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Working to benefit lost youth

Amid the doom and gloom in Westbury
LUMKA OLIPHANT finds one man who wants to change the face of the township.



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A SEARCH on the internet for the township of Westbury in Johannesburg paints a grim picture of gangsterism, drugs and murder.

It's described as a township where kids as young as seven years old have access to drugs and engage in sex.

And it is this scenario that led Glen Steyn to start an organisation called Conquest for Life 13 years ago. Since then he has opened branches in Soweto, Orange Farm, Reiger Park and Ennerdale.

A former convict, he has first-hand knowledge of the challenges young people face in Westbury.

"If you open any newspaper and you read about Westbury, the only thing you will see is that it is a hotspot. You seldom hear about good things happening here and I would like to change that," says Steyn.

Steyn, with his group of youngsters, aims to keep the youth of Westbury off the streets by organising projects and camps. Every day, he and his 20 staff help kids in the area with their homework and life skills. They also give motivational talks in prisons.

He has teamed up with most of the area's schools and uses life-orientation skills to drive home his message. "My main aim is to reach all the children that society calls a problem and turn them into responsible adults," he says.

Steyn is working on a project called Youth Enrichment through which he tries to create new role models.

"We need different people for our children to look up to. The only role models our children are exposed to are guys driving flashy cars, wearing jewellery and women with mini-skirts. We need to change that."

He says his projects are a success largely because they are "run by young people for young people".

One person who benefited from Steyn's vision is Baba Kubheka – a 27-year-old former convict.

"I was in prison for eight years for rape and attempted murder and since I came into contact with Mr Steyn I am a new person," says Kubheka.

He favours the organisation's diversion project because it deals with kids in conflict with the law. "Going back to prison and trying to help other young people to make better choices makes my day and helps me want to do this more," he says.

Kubheka believes he had to go to prison to learn valuable lessons.

"Prison is one place I do not wish any young person or adult for that matter to experience. If I only change one person, that is good enough for me," he says.

Kubheka is now the project manager in Orange Farm and helps more than 200 kids a day with homework, drafting CVs and motivating them.

Reformed gangster John Molele (35) is another young man who has benefited from Conquest for Life. "There was nothing I didn't do as a youngster in Newclare and people still can't believe that I'm singing a different tune," he said.

Molele still remembers vividly the day in 2003 he arrived at a three-week camp in Vereeniging. "I didn't want to listen to anybody about anything and the only thing I could think of was going home."

But he soon mellowed. "I was a changed man by the end of the camp and I am still going strong. I now know that the easy life only brings you trouble. I am doing the

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best I can to make sure that other young people don't make the same mistakes."

Steyn says he will only rest when he changes more young people like Molele and Kubheka.

"The vision is not only for Westbury but the entire country and June being Youth Month I hope to do my bit to change the young people of this country," Steyn says.

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