

Fall 2017

To the many who have cared,

Wilder contacted Only A Child in search of refuge. He needed to go into hiding – not from the law, but rather, from former colleagues – to escape the possibility of deadly consequences resulting from decisions badly made during the previous year.

The neighborhood where Wilder grew up was one of the many infiltrated by gangs at that time. Wilder succumbed to pressure from nearby gang members and personal curiosity and, against his better judgment, joined his local gang. Six months into his new lifestyle he regretted his decision and left the gang. As is most always the case, the leaders of the gang rejected his *resignation* and repeatedly threatened his life. Such threats are seldom idle and required that Wilder go into hiding at Only A Child.

It was 2010, and Wilder was just 16 years old, yet he was sure of himself to the point of being cocky. He was also angry and argumentative and in possession of a tongue capable of offending others with regularity and ease, so much so that most of his companions quickly decided to keep him at a distance. But Wilder proved to be an excellent student and a quick study at our carpentry shop. It soon became clear that he not only had significant plans for his future, but also, the ability and work ethic to convert such plans into tangible accomplishments.

He tested my patience with more frequency than I wished, but I endured it not simply because I saw in him significant potential. I also understood that much of his anger resulted from a childhood trauma that he had not yet come to terms with. Wilder's father had been the unintended victim of a drive by shooting and lost most of his vision and much of his mobility as a consequence. Wilder and his family had witnessed the event.

Much of Guatemala City is made up of working class neighborhoods. Many of these neighborhoods could also be described as *barrios*, as they are marked by high levels of poverty and crime. Wilder is from such a neighborhood. The crime, which is largely gang and drug related, can be violent to the extreme. And it is not exclusively restricted to the area where it is based. It routinely finds its way to common locations and touches the general public, often times with deadly consequences.

On a recent weekday morning, such an event took place and resulted in a massacre outside a large public hospital. A member of the hierarchy of a prominent Guatemalan gang was temporarily released from prison, supposedly in need of medical care. Armed members of the prison's security force accompanied him during the nearly two hour journey to Roosevelt

Hospital. A rotary fronts the hospital and provides access to the main entrance, the emergency ward and a pharmacy. Upon entering the rotary at approximately 7:30 AM, the pickup truck used to transport the *patient* was ambushed by a band of armed assassins who had been lying in wait to the front of the pharmacy. Gunfire was exchanged for roughly five minutes and at its conclusion, 7 people were dead and 11 others wounded, some badly.

The day after the massacre, Wilder and I met for coffee, as we have done fairly regularly since his departure from Only A Child several years ago. While with us, Wilder graduated from high school near the top of his class and completed nearly half of a 16 month course at an English language academy. With time, he completed the course and found employment as an English speaking customer service representative.

Wilder wanted to discuss a planned change of career. He had fallen into a pattern of job hopping every several months and had recently concluded that working in a cubicle did not suit him. He wanted to put his English skills to more satisfying use.

Unemployment remains high in Guatemala. The prospects for the working class are especially dismal. Wilder had observed an ever increasing despair among the unemployed youth of his neighborhood. Showing compassion and initiative, he began to donate his time by teaching an English class at a local school, to young men who could not afford to pay for the privilege. The goal was to create opportunities for employment, which speaking English unquestionably does.

The response surpassed Wilder's expectations and motivated him to secure a space in a community center; the plan being to offer English classes throughout the day at minimal cost. Breaking into laughter, Wilder confessed, "I love speaking English, but I've learned that I would much rather teach it than use it to serve frustrated and angry customers."

Wilder paused and waited for my response, or, more specifically my approval, I believe. The pause was brief. "I think it's a wonderful plan. First, I congratulate you for showing concern for your neighbors, and then, for deciding to try and do something to improve their situation. You've shown a remarkable ability to size up a situation, identify a need and finally, respond in a productive way. It is not a gift than many people possess. You've come a long way since the first time I met you many years ago."

Wilder beamed, clearly pleased with what I had said. "If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be doing this." "What do you mean?" I asked. "Well, I became interested in studying English when I was with Only A Child. I heard you speaking it and my roommate Conrad was studying English when I first entered the program. That's what gave me the idea. And look, now so many other guys will be helped thanks to the help you gave me. They'll be learning English, too."

Five young men were captured as they attempted to flee after taking seven lives at Roosevelt Hospital. Their ages are: 29, 22, 20, 19 and 17. It was learned at their arraignment that each had been paid two hundred quetzales or twenty-eight dollars for their services by the gang to which the still-at-large leader belonged. For many people, one of the most shocking aspects of the crime was the fact that human life could apparently be bought for next to nothing. Perhaps understanding that it was nearly impossible to comprehend why they had done what they had

done, one of the captured suspects shrugged and offered, "Times are tough." Another, the 17 year old declared, "I'm not afraid to die."

As Wilder and I stood to leave, my eyes glanced at a television set hanging on the wall of the convenience store where we had met. A breaking story was being reported by one of Guatemala City's major stations. The subject was the apparent at home suicide of an adolescent boy. Another casualty, I ruefully thought, among young men lacking hope or a reason to get out of bed in the morning. The adolescent boy who had taken his own life had expressed his despair in one way. The five young men responsible for the massacre at Roosevelt Hospital had vented theirs in quite another.

Wilder first came to us a frustrated and angry young man, seemingly incapable of caring about the welfare of another. He unquestionably changed for the better during his time at Only A Child. More noteworthy still, is how he continued to mature once on his own. It is our work to plant a seed in a young life and then nourish it to the best of our ability, until the life no longer needs our regular guidance. Often times, a life like Wilder's will continue to flourish long after leaving our care and ultimately come of age by bearing fruit in a local community. In Wilder's case, it might even be called redemption.

Once again, I feel compelled to say that without your interest and concern, there would be no such stories to be told. Thank you for continuing to support Only A Child and its effort to nourish young lives in search of a place in this world.

May God bless.

George

PS Are you ready for another "*Taste of Guatemala*"? Thanks to the great success of last year's event, Only A Child will be doing it again on Saturday, November 18th at 7 P.M. Hope you will be able to make it. More info to follow...