

Glen: The Original Free Mind

By Kelli Taylor, Free Minds Co-Founder

*R.I.P. Glen Charles McGinnis
January 11, 1973 – January 25, 2000*



Every day in the United States people with guns murder an average of 30 people and injure another 162. So much of our focus is (understandably) on the victims of gun violence, that we tend to forget the harm that picking up a gun does to the person pulling the trigger. I know this may sound strange, but let me tell you a story. It's the story about the first Free Minds member. His name was Glen.

Glen was born in Houston, Texas to a crack-addicted single mother. His mother often brought men home that physically abused Glen. One of them even raped him. His mother was in and out of jail. When he was just 11, Glen dropped out of school and lived mostly on the streets, with several bids in juvenile detention facilities for theft and trespassing. As he became a teenager, his mom began prostituting herself to feed her crack habit. Glen was crushed. One night, when he was 17, Glen's mom told him that she desperately needed money. He decided that he would get it for her. He took a .25 caliber handgun from his aunt's home and attempted to rob a drycleaners service. When the clerk turned to pick up the phone and call the police, Glen shot and killed her.

In 1996, I was a television producer in Washington, DC when I received a letter at work from Glen. I didn't know who he was, or how he'd gotten my name. He had written to a number of newspapers and television news outlets because he felt like the world didn't know how many young Black and Latino men were on death row in America. We ended up filming an interview with Glen and producing a documentary on the subject that aired on television in Australia (they don't have the death penalty in Australia—they are one of 140 countries around the world that have outlawed it).

Glen and I began to write to each other and I learned the sad and tragic story, not just of his crime, but of his life. His father left when he was little and didn't want anything to do with him. The men his

mother brought home routinely burned him with cigarettes and whipped him with electrical cords. Even though he dropped out of school at the age of 11, Glen taught himself to read and he loved books—everything from James Patterson to J. California Cooper to science textbooks. I began to order him titles that we would read at the same time and then discuss through letters (so now you know why we call him the first Free Minds Book Club member!) Glen was extremely intelligent. We wrote back and forth for almost four years and became the most unlikely of friends. Glen had an enormous heart, a funny sense of humor and was interested in everything—gifts that few would ever see or benefit from. I went to visit Glen in prison in November, 1999. Two months later, he was executed by lethal injection.

I feel so very sad for the woman who lost her life because Glen picked up a gun. Her name was Leta and she was only 30 years old with a husband and two little children. Their lives were forever shattered. I don't excuse what Glen did. My point is that the gun that killed Leta also killed Glen. It left his mother (who has now been sober for more than 10 years) without her only son. And it left the world without a young man with an unlimited positive potential.

People are desperate. They are desperate not just for a sense of security (i.e. enough money to take care of themselves and their families), but for love and a sense of belonging. As a community and a society, we have to find the positive and the right ways to fill those needs for everyone. I believe that too many people, especially young people, mistakenly see guns as symbols of power. They believe that if they have a gun in their hand, it somehow lifts them up. The dirty truth about guns is that they don't just harm others, they do irreparable damage to the individuals who hold them and pull their triggers.