

HuffPost Greatest Person Of The Day: Luke Dowdney Wants Kids to Fight for Peace



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Boxing has long been a staple of rough neighborhoods. From South Central, L.A., to war-torn Ireland, boxing gyms have instilled hard work and a sense of community; a way for kids to let out aggression and stay off the streets at the same time.

Luke Dowdney, founder of Fight for Peace, has taken that idea one step further. Born in London, Luke moved around a lot as a kid, but always loved to box. He competed professionally for a time, but he also concentrated on his academic studies, eventually obtaining a masters degree in anthropology from the University of Edinburgh. His dissertation focused on violence and its effects on children in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

"I found myself studying in Rio in 1995," Luke remembers in an interview with The Huffington Post. "I was volunteering for a few groups and got deeply involved in the human rights struggle. I watched a lot of kids I knew get killed."

But before returning to Rio a few years later, he had to get a few things out of his system. He won the British University Boxing Championship as a light-middleweight and also spent some time in Japan trying his luck at a professional career. "But that quite didn't work out," Luke said. "I ended up back in Rio, volunteering."

Soon, through the Viva Rio organization, Luke started a small boxing club, hoping to reach out to the young people living in the favelas, the Brazilian term for slums. "We had a lot of kids working with us, but we weren't managing to access the really hard-to-reach kids. The ones involved in the gang and gun violence, the kids who really needed [the outlet]."

So Luke restructured his gym. "I thought: If you can take the boxing and combine it with a much more structured approach, then you could really have a way to communicate with kids," Luke said. "I'm talking education, mentoring, home visits, casework. Not just the boxing. We help the kids get jobs."

At first, people doubted that "some British guy" could come in and make a difference in these kids' lives. "Even the parents were like, 'I don't want my kid to box,' you know?" But within 6 weeks, parents were coming up and thanking Luke for his work. "Because the kids suddenly had a focus, something they were working on," Luke said.

The program grew into a huge success, reaching thousands of youngsters in its first few years and raising millions of dollars in funding. In 2005, they were able to build the Fight for Peace Sports and Education Centre in the Complexo da Maré, a slum just a short distance from Rio's airport.

"This is a 1,200 square meter [facility] with boxing gym, dojo, three classrooms and computers," Luke said. "It's a real set change for us."

And Luke wants to make clear that this isn't just boxing for charity's sake. The boxing training is just as strenuous as the training for life, and Luke has produced real competitors in the ring.

"Roberto Custódio is a welterweight who just won the Brazilian National Championship," Luke said. "He came through our program." Roberto is expected to compete with the Brazilian national team in the 2012 Olympics.

In fact, the program has been so successful in Brazil that Luke has recently ushered in a successful UK Fight for Peace Academy, and he's been meeting with other countries about initiating other programs in Africa and South America. Recently Luke launched the Luta clothing line with actor and musician Idris Elba. The line features training and street wear, and half of its profits will go to Fight for Peace, with the other half going to investors.

"This is about saying to the kids: 'If a gang is offering you protection or offering you strength through being in a group, getting girls, adrenaline, we can give you all the same stuff at Fight for Peace,' Luke said. "You're part of a team, you stopped getting bullied, and people look at you different. You're not just some charity kid."