IKF* editor in 1986, but unfortunately it was submitted in 1984. Further, although the author was the first person placed in *IKF*'s Hall of Fame as "Humanitarian Of The Year", and placed there twice, not many martial artists remember his name, or know of his efforts to publicize the plight of the developmentally impaired.

Yet, his story and the funds he has raised over the past 20 years for children born with developmental disabilities will never be forgotten by those he's touched.





Photos by Dorely Marshall

# “Flare-up would cause partial paralysis that would last from three-to-seven days.”

Lou Illar is known throughout the country for his work with children.

This article is about a real dragon. One that has found a challenge not in the ring to devalue human life, but a challenge outside of the ring to give life value. This has been a struggle that now crosses martial art generations. You'll not find this man explained well in pictures, because photos cannot display the whole dragon. This dragon's tail can never be seen for it knows not its end. It is a "tale" that already has been labeled as an "extraordinary art".

In the beginning Lou Illar was involved in martial arts for all the wrong reasons. Power, glory, trophies, ego, he wanted everything he couldn't have as a hyper young asthmatic kid. Having a father who worked as a coal miner, and was classified as a fairly skilled boxer, his father found his son spirited but small, and he stimulated his kid through the study of martial arts to make up for his lack of size.

But his entire perspective was effected upon meeting Robert Hill, a famous lawyer and legendary tough guy who could pop a coconut with an elbow or crunch a bottle with his incredible grip. However Robert Hill presented himself, he was certainly outstanding, because he suffered from the incredibly painful plight of chronic polio.

Incredible feats aside, master Hill often had difficulty performing the simplest stepping action without falling. Hill's impairment and relentlessness suddenly made Illar see that fighting was actually a byproduct of martial art studies. A disciplined character and a focused mind were the primary objectives. The character had to be disciplined to manage right from wrong within his community, and a focused mind managed to grant him through all his endeavors a consistent character and identity.

Through his years of teaching, Illar's philosophy of developing balance and responsibility to one's family and community attracted students with a wide range of backgrounds and abilities. Some students were athletic, but most were not. Individuals with various limitations including spina bifida, Tourette's disorder, attention deficit disorder, mental retardation, severe visual and hearing impairments, and heart and cancer patients have benefited from his kung-fu instruction.

And he formed a traveling martial arts troupe that entertained special kids at circuses and benefits.

*Ron Schulingkamp is a white crane kung-fu instructor who has studied from Lou Illar for 15 years.*



“Tied in with the traditional Confucius perspective, parents used to look for a kung-fu teacher who would give the child that which he missed, that which his personality lacked,” Illar explains.

“And so often the term ‘sifu’ was defined to me by Chinese as sort of Godfather, someone who brought out the manners and the morals of a youngster. Adverse to how to defend himself, they taught him what not to do to people. The best self-defense was to learn how to live in this world and how to have human relationships.”

Illar, who lives and teaches white crane in Baton Rouge, La., says everyone gets something from teaching these special students.

“The interesting part of helping these children isn't that you help the child, but you also help the fellow who is the great athlete, the one who think he's achieved something when he's won a big trophy,” Illar adds.

“Then he becomes the kind of kid I like and oddly enough he learns more than the developmentally impaired child. He learns what real strength is, he learns how he can impact society in a positive way and he finds that can be a lot more rewarding than the trophy.”

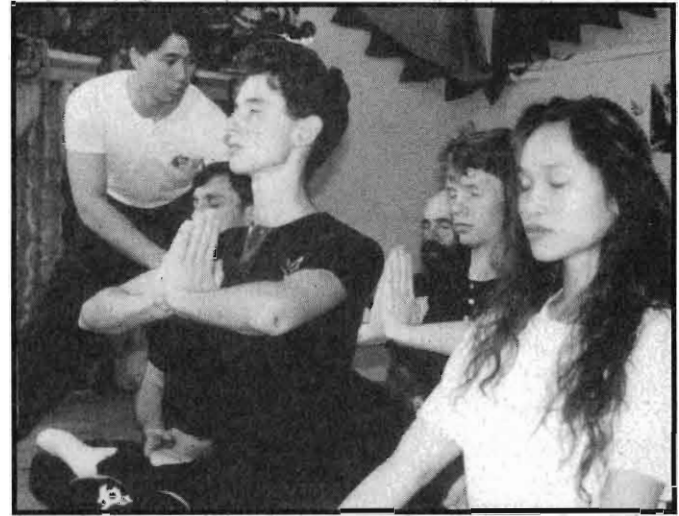
The experience becomes a positive effect which follows the child throughout his life.

“The guys that I have done this with end up liking it and oddly enough, every one of them has managed to get through college,” notes Illar.

“The experience has given them a chance to see they can make a difference in someone else's world and they too grow from that relationship.”

Dale and Bill are the fathers of two 17-year-old sons with Tourette's disorder and attention deficit disorder. According to the fathers, the five years of kung-fu study has played an important role in their sons' development. The fathers believe their sons have become self-aware and responsible adolescents. Tourette's disorder occurs three times more often in boys than in girls and essential features are recurrent, involuntary, repetitive, rapid movements (tics), and multiple vocal tics. When compared to their peers, gross





Left: Lou hands a local Spina Bifida representative a check for \$5,000 which martial arts helped raise. Above: Grant Kwan and Randy Wong lead students through meditation.

motor skills are usually below average, but are considerably better than fine motor skills.

Bill said a school principal thought he was “crazy” to enroll his son, with little understanding of responsibility and control, in a martial arts program where he would learn how to punch and kick. School administrators have noted children enrolled in martial arts class escalated violence in school and at home because they have not matured and have yet to learn responsibility and control.

Issues such as values, roles, responsibility, control and balance are constantly reinforced in each kung-fu class. Dale explained his son matured from the different kid that had strange twitches and was picked on, to a teenager with an interest in self-development and sincere concern for others. Dale said teachers have commented how his son is the first to assist classmates who are ridiculed by other students.

The fathers were pleased with the principles taught in their kung-fu class. The morals and values taught at home are reinforced in class and a special emphasis is placed on their role in the family. Dale and Bill noted their sons are committed to the family and understood their role in and out of the home.

Christine, the mother of 11-year-old son, Robert, classified by child specialists as moderately mentally retarded with strong autistic tendencies, enrolled her son in kung-fu class at the age of eight with his two older brothers. Robert was in an early educational intervention program in public school with extensive speech and physical

therapy. He exhibited two distinctive features, echolalia and extremely poor muscle tone. Echolalia is a condition whereby the person repeats verbatim any question asked, rather than answering the question. Christine’s memory of her son’s early childhood was typified by a photograph of her son at the age of four standing slack-jawed, drooling with a protruding abdomen that was unrestrained by any muscle control.

Robert’s instruction started with one 15-minute class each week. As his ability to focus developed, the class time increased to 30 minutes and then one hour. By the end of the first year, his teachers and coaches commented to his parents on Robert’s improvement. Robert became more involved and active. He started to participate in athletic activities and improved academically. He now plays on an adaptive soccer team, has competed in Special Olympics track and field and is looking forward to swimming competition this coming year.

His parents feel kung-fu was a catalyst for his ability to work with his teachers, coaches, therapists and family. Although he never was taught to punch or kick another person, his kung-fu class helped develop his ability to establish relationships and focus. Robert’s kung-fu classes also had an effect on the other kung-fu students in the school, especially those who had not yet developed patience, concern and feelings for others.

In October 1991, Lou Illar contracted Epstein-Barr virus (EBV) while working on the Chuck Norris movie *Sidekicks*. He had written the screenplay four years earlier and was working tirelessly on the set to ensure a quality production. EBV is a lymphotropic virus and is considered to be the cause of infectious mononucleosis. The virus has been known to affect the liver and central nervous system. In Lou’s case, his acquisition of EBV exhibited all the classical symptoms of mononucleosis and central nervous system as primary manifestations.



Students use detergent bottles to practice long arm techniques.

It has put Lou's faith to the test. Every time he thinks he's getting better, another setback creates a whole new series of doubts.

"I'd like to believe I'm going to get through this, but every time I think I'm out of the woods something comes up," he notes. "Emotionally that can be draining. Thankfully, a lot of my students are reciprocating. Now they're taking care of me."

The pain, at times, has been excruciating. Some days, it's not a matter of feeling good enough to get out of bed. It's a matter of physically not being able to get out of bed. Today, a swollen thyroid has kept him up all night. That generally happens when you can't swallow. No one would blame him for taking a "why-me" attitude. But that's not Illar's style.

"I don't think about any of that," he admits. "At the time I have a pain I try to deal with that pain. The greatest gift that I have is that I can pay attention to other people with problems and I can see that everyone has problems. I'm fortunate that kung-fu has prepared me to deal psychologically with my world. I can and I do. And I hope it continues this way."

Although EBV is not serious if acquired as a child it can be extremely threatening as an adult. In Illar's case, the virus attacked his central nervous system with a vengeance. The nature of the virus is such that there are flare-up periods when he would suffer partial paralysis which would last from three-to-seven days. A week or two would pass where his condition would improve and then he would suffer a relapse. The convalescence period can span two years. On Sept. 2, 1992 he suffered a shocking paralysis that altered his life's ambitions.

His contraction of EBV tested his 30 years of kung-fu study and

## "The greatest gift that I have is that I can pay attention to other people with problems."

understanding of human energy. Since there are no specific drugs to treat EBV and there was little doctors could do, he was left to his own resources. Realizing the importance of emotional and physical energy, he underwent acupuncture massage and meditation several times a day. At times, the pain in his heart was so intense he

really didn't think he would see the next day. This intense pain caused by recurrent relapses lasted almost nine months.

It has been more than two years since his battle with EBV began and his condition is gradually improving. However, doctors can't predict if he'll ever enjoy a full recovery.

Whatever happens, Illar is thankful for what he has accomplished in life, the friends he's made and the lives he's touched. After all, he maintains, it could be worse.

"I don't like people to think of me as sick," he explains. "I don't like them to be concerned about my health. It helps me to put my focus elsewhere. I feel for the other ones more than myself.

"At one point in the paralysis, the doctor said I could have died. At that point, you start to think you're really sick. As he takes me to a Bark-a-lounger to draw blood, a little kid who's head is shaved and face is drawn comes into the room. I started feeling much better. What I have is not a problem. Whatever happens, it's been a good life, it's been quite an adventure."

At times when he is emotionally and physically exhausted, he often reflects on those in his past, people like Robert Hill, and feels empathy for his present students who have to fight their battle each day.

It is at these times that Illar fights the hardest because dragons don't walk. They fly.