

As a teen-ager, I got what I wanted—took what I wanted—because of my strength and size. That was before Glenn taught me “size is in your heart and soul”

## UNFORGETTABLE Glenn Cunningham

BY KEN WEST

I WAS 16 years old and 200 pounds of swaggering bully when I first met Glenn Cunningham. My desperate mother had brought me to Glenn's youth ranch in Kansas because she could no longer handle me after my father's death seven years before. She had become terrified of my temper. Once I even smashed a shovel through the door to our house.

As we pulled up to the ranch that fall day in 1966, I couldn't believe my eyes. There were Arabian horses in a field. Beside the old two-story house was a herd of bighorn sheep. There were also monkeys, buffalo, Angora goats, llamas, peacocks. And everywhere there were kids of all ages, sizes and colors.

I was a loner and *knew* I would never fit in; I wanted out of this place. But my mother held firm, refusing to give up on me.

The man walking toward us, as we got out of the car, had to be the boss. He was five-foot-ten and, even at a distance, you could sense

his strength. He had rough, coarse hands, a farmer's sun-worn face and eyes of steel. He shook my hand—the power in those eyes seemed to double with the firm handshake—and said simply, “My name is Glenn. Welcome to Kansas.”

“You Can Do It!” They never really kept count, but Glenn and his wife, Ruth, had welcomed thousands of children to their home since they had settled there in the 1940s. For them, taking care of kids wasn't just a job. It was their lives.

They hadn't planned it that way, but then much of Glenn's life hadn't gone according to plan. He was born in Atlanta, Kan., on August 4, 1909. At the age of seven he was burned so badly in a schoolhouse fire that doctors said he would never walk again. But Glenn's father had taught him: “Never quit. Work your problem out.” And his mother had given daily massages to help him recover the use of his legs. Glenn Cunningham went on to become the greatest



American miler of his generation and a 1936 Olympic silver medalist in the 1500-meter competition.

In 1938 Glenn got a Ph.D. in education from New York University, and after his war-time Navy service, he and Ruth settled on an 840-acre ranch northeast of Wichita. By then Glenn had developed a reputation as an inspirational speaker and constantly received requests to talk at commencements, clubs, churches and schools across the nation. His “You can do it!”

message kept both young and adult audiences spellbound. After his lectures, Glenn was swamped by parents whose kids had problems. Before long, he found himself saying, “Bring 'em out to the ranch for a while,” and that's how it all began.

The kids—some wayward, some just unwanted—would come to live with the Cunninghams for days, weeks and even years in that run-down farmhouse filled with love. There were plenty of heartbreaks, plenty of failures. Glenn and Ruth just never turned a kid down as long as there was room. There

were young prostitutes and drug dealers, car thieves and drug addicts. The average age was probably 14, but many were older and already entrenched in their lifestyles. I was just one of those troubled kids who wound up becoming a member of their family.

That first evening Glenn told me what he expected. "Look, Ken," he said, "there are certain things we do here. We work hard on schoolwork. We get up early and do chores. You'll be assigned a certain amount of responsibility with the animals." I had never done much work in my life and never handled animals before. He went through the feeding and watering procedure. He finished with, "And you will be disciplined if it's not done properly."

**Tough Love.** The Cunninghams were firm believers in "animal therapy" for troubled youngsters. Like every other kid on the ranch, I was given my own horse to take care of. Glenn knew hard work and accomplishment brought self-esteem—and took your mind off your problems. He also knew that love for an animal could work wonders.

Glenn was a tough man who believed in physical discipline when necessary, balanced with an unlimited number of hugs and a large dose of humor. I had been looking for someone to establish some boundaries in my life ever since my father had died.

On my second afternoon at the ranch, I was horsing around with the kids, trying to fit in, and threw a

rope around the neck of Glenn's eight-year-old daughter. I hadn't meant to hurt her, but the rope burned and she went crying to her father. I saw his stern figure standing at the door and heard him call firmly, "Ken, come here." I swaggered by him, threw him a dirty look and said, "Go to hell."

I found out that was not what Glenn Cunningham meant by the word "respect." I was disciplined that day by a man who understood tough love and the old-time value of a whipping. It didn't feel good, but immediately afterward, Glenn put his arm around my shoulders and said gently, "Ken, I can't let you self-destruct. You're part of our family now." Something clicked inside me. I wanted to belong.

Glenn's philosophy hit so hard—and stuck with so many of us—because he *lived* it. He was always the first one up in the morning, and if there was a barn to be cleaned, he'd be there knee-deep in manure along with us.

**Lesson in Forgiveness.** Ruth had the same nonstop energy. I can still remember her writing checks from her bed late at night to pay off a tow truck for pulling out a car that one of us boys had driven into a ditch. She did it knowing there was barely enough in their account to pay for the next day's food. Moreover, her loving arms and tender voice were always there to soothe away our nightmares.

Many of us had been through dozens of counselors who worked on our minds. Glenn and Ruth

Cunningham worked on our hearts.

Once Glenn bought a box full of small-game traps and told us not to touch them. But I started pilfering and selling them one by one to a buddy at school for soda money. I did this day after day, even though it kept eating at me.

One day Glenn and I went down to burn the trash. "I've got to tell you something," I said.

He turned to me with a look as though he knew just what I was going to say. "What's the matter, Ken?" he asked in a tone that could scare the daylight out of you.

After I confessed, Glenn asked, "What did I tell you I'd do to you if you were ever dishonest?"

"You said you'd whip my rear."  
"So what do you think I should do now?"

I hurt so bad inside that I could barely talk. "I guess you ought to start whipping."

I waited. He put his arm around me and said, "I think you've been punished enough already. Let's just go to the house and talk." And surrounded by other kids in the living room he and I sat and discussed trust and consideration for others.

I've never forgotten that demonstration of forgiveness. He went on to say: "Honesty is the most important thing, Ken. Don't ever be too little to make a wrong right."

**Strong on Laughter.** We had some pretty crazy times around the ranch. And I believe Glenn's sense of humor is what helped him survive them all. He told us, "Laugh-

ter builds strength in the soul, and without muscle in the soul you can't face the tough things in life."

One of my own tough things was epilepsy. At times I experienced severe seizures, which made me feel ashamed. That didn't last long in Glenn's home. His son Gene, who was my age, started good-naturedly calling my seizures "wobbies." "Oh, oh," he'd say when he saw one coming on, "Ken's gonna have a wobbie." Glenn and the others soon joined in, and before long I relaxed and began to accept my condition, laughing right along with them.

Glenn always stressed that weaknesses can become strengths. My epilepsy is now indeed one of my strengths, because it helps me convince others they can deal with their problems. Glenn had a parable for it: "Two men see a river. One considers it a problem, the other considers it a challenge. Guess who gets to the other side first."

Glenn also believed in Ralph Waldo Emerson's premise that the only true gift "is a portion of thyself." And he, Ruth and their own children—six daughters and four sons—were a constant example.

The family went deep into debt to keep the ranch going. The grocery bills, hay and grain for the livestock, and clothes and supplies for 35 kids all demanded far more money than was coming in. The Cunninghams refused state or federal aid. "Once you accept it," Glenn explained, "they bring in all the psychologists

## READER'S DIGEST

and psychiatrists, and that's what these kids have had too much of."

There were a few faithful people, including my mother, who donated to the ranch. But for over 30 years, Glenn paid the bills mainly through his speaking tours, and half the time he would come back with another kid in need.

**My Turn.** At age 25, after working on ranches in Arizona and Colorado, I decided it was time to start giving back what had been given to me. As Glenn said, "If you have a tune in your heart, you owe the world a song." So I began to study the craft of custom knife-making. Glenn helped me set up my shop and was a regular visitor for the next 11 years.

Every day after school, kids from town would gather in my workshop to watch me. Boys often have a love affair with knives and it was a natural opening. I would work with them, listening to their problems. Many times, I crisscrossed the country with Glenn, making speeches.

In 1978, due to both finances and Ruth's failing health, the Cunninghams closed the doors of their ranch and purchased a home in a town nearby. But it wasn't long before the sound of children's voices once again came from the old Cunningham ranch. In June 1985

two young couples who wanted to continue the Cunninghams' work—Cindy and Jody Brown and Laura and Brian Elmore—reopened the ranch. Glenn and Ruth agreed to serve as advisers. Glenn also offered to travel the country once again to help raise funds.

**Legacy of Hope.** Today, the 30 ranch kids file into our local church every Sunday—where Glenn's son Gene is pastor. They are us 22 years ago. I remember pulling Glenn aside one day at church and saying, "Glenn, we couldn't have been as bad as these kids." He smiled and said, "Don't give up on them. There's good in there somewhere. You just have to help them find it and then let it shine through."

Because of his religious faith, Glenn had no fear of death. At the age of 78, he was still hauling hay, loading 500-gallon water tanks and working his stock. He died of a heart attack last March, after completing his evening chores at the ranch—where he most loved to be.

Glenn Cunningham always considered himself a common man. But those of us to whom he gave so much knew differently. Glenn and Ruth's impact on thousands of young lives will continue, passed on through generations. And I think Glenn would consider that legacy to be his finest race ever.

**How's That?** From the society news in the Jamaica, West Indies, *Gleaner*: "Mrs. S was a picture of loveliness in a black-and-gold, one-shoulder creation that fell to the floor."

## POINTS TO PONDER

### Alan Baron:

We make a mistake assessing an election campaign as if we were judging a prize fight—focusing only on the skills of the contestants and what is happening in the ring.

An election more resembles the process at an art auction. To determine whether bidders will prefer a Rembrandt or a Picasso, you need to factor in the taste of the customers—their beliefs, their values. Indeed, the value of a painting—or the quality of a candidate—lies in the eyes of the beholder.

### Harry Kemelman:

In this life you sometimes have to choose between pleasing God and pleasing man. In the long run it's better to please God—he's more apt to remember.

—*Saturday the Rabbi Went Hungry* (Crown)

From a letter in a General Motors employee contest:

My foreman thinks I have more ability than I think I have. So I consistently do better work than I thought I could do.

—*My Job and Why I Like It*

### Noel Perrin:

Some people make their own bodies a lifetime work of art. It's too small a surface to be worthy of that much attention; and, anyway, for the last 30 or even 40 years of the owner's life, it's a work of art whose esthetics steadily diminish. Depressing. Some make their houses and apartments lifetime works

of art. The house at least endures. But again there is not enough scope. When it's all furnished and remodeled, there is not much left but dusting and cleaning the windows. A farm, on the other hand, can keep on changing and getting more beautiful for a thousand years. A farm is, in fact, an immortal work of art.

—*Third Person Rural* (Godine)

### Russell Lynes, on equality:

A friend told me a story about Dame May Whitty, the distinguished actress. Maybe it's apocryphal, but the point is well taken. Once an uppity London saleswoman was offhand and rude. Dame May, piqued, said, "I suppose you know who I am." The clerk replied, "Certainly." To which the actress said, "I suppose you think you're as good as I am," and the woman said, "Of course." "Then why," Dame May said, "can't you be civil to your equals?"

—*Architectural Digest*

### C. S. Lewis:

Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.

To love is to be vulnerable.

—*The Four Loves* (Fount Paperbacks)