

STEEL WARRIORS: EMPOWERING THE PEOPLE

15 March 2021 | Giving Back

Harry Edwards and Juan Lopez have had two very different lives and career pathways - but they were both led to the same remarkable initiative on the streets of London.

Every so often you hear about a charity that has grown from such a simple but ingenious seed you just want to stand up and give its creators a round of applause. The premise of Steel Warriors is a prime example... The last seven years have seen an seemingly inexorable rise in the number of knife-related crimes in the UK. Excluding Greater Manchester (due to unavailable data), there were over 46,000 instances in England and Wales alone for the year ending March 2020.

It's a statistic that in 2017 galvanised PR and advertising executives Ben Wintour and Pia Fontes to come up with the brilliant idea of taking the knives that are confiscated from London's streets every month, melting them down and turning them into street gyms (<https://vimeo.com/279623430>).

But where this idea really soars into the stratosphere is the gyms are then staffed with dedicated trainers who work with the people using them, building thriving communities, fostering fitness and providing a wonderfully positive replacement for the street gang culture behind the knife crime in the first place.

So simple, so inspired and so effective, it's an initiative that has understandably attracted a number of high-profile partners - including Sky, Twitter, Nike, Red Bull and Herbert Smith Freehills. And on an individual level it has gained the support and involvement of two men from very different backgrounds.

Harry Edwards is Oxbridge-educated and now Partner and Head of Melbourne Disputes at Herbert Smith Freehills, having relocated to Australia from the UK early in 2020. He was one of the first trustees to come on board at Steel Warriors, approached to deliver some legal and business expertise, and "jumping at the chance" to do something positive about the problem of knife crime. "I could see what a horrible scar it was leaving on London as a city," he says.

Coming from Colombia

Juan Lopez, on the other hand, emigrated from his native Colombia to London as a young boy, grew up in the disadvantaged northern suburbs of the capital, left school early and avoided getting into ever more serious trouble with the law by spending 12 years in the British Army and fundamentally changing the trajectory of his life. Lopez is now Steel Warriors' community manager, spending his days working with young people in the street gyms to help them reorient their lives in the way he did his own.



When Edwards became involved in the charity, Herbert Smith Freehills was already acting as a pro bono partner in the area of property and general charity advice, but with a growth strategy established the charity needed to ensure it had adequate corporate governance in place. It's a lean machine with just six trustees (including the two founders and Edwards, managing director Elly Dymond, Lopez and four volunteers helping out with finances, marketing/social media and general administration.

But its dynamic approach and message resonated strongly with Edwards who has always believed in the importance of lawyers getting involved in pro bono work. "There is so much we can give back to our communities," he says. "There are skills that we have, which we have honed over our studies and our experience... and there is nothing more satisfying to me than having an impact in an area where they are crying out for those sorts of skills and experience."

Before Steel Warriors he was able to support people working their way through the labyrinth of the UK's asylum system to prevent them falling into destitution during the process. "That was a very interesting and frankly harrowing experience," he says, adding that he's eager to continue such work now he's moved to Melbourne, and has recently taken the exams necessary to remove the pro bono restriction currently on his practising certificate.

He speaks positively about the pro bono culture in Australia. "During the course of the year, everyone is encouraged to get involved in a pro bono activity of their choosing," he explains. "And many of us want to do something other than strictly law as part of our charitable giving back."

Long distance love

For him now though, this means, despite his move to the other side of the world, he is placing an increased focus on Steel Warriors, which like non-profits and charities everywhere has been severely challenged by COVID-19. A fitness fan himself, he says its goals immediately struck a chord with him and “the natural affinity I have with the idea of an outdoor gym that everybody can get involved in”.

And get involved they do. Unlike some of the council initiatives you may see in your local area where equipment has been installed with seemingly very little consultation or consideration, the four gyms (three in the London suburbs of Haringey, Tower Hamlets and Lambeth and a fourth in Brixton Prison) already established by Steel Warriors are thriving.

“The gyms are never empty. Every time I’ve turned up to any gym, I’ve always seen a minimum of five or six people,” says Lopez. “What’s interesting is to see the communities that have been organically grown around these gyms,” he adds, “and how these communities have almost created their own identities and they all tend to lead to a style of calisthenics.”

Calisthenics in Australia may be associated with hordes of tween girls in bright leotards and heavy make-up performing routines, but its core meaning is from the Greek for ‘beautiful strength’. In the UK, the US and across Europe the discipline is also known as street workouts and it’s a style of fitness that uses the body’s own weight to perform exercises.

Steel Warriors uses trainers to run sessions in the gyms, which are free to attend. The results are remarkable, says Lopez, noting that his involvement with Steel Warriors was a natural progression from his army experience training recruits, and particularly a period afterwards when he ran a military training centre in Edgware. There he worked with a cohort of 12 serially offending young criminals. “They would happily stab you or rob you,” he recalls. “The only reason they joined the college was because of how I spoke to them.” Sharing his own story and speaking their urban slang, he was able to first intrigue them and then show them an alternative pathway to success – both financial and personal.

Lopez says now, “The best thing I’ve done in my entire life was helping those guys turn their life around, because every single one of them actually left crime.”

Making lives matter

The mentality and personal development program he created there gave rise to the one he is able to deliver through Steel Warriors now and meant there was a natural fit between the charity's aims and Lopez's own values. "It was an easy decision to join," he says.

There are, however, many challenges. And when asked if the Black Lives Matter movement has had a positive effect on the levels of knife crime in the UK, Lopez is candid. "Do you want the truth? No. It was just a thing of the moment. The kids here are still killing each other. They're still finding it just as hard to access opportunities to improve their quality of life. They're finding it just as hard to find employment."

This is why an initiative like Steel Warriors is so vital and can do so much to empower the communities it helps to build. It has ambitious expansion plans - Wintour would like to see a nationwide program and an accompanying street workout movement, and then possibly an international one too. Right now there are 12 tonnes of confiscated steel just waiting to be turned into gyms, so that's a dozen gyms in waiting stymied by COVID restrictions and a lack of funding.

The physical, mental and emotional benefits of fitness are well documented. A program like Steel Warriors that offers the hardware and the free community training sessions to use it properly is such an elegant and inspired solution, the only surprise is that more organisations aren't clamouring to get onboard.

To secure the charity's survival and keep the vision on track, help is needed. "Cash, frankly, is the key," says Edwards. "Immediate cash flow from donations or corporate sponsors, but also securing a key strategic partner into the medium term. We're obviously seeking government grants to secure a solid economic foundation, but those can take time. They're bureaucratic by nature, extremely valuable and critical for the long-term future, but they're less energising or powerful in comparison to a partnership with a fantastic brand that can engage in depth with our target demographics. So we are very much on the lookout for corporates who would be interested in playing that role, to build the brand in the way it deserves."

** If you are interested in making a donation to Steel Warriors, please find the relevant details [here](#). To get in touch with Harry in relation to sponsorship or any other queries please contact him on harry.edwards@hsf.com.*