



CONQUERING THE PAST

People call him a social entrepreneur, but Glen Steyn sees himself merely as an ordinary individual who used to frequent the streets and is now trying to show children just like he was that there is an alternative to violence. Glen has however not always been the person that he is today.

It was a Friday night and Glen was on his way to meet the rest of his gang. His gang, called The Young Americans, was a tight-knit, tough-talking street gang from Westbury in Johannesburg that brooked no nonsense. That night he realised that some of them might be killed, something that he had considered on many similar nights.

Since Glen was early, he was walking slowly through the neighbourhood when he saw a small group of people gathered around a man. He walked up to the group and leaned in to hear what the man was saying. What he heard were strong words of comfort and of upliftment – more importantly, they were words of hope. Standing there with his knife thrust deep into his pocket, he realised that the man, a pastor, could have been talking to him personally. The pastor's words struck a cord and Glen knew then that he did not want to live the way that he had been living.

A NEW KIND OF LEADER

"Until the great mass of the people shall be filled with the sense of responsibility for each other's welfare, social justice can never be attained."

HELEN KELLER





From that day on, Glen Steyn turned his back on violence and began a journey to become the best person that he could be.

Once he had made this decision, he threw himself wholeheartedly into changing his life. In doing so, he sought out other like-minded people in his community who were determined not only to improve themselves, but also to improve life on the street for all the community's children.

For the next few years, he talked to political and church groups trying to find the best way to do something really worthwhile in the community. There was much talking, most of it based on good intentions, but there was very little concrete action to help the children on the streets – children who were exposed to violence daily, just as he had once been.

In late 1995, however, Glen and a group of six friends began investigating ways of establishing a non-profit organisation that would allow them to make a difference to the lives of the children they were seeking to help.

It was a difficult time. Obtaining funds to run the organisation took up most of their time. Promises were made, but remained unfulfilled, leaving Glen with an empty wallet and bills for the most basic of resources. It was probably the most frustrating time that Glen had ever known. Everything was in place to implement the project, except the necessary funds. In the end, all of his partners simply walked away, for there was too much inertia and too few of their ambitions were being achieved. Suddenly, Glen was on his own.

Most people would have been discouraged by this turn of events. Glen, however, began networking with

renewed vigour. Early in 1996, his efforts paid off and South African Breweries pledged some support. Soon afterwards, Eskom donated R60 000 to his organisation. Suddenly, everything began to fall into place. Telephone bills were paid, offices in Westbury were cleaned so that there could be a visible presence in the community, and essential members of staff were hired.

The big idea

By now Glen knew that what he wanted to create was something completely new, something for the children and from the children, something that was self-sustaining. He called his creation "Conquest for Life" and the project's mission statement says it all: "To become a self-sustaining youth organisation, run by young people empowered to become agents of change by developing their identity, self-worth and a sense of community."

The enthusiasm underlying Conquest for Life is evident when Glen Steyn explains his motives for establishing the organisation. "We wanted to do something that was different in the community and that was not linked to any political organisation or church. We wanted to do something independently, but at the same time have an impact on the whole community."

The years since then have seen Glen turn into a respected negotiator. Every Rand is precious to the project and the street fighter turned evangelist now fights for good deals on everything from food to property so as

Don't kill yourself, skill yourself.

to help the venture grow. In the past ten years, the organisation has expanded significantly and it now has programmes covering Soweto, Ennerdale, Westbury and Orange Farm that provide about 250 children with a safe place and food every day.

Glen and his staff are justifiably proud of their achievements so far. As they are fond of saying, "Teamwork makes the dream work."

One of Conquest for Life's key programmes is the In-and-Out Programme which is designed to give 14- to 25-year-olds a three-week outdoor break. The programme takes these youngsters away from the influence of their friends, and away from the flashy cars and expensive clothes, and encourages them to think for themselves. "Young people want to believe in their future," says Glen. "That is why we tell them, 'don't kill yourself, skill yourself'."

Another programme is the Youth Risk Programme, which now includes a young mothers' project, a prison project and a victim-offender conferencing project. In addition, various workshops are held for parents and members of the community. These projects provide mediation services for young offenders and counselling for those youths who are caught up in the maelstrom of violence that was once part of Glen's own life.

The organisation also has several other programmes in place in over 120 schools. Among these programmes is the Just-for-Kids Programme, which teaches thousands of children the importance of communicating with one another without resorting to violence. The After-School-Care Programme is one of the organisation's flagship programmes and encourages young learners to stay off the streets and resist negative influences.

Sustainability is the key

Over time, Glen has become a very successful entrepreneur, buying and selling properties on behalf of the project and acquiring much-needed capital to reinvest in Conquest for Life.

The organisation now owns two farms, one in Vereeniging and one in the Magliesburg. It is on these farms that youngsters acquire leadership skills and have access to counselling and support services during the In-and-Out Programme. Conquest for Life also owns its own head-office building, which means that the organisation does not have to use its valuable funds to pay

rent. In fact, the organisation's low overheads enable it to be self-sustaining and debt-free.

With financial sustainability clearly being an important goal, Glen formed a partnership within the framework of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) regulations so as to create Kolisa Holdings and thereby generate additional income. Under the partnership, Conquest for Life puts the companies forming part of Kolisa Holdings, and which are seeking to fill vacancies within their organisations, in contact with potential employees.



"This is a win-win situation for all the companies involved," says Glen. "We are able to place our people in gainful employment and the companies are able to achieve their corporate social investment objectives."

Many things still motivate Glen to expand Conquest for Life into a project that has even greater sustainability, and proving other people wrong is but one of these. "I get a thrill out of that. When I start, I want to finish. Up to today, there is no-one to whom I owe money. At night, I go to sleep peacefully."

The everyday legend

Glen, who is now 37 years of age, has become a role model for the children in the community and for other social entrepreneurs. "At the end of the day," says Glen, "A social entrepreneur and a business entrepreneur have the same objective – that of creating opportunities. The main difference is that I create these opportunities out of love and to bring about change in my community, whereas a businessperson does this for profit."

As Conquest for Life continues to grow, expanding its fundraising activities to include America and the United Kingdom, it is important to look back on the life that Glen turned away from to get where he is today. He lost his brother to gang violence, and his family was constantly drawn into the war on the streets, and into a world of drugs and serious violence.



Teamwork makes the dream work.

The Conquest-for-Life Project has been a resounding success. It has helped hundreds of children to escape the endemic violence of the streets and to learn the importance of taking control of their own lives and of their future. Through the project, they see for themselves that a rewarding adulthood requires a strong belief in their own abilities and those of their peers.

As Glen himself puts it, "Many people think that young people are the leaders of tomorrow. We don't believe this. We believe that young people are the leaders of today."

Written by Ian Franks. For more information on Conquest for Life call 011-473-1651.



CHANGE-MAKERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Social entrepreneurs such as Glen Steyn are important drivers of change in South Africa.

Glen Steyn is the embodiment of the driver of change who now characterises the twenty-first century. He is at the forefront of social change, has the skills of a business leader and channels his talent and experience back into the community of which he is a part. Full of hope and energy, and with sound solutions and determination, social entrepreneurs have the initiative, understanding and creativity to reshape the world for the better. The new organisations that they build to drive this change depend on teamwork, have long-term goals and have the ability to adapt to changing environments. Social entrepreneurs are always looking for new opportunities to grow as individuals and to innovate.

Like business entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs often experience difficulty in obtaining the support of people who believe in their ideas to the extent that they do. Ashoka, a global organisation, however endeavours to address this problem by providing social entrepreneurs with a support network. Ashoka fellows, like Glen Steyn, receive a stipend for three years that allows them to devote all their time to building their organisations and to promoting their ideas.

Glen Steyn offers the following advice to new social entrepreneurs: "You must have a love of what you do and of what you believe in. Without this, you will find it very hard to succeed. The road travelled by the social entrepreneur is not an easy one, but there are great personal rewards along the way."