

Knuckle down and fight for a better life, says Lennox Lewis



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Former world heavyweight champion Lennox Lewis looked out over the sea of eager young faces and asked: "How many of you used to get into fights all the time?" A dozen hands shot up. "And since you started boxing?" Every arm came down. "Why?" he challenged them. A 14-year-old girl spoke first: "I learned to control my anger."

"I was the same," said Lewis. "When I moved from London to Canada as a kid, people mocked my accent, called me names and said, 'Go back to England'. Boxing taught me tolerance, built my self-esteem at a time when I didn't believe in myself." But his biggest lesson, he said, came from his mother, Violet, a single parent, who told him: "Nothing comes without hard work."

So the message he wanted to pass on to the 150 teenagers gathered at this brightly lit gym in Newham was this: "Getting into trouble can put you in jail for three years. But work hard at something you care about for three years and you can become really good at it and build a life."

Lewis was speaking at the Fight for Peace academy, a remarkable charity pioneered in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro and founded by former British amateur boxer Luke Dowdney, 39. Using boxing and martial arts, Fight for Peace promotes the development of disadvantaged youngsters living in high crime areas.

It is one of 190 projects funded by Comic Relief - the charity organising Sport Relief which has chosen the Evening Standard Dispossessed Fund to be a major beneficiary of its fund-raising activities this year, including the Sainsbury's Sport Relief Mile in London. About 30,000 people are expected to enter this biennial event, which two years ago raised £6 million. We are asking our readers to sign up and do the one-mile, three-mile or six-mile event in The Mall on Sunday, March 25.

Since Fight for Peace opened its doors on this abandoned school site in North Woolwich five years ago, 1,900 youngsters have signed up. One of the first to join was Michael Appiah, 19, who came at a critical turning point in his life. Mr Appiah attended Kingsford Community School in Beckton, but at 14 his classmate Paul Erhahon was stabbed after being attacked by a local gang. A month earlier, another teenager in his school, 15-year-old Adam Regis, had also been fatally stabbed. The killings of two boys from the same school sent shockwaves through the community.

"It was a wake-up call," said Mr Appiah. "Paul was in my year group and Adam in the year above. I watched friends getting pulled into drug dealing and theft. It was an opportunity to make quick money and often these gang members were very smart, though now I look back and see they were groomed. I am lucky because I have a stable family with a good work ethic but in high school you are more influenced by peers and there was a moment when my life could have gone either way."

Mr Appiah described how he became a reluctant Fight for Peace conscript. "One day I was killing time with a friend in the park when an outreach worker invited us over to do some boxing. I was sceptical because you get a lot of people in this forgotten part of London promising you the world and then fizzling out after like 10 minutes, and I wasn't even into boxing, but decided to give it a go."

From the beginning, he was hooked and started attending every evening from 7pm to 9pm. "I liked their ethos of hard work and discipline, and the way they built my self-esteem and concreted my aspirations to be a lawyer. I learned to box quite well, but really, sport was just the carrot. Once a week we had one-on-one personal development sessions with a mentor. I got to understand myself better and what I wanted to do. They arranged a two-week work experience with Cleary Gottlieb, a legal firm in the City, and later for a barrister, Stephen Ferguson, to mentor me."

In Brazil, Fight for Peace has already produced a champion, Roberto Custodio. He hopes to represent Brazil at this year's London Olympics and said: "My father was murdered on the street when I was a kid and I was full of anger. If I hadn't joined Fight for Peace 10 years ago, I could have picked up a weapon, I could be dead."

While Mr Dowdney is proud that Fight for Peace can produce champions, he emphasises that boxing is simply the hook. "Boxing is a means to teaching you how to live your life." He started boxing because he was bullied at school and went on to win the light-middleweight British Universities Championship.

He noticed the transformational power of boxing while at Edinburgh University. "My dissertation was on the abandoned street children of Recife who were off their heads on glue. One of them heard I boxed and asked me to show him some moves. Suddenly three other kids joined him. It was the first time I'd seen them put down their glue bottles. That day, the germ of an idea was born."

It would be another six years before Mr Dowdney, then 28, started Fight for Peace in Rio. "At the time, three heavily armed drugs gangs controlled the community, but when they saw we were genuine, they left us alone."

Of those first 10 kids who joined, five are dead, victims of the Rio gangs. But Fight for Peace thrived and 5,000 kids have since signed up. Five years ago, inspired by a piece in the Standard that showed Newham to be the worst London borough for adolescent knife crime, Mr Dowdney opened his boxing academy. A councillor warned him: "You can have the site, but you'll never get any kids down there."

But the project has been so successful that he is looking to move to a larger building in East Ham that has been offered to them rent-free by Newham council. "It will enable us to help 1,500 youngsters a year, but it costs £2 million to refurbish. Marvin Hagler came down and helped us raise £600,000 the other day, but we have £1.5 million to go so we need all the support we can get."

Meanwhile Mr Appiah, climbing into the ring to spar with Lewis, could not stop grinning. "It's a great thrill to meet a champion like Lennox, but like Lennox, I know that it is up to me to forget about excuses and make something of my life."

"I will never forget the day when the mother of Adam Regis came down to Fight for Peace to talk to us about making the right choices in life. One day I hope to be a barrister. I can say Fight for Peace helped me make the right choice in life."