

Glen Shackleton

HAUNTED TOUR DIRECTOR

BAH History, Queen's 1996

In his own words: "Pursue what interests you and success will come naturally in life. We're always at our best and our happiest when we're in love with the work we do."

For someone who haunts the world of ghouls and graveyards, Glen Shackleton is a remarkably fearless fellow. As tour director for Haunted Walks of Canada — a unique company offering historical walking tours with a spooky theme — Glen knows dozens of terrifying tales, but the one that sticks with him recounts how he launched his business in the first place.

It takes place during the final year of his History degree at Queen's. Fresh from a summer's dry run of haunted tours in Kingston, he boldly enters the Queen's School of Business National Entrepreneurship Competition. One of only two Arts and Science

students in the running, he faces an impressive pack of Commerce and MBA students from across Canada, plus a panel of stellar business leaders acting as judges.

"It was a tough crowd, so it was scary. What did I know about business? I was in History, so I didn't think I had much of a chance. I entered my business plan and then got up in my tour gear — big black cloak and lighted lantern — and told ghost stories. It wasn't as slick as some presentations, but I wanted to compete on my own terms. I took second place and walked out with \$1,000."

The money helped launch Haunted Walks, while the win itself convinced him that historian and businessman could coexist.

"I was greatly encouraged about running a business. I also learned that I was better off doing things my way rather than trying to impress others. That competition was a huge turning point for me."

Since 1996, Haunted Walks has annually sent thrills and chills down the spines of about 20,000 people. Except for a brief foray into Victoria, British Columbia, it has focused on the dark side of history in Kingston and Ottawa. Staffed by 20 employees — even the bookkeeper

knows how to conduct a tour — the company is proof that Glen was dead right to ignore an early piece of business advice: "Forget the ghost thing and just do the history. Ghosts are gimmicky."

Doing things his way is a recurring motif in Glen's life. As an English major doing a medial in History, he was in the first class of Queen's students at The International Study Centre at Herstmonceux Castle. He dug into the history courses there and explored old cities such as York, where he once tagged along on a haunted walk. He felt at home instantly. "I told everyone that I wanted to do similar walks in Canada. They thought I was crazy. The work was totally out of character for me. I was the guy who was terrified of public speaking."

Back at Queen's in January 1995, Glen switched his major to History and started gobbling up any local history with even a whiff of murder and mayhem. His research skills — honed from writing academic essays — were a godsend. For six solid months, he combed the Queen's Archives (where he worked part-time), Special Collections, books and local newspapers. He tracked down anyone privy to bizarre tales, no matter how wild the goose chase.

When he hit the streets of Kingston in May 1995 — having talked himself past the stage fright — Glen knew Haunted Walks was a winner. He ran a straight historical tour that pulled in a trickle of interest, but the haunted tour would easily draw around 40 people. Even on stormy summer evenings, they insisted that the tour go ahead.

"When I started, people suggested that the interest stemmed partly from the

release of the movie *Casper* and the *Goosebumps* books. But I think that an interest in the supernatural and the afterlife is part of the human condition. Victorian newspapers, for instance, are full of ghost stories, as is Shakespeare, the Arthurian legends and much of human history."

By the following summer, Glen had won the entrepreneurial competition and Haunted Walks was well and truly launched, with tours in Ottawa as well as Kingston. Within a year he had expanded to Victoria — he lived there from 1997 to 1998 — but he eventually realized that he needed to scale back his operation. ("Victoria taught me about doing too much at once.") Business, in fact, was so good that he gave up a "day" job working with developmentally delayed and special needs children.

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"The more interested I became in the history, the more I dug into it. The more I dug, the more I found. Luckily, I have good mentors in the business, people who

run London Walks in England, for instance, and Tour Charleston in the U.S. We compare notes frequently and cooperate on analyzing operational aspects of the tour such as rates of pay and advertising. Any entrepreneur will find mentors and networking very useful. Mentors aren't hard to find, provided you look for someone who won't be your direct competition. Most cities have small business and entrepreneurship centres that offer assistance in finding a mentor."

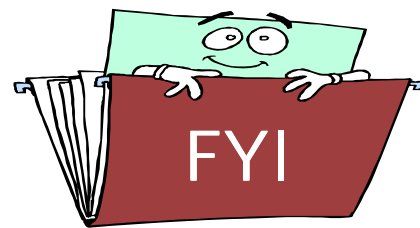
Working for himself, Glen has discovered, is even more fun than scaring the pants off people. “It’s really more a labour of love than a business, and it’s immensely challenging. I’ve had to learn everything: how to promote myself, how to create a web site, how to manage people. I recruit and train very talented guides — professional actors in Ottawa, drama and history students in Kingston. Together, we all feel like a co-operative. I feel like a director in the theatre, someone creating and selling a unique production.”

Glen admits that entrepreneurship means “putting your nose to the grindstone,” sometimes in the form of 18-hour days and a job description that changes almost by the hour. As much as he loves Haunted Walks for the kind of creative latitude it gives him, he is astute enough to recognize that while the business could easily last forever, his interest in running it may diminish at some point.

“The one-job kind of career no longer exists. Everybody is finding that out the easy way or the hard way. I don’t think sticking to one job is the way to wealth or happiness. People need change. I think people are happiest when they’re dabbling in what interests them, when they’re not after the big bucks.”

His advice to fledgling entrepreneurs is simple: Do your homework and then just go for it. “Four out of five small businesses fail in their first five years, so research, market analysis and a full business plan are very important. That said, there isn’t an entrepreneur alive who didn’t have to be a little fearless and just go for it at some

point. I’ve run into dozens of people who thought of the haunted tour idea before I did. The only difference is that once I finished analyzing the situation, I did it.” ❖



Glen learned that finding information gets easier when you’re interested and when you’ve got help:

“The more interested I became in the history, the more I dug into it. The more I dug, the more I found. Luckily, I have good mentors in the business, people who run London Walks in England, for instance, and Tour Charleston in the U.S. We compare notes frequently and cooperate on analyzing operational aspects of the tour such as rates of pay and advertising. Any entrepreneur will find mentors and networking very useful. Mentors aren’t hard to find, provided you look for someone who won’t be your direct competition. Most cities have small business and entrepreneurship centres that offer assistance in finding a mentor.”