

YMCA 175

Oral Histories and Stories

Story teller Peter Posner

Subject Personal Reflection

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**Peter Posner, World YMCA, immediate Past President
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**Interview conducted by Megan Cooke, Gymnastic Coach, YMCA Barry and YMCA
Youth Ambassador**

MC: Hello and welcome to YMCA175, can I ask who you are please?

PP: My name is Peter Posner.

MC: Fantastic, and what's your role within the YMCA at the moment?

PP: I am Vice President of YMCA England & Wales.

MC: Fantastic, and what roles have you had before this, why do I know you so well?

PP: Well, just a year ago I was the President of the World YMCA, I did that for four years, and a couple of years before that I was the President of YMCA Europe, and a couple of years before that I was the Treasurer of YMCA Europe, and a few years before that I was the Chair of YMCA England, and I've been around a little bit!

MC: So a wide-known celebrity throughout YMCA, we absolutely love it. So, I've got a couple of questions for you, first of all - what inspired you to get involved with the YMCA in the first place when you were younger?

PP: My boss told me to get involved in the YMCA. I used to work for a bank, in a big city in England, and all the junior managers were told in a very polite way to get involved in something. So I was asked to become the assistant treasurer of the YMCA in my city, which is what I did. And, always for many, many years, the senior guy in that bank was the treasurer of the YMCA, and he needed someone to do the paperwork, and that was me. So I did that for a couple of years and when it was time to move jobs I did something strange, I said 'is it possible to stay?', remembering then I was only 27/28 so I was easily half the age of anybody else on the Board. Yeah, so that's how I got involved and that was 1981.

MC: Fantastic! Was there a moment that really inspired you, that you saw someone else, or you saw a programme that made you go, actually 'I really want to stay within the YMCA'?

PP: It's an interesting question, because I think the answer to that is yes! I was working in an artificial world of money and prosperity and I realised that the Y gave opportunities to people that would normally never have those opportunities, we use this phrase such a lot with the YMCA - but life changing. It changed their lives, and life saving, and I with my modest background with my modest background and white middle-class life was able to something to help save and change the lives of young people. Incredible.

MC: Fantastic. So, obviously you have been able to do so many things with all your roles within YMCA. I know this is probably a question you get asked a lot, but I would like to know, what's been your favourite memory or most meaningful memory that you've had within YMCA?

PP: I have grown a lot through the YMCA, and I'm sitting here with all that stuff behind me because of the YMCA, albeit the abilities it has given me, and one of the great

things its enabled that I am able to talk to people like you and just chat and listen to people's stories. And one of the things that always floors me, is when somebody comes to me a year or 10 years later, they say 'remember we had that chat' - like you did to me - remember when we had that chat and we spoke about such and such, well I actually went ahead and did it and now I'm doing something else. To know that I've actually had an effect on people's lives is a heck of a responsible, and what a massive privilege. So there are many of those and I'm blessed to be able to say that, [inaudible].

MC: Well, very good, so obviously you're a hero of mine, but who has been a hero of yours in the YMCA?

PP: In the YMCA... so many, so many. One of the massive things about the YMCA is everybody's a hero. I'm not avoiding the question, but its so many, it's seeing young people on the stage today and telling all their stories. I've had the honour of representing the YMCA to Government Presidents, or ministers or heads of churches and stuff and they're all lovely, but actually the key people are the people, in my opinion, who are in the local YMCAs, either the delivery people or the young people who are receiving some benefit from the YMCA. Those are the people that impact and one of the things that I've learned over the years is when we make decisions like here today about the YMCA, we've always got to remember what impact will that have on the young people that come to our YMCAs. Is it going to be good impact, are they going to be involved, is it bad impact, is it going to be an old guy with grey hair trying to make decisions for young people? Or all of these questions are so important - yeah, I could go on forever.

MC: Right, so as someone that - I've just newly been started, I've only been with the YMCA for four years, my job role isn't quite the normal side of the YMCA - and I really wanna get more involved with the charity side of it. As a young person inspired by the charity, what advice do you have for me?

PP: Just do it, just do it. I've learnt over the years, and now I've got the benefit of being and old man that I can get away with stuff. But just do it, just put yourself there, just say I can do this. We've heard it this morning, that that fantastic young women from Haiti, who said just do it. 'What do you wanna be when you grow up? You.' That's what you wanna be. And so, very often the YMCA is blessed with and cursed with people like me that hang around for ages, and what we need to do is encourage space for you to take over those positions and the way to do it is to just be there. The reason that I stayed after my two years and not move away is because I said please can I stay, and they had to have a board meeting to find out if I could stay with the YMCA, and five years later I was the Chairman of that YMCA. And I was in my early 30s, literally half the age of my predecessor, that's what you do, you push yourself there. The other thing to remember is you don't know everything but that's good, but when you don't know stuff you ask questions. All, I mean it's a cliché isn't it, all good leaders have a team around them, so you know far more about what you know than I do, but I know a little bit more about other stuff and between us we can do ten times that we would.

MC: Right, so one of my final questions now - this is the Epic Storytelling Place, where we are within YMCA175, so if there was one story that you could tell me, and what I [inaudible], is what is there, is there one memory within the YMCA that you think back to and you just have a biggest smile on your face?

PP: I was reminded yesterday that I went to YMCA Australia, to their Annual Assembly, their Annual Conference, and it was the north of the country in Australia. And they had a

fantastic programme to raise money to buy indigenous local people, Aborigeni people, passports, to enable them to travel to international YMCA stuff, and the way that they did that was to sell tickets to vote who was going to be fed to a crocodile, and you paid a \$1 for a ticket and they raised several hundred dollars and inevitably if the world President was going to be there, he was going to be one of the guys that was going to be fed to the crocodile. So, after about day 3, we're in this place and there's - looking down - and there's a five and a half metre crocodile, the third biggest crocodile in captivity. And I got lowered in a plastic tube in the water, in my swimming costume, to say hello to this crocodile. It was all very safe, but nobody else wanted to do it - crazy!

But it raised money for young people, it showed that this world President was prepared to put a swimming costume on and go swimming with a crocodile and it, they, were just a lot of fun. Yeah!

MC: That sound's exceptional. Last question then, we're going to go to the other end of the spectrum and what's been the most [inaudible] and emotional memory for you that, you know, maybe someone's story that you met with or, just maybe being somewhere - myself I've been really emotional this week, just seeing and hearing any of these stories is fantastic.

PP: Two quick responses, I've been, I'm an emotional sort of person, and I've been in tears because of the frustration I've had with stupid YMCA people who can't see sense and keep fighting and don't do the right thing, that makes me mad. And I've been in tears with joy and laughter with, let me give you an example, being in a slum in Nairobi where we have a YMCA 500,000 people who live in tin huts that are two metre square, no toilets anywhere, other than public ones - but there expensive so don't get used, and in the middle of this there is a YMCA, and there are kids there from the age of about three to eighteen and they have a choir, where they have a sing and they win awards and they sang for me, and I was in tears because its incredible. Our beautiful YMCA.

MC: That's a beautiful story to hear, thank you so much for talking to me today, this has been a really great experience for myself, thank you.

PP: And well done, and thank you for making it enjoyable.

MC: Thank you!