

“Shoooooes!”

**The story of
Leonard Gregory**



Written by Peter Rule

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Dangerous Dinosaurs Football Club of Durban.

Chapter 1

Human Rights Day, 31st March, 2000

Leonard Gregory sits beside the soccer field at Bhongweni Stadium in Kokstad. Leonard is a Griqua who comes from the East Griqualand area in KwaZulu-Natal. He is watching Bush Bucks from Mthatha play an invitation team made up of players from teams around Kokstad. A large crowd has come to watch the match which is part of the Human Rights Day celebrations.

After this match the main event is on – the Dangerous Dinosaurs from Durban against Vukuzenzele from Bizana. This is a soccer match of a very different kind. It is crutch soccer. The players have physical disabilities and play on crutches. The crowd is amazed that people on crutches can play soccer. These players use their crutches like another pair of legs and have great soccer skills. The crowd has never seen anything like it before. They whistle and cheer to encourage the players.

Leonard Gregory is the person who arranged the event. As he watches the players rushing around the field on their crutches and listens to the cheers of the crowd, he smiles with satisfaction. His plan has worked.

He knows that the community will now accept that people with disabilities can do things for themselves. They are not useless and helpless. They have a great deal to contribute to the life of the community, just like Leonard Gregory.

Leonard Gregory has a disability. He uses a wheelchair. When he walks he uses crutches like the players on the field, but he was not born with a disability.

In this story you will find out more about Leonard, his life, his faith and his work with the disabled people in his community of Kokstad.

Chapter 2

“Shoooooes!”

The soccer star, 1976 – 1991

When Leonard Gregory was 15 years old he was a soccer star. He played professional soccer for Zulu Royals. This was the most famous club in KwaZulu-Natal, which later changed its name to AmaZulu.

Many goals started at Leonard’s feet. He played central midfielder. He was the one who “pulled the strings” in the match. He collected the ball in midfield and, using his wonderful ball skills, made great passes to his team mates.

“Shoooooes!” the crowd would roar when Leonard gathered the ball.

Leonard played for many teams in KwaZulu-Natal and the Transkei. From Zulu Royals he moved to Durban Bush Bucks where he played for four years in the National Professional Soccer League. His next club was Aces United in the Federation Professional League.

In those days of apartheid, soccer was divided along racial lines. There were separate leagues for different race groups. Who knows how far Leonard would have gone if there had been one non-racial Premier Soccer League at the time?

Leonard moved to Mthatha and played for Liverpool United in the Transkei Professional League. He was one of the best players in the league and played for the Transkei team against Bophuthatswana. Then he moved on to Thembu Royals where Bantu Holomisa, now a member of Parliament, was the manager.

Leonard still remembers that Bantu Holomisa used to say, "Gentlemen, the final hour has broken!" to his team before each match.



Leonard "Shoes" Gregory, Dorrington Webster and Real Taj fans at Northdale Stadium (1986).

Next Leonard moved to Kokstad. There he joined Kokstad Swallows who found him a job in a motor spares shop.

He married the beautiful Sylvia Kroutz, settled down and had two children, Lee and Leandra. He continued to play soccer in Pietermaritzburg as a guest player for Real Taj in the Federation Professional League. He travelled all the way from Kokstad to Pietermaritzburg on the weekends for matches. Things were going well for Leonard in Kokstad.

Then the accident happened and everything changed.



Leonard and Sylvia with children, Lee and Leandra, on Leandra's first birthday (13th November, 1990).

Chapter 3

The accident, 8th February, 1991

In 1991 Leonard was the manager of a furniture shop in the small town of Mount Frere in the Eastern Cape. Every day he drove from his home in Kokstad to work in Mount Frere. On week nights and on weekends he was a soccer player in Kokstad.

On the day that changed his life, 8th February, 1991, he woke up early and prepared as usual for his day at work. He was on the road by seven o'clock. He whistled softly as he travelled. "By eight o'clock I'll be in Mount Frere," he said to himself. The road was busy. Everyone was in a hurry and many cars overtook him.

As he drove around a bend his car suddenly swung out of control. "Oh God!" he screamed. "What is happening now? Help, please help, I am going to die!"

The car overturned and he was thrown out. This was the last thing that he remembered until he felt someone shaking him, saying, "Wake up! Where do you come from? What is your name?"



Leonard as store manager of Dan Hands Furnishers in Mount Frere (1990).

He opened his eyes. A truck driver was looking down at him. "What happened?" Leonard asked anxiously. "Move this car off me."

The truck driver said, "There is no car on top of you, young man. We are going to help you. What is your name?"

"If there is no car on top of me, who is sitting on my feet? Where does all this blood come from?" Leonard asked, getting more and more anxious.

"Just hold on. Try to relax, young man," said the truck driver. "We will call an ambulance for you. It won't take long, you are going to be fine."

A crowd had gathered at the scene of the accident. The road was blocked. Everyone wanted to know what had happened. The police arrived and ordered the people to move away from the scene.

"What was the cause of this accident?" asked a policeman. "Who was involved?"

"I am an eye-witness," replied the truck driver. "This man is badly injured. I don't know his name yet."

The policeman came closer to Leonard.

"Young man, are you still alive?" he asked. "Can you hear me? What's your name?"

"Yes, I am still alive," Leonard replied faintly. It was hard for him to speak. "I'm Leonard Gregory. Please rush me to the hospital, I'm dying."

He could hear women in the crowd praying for him. By this time the ambulance had arrived. They carried him to the ambulance and rushed him to the hospital in Mount Frere.

There was a long queue at the hospital. Some people were on the floor, and some of them were even lying in pools of blood. Leonard could hear them groaning in pain. A nurse looked at him and shook her head. He was bleeding heavily, but the nurses could not help him because of the number of people waiting for attention.

"Can the ambulance take me to another hospital?" he begged in a hoarse voice. A nurse looked at him and shook her head. Ambulances from the Transkei were not allowed to take patients to hospitals outside the Transkei.

Fortunately the nurses were able to find a car which took him to Grey's Hospital in Pietermaritzburg. At Grey's the doctors examined him. It was clear that he was severely injured and he was admitted immediately.

Chapter 4

The recovery

Lying in the hospital, many thoughts ran through Leonard's mind. He had been a famous soccer player. Now he depended on people to push him around in a wheelchair. Once his strong legs enabled him to entertain the crowds. Now his legs would not move by themselves.

"Is this the end of my soccer career?" he wondered. "Will I ever hear the crowd shout 'Shoooooes!' again when I get the ball in midfield and head towards goal?"

One day the doctor who was treating Leonard came to speak to him. "Mr Gregory," he said, "I don't know how you are going to respond to this news. Your accident means that you will never use your legs again the way you used to. Life is like that, Mr Gregory. Sometimes things happen which we do not expect, or want, to happen."

The doctor kept quiet and waited for Leonard's reply.

"I understand, Doctor," said Leonard without hesitation, smiling.

The doctor was surprised that Leonard was taking the news so well. He continued, "You will be in a wheelchair for the rest of your life or you will use crutches."

"I understand you completely, Doctor," Leonard answered bravely. "I know that God will give me the ability to cope with this new way of life."

The doctor realised that Leonard accepted his situation. He told him to have a good rest and promised to see him the following day.

After the doctor had left, Leonard meditated on the news that he had heard. "What does all this mean for me?" he asked himself. He touched himself to make sure that he was not dreaming. He tried to shake his legs.

Leonard was worried about his family. Would his wife and children accept him as he was? What would happen to them now that he could not walk? Would he be able to provide for them as a husband and a father? This type of question kept him awake at night.

He had grown up in a Christian home and had always been spiritually strong. He thought about his grandmother, Lilly, who had been a powerful influence on him when he was young. She had been disabled as a result of a snake bite. She had a hunchback and was short of breath, but she always had firm faith in God. Leonard's faith in God was a great help to him during this time.

Then, after many weeks had passed, Leonard's family came to visit him in hospital in Pietermaritzburg. It was a long way from Kokstad. They were very pleased to see each other. This visit was a great relief for Leonard.



Lilly, Leonard's inspirational Grandma, with his sister, Sonia, and his mother, Florence, after Sonia's first Holy Communion ceremony.

His family did not reject him because of his disability. They showed great acceptance and they encouraged him to continue with his plans. Leonard also had a lot of support from friends and from the church. Leonard was encouraged by the visits of his family and friends.

He requested a transfer to a hospital near his home so that his family could visit him often. Soon he was well enough to return home to his family.

When he went home from the hospital, Leonard did exercises every day to strengthen his legs. Although it was very difficult and painful, he persevered. Soon he was able to use his legs with the assistance of crutches.



Leonard and Sylvia renewing their wedding vows and sharing Holy Communion at the Christian Fellowship Church (May 2000).

Chapter 5

The coach

The accident had suddenly ended Leonard's playing career in 1991 at the age of 31. After sixteen years of top-class soccer, Leonard was disabled.

He prayed, "Dear God, give me courage to face the reality that you have placed me in." Leonard felt a new courage after he had prayed. He decided to return to soccer, in a different role.

"I won't be able to play again," he said to himself, "but I still have eyes and I can think. I will be a coach. I will start a new team and I'm sure I will make a success of it!"

Without wasting time, Leonard brought together a number of boys in his local area and began to coach them. He formed a team called Young Swallows as a feeder team for Kokstad Swallows. He thought that Young Swallows would shape and guarantee the future existence of Kokstad Swallows.

Leonard's many years of experience playing soccer were very useful and he found that he enjoyed coaching. He was very close to his players. More and more boys joined the team, and soon Leonard was coaching teams of younger players as well.

Young Swallows was good for the boys in Leonard's area. It taught them soccer skills, team spirit and determination. It gave them something positive to do and kept them away from gangsterism and crime.



Leonard and local boys during trials and the formation of the Kokstad Swallows feeder teams (1996).

Many of Leonard's players have gone on to play for their province and some of them have been successful as professionals.

Although Leonard loved coaching Young Swallows, he realised that soccer was only one of the things that he had to do. As a person with a disability, Leonard felt called to work with other disabled people.



Kokstad Swallows at MCDPO's Human Rights Day disability awareness event (1999).

Chapter 6

The disability activist

Leonard found that many people with disabilities in Kokstad had difficult lives. Some of them were neglected or hidden away in a back room by their families. Others lived in poverty. Many of them did not know about their rights as disabled people.

Leonard also discovered that people in the community had negative attitudes towards people with disabilities. They thought that people with disabilities could not do anything for themselves. Some people pitied them, others were ashamed of them. Leonard realised that people with disabilities had to unite to change this situation.

Leonard mobilized people with disabilities in Kokstad. Together they formed a new organisation, the Mount Currie Disabled People's Organisation (MCDPO). It is named after the huge mountain which lies behind Kokstad. The launch of the MCDPO was held at the Kokstad Town Hall in March 1999. Children with disabilities performed music and drama and there were

guest speakers from Parliament and recognition awards for the people who had helped start the organisation.

Since then the MCDPO has become a famous organisation in Kokstad and the province of KwaZulu-Natal. It has put a lot of effort and energy into advocacy and awareness-raising. It has tried to change people's attitudes and gain the respect of the community for people with disabilities. It has arranged public events to show the community that people with disabilities can do things for themselves.



Kokstad City Lovers under 14 team with head coach, Leonard Gregory, and co-officials at Mthatha Independence Stadium during the national under 14 Transnet Soccer Club Championships (2000).

One of its greatest achievements was to hold a gathering on June 16th, 1999, National Youth Day. On that day, children with disabilities met with able-bodied children from mainstream schools. Disabled youth choirs performed music and drama. Children with disabilities made speeches. The non-disabled children and the children with disabilities found that they enjoyed the same things. Afterwards the children with disabilities said that the able-bodied children treated them with respect. They were very grateful to the MCDPO for arranging the event.

The MCDPO has also helped deal with the housing crisis facing people with disabilities. Many of these people did not have their own houses and lived in poor conditions. The MCDPO helped them to get houses from the town council. For many people this was the first time they had a house of their own.

Another problem that people with disabilities face is unemployment. They cannot get jobs because employers do not want people with disabilities as workers. So the MCDPO set up a welding and carpentry workshop in some old municipal offices. Using skilled people with disabilities, MCDPO members were trained as welders and carpenters. The organisation won a welding contract from the municipality.



Leonard sharing his testimony to encourage people in the Kokstad Assemblies of God Church.

The organisation also fixes wheelchairs at its workshop. In this way it makes some money for the organisation. This money is used to buy new equipment. What is left is shared among the members.

Leonard and the MCDPO built up strong relationships with the municipality, the provincial government, non-governmental organisations and professional soccer teams. The ex-Premier of KwaZulu-Natal, Lionel Mtshali, spoke at MCDPO events. Soccer teams like Bush Bucks played at their celebrations.

Leonard uses his contacts in the soccer world to help improve the lives of people with disabilities. The MCDPO has many plans for the future. It wants to start a crèche for children with disabilities and a literacy programme for adults.

"Disability shouldn't stop you," Leonard says to people with disabilities. "You can participate fully in your communities."

Leonard's message to the community is simple. "People with disabilities have so much to offer. Members of the community should change their attitudes so that everyone can benefit from the contribution of disabled people."



Leonard receives recognition from Bishop William J. Slattery for his achievement in coaching soccer (1999).

Leonard the activist is no longer a soccer star. Now he is an excellent soccer coach, but he has also found a new role – disability activist. Even today people still call him “Shoes”!



Leonard “Shoes” Gregory with Mlungisi “Professor” Ngubane and Leonard’s son, Lee Gregory (2000).

About the author



Peter Rule

Peter Rule is a teacher, writer and scholar who works with disabled people's organisations. He loves reading and writing stories.

He thinks the stories of people with disabilities should be told more widely. "Our goal should be 'A society for all'. The stories of people with disabilities help me to understand what that means and how we as able-bodied people need to change our attitudes."

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