

Glen Steyn

For more than a decade, Glen Steyn has been the director of Conquest for Life, a youth organisation established in response to the longstanding cycles of violence in South Africa's disadvantaged communities.

On a Friday night in the 1980s, a young gang member named Glen Steyn was on his way to a fight. He and other members of his gang, called the Young Americans, were scheduled to challenge another gang, and Glen suspected that a few people would be killed.

But on the way to meet his peers, a bright light on the side of the road caught Glen's eye. It was a Christian youth meeting, and with a little time before the fight, Glen slipped in to the audience. It turned out to be a defining moment in his life.

"While the pastor was talking, I decided, 'No, I don't want to live like this,'" he said. "That night, I made a decision that I want to be the best me that I can be."

With his knife in his pocket, Glen decided not to go to the fight. His friends tried to convince him, but he didn't go. Gradually, his friends shunned him, and Glen sought out peers who had a more positive attitude. Though violence seemed to be inescapable in his township, he was committed to turning his life around.

Looking for a Place to Make a Difference

During the 1980s and early 1990s Glen grew frustrated with the level of discord in community organisations. He became deeply involved in the church and then later with civic organisations. Both these experiences taught him a lot about the politics of people and as much as he wanted to

build something positive for the community through these structures, he constantly came up against conflicting agendas.

By 1995 he had reached the end of his tether with politics. He decided to go back to working within the church, where he became an administrator. In September that year, Glen and his colleagues organised a very successful “crusade,” or mass religious meeting, with a focus on crime and gang activity in the communities. The event brought 5,000 people together under a single tent in the midst of the community. He invited the Gauteng MEC for Safety and Security, the community policing forum, and community members – and the event received a fair amount of media coverage.

Glen’s success with the crusade meant he became recognised in the community as an opponent to gangsterism. He began to mediate with the gangs and the youth. It brought unwelcome attention, including jealousy and hostility from other organisations and religious groups. So he suggested to five of his friends that they start something completely independent of both the church and the civic groups, something with its own identity. With the support of the others, they decided together that whatever they established would focus on children and youth.

A Daunting Process

In October 1995, this group of six community members started to research how to set up a non-profit organisation. At the time, they didn’t know the first thing about how to set up such an organisation. The process seemed overwhelming.

“People undermined us, saying: ‘You can’t speak proper English. You come from a poor background. You don’t have money. You don’t have status,’” he said.

But Glen met Dr Saths Cooper, a clinical psychologist, during a television interview on gangsterism and the role of the church. Cooper suggested that Glen and his colleagues set up a Section 21 company. One of the team of six worked at Standard Bank where he had access to a library and so he was given the job of finding out everything about non-profit organisations. But the issue of legal requirements was daunting.

“You must remember we come from Westbury and the people in the church would always undermine us, saying: you can’t speak proper English; you come from a poor background; you don’t have money; you don’t have status,” Glen recalls. “They would always also put us in a certain class, so we would suffer from a complex right in the back of our mind.”

New Violence Required a Response

In December 1995, there was a big gang-related killing in the area, with several fatalities. It was the catalyst that pushed Glen’s work against gangsterism to another level. Overnight, he was heavily in demand, receiving phone calls from the MEC for Safety and Security and journalists, amongst others.

At the time, he was working for the dairy company, Clover SA. With the renewed violence and demands for something to be done, his phone was ringing off the hook at work. This was an intense time for Glen; the gangs wanted to wipe each other out, while Glen and his team were right there in the middle negotiating with them.

But such negotiating work couldn't be sustained while he was working full-time. One day, his manager called him into his office and explained that while he sympathized with what Glen was trying to do, the time had come for him to make a choice between his day job and his passion. Hoping that his new organisation would get support from the National Business Initiative (NBI) and Business Against Crime (BAC), Glen decided to resign.

For the next few months, Glen worked out of an NBI office. Hoping to get funding from the Independent Development Trust (IDT), Glen and his team applied for a grant with the assistance of a professional proposal writer. The NBI provided Glen with office space with the understanding that when the project raised funds they would pay the NBI back. But funds never materialised, and after four months all the team members but Glen walked away. Glen continued to send out proposals and raise support for the fledgling project.

Becoming a Role Model in Westbury

Eventually, in early 1996, South African Breweries gave some financial support, and soon after Eskom provided Glen with a substantial grant of R60,000. It was the next turning point in the organisation.

With the new money, Glen started renovating new offices in Westbury, because people in the community said he was not visible and it therefore looked like he was doing nothing. In May, Glen moved office to Westbury. The funds from Eskom were also used to employ staff and pay for the telephone bills.

By building a presence in Westbury, Glen's main aim was to create alternative role models for young people. He knew that children in the township saw the gangsters as heroes; often, gang members were the ones who paid rent and bought food for the people in the community. One gang member still holds a party every December for the whole area.

As a young gang member himself, Glen used to get high on anything he could get his hands on.

"Ever since I can remember, I had to fight my way through," he said. "I had to fight my own demons. And all of a sudden now I'm faced with this challenge, this thing that I want to do for good."

Programme Offerings

As Glen and his group established connections in the community, he emphasized its mission: To be 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. He called the organisation Conquest for Life.

In just a decade, Conquest for Life has flourished, with its programmes offering new hope to thousands of young people in some of the region's most marginalised communities. Conquest for Life is well established in the townships of Westbury, Soweto and Ennerdale, as well as the informal settlement of Orange Farm.

The group's after school programme offers a safe space and food to an average of 250 children a day. Its "Just for Kids" Peace Camps and other programmes run in 120 schools, teaching thousands of children skills in communication and non-violence. Its computer training centre

serves about 20 to 30 people a day. Its Victim Offender Conferencing project mediates dozens of cases involving young offenders every year. And its Reathusana Child Youth Justice Project programme counsels 1 500 young inmates annually and soon plans to reach 1 500 more.

One of Conquest for Life's most critical programmes is its Youth-At-Risk Camps. Each year, about 200 teenagers and young adults attend one of the group's three-week retreats in a rural area, away from gangs and violence. There, they learn basic life skills, self-empowerment, leadership, and basic business skills. Many of the youngsters who have passed through their programmes went to university and have jobs.

Financial Sustainability

The camps themselves are also part of Conquest for Life's plan to become financially sustainable. For a while, Conquest for Life rented space to run its programmes. But over time, the organisation decided to purchase real estate to increase its asset base and mitigate long-term costs. Today, the group owns two farms from which it can run its camps – in Vereeniging and in the Magaliesburg – as well as the building they operate from in Westbury, so their overheads have come down drastically.

This was not an easy achievement. Initially, Glen didn't have the immediate support of his board members, who teased him about becoming a real estate agent. But he showed them how buying the properties made sense in the long term.

He took another significant step towards financial sustainability by forming a partnership with a company under new Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) regulations. One of Conquest for Life's board members had a friend who ran a private actuary company with a client base of 280. With the help of a human resources firm, Conquest for Life joined the company and other partners to form a new company, Kolisa Holdings. Conquest for Life has a 15 percent share in the company. Glen expects the involvement with Kolisa Holdings to generate additional revenue for Conquest for Life.

"When these companies have vacancies, we will draw from Conquest for Life," Glen said. "These other companies will get involved in social development and Conquest for Life will be one of the main beneficiaries of this development."

Expanding Abroad

Glen, who was named an Ashoka fellow in 1999, still manages the 20 staff members in South Africa. Always hoping to expand his vision, he works tirelessly six days a week to further the mission of Conquest for Life.

Last year, the organisation took steps to expand to the United States and United Kingdom. He established advisory boards in those countries that would complement Conquest for Life's national advisory board in South Africa. He then formed an international board to oversee all of the group's operations – and called in his trusted colleague, Dr Cooper, to serve as international chairman. Under the international system, Glen's responsibility will now be to manage to the organisation, report to the international board and each of the advisory boards.

Looking Back

Glen's passion to combat crime comes from his own childhood experiences with gangsterism. But when Glen was a teenager, even after he had decided to turn his life around, he felt the toll that crime takes on whole families.

"My brother died because of gangsterism in 1993; his own friends killed him," Glen said. "My mother was selling drugs at that time and was making a lot of money. So now you must know the odds that I'm up against. I want to try to do good but my family, even my uncle, my mother's only brother, was a gangster."

Today, despite a full schedule at Conquest for Life, Glen is raising his own children. He is committed to becoming a positive role model for them and other young people in the community.

Lessons from Glen

- The three words Glen lives by in his work are honesty, integrity and accountability. "If I promise something, I want to deliver. If I do something, I want to do it to the best of my ability," he said.
- Love your work. "If you don't have passion for what you are doing, and you don't have a heart for it, then forget it," Glen said. "You need to love what you're doing."
- Question your motivations. Glen said: "I think the first thing I would ask an aspiring social entrepreneur is, 'Are you sure this is what you want to do? What drives you to do this? What motivates you?' I have a problem when people do things for what they can get from it. For example, if you'd just do it for the money, you're going to be frustrated for the rest of your life, because you're constantly going to be chasing money and money is going to run away from you."