

the love

Heart of Gold

Geoff Thompson- Fighting for the Future

Ever since he can remember, life has been a struggle for survival for Geoff Thompson. A man brought up in a tough East London school, Geoff always found himself having to fight for his right to even exist. Following an incident at school in which Geoff laid out a school bully, earning himself the nickname 'Hands of Death,' he found his way to a sports centre and first encountered the world of martial arts. Immersing himself in the culture and discipline attached to the sport, Geoff trained hard and ultimately became a five-time World Karate champion. Travelling the world with his sport and quickly becoming a household name, Geoff became aware of several political issues surrounding sports, and soon entered the political arena himself;

"I was always mindful of my journey from the streets to the stadiums, and from the stadiums to the rostrums; I always went back and always kept my feet firmly on the ground. Around that time, I was beginning to comment and make contributions to certain debates, and two things happened that I contributed to. First was the formation of the Prince's Trust, who had taken a very welcome interest into the plight of the inner cities, and in particular black and ethnic minority youth, and they consulted me as to what they might do to help. Secondly, the then-Thatcher Inner-City Review Group for sport in the inner-cities came about. I participated in both of these and that's what saw me make the transition from tracksuit to lounge suit."

In the wake of the tragic death of 14 year old Benji Stanley, shot in Moss Side in 1993, Geoff committed himself to improving the lives of our country's youth. Determined, driven and full of self-belief, he took to the streets of Manchester to find out why the violence was so imprinted on the minds of our city's children. Confident that sport could provide a real way forward for troubled youths, Geoff worked tirelessly to unite the community in the war against drugs and violence;

"I knocked on doors, banged on doors if required, and started to broker a truly multi-agency approach that happened in three ways- we challenged the kids on the streets to put down their guns and find another way; we challenged the authorities, private and public sector agencies who should have been providing the opportunity and environment for that to happen and we also then engaged with those who could make it happen. The Youth Charter was a culmination of my own professional, cultural and social experiences- its formation was the single most defining moment for me, and it has stretched me since in every which way I could ever imagine."

Once the community had begun to unite behind Geoff's campaign for social independence and integrity, the next step was to establish clear-cut aims;

"The aims were very simple. I looked at my own journey- socially, culturally and developmentally, through sports, physical activity and recreation, and I felt very strongly that I could be part of this contribution to see things rebalanced and to help young people see that they do actually have a choice."

Although the struggle continued for Geoff, his strong values and positive aims continued to impress upon our city, and the Youth Charter steadily began to see tangible results;

"I've always believed that real champions are those who not only achieve in sport, but who also achieve in life, and that's what I've tried to do with the youth charter: it's a choice for life or a choice for gold- we want to encourage the discipline, self-confidence, character building, self-esteem, self-respect, mutual respect and respect for a wider society in which everybody is valued, and to have none of this at the expense of somebody else."

Since its inception the Youth Charter has become a real force to be reckoned with in Greater Manchester. Many youngsters have passed through the scheme, some of whom have gone on to amazing success, both in and out of the sporting arena. Despite this, Geoff firmly believes that sport is not the only way forward;

"Sport is a vaccine, the arts are an antidote, but collectively they are not the answer. At the end of the day it was about being able to give those agencies, who were still looking for solutions, some of the answers. Our biggest success is that we're still here. Seeing young achievers working in Hollywood was an amazing high. I knew I could coach winners in sport, I never knew I could coach winners in life."

For now the work of the Youth Charter continues although, as Geoff says, the real success of the agency will come when the people behind it no longer have to be there and the citizens of Manchester can work together independently. Despite having seen more lives lost during the past ten years, Geoff is as committed as ever to the Youth Charter and continues to campaign for equality and serenity for our children. A big man with a big heart, Geoff has dedicated himself to a campaign driven only on passion and pure self-belief and, having fought the good fight for over ten years, finally appears to be on the winning team.

For more information on the Youth Charter, go to: www.youthcharter.co.uk

the text: Matthew Barnes

46 the magazine

