

## Using Rwandan Video Testimony to Understand the Patterns of Genocide

### BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE: CARL WILKENS

*This biography is derived from Carl Wilken's testimony in the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive.*



Carl Wilkens was born on November 20, 1957, in Takoma Park, Maryland, the third son of John and Edith Wilkens, a Seventh Day Adventist family. Influenced by tales of fighting discrimination such as *The Hiding Place* and *Black Like Me*, Carl first traveled to Africa in 1978 and spent a year volunteering in Transkei (southeastern part of South Africa) and later hitchhiked to Zimbabwe (Rhodesia). It was there Wilkens witnessed mistreatment based on discrimination, and according to his testimony, it opened his mind on how people can adapt to extreme circumstances.

Returning to America, Carl capitalized on his lifelong interest in fixing and repairing all things by attaining a mechanical degree in Automotive Technology and Industrial Education at Walla Walla College. He later became a high school shop teacher for four years. He married his high school sweetheart, Teresa, in 1981 and together they decided to move to Zimbabwe, where he taught and did maintenance at a school of 1200 children while Teresa worked in the business office. In his testimony, Carl says he always felt very welcomed in this African community, and the couple welcomed their first daughter, Mindy, there in 1983 and later daughter Lisa in 1986. In 1987, the family returned to the United States so that Carl could finish his MBA. Son Shaun was born in Maryland in 1988.

In 1989 a job opportunity to head the Adventist Development and Relief Agency International in Rwanda was presented, and the family returned to Africa, according to Wilkens, to “make a real difference.” In the testimony, Carl explains that they loved the sense of humor, community, and acceptance in Rwanda, so after six months of French language training in Europe, the family moved to Kigali in the spring of 1990.

According to Carl's testimony, Carl was too busy running five health centers and building five primary schools to be occupied with observing discrimination, and for the Wilkens' family there wasn't much distinction between Hutus and Tutsis. Carl stated, however, that anyone could see a gradual war between the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and the Hutu-led government. Also inside their home, the family employed two Tutsis: Anitha, who worked in their house three years before the genocide; and Janvier, who was their night watchman. They became important to Carl's evacuation decision as the genocide drew near.

On the evening of April 6, 1994, President Habyarimana's plane was shot down, and the genocide began. Wilkens and his family remained in their home until they received word that all foreigners were ordered to evacuate. Immediately, the Wilkens' began hearing gunshots and killings in their neighborhood. One late evening during the genocide's first week, the Interahamwe came to their gate armed with machetes and rifles to presumably kill their family and loot the house. Remarkably, the Rwandan women of the neighborhood managed to run off the killers, telling them about all the kindnesses of the Wilkens' family. Carl is convinced the relationships his children built with the Rwandan community saved their lives.

When the Kigali embassy closed and all foreigners began to evacuate, Carl made the decision that he would not leave. He could not abandon the two young Tutsis who worked in their home. So while his family evacuated to Nairobi, Carl, Pastor and Mrs. Seraya of the Adventist church, and the two workers remained for 21 days inside his home before venturing out to begin humanitarian work. Carl Wilkens was the only American to stay in Rwanda during the genocide.

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#### Carl Wilkens Cont'd

According to Carl's testimony, from May to July of 1994, Carl ran food and medicine to the Gasimba Orphanage and other places of refuge for Rwanda's Tutsi population. He orchestrated the rescue of 12 people from Nyamirambo into the safety of the Mille Collines Hotel. He used his diplomatic skills to convince war crime perpetrator, Colonel Tharcisse Renzaho, to provide security and transportation for those in his care during those weeks and once approached the prime minister of Rwanda when militia threatened the 400 orphans in Gasimba and convinced him to intervene. These negotiations helped to save countless lives as did his constant sacrifice of personal safety.

When the RPF finally gained control of Kigali on July 6, Carl, according to his testimony, remained behind to help in the rebuilding efforts. He returned briefly to Rwanda in 1995 to continue reconstruction, but since 1996 has traveled the world telling his story and inspiring young people that one person can stand up and make a difference. In 2011, Carl Wilkens published his memoir of his genocide experience in *I'm Not Leaving*. His advocacy and anti-genocide campaign led to the creation of World Outside My Shoes, "a non-profit educational and professional development organization committed to inspiring and equipping people to enter the world of 'The Other,'" which he and his wife run.