While growing up in the Sugar Hill section of Harlem, New York, in the forties and fifties, Sigmund Wortherly had no shortage of positive role models. Among the celebrities who at one time or another lived within shouting distance of his childhood home were Joe Louis, Willie Mays and Duke Ellington.

Although Wortherly grew up in a middleclass family, surrounded by a loving grandmother, his mother, and numerous cousins, his youthful restlessness led him into boxing. He began training at the old Uptown Gym on 125th Street, and then moved to the Al Wells Gym, which was ten blocks north on 135th Street.

He quickly developed a fearsome reputation as a gym fighter, whose greatest amateur glory came when he stopped Sylvester Banks, an awe-inspiring New York City Golden Gloves and National AAU champion, in the second round.

At the age of 21, Wortherly, who had served as a radioman in the United States Navy before being dishonorably discharged for insubordination, had few other options than boxing. From 1959-65, he campaigned as a professional light heavyweight and compiled an unenviable record of 6-6-2 (1 KO).

What he lacked as a boxer, he more than made up for as a rough and ready sparring partner for such championship caliber fighters as Paul Pender and Dick Tiger. He also jogged regularly with Emile Griffith.

"Paul was a nice guy, a tremendous man," said Wortherly, who is now 67 and on parole for just one of the more than 30 contract killings he claims to have committed for the Harlem underworld. "I made $25 a day, but never ate so good as when I trained with him in Cape Cod. People say he wasn't a puncher, but that's bull. He just broke his hand so many times, he was afraid to commit to his punches."

Tiger, he says, was "a hard, hard man," and adds, "I almost knocked him down one day. After that, I told myself, when I'm focused I'm bad."

Wortherly, who had a wife and two children, augmented his income in a number of ways. Sometimes he worked on the docks, other times in an auto assembly plant. However, he was most proficient at armed robbery, a vocation that he says eventually evolved into him becoming a cold-blooded killer.

"My first [prison] stint was for sticking up a numbers bank, but I also robbed drug dealers and fences," said Wortherly with nary a hint of regret. "I did ten years and four months."

He insists he doesn't like criminals, but admits that he was a "mean guy" who only got meaner in prison. He did time with such infamous thugs as "Crazy" Joe Gallo, John Gotti, Harold "KO"

Konigsberg, and Nicky Barnes.

Eighty days after being paroled from his first bid, Wortherly was back in jail. "I did four years and eight months for stabbing a dude," he explained. "All in all, I spent a good part of my adult life in jail. I served time in 13 different prisons with some of the meanest mothers you could ever meet."

After his second release, Wortherly says he became a one-man crime spree. "I mainly worked for one guy, but did a lot of freelance work too," he explained. "Mostly I was doing ghetto hits for $1,000 or $1,500. Five thousand was a lot, but I got as much as $10,000. But remember one thing, and this is important: I never killed anyone who didn't deserve it, and I turned down more hits than I actually did."

Wortherly, who was dubbed "Mr. Tough" by the authorities, was most recently paroled in 1997 for the killing, six years earlier, of a pimp who he says "shucked and jived" him in Manhattan. Now he would love to impart the hard lessons he has learned on others who might follow his path. A complex character who is extremely intelligent, articulate and engaging, he would be great fodder for an in-depth psychological study.

"I spent a lot of years in jail, but I also flew under the radar for a long time," said the extremely erudite Wortherly, who reads at least one book a week. "People often ask me how many people I killed, and I tell them I don't know. I lost count."

One person he didn't manage to kill was a child molester, who was serving time with him in an upstate prison. Although Wortherly seems to live by a symbiotic criminal code of honor, he wasn't particularly appalled at his prospective victim's crimes against a hapless child.

He said the guy was just incessantly annoying. He was also diabetic, so Wortherly's weapon of choice was a German chocolate cake that he bought at the prison commissary.

"I knew the guy couldn't turn down sweets, and he ate the whole bleeping thing," he recounted. "I expected him to go into diabetic shock, but all he did was burp, fa** and thank me for it."

Wortherly says his only regrets in life are not seeing his boxing career go further, and missing out on his children growing up. He has vowed that, under no circumstances, will he ever return to prison.

"I might have about a good ten years left," said Wortherly, who lives in a senior citizen housing complex not far from where he grew up. "Hopefully I can guide some people on the right track. If I could, maybe all of this craziness would have been worthwhile."