

A Life Less Ordinary

Robby Sukhdeo was determined to bring his tennis dream to a north London park—but could he cope with teenage vandals and near financial ruin?

SERVICE WITH A SMILE

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY
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It was nine o'clock on a damp summer morning when the park caretaker phoned Robby Sukhdeo with the bad news.

Robby's recently opened Pavilion Sports and Café—which should have been the centrepiece of Albert Road Recreation Ground in north London—had been vandalised. Again.

Robby walked through his beleaguered premises, picking up empty cans, cigarette butts, overturned tables and a broken chair. Someone had obviously ▶





◀ been having a good time. He checked the adjoining tennis courts. More cans and fag ends—and there were wet streaks on the cafe wall. Not the sort of look, or smell, that would encourage people to stop by for a coffee.

For a few moments, Robby felt sick and wondered whether it was worth the hassle. Then he remembered his dream of giving locals a community focal point—and how much time and money he'd invested. He got out the bleach and filled his bucket with hot water...

Robby had set up his Muswell Hill business

a few weeks earlier in 2003, but had been plagued by a particularly nasty gang of teenagers, known as “The Vampires”. They set fire to the tennis nets, scribbled graffiti over the front of the cafe, threw rocks on to its patio and kicked footballs at customers. “There were two break-ins,” Robby recalls. “They stole the float from the till, cameras, my sunglasses, anything of value.”

Robby would confront the gang, and they'd run off—but they'd be back the next day. “It was nothing personal, they just didn't want us here,” says Robby, 55. “They thought it was their park. I was determined it would be for everyone.”

Robby Sukhdeo moved to north London from Georgetown, Guyana, in 1961, aged

four. He was 16 when he played his first game of tennis, at Wood Green School. “O levels had finished and our PE teacher had us out on the school's tennis courts until the end of term,” he recalls. “I played

every day, really got into it.”

He was good, too. Good enough that when he joined Edmonton Tennis Club, aged 19, members were more interested in how Robby might help their teams win games than in his background or the colour of his trainers. After a couple of years, he made the first team, playing in Middlesex League Division One. He also helped Robin Brown,

Edmonton's county player, with the coaching. “You need a certain level of skill to teach others,” says Robby. “But it's more about understanding the game and wanting to pass that knowledge on.”

By the early Nineties, he was a science technician

at Muswell Hill's Fortismere comprehensive school. The head of PE Patrick Haddow happened to be Robby's best friend and suggested he coach the tennis team. Robby took them as far as the London championships several times—one year, even beating Dulwich College, the top independent school, six-nil.

Sadly, Patrick died of cancer in 2000. More than a thousand people turned up



The way things were, complete with tatty courts and vandalised cafe



COURTESY OF ROBBY SUKHDEO

to his funeral. “He was an inspiration, who dealt with the roughest, toughest kids and changed them,” says Robby. “He’d be there at seven in the morning running basketball classes and late at night taking school teams. He had time for everyone.”

Without Patrick, Fortismere just didn’t feel the same, and Robby decided to leave. But he would apply his friend’s spirit to a new project—turning the derelict Albert Road pavilion into a cafe and leasing the disused tennis courts from Harrogate Council. A city-trader friend, Mick Dainty, put up £75,000 to get the business going, and Robby found another £25,000—plus the £6,000 a year needed to lease the courts. The Pavilion Sports and Café opened a year later.

But a combination of the Vampires, tatty old courts and the British weather kept the customers away and, after 18 months, Mick pulled out. “We weren’t making any money,” Robby says.

Robby didn’t quit, though. He remortgaged his house, then remortgaged it again when the business needed more investment. His wife Sharon, an RE teacher, and the profit Robby had made selling an old family home, kept them going financially.

Still the Vampires wouldn’t go away. At one point, the council spent £132,000 on the park, planting 20 trees, putting up noticeboards and tarmacking all the

pathways. “The very next morning 12 trees had been pulled up and the noticeboards smashed,” Robby says.

In the first two years, there were 130 incidents of vandalism against Robby’s business. The police had their eye on the troublemakers and eventually

the local authority anti-social behaviour team threatened to ban them from the park.

“They didn’t want that and, in a strange sort of way, it created a dialogue between us,” says Robby. “I’d ask them why they were wasting their time causing trouble and they’d tell me there was nothing else to do, so what did I expect.”

Then, in June 2007, during one of those conversations, Robby did something that would change his fortunes. He asked one of the Vampires, 16-year-old Kyle Mitchell*, to help him coach tennis.

“Everyone knew that Kyle was the ringleader, so I gave him a choice. Stop vandalising the cafe, stop causing trouble and come and work for me—or get banned from the park.”

Kyle took up his offer and that summer, four gang members, aged between 16 and 19, helped Robby at the courts, earning £25 a day. They took care of the equipment, walked the younger players to and from the cafe, organised games, and helped the children with some tennis skills. “We gave them responsibility, a chance to excel and an incentive to look after us,” says Robby.

The rest of the gang soon stopped ►

“Everyone knew Kyle was the ringleader so I gave him a choice”

*Name changed to protect privacy



Keep it up:
last summer
570 children
signed up
for free
coaching

◀ targeting the cafe, and hung around the park less and less. “After a few months it was half as much, by the following summer even less, and soon not at all.”

Less trouble meant more customers, but the business still wasn’t making a profit. The old concrete courts hadn’t been resurfaced since the Seventies and were full of cracks and potholes. “When it rained they were too slippery to use,” Robby recalls. Puddles stayed for days. Good players found better courts.

Robby chased funding for new courts, but the rules didn’t favour him. If he could find 25 per cent of the cost, the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) would cover 20 per cent, and provide the rest in an interest-free loan. But the total cost would be around £350,000—and the courts would still belong to the local authority.

Robby asked the LTA to set up a City Tennis Club at Albert Road. City Tennis was a national initiative to introduce the

game to poorer neighbourhoods and could have funded the new courts. But Muswell Hill didn’t meet the funding criteria—it wasn’t poor enough.

By the beginning of 2008, Robby was on the point of giving up on his dream.

“To make a living, I thought I would have to concentrate on other sports and turn the cafe into a restaurant,” he says.

Then, in April of that year, former England player Sue Mappin came to the park. The LTA had asked her to conduct a review of community tennis and she’d heard good things about Robby’s set-up. “Sue liked what she saw,” he says. “The cafe was full, the courts were buzzing, but she could see that the state of those courts was a problem.”

Three months later, Sue came back with good news. Now the chair of the Tennis Foundation—a charity that aims to make tennis a sport for all—she was

looking to support suitable projects that wouldn't need government funding to keep going.

The Tennis Foundation put up £300,000 towards the new courts, Haringey Council added £20,000 for the floodlights' power supply, and Robby borrowed the rest from his sister, who'd just had a retirement payout. The Pavilion Sports and Café would become one of six Tennis Foundation's hot spots—six good ideas from local entrepreneurs that would show others how to run affordable tennis. "After all that struggle and hard work, things were finally coming together," explains Robby.

The courts have been up since summer 2010. Six are full-size and anyone can book them for £6 an hour; four are for

children. Today, around 175 people regularly play tennis at Albert Road and there's a waiting list for new members (who get discounted playing rates). The club runs several teams in local leagues, and 570 children signed up for last summer's free coaching camps. Robby employs three people to take the sessions and to coach in eight local schools, which also use the courts for PE lessons and after-school activities.

The cafe, meanwhile, is almost always full—and after ten years, Robby's business is making money. He's even started paying himself a salary.

Success means he spends more time in his office than on the courts, and last month he opened a second tennis and cafe business at Bruce Castle Park in ►

Making great strides: but Robby's success took ten years



◀ Tottenham, 50 yards from where the riots started in 2011.

But he still has time for kids who need him. He recently wrote a job reference for one of the original Vampires, who now runs summer camps in France. Kyle Mitchell also pops in from time to time—he's 22 and working in the building trade. In December, when a 15-year-old park regular was arrested for stealing a mobile phone, Robby arranged for him to do his community service at the café. And every year, local schools send around 20 work-placement students—often their most difficult youngsters—to help Robby out.

“You have to reach out to kids and engage with them, not stand back and preach,” he says.

A couple of months ago, he called the police out after somebody jumped over the fence at night, and graffitied the café wall. A few days later, the culprit's dad marched his son up to the courts, made him apologise to Robby, and watched while the boy scrubbed the graffiti off the walls.

Robby could reflect on the latest little victory for his dream and the community. It was the first incident of vandalism at the Pavilion Café for over a year. ■

All Publicity Is Good Publicity...Maybe



piled in with claims of fingernails in burgers and other freaky tales. And you have to wonder what

tobacco giant **Philip Morris**, which decided to talk up the “positive effects” of smokers’ deaths by highlighting a study in 2000 that apparently showed cost benefits in terms of “healthcare, pension and public-housing”.

☀ Given the millions of companies spend on pushing their brands, it comes as something of a shock when even well-established names get it wrong.

Some slips are quite mild. Earlier this year, **McDonald's** #McDoStories hashtag on Twitter flopped badly when, instead of swapping “good news stories” about the fast-food outlet, users

Urban Outfitters was thinking when it started selling an updated version of Monopoly called Ghettopoly—the objective was to make money by “buying stolen properties, pimpin’ hoes, building crack houses and getting carjacked”. (“You got yo whole neighbourhood addicted to crack. Collect \$50,” said one of the Chance cards.)

Even worse was

But when it comes to business people scuttling their own ships, the top man has to be **Topman's** brand chief. A few years ago, he described his own customers as “hooligans or whatever”. Digging a deeper hole, he added, “Very few...have to wear suits to work—they'll be for his first interview or first court case.”