

INTERVIEW

Last Man Standing:
The American Who Stayed During the Rwandan
Genocide—An Interview with Carl Wilkens

Jerri Shepard

Carl Wilkens is a peace activist and an educator who headed up the Adventist Development and Relief Agency International in Rwanda (ADRA). He was the only American who chose to remain in Kigali, Rwanda during the genocide of 1994. His choice to remain in the country during that time of brutal atrocities resulted in the prevention of the murder of hundreds of children. Wilkens was featured in Frontline's "Ghosts of Rwanda" and in "The Few Who Stayed: Defying Genocide," an American Radio Works documentary broadcast on National Public Radio. He has received several humanitarian awards, including awards from Saint John's School of Theology Seminary and the Simon Wiesenthal Centre. He is a Seventh-Day Adventist pastor who devotes much of his time to promoting activism for peace. Wilkens and his wife, Teresa, founded World Outside My Shoes (see <http://worldoutsidemys shoes.org>), a nonprofit educational and professional organization committed to inspiring and equipping people to enter the world of "the other," which Wilkens indicates may be under our own roof or on the other side of the globe. The Wilkenses also started Pedaling for Peace (pedaling2Peace.org) and travel around the United States sharing their stories of hope. Jerri Shepard, Associate Professor in the School of Education at Gonzaga University, spoke with Wilkens on June 8, 2010.

SHEPARD: In your definition of *other*, you talk about the fact that "the other" is fluid, and you said something about the "transitional" nature of "the other."

WILKENS: Yes, this phrase "the other"—I think when we talk about it being fluid, as I said, we are so surprised: "I thought I knew you." And so instead of the "other" being Al-Qaeda, or somebody who we think is just so different and so opposed—I mean different isn't always the thing, it's usually when it is opposed to our way of thinking, or that person's lifestyle, or whatever the political terminology. For me, our perceptions change constantly, and Dad used to say something that I think is really relevant: "What you are not up on, you are down on." It is a simple little phrase, but it really speaks about what we are not informed on. It seems as if too often

our default is negative and defensive, and that is so for a lot of reasons. One of them is that we don't take time; we are in a hurry; if something doesn't fit in the pigeonhole right away, we are like, "Whoa, wait a minute . . . what's going on here? Because I have a pretty well developed set of pigeonholes. And everything should fit in and all of a sudden this doesn't." We don't see it as an opportunity as much as we see it is a problem or something in our way.

I think when I slow down . . . That was what was nice about pedaling this year: It forced us to slow down, and when I slow down it is easier to see these differences as opportunities. That is why we came out with *World Outside My Shoes*. My world doesn't really exist. It's just a little construct between my ears.

SHEPARD: I really loved one of the quotes on your website about "Seeing is believing," and how now you are more inclined to think that "I see what I believe."

WILKENS: It's huge for me. I trained as a high school shop teacher, auto mechanics and welding and all that stuff. We went to Africa freshly out of college, freshly married, to Zimbabwe. That's why our attitude is, "Show me. I'll believe it when I see it. You are all just a bunch of talk until I see some action, and then I'll believe it." Something more wonderful is how we see. So after the genocide, I saw the physical things being destroyed. And that's one of the things that challenged me. The grinding mill we installed at the clinic is hauled away, the school is devastated, the clinic you are operating in is destroyed. And you realize that what remains is the relationships. Not these physical concrete things. And that is when you shift in your thinking. It just takes you to deeper dimensions. I think that that's probably one of the greatest gifts out of that horrible tragedy, forcing me to think in different dimensions. And I think that when I talk to people who deal with great tragedy, sorrow, and hatred, some of the things that "break" us; that is, some event that makes you look from a different perspective or another dimension.

SHEPARD: So let's go back to what you were talking about in terms of "the other." Is that something we do from the time we are small children, that we make someone "other" if he or she is not exactly like us?

WILKENS: I think that is something we get from our parents and our surroundings. And then we have experiences that we fit into our pigeonhole. I think you have to navigate through life. I hate this term *pigeonhole*, but it is so useful. You can't just be making new pigeonholes all of the time. You do tend to make pigeonholes or generalizations.

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SHEPARD: Do you think that “othering” is an inherent thing we do?

WILKENS: When they asked a guy who was participating in a genocide why he did it, he said, “Because my uncle was doing it.” Because they had these models. Some families never had Blacks in their home. I have never sat down to construct where this came from.

SHEPARD: So how did you experience this construct?

WILKENS: In Rwanda, the construct of “the other” was no more profound than in any other place. I mean typically you will cite the radio propaganda that was going on. It was done in the name of equality, but still it was this building of “the other.” I think that is superficial when you look at the [high amount of] intermarriage. Wealth was sometimes an issue. And Tutsis, sometimes if you were to generalize, might have been a little better off than Hutus. But I think they start killing each other because they have “othered” them. But “other” was a part of it when it came time. I think a lot of times we don’t start “othering” people until a time of crisis. And then in a time of crisis, we want to blame someone. We want to unite people against a common enemy. And then this “othering” becomes an intentional act: “I told you you could never trust those people.”

SHEPARD: So how does hate fit into this? How do you define hate, and where does it come from?

WILKENS: We naturally think that it is hate [that is the cause]. I don’t think hate was always the key factor; I think that is important for people to realize. Right next door to hate was fear. If you are going to say hate was the big thing in the Rwanda genocide, then you have a lot of explaining to do [in light of] all of the intermarriage. There are tons of “others” [who are not treated that way]: business partners, church fellowships, beer-drinking buddies, [and people who have] shared gardens. So there are tons of examples of not being “the other,” not being “them” and “us.” I just mention marriage because it is such an easy example. So how are you going to explain that? That is why you have to look at other things in driving the genocide.

SHEPARD: How did that come to be? The fear? How did that start?

WILKENS: We had a three-year war going on and that is a huge context for fear. In a war everything is threatened: your home, your family, your health, your future; it’s great foundational soil for fear. Then you have acts of terrorism. You have a bomb go off in a taxi stand. Or some unpaved roads downtown and a semi hits a land mine. And then you get this really crazy

message from the government and they are supposed to be the ones to calm people down and say that everyone should get along, and they start broadcasting these negative messages about “the other.” In Rwanda, the main means of communication for years was your little radio; yes, you could pick up the BBC, but your main thing was the government’s one radio station. You don’t have telephones or newspapers; it’s the radio. And then maybe 18 months before the genocide, a second radio station comes along in Kinuwanda. They are really good; they have funny disc jockeys, they have new Western songs; this second radio station piggybacks on the credibility of this first one—it’s another radio station in your own country in your own language. So if you want to talk about the fear, then this radio station plays a big role. You have this radio station telling you about “the other” and they are hate messages. And then when it blows up in your city, in your block, and you fear for your life, and your wife or your grandmother is Tutsi—The Tutsis were thinking “this is stupid” all along. The international community has always stepped in, in different situations, and Rwanda has a long history of stepping in.

SHEPARD: Who are you are talking about when you say international?

WILKENS: The first line would be the French; it was a Belgian colony, but economically and politically, the French moved in after independence. So Rwanda became very tight with France; after that, the Belgians were still there, and they would come in too. After WWII there was UN involvement in Rwanda; there wasn’t the UN, but there was the League of Nations; there was this sense of international community. Probably more accurately, *colonization*, but there was a community out there, as far as the Rwandans were concerned, whether they knew it for their own selfish exploitive reasons or whether they simply knew that the missionary, the Bwana, is a nice guy. That community is there, and they always have a finger on the pulse, and what this radio is talking about will never happen because of the international community. Then you see ten Belgian soldiers being murdered, and then the UN leaves. Talk about fear! The things you have been counting on are melting away. This isn’t just fear like hysteria, which happens when guys start spraying the place with machine guns; yeah, that happens, but it is also fear based on long-standing things you thought you could depend on falling away. Then you do start to move to the more immediate fear of attacks in your neighborhood; of “What am I going to do for the safety of my wife, my children? I have to prove to them that I am a strong Rwandan, I am a real Hutu, and I don’t support these rebels.” I haven’t read a lot about it, but I know there are conversations about what part the war played in the genocide and the level of fear that would allow people to move on to

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that. And then the fear and hatred are not two clear, separate things. I think it is when fear becomes second nature and habitual that we begin to see a stronger emerging of what we might call hate.

SHEPARD: How does the concept of territory factor into hatred?

WILKENS: I think about territory and I automatically jump to land and possessions, in terms of what we identify with. One of the initial reasons we stayed in Rwanda was that there was this young lady that lived and worked in our home and helped Teresa with domestic help. When we knew that she was being threatened because her ID card said Tutsi—that was a big part of the decision Teresa made to stay. And that was based on a relationship. And while the young lady wasn't "family," she *was*. Our youngest was in diapers when we got there. She was so gentle with the kids; they loved her, my wife loved her, she was so wonderful to have in our home. She lost family members and she married a man whose ID card said Hutu. And so her little boys are growing up in a home like thousands of others; now there is no Hutu or Tutsi on the ID cards. It is amazing to me when I see a picture of her family, by typical construct measurements. She looked at me and couldn't quite get why she inspired people. She said we are all the children of God. That was the overriding construct in her mind. And if anyone had a reason to hate, it would be her. She wasn't terrified during the genocide. She was still stable and still thinking of others.

SHEPARD: How did you and your family get through that time?

WILKENS: For Teresa and the kids, it was Wednesday night until Sunday. You maintain your sanity by focusing on the kids, and I was in charge of a group of American missionaries. I had three weeks of not being able to leave my home. I did a lot of reading. I had daily radio conversations. Then Teresa went to Nairobi, Kenya, and she stayed for the rest of the genocide in Kenya. The people in my home—there was this young man, and his dad had worked for us for a little bit; those two men had ID cards that said Tutsis. Then I invited a pastor and his wife to come; he was the financial guy. Their home was in a no-man's land; that neighborhood got evacuated. I told him, "I am not leaving, and you can't stay in your home, so come." So when he came to my home, he and his wife were a huge support. Physically, she would deal with the thieves. Emotionally and spiritually, they were very mature. They were very other-focused, or outward-focused, not inward-focused. In terms of maintaining sanity during that time, being able to read, and being able to have conversations with my wife and family, and having the people in my home, really helped. My home took some bullets, but it stayed intact.

SHEPARD: How were you seen by the Rwandans?

WILKENS: Some people saw me as a thorn in the flesh, and some people saw me with great respect, and some people didn't know what to do with us. Our neighbors came and stood outside our home and stood in front of the gate, and said "You can't go in this home" [to those who came to do us harm]. So those neighbors who stood up for us, they basically said, "Their kids play with our kids." This is a really important concept in the process of rehumanizing. Often with hate, and the subject of "the other," we focus on the dehumanizing; it is essential that we focus on how we *rehumanize*. How is that going to turn a band of killers away? I can't give you the exact point when our neighbors convinced these killers to move away. I do believe that stories are the most powerful tool we have to rehumanize ourselves and others. They did not need to rehumanize themselves, so with us, they managed to rehumanize us. We are not going to do these horrible things to *us*, we are going to do it to *them*. "Them" is always less than "us." Stories—that is really what drives Teresa and our work—the opportunity to tell stories, believing that these stories will change the way people think. They won't just be those Africans that have been killing each other for hundreds of years, or they won't just be those Muslims. All of a sudden those people are going to have names, and characteristics, and acts of generosity. You are going to see acts of selflessness. Thus, it really complicates our nicely built pigeonholes.

SHEPARD: You have told me a few stories. Is there one that comes to mind when you think about this humanizing process?

WILKENS: For me, the one that comes to mind is the neighbor story, and it is the most powerful one because it could have easily been the difference of life and death for us. Earlier in the day we had heard these killers walking down the street with the furniture and the belongings of people; we heard the screaming and the killing of the people down the street from us. It doesn't get any closer than that. That night we didn't even know—the next morning we found out that the lady who was living in our house was talking to the neighbors, and they were explaining what had happened. She said, "They were at your house last night, at the gate, the gang was there, but we stood there and we came out." That blows me away. To step outside their security—they are in a mud hut with a tin roof. We are in a nice Western-style house; they are in a mud house with a tin roof and it doesn't seem secure; why step outside of that security for someone that is not even you? They could just say, "Oh those foreigners, they probably have guns; they could take care of themselves." Or they could say, "Those foreigners they probably have a phone to call for help, or their government is sending

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soldiers.” They could come up with any excuse they want. But for these people, they didn’t; they left the security of their home, they left other people in their home for a certain period of time, and they stood in front of our gate and told these stories.

SHEPARD: You had been there for four years . . . did you go as a pastor?

WILKENS: No. We were doing industrial arts for six years. After the first six years in Africa, of teaching at a school and working at a mission hospital, doing very practical things, I came back and got an MBA; then with the business and technology combination went to Rwanda as a humanitarian worker for ADRA [the Adventist Development and Relief Agency International]. I only became a pastor two years after the genocide. I didn’t go to seminary or college or anything; I just kind of got put in the job at a high school as a chaplain with a small congregation in southern Oregon. I did that for eleven years, then two years ago left that specific kind of pastoral work and am now a full-time activist and educator.

SHEPARD: How do you think people can remain hopeful when we continue to see these behaviors again and again? Where does forgiveness fit in?

WILKENS: We mean so many things by forgiveness. So you need to ask, what do you mean by forgiveness? To maintain hope you need to spend time in the lives and stories of people who will not accept hatred. They will not settle for less. There is a danger because people say that it is not real. I know it’s not the norm and it’s not average, but don’t tell me it’s not real. It is very, very real. When I spend time talking about Rwanda, I do not spend too much time talking about the horrific things, for several reasons. I spend time on what can happen when we make choices that are different from what might be expected of us. I sit down and talk to Rwanda genocide survivors and I am reminded how horrible it was. I almost have pangs of guilt. I ask myself, when I am not telling the whole story, are you disrespecting or minimizing the horror by not talking about these things when you tell your stories? I have to tell myself: Nope. I don’t shy away from visiting with survivors or the horror of it all. I was there; I was in the middle of it. I don’t deny it. So many other people are highlighting the horrors. There has to be a place to highlight the courage, the selflessness, and the willingness to go against the stream.

SHEPARD: Do you go back? Have you gone back?

WILKENS: Yes, physically and mentally. Last summer I was with a group of teachers. I took about nine high school teachers, who are teaching the

Holocaust and genocide, to have the personal experience of sitting down with survivors. When people want to deny the Holocaust or genocide, you need to sit down with the people who survived and are still trying to survive today. I think that is a huge part of rehumanizing. I am tempted to say all, but that can't be true; an unimaginably huge amount of people come away from Rwanda with hope. You think how, in a country where one million out of seven million people were killed by their neighbors, not a tsunami or an official war machine, but betrayed by a neighbor, the most intimate relationships were betrayed. You think people would come away from it shaking their heads, saying "I feel dirty," but people come away from that saying "Wow, what hope, what courage!" I may not be talking about the majority of people, but there are people who are willing to move past, not ignore and not minimize, but people who are willing to live in the present. I have hang-ups with people saying, "You've got to get over this," but when you run across people who are really being able to live in the now with genuine respect to revisit the past, but really living in the now—that is really powerful. People who are not still controlled by their past, definitely influenced by their past, but they are allowing new life experiences to continue to shape them on their journey, and I think that is probably not unique just to Rwanda; people are willing to let new life experiences shape their perceptions and their choices.

SHEPARD: How do we focus on the solutions and not get stuck on the problems?

WILKENS: I would come back to service. Service just has this huge potential. When you talk about rehumanizing and service, [there is a] story that has been told about our time during the genocide—this attempted massacre at an orphanage. The government moved the orphans from the horrible, horrible, horrible place to just a horrible place. And it really did stop the massacre, and now recent research is showing that there were two attempted massacres at the orphanage; the first one, I was there on that day and managed to be part of a team that thwarted that one. The second one, the government came to evacuate them on a day where the second one was planned, and the government aborted it. I think it was a very political move. We needed to move the orphans to this other place and there would be a massacre, so hold on to your massacre horses. When they were moved and I got word of that, I went back there to collect their belongings. I got to the second place; it was only a stone's throw away from this other place, made famous by this movie *Hotel Rwanda*. I got there and there were more than 400 orphans, close to 300 who had just been brought there; they didn't have blankets or cooking pots; they needed their stuff, and it gets cold at

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night. They wouldn't let us take anything. So I go to the colonel that is in charge; he is [now] in jail. He is a man I built a relationship with during the genocide that allowed me to do a lot of the work I was able to do. So I said to him, "Thank you so much for moving the orphans, but they don't have their stuff. Will you write me a letter authorizing me to go back there and get their stuff?" He says sure, so he writes me this letter and the secretary stamps it. He gives me the letter. I go back to the orphanage and it's deserted now, it's like a ghost town, and as I come along the right side, here are about a dozen of the militia guys, would-be massacreists with their leader, looking around, poking around, seeing what they can loot from this orphanage. And they are shocked to see me and I am terrified to see them. All of a sudden, I am thinking, "I am going to die right here, right now"; they are angry, they didn't do their massacre, they are going to kill me; they know I am connected. All of a sudden I remember the letter; I pull it out and I show it to their leader. And I think it is very important to recognize that planners of genocide, leaders of hate, somehow move to the point where they consider themselves legitimate people. We look at them as these hatemongers, these extremists, but they see themselves, and would like to portray themselves, as legitimate people. So I think it is important, as much as we disrespect what they are doing, and what they seem to be about, that we can somehow see their humanity and somehow extend to them a respect, a human treatment that can have the potential to change things. So I pull out the letter, hand it to the leader; he reads it, he sees the Colonel's signature, and says, "Oh, of course, the orphans need their things." He's in a legitimate, rational mode; so he says to his guys, "Help him load his truck." So the guys that would have been our killers a couple days earlier have now been instructed to help us load our truck. I walk in the orphanage with these guys behind me and I say to them, "Well, guys, if you could just put blankets on the floor—" so they come out to my truck with a blanket over one shoulder and an assault rifle over the other. My truck is way too small, so I ask, "Hey guys, do you know of any other trucks in the neighborhood I could rent? I will pay them well." We organize a bigger truck and we work for a couple hours, two truckloads, standing tables on end on each side of the truck to build up the truck so we can round up these orphans' belongings on this truck. By the time we are done, these two-three hours later, I am slapping the guys on the back, saying, "Hey, thanks for your help, that was a really good idea with the tables," and they were rehumanized for me, and I think I was rehumanized for them. I believe it is hugely connected to service; when we get involved in service we see a different side of people that we ordinarily would not have seen, and they see a different side of us. The typical rhetoric of the hate and the prejudice just somehow doesn't seem to stick as easily; it seems to fall off when you are working side by

side with someone else. They probably did go on to kill others, but I would like to think that they got paused and that somehow that exercise of service did somehow change their thinking. I don't know; all I know is that for that point in time when I treated them like they were rational, as irrational as they were, when I treated them human-like, they acted human. I think that is why it comes back to this concept that it is not so much believing what you see, but recognizing that you see what you believe. I believe there is a potential for good here, of course it's not like I am sitting there thinking, "Should I believe in this guy or not?" It wasn't a real rational thing, but when I expected and I looked for good—you don't always find it, but you have a much better chance of finding it if you look for it.

SHEPARD: Please continue talking about service.

WILKENS: We share so much more in common than what separates us. We've got boatloads of stuff in common, and service really helps us to recognize and see, because there is this certain level of humanity. If you haven't seen this documentary yet called *As We Forgive*, it's about how do we live side-by-side after the Rwanda genocide. This one lady refuses to forgive, which I really value, because it's not like, "Okay, everyone forgive, now we all live happily ever after." But she is involved in service afterwards, building a home for a person released from prison, and I believe there is this psychological, physical, spiritual interaction that takes places when we are involved in service that literally physiologically changes us; we know that it produces chemicals in our brain. It opens the window for a new path in our brain to be formed that we never knew could be or would have never thought of. And it is actually connected with doing something physically with your hands and exerting yourself. We know that there are all kinds of mind and body relationships and that service is one of those potentials to do that.