

Fighting for the future

By Emma Mahony

Luke Dowdney arrived in Rio with one phone number – and built an academy for hundreds of young people



If the relationship with his girlfriend had not broken up in Tokyo back in 1997, Luke Dowdney would not have flown to Brazil on a whim and might never have gone on to set up his charity Fight for Peace (Luta pela Paz). He arrived in Rio de Janeiro with only one telephone number in his back pocket and limited Portuguese. After 14 years, he has settled and transformed the lives of hundreds of young people through his boxing and education centre.

London-born Dowdney, now 38, had his first taste of Brazil in 1995. He studied in Recife for eight months, finishing a masters degree in social anthropology and writing his dissertation on gang culture. Dowdney then had little idea that he would go on to raise money for a boxing academy in Complexo da Maré, where, every month, 290 young people learn how to box and find work through mentoring and education programmes.

“I was 22 when I was completing my dissertation in Recife. During that time, three of the pre-teenagers I was working with were murdered. There seemed to be a paradox between Brazilian society’s care and support for children and the fact that, back then, street children were being murdered by the police, the very people who were supposed to protect them,” he says.

Today’s violence mainly stems from the number of guns on the street, and young males are the biggest perpetrators and victims. “Of the 10 or so young people who started at Luta pela Paz in 2000, around half have died from gun violence,” says Dowdney.

The academy is in a favela in the city’s north zone. A high wall was recently erected to hide the slums from the main road leading to the Rio de Janeiro airport. There are around 135,000 people living in Maré and it is presided over by two rival drug gangs. Dowdney, who won the British Universities’ light-middleweight title in boxing while at Edinburgh University, saw that gang culture offered a macho sense of inclusion that boxing could replicate. After three years of working in the favelas for the NGO Viva Rio, he learnt how the charity business worked and set up on his own in 2000.

He first lived with a friend in a 15th-floor flat in Botafogo in the Zona Sul, with views over the Sugar Loaf mountain and the statue of Christ the Redeemer. He settled in Copacabana, renting a three-bedroom penthouse opposite the favelas for R\$2,000 per month (£500 at the time). “I missed my chance to buy in 2006 – now prices are sky high. They’re not anticipated to return to normal until some time after the Olympics in 2016,” he says.

He found commercial space in Rio’s largest and poorest favela and raised \$1m to build the academy. The 1,200 sq m building has recently been refurbished with a boxing gym, classrooms, an IT suite and a martial arts studio. This is where Dowdney’s latest protégé, Roberto Custódio, was discovered and encouraged to box as a light welterweight. He won the Brazilian National Championships last year and is now an Olympic hopeful. Custódio, 23, could have gone the way of many young men from the favelas after his father was murdered by a drug trafficker when he was 13. However, he joined the academy at 14 and has since become a role model for the whole community.

“We don’t just do boxing,” says Dowdney, who registered his charity in England and Wales and set up another Fight for Peace academy in North Woolwich, London, in 2007. “We have a ‘five pillars’ model which is personal development, education, training, work access and youth leadership.”

The charity received a visit from the Prince of Wales and Duchess of Cornwall in 2009 and Dowdney was given the MBE. When we meet in London, he is wearing a T-shirt from a range of fight wear that he launched in the UK to help support the charity.

Will he ever return to London? “I love it in Rio. The city has become much more cosmopolitan in the past few years. I don’t dislike London, particularly the cultural stuff, but I find the long winters depressing and I always long to be back in Brazil when I visit.”