

*Tribute to Courage Issue 3*

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## "A TRUE HUMANITARIAN"



## A TRIBUTE TO CARL WILKENS

*"Carl has the heart of a true humanitarian. This single individual, acting on his own, made the decision to stay, without a gun, with no weapon with which to defend himself but his inner strength. This is true proof of his bravery. This needs to be strongly emphasized."*

**- Damas Mutenzitare Gisimba**

*"In a way I don't quite understand it myself. He said: "I can't leave Rwanda. I'm staying with them. If they die, I die with them." Carl had nothing to gain by what he did. Yet he offered us his life. He's a hero, a true hero. I wouldn't know what he deserves as a reward."*

**- Thomas Kayumba**

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## DEFINING AND CELEBRATING COURAGE

When Carl Wilkens made the decision to remain in Rwanda in April 1994, making it possible for him to save hundreds of lives, he was only 36 years old. As the country director of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), he refused to abandon his Rwandese colleagues and friends to almost certain death, in the process keeping countless strangers out of harm’s way. Understandably, most international staff in Rwanda left in the early days of the genocide, many of them reluctantly. Carl Wilkens is the only American known to have stayed in Rwanda during the genocide of the Tutsi minority. Throughout the spring and summer of 1994, he risked his life to seek out safe havens for those in danger within Kigali and to transport them to safety, to obtain and deliver much needed water, food and money to hundreds of people in hiding, and to ward off threats by standing up to the perpetrators.

In 2002, *African Rights* published *Rwanda: Tribute to Courage*, a collection of remembrances from survivors and witnesses of the genocide, told publicly for the first time, which paid homage to 17 individuals who defied the genocide to rescue lives. Since then, *African Rights* has continued to research the identities and actions of those who shielded people from violence and death, and to record the gratitude of survivors. In the face of genocide, it is easy to focus on why it occurred, how it unfolded, who was responsible for it and how it was allowed to take place. But it is also important and necessary to understand how and why certain individuals rejected the call to violence and indifference, and by doing so, upheld the values which define our common humanity. Their examples arm us with new insights in the fight against genocide and crimes against humanity in the future.

This edition of the *Tribute to Courage* series chronicles the extreme challenges, dilemmas and dangers that confronted Carl Wilkens as he faced up to his decision to defy the genocide, revealing his remarkable determination and resilience, and ultimately his successes, in saving those targeted in the violence. Many of those who owe their lives to his bravery found it hard to express their appreciation. Yet all agree that his selflessness in the face of a conflict on which he could have easily turned his back, illustrates the meaning of a true hero.

As a foreigner living in Rwanda, Carl could have made the choice to leave with the other expatriates, yet he felt a singular obligation to the people of Rwanda, the country that had been his home for four years. The few outsiders who withstood the dangers and who tried to intervene during the darkest days of the genocide will forever hold a special place in the hearts of survivors.

## INTRODUCTION

No one could have imagined or predicted the scale, speed or nature of the tragedy that would engulf the small country of Rwanda in the spring of 1994. A land of green rolling hills, where neighbours of differing ethnic groups lived side by side, shared the same culture, language and religion, and often intermarried, it became the site of large-scale massacres in an attempt to eliminate the minority Tutsi population. Within three months, from 7 April-4 July, between 800,000-1 million Tutsis are estimated to have died, with countless others left widowed, orphaned, physically wounded or psychologically scarred.

On the evening of 6 April, the plane carrying President Juvénal Habyarimana was shot down as it approached Kigali airport, killing all on board. This was the trigger—and the pretext—for extremist Hutu elements within the government and the armed forces to orchestrate and launch the genocide of the Tutsi minority, blaming them for the President’s death. They argued, in addition, that Habyarimana’s assassination was only the beginning of a Tutsi plot to kill all Hutus who must, therefore, strike first in self-defence.<sup>1</sup> Almost instantly, politicians, civil servants, local government officials and military officers began recruiting bands of killers amongst the population, the militia began searching homes and roaming the streets in pursuit of Tutsis, and radio stations began transmitting messages calling for the extermination to commence. The killing was carried out principally by the army and gendarmerie, and by members of the interahamwe militia. But through the use of racist propaganda, the cultivation of a climate of fear, and promises of economic benefits, leaders were able to convince the Hutu majority population, in overwhelming numbers, to join in the killing spree. The degree of popular participation in the genocide was unprecedented in the world. Many Tutsi men, women and children were betrayed, directly or indirectly, or murdered, by their neighbours, friends and even their own family members.

Within a few days, the city of Kigali was plunged into chaos and terror, the body-strewn streets and mass graves a potent indicator of the progress of the genocidal campaign. Carrying a Tutsi identity card was an invitation for almost certain death. As many Tutsis sought refuge with neighbours, or in trusted havens such as churches, schools, or other public buildings, many of these gathering places became the site of huge-scale massacres.

Yet amidst the horror which unfolded, there were men and women, both Rwandese and foreigners, who did not falter when confronted with the dangers and the physical and psychological reality of the genocide. Carl Wilkens, an American raised by missionary parents, was one such individual. His fearlessness and generosity made it possible for him to preserve the lives of hundreds of Tutsis. Many were strangers, some were close friends and members of his own staff. He worked indiscriminately to safeguard their lives within the capital of Kigali where he was based.

<sup>1</sup> From October 1990, until the signing of a power-sharing agreement, known as the Arusha Accords, in August 1993, Rwanda was embroiled in a war between the government of President Habyarimana and the Rwandese Patriotic Front, [RPF], a rebel group whose troops invaded from Uganda. The RPF was made up largely of the children of Tutsis who had been driven into exile in 1959 and the early 1960s. In December 1993, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda [UNAMIR] arrived in the country to oversee the peaceful implementation of the Accords. An uneasy peace held until 7 April 1994, the day after the President’s plane was shot down, when the war resumed. From then until 4 July, when the RPF took control of the country, Rwanda experienced both a genocide and a war to stop the genocide.

## **“A STRONG SENSE OF COMMUNITY SERVICE”**

Carl Wilkens first came to Africa in 1978 as a volunteer, taking a year off from college to work at a mission school in the Transkei, South Africa. He returned to the US to finish his bachelors in industrial education and, having “fallen in love with the continent”, he and his young wife, Teresa, returned to Africa in 1981, settling in Zimbabwe where he taught school for four years. Their first daughter was born in Zimbabwe. In 1985 the family moved to a remote hospital in Zambia where Carl was responsible for purchasing and maintenance; their second daughter was born in Zambia. In 1987, after six years in Africa, they moved back to the US where Carl studied for an MBA at the University of Baltimore and where their son was born.

In 1990, the Wilkenses returned to Africa again, this time to Rwanda. Carl said he found his background in business and technology useful in his post as the country director of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), which worked primarily to build schools and operate health centres around the country. When the war began in October 1990 between the government and the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF), ADRA began assisting people living in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs). Carl’s secretary at the time, Amiel Gahima, remembers Carl as “a very dedicated, tireless and diligent person who worked hard and long hours.”<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Niyindorera, now the Finance Director at ADRA, began working with Carl in 1990.

He always felt a strong sense of community service to those around him, and especially to ADRA staff. For me, he wasn’t only a director, but also an intimate friend who had helped me in many ways in the past.<sup>3</sup>

Valence Nsengiyumva, a long-time construction worker for ADRA, became acquainted with Carl when they worked together on a project in the north of the country.

There was a lot of destruction then from the war in the north and ADRA had a project for malnourished children. Carl was collaborating with MSF Holland to create health posts in the IDP camps. At that time I could see that he was a good man. Whenever he saw malnourished children, ill mothers etc..., he was moved. He wanted to do what he could, as fast as possible. He’d even come and spend the night in the camps with me. This is when I got to know what kind of a man he was.

Carl’s character became even clearer during the months of April-July 1994.

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<sup>2</sup> Written testimony sent to *African Rights*, 12 April 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Interviewed in Kigali, 10 December 2004.

## **Refusing Evacuation**

During the first few days of the genocide, Carl and his family had to barricade themselves in their home, listening to the radio for news. He spoke of the first restless night that the family spent sleeping together in their hallway amidst the sound of artillery fire and gunshots.

When the screaming, the shouting, the shooting started within our neighbourhood, we knew this wasn't just RPF and government soldiers.<sup>4</sup>

But at that time, most people believed that the fighting would end quickly. Few could imagine in those early days that a well-organized plan of extermination was already underway.

As it became increasingly evident that the violence had the potential to overwhelm the entire country, embassies and international organizations made the decision to send their expatriate staff out of Rwanda. As the director of ADRA, Wilkens was the point of contact for organizing the evacuation of foreign Adventist missionaries and pastors in Rwanda, and was in close contact with the staff of the US embassy to arrange the logistics of their departure. Carl was taken aback by the speed with which the plan was put into place, saying, “It was just so fast.”

Most foreigners were taken in trucks to neighbouring countries, and Carl and his family were instructed by both the American Embassy and his superiors at ADRA to join them. However, from the start, Carl and his wife, Teresa, were hesitant. Praying for guidance on how they should proceed, they decided that Teresa would go with their three children and Carl's parents, who were visiting at the time, but that Carl would remain behind to see what he could do to be of assistance.

Every once in a while, Teresa and I would go back to the bedroom and we would talk, because we had made a decision that I wouldn't evacuate. We would pray, and I'd say: “Does this still seem right?” and she said: “Yes, it does.”

It was, Carl said, “much tougher for her, much tougher to leave someone you love in that situation.”

When the call finally came for Carl and his family to meet the group of Americans who were to be transported by truck to Burundi, Carl was in radio contact with Laura Lane, the political security officer at the American Embassy. He told her that he was sending his wife and children over to the ambassador's house to join the others.

She came back and said: “Wait. What do you mean you're sending your family?” I said: “Well, Laura, I'm not leaving.” She said: “No, you don't understand—other times there were options. There's no option this time. You have to come out with them.” I said: “Laura, as a private citizen, I think I can make that choice, and I have to [stay].” ... [So] finally she says: “You need to write down that you've refused the help of the U.S. government to evacuate.”

By the time Carl made his decision, says Emmanuel Niyindorera, he had little doubt about the gravity of the situation.

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in PBS Broadcast, Frontline: Ghosts of Rwanda. Available at : <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/ghosts/interviews/wilkens.html>. Posted 1 April, 2004.

He was well aware of what could happen to him: gunshots, assault and theft by the interahamwe. But he was more concerned about what was taking place here. He didn't see how he could say goodbye to the country given the circumstances. He had so many people to think about, including us, the staff.

What Carl said he felt, above all, was sorrow in seeing the country, which had come to mean so much to him and where he and his family had spent four years, forsaken in its hour of need.

This sadness just kind of came over me, because if people in Rwanda ever needed help— and I mean [Rwanda] was really blessed with a lot of aid organizations and everything else—but if they ever needed help, now was the time. And everybody's leaving.

In the early days of the genocide, Kigali was tightly controlled by the extremists from the old government, including political and military figures, and militiamen. The United Nations Assistance Mission to Rwanda (UNAMIR) had a small number of troops on the ground, sent to monitor the Arusha Accords, which outlined a power-sharing agreement between the government and the RPF. Yet, when a group of ten Belgian soldiers were murdered on 7 April by government soldiers, a strategic move meant to frighten off foreign intervention, the international community lost the political will to try and stop the killings. Without the mandate or the men to intervene in an effective manner, the UN forces could do little to rein in the killers.

Many of the men and women who attribute their survival to Carl's interventions are themselves at a loss to understand his decision. Thomas Kayumba, who was the construction supervisor of an ADRA health centre in Byumba, spoke for many others when he commented:

All the foreigners left, but not Wilkens. He was still young. To take leave of his little children and his wife, to give himself to the Rwandese people, I don't know how to explain it.<sup>5</sup>

Emmanuel believes that the plight of children as a result of the fighting was an enormous pull.

Why do I think he stayed? I think out of a humanitarian feeling, to see if his presence could make a difference, regardless of the consequences for him. Carl could see all the killing, including the murder of the Belgian soldiers. I don't think he thought he would be exempted. But seeing the children's suffering, he decided that it was better to put his life on the line and to try and do something about it.

He reflected on the strength of character that Carl's decision demonstrated.

He did not act as he did in order to be seen later as a hero, but out of an extreme humanitarian love that made him forget about himself. Normally, as human beings, we tend to try and shield ourselves from danger. But to go as far as he did and to reach a point that you forget about yourself, that is not common. I'd say, as a Christian, that it might not even be human.

Yet Valence was not surprised by the choice he made.

Since I knew how much he wanted to help people, the fact that he did not leave didn't shock me. He'd worked with IDPs, he knew the situation and how they were living. I once asked him the reason and he said: “Honestly, I can't desert people when they are facing such terrible times.”

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<sup>5</sup> Interviewed in Kigali, 16 March 2006.

Carl’s own explanation is rooted in his relationship with people, and his sense of responsibility for their security and well-being. He thought about the fate of his Tutsi colleagues and friends, and about his housekeeper and his guard, who were both Tutsi.

Sometimes the hardest questions almost have the simplest answers, and yet in their simplicity, we almost don’t believe it. For a while, when people would ask me why [I] chose to stay, I would try to go into some detail [about] that Tutsi young lady and that Tutsi young man [who worked for me]. [They] were [the] faces [of the victims of the genocide], representing the country and I felt if I left, they were going to be killed. ...

The first three weeks, I never left my house, and I was wondering, why did I stay? What am I doing? [Then I realized] the two people in my house [were] still alive, and I [was] very grateful for that.<sup>6</sup>

### **“Bold and Life-Saving Interventions”**

Carl spent the first three weeks of the genocide in his house, as he himself pointed out above, because of the travel ban in place in parts of the capital. He spoke daily with his wife, who was in Nairobi with their children, and said that he found her “an incredible source of courage and inspiration during those 100 days.” After three weeks, the government announced that heads of organizations and businesses would be permitted to go to their offices to check on the security of their buildings.

When he finally ventured out, he found that movement within Kigali was under tight control, and that a system of roadblocks had been quickly constructed throughout the city, manned by frenzied militiamen, often drunk or intoxicated by the adrenaline of killing, and on the lookout for anyone with a Tutsi identity card. Even for those who were not Tutsi, these roadblocks were a constant menace. As an expatriate, Carl could navigate through the roadblocks more easily, but it was nonetheless hazardous, and nearly impossible to drive Tutsis through them unless accompanied by armed soldiers. With stray bullets and mortar shells exploding all around, and under fire from both sides of the fighting, just leaving the house was a perilous undertaking.

Using the connections that he had developed through his years of working in Rwanda, Carl approached powerful authorities, including Colonel Tharcisse Renzaho<sup>7</sup>, the préfet [governor] of Kigali, who had the power to issue orders to those in charge of the most dangerous roadblocks around the city. Carl negotiated with Renzaho, and received permission to move around Kigali to deliver humanitarian assistance to those in need. Saying that they recognized the value of his work, Emmanuel Niyindorera explained that the authorities later gave Carl a vehicle.

He even went as far as getting hold of a truck from the préfecture of Kigali after the ADRA vehicles were taken by force. No sooner was it given to him than he went out to distribute water to places that were sheltering refugees.

Carl kept busy on many fronts: delivering food and water, securing food and supplies, finding hiding places for people, and even trying to convince the perpetrators to halt attacks. Thomas is thankful that a certain Rwandese proverb did not apply to Carl.

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in PBS Broadcast, Frontline : Ghosts of Rwanda.

<sup>7</sup> Col. Tharcisse Renzaho is currently in the custody of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in Arusha, Tanzania. For more information, see *African Rights* Charge Sheet No. 6, “Col. Tharcisse Renzaho: A Soldier in the DRC?”, October 2001, 23 pages.

There is a Rwandese saying, *Ihwa lyumva nowo rihanzo*, meaning that “you can only feel the thorn if it pricks you.” But Carl could understand. He felt our pain.

Like many Rwandese who dared to oppose the killings, Carl hid a number of Tutsis in his home, including Valence Nsengiyumva.

I lived with Carl during the genocide because my place wasn't safe. My mother was there and a pastor. There were also about 20 children in a house nearby that he looked after. I saw that he was a practising Christian. He felt so deeply moved to reach out to people in distress. Really, I don't know how to express it. What I saw is that if someone came to him with a problem, even if he didn't have the money, he showed that he wanted to lend a hand.

Carl especially went out of his way to check on his Tutsi employees, seeking them out in the places where they were waiting out the genocide, and passing along money. Through another ADRA employee, Carl located Thomas' refuge and made sure he had the means which enabled him, and even some neighbours, to survive.

He sent Hutus who were working with ADRA to see if we were alive or dead. By the time Carl contacted me, the food in the house was almost finished as we shared it with the neighbours. And when I started getting money from him, I shared that around too.

Though many of Carl's acts will surely go unrecorded, the memory of his kindness lives on in the hearts and minds of many Rwandese. In addition to individuals that he met or knew, Carl also sought out large groups of Tutsis who had congregated in orphanages and churches, bringing them water and food, and in some cases approaching the very people responsible for the killings, proving his determination to keep them alive.



## **“BECAUSE OF HIM WE WERE ABLE TO LIVE”**

### **Gisimba Orphanage**

Before the genocide, the Gisimba Memorial Centre, an orphanage located in sector Nyakabanda, Nyamirambo district of Kigali, and run by Damas Mutezintare Gisimba, was home to about 60 children. But after 6 April, the Centre took in nearly 300 Tutsi children, women and men. Some were concealed within the ceiling; others hid in the bedrooms, all the time fearing discovery by the interahamwe militiamen who repeatedly came to search the orphanage for Tutsis.

### **“When I Saw Him Coming, I Felt In My Heart That I’d Have Water To Drink”**

Life at the orphanage changed overnight with the sudden influx of refugees. The lack of space was compounded by dwindling rations of food and water, which now had to be shared by so many people. While there was some food in the stocks, it was impossible to look for water for fear of being kidnapped by militiamen.

Carl became aware of the situation when a man named Tatien, a friend of Gisimba’s from their secondary school days, intervened. Tatien, concerned about the large number of hungry refugees there, took the initiative to contact Carl. Gisimba recalled their first conversation about Carl.

When Tatien saw the enormous crowd there, he immediately told me about a white person he had seen at the office of the préfecture asking for permission to feed all those in need. I couldn’t go out and fetch this white man myself, so Tatien decided to go and find him and to tell him about the hardships we faced.<sup>8</sup>

Two days later, a vehicle pulled up at the Centre.

The car had ADRA written on it. The man who got out was Carl Wilkens. He told me everything that he knew about the situation in our area.

He asked to have a look around, and Gisimba accompanied him as he assessed the conditions.

He was completely shocked. With tears in his eyes, he wanted to know if I would be able to cope with the responsibility that had been placed on my shoulders. I told him that I had already received threats from the interahamwe, but that the biggest problem by far was looking after all the children. We no longer had any water, the food stocks were empty, and at the very least we needed some milk.

Carl made no promises, but returned a few hours later.

Carl came back at about 3:00 p.m., again with his car, but there was also a truck carrying four enormous barrels full of water. He also told me that he was going to try and find some food for us and milk for the babies.

He visited the Centre again the following day to deliver what he had been able to salvage.

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<sup>8</sup> Interviewed in Kigali, 13 September 2005 and 3 March 2006.

He told me that the area where their supplies were kept had become a war zone. The interahamwe were looting everything and no one could go near the place. But even so, he brought us some milk for the little ones, the one they call Milex.

Because they did not know his name, Alphonse Kalisa<sup>9</sup>, one of the youngsters at the orphanage, said they first took to calling him ADRA or Charles.

Over time, reaching the orphanage became fraught with tension because of the presence of militiamen. “But somehow,” Damas added, “Carl managed every time to find a way to bring us something, be it milk for the babies, water or food.”

Just how acute the water shortage was, and the consequences, was underlined by Jean-Baptiste Habyarimana, an orphan who was 12 years old at the time.

There were a lot of people here at the Centre, children, men, and women. If you have no water to drink or to prepare food or porridge in the morning for the children, it’s miserable. We were dirty, everywhere smelt and we sweated so much. But we couldn’t go out. Before Carl started coming here, things had really become impossible.<sup>10</sup>

Water was available in the neighbourhood, but as Jean-Baptiste remarked, they were afraid to go and look for it. Alphonse touched on the reasons why.

Before Carl’s arrival, we used to go and fetch water from the Electrogaz reservoir. But access wasn’t easy because there were interahamwe nearby and it was the only place providing water for everyone in the area. Only the strongest could get that water.

The provisions that Carl delivered for the refugees and orphans met their immediate needs and hugely improved hygiene and their living conditions, but his visits also lifted their morale, as Alphonse remarked.

We would be happy when we saw him coming because he brought us water. We didn’t eat a midday meal and we were hungry and thirsty. That’s to show you how much we needed water.

Like all the children, Jean-Baptiste came to associate the sight of Carl with the availability of water.

I didn’t know him before, but when he arrived, things got better. When I saw him coming, I felt in my heart that I’d have water to drink. We were so thirsty and hungry, so it was through him that we were able to live. He was a man with a lot of strength.

Richard Cyubahiro, another of the boys living in the orphanage, was not only impressed by this stranger’s dedication, but by the fact that he persevered in coming to the Centre, despite the evident dangers.

He never stopped looking after us throughout the genocide, right to the very end. Once we noticed a bullet hole in his windscreen. Apparently it was a stray bullet. We thought this might stop him from coming to visit us, but that never happened. He continued with his work.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Interviewed in Kigali, 7 March 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Interviewed in Kigali, 7 March 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Interviewed in Kigali, 7 March 2006.

Years later, Damas Gisimba continues to marvel at the challenges that Carl endured every time he visited the Centre.

His car became the target of acts of aggression. One day it would be a flat tyre, the next a hold-up with the sole aim of demoralizing Carl. But he had a real determination. He wasn't afraid anymore. Sometimes he would even walk home on foot, since his car was such a magnet for the interahamwe.

He wanted to make the orphanage a safe haven, no easy task given the resolve of the local militia to force entry and to flush out any Tutsis they found there.

### **“That Was A Tough Day”**

In addition to the massacres of Tutsis, and the war between government soldiers and the RPF, which were raging on outside the walls of the orphanage, groups of militia repeatedly visited the Centre, and their offensives were only thwarted by the quick thinking of Gisimba and others to conceal the refugees' presence. It was only a matter of time before the refugees were discovered, and most likely killed or raped.

Frustrated at their inability to corner the refugees within the Centre, the interahamwe devised another tactic: to lure Gisimba away, leaving the orphanage open to siege in his absence. Gisimba described how he was called to a meeting with a man named Phocas, the director of RTLM radio station<sup>12</sup>, supposedly to discuss the plight of the orphans. Unaware of the plot, Gisimba set out for the meeting.

One day RTLM called me to say that the minister of social affairs wanted to see me. It was a strategy, I learnt afterwards, to get me out of the Centre so that they could at last go in and kill all those inside. So I went to the offices of RTLM without ever thinking that it could be a trap.

When he reached RTLM, the director told him that he had a friend who worked with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), who was willing to give a hand to the children at the orphanage. Together, they headed out to find this man, Philippe Gaillard, at ICRC headquarters.

Philippe welcomed us in and asked Phocas to prepare some coffee. While he was out, Philippe warned me, saying: “Watch out for this man.”

By chance, Carl arrived at the orphanage shortly afterwards to offload the water he had brought. He found it surrounded by militiamen, waiting for the signal to begin killing. Among the huge group of men, Alphonse noticed the presence of Grégoire Nyirimanzi, the councillor of their area, sector Nyakabanda.

There were a lot of people armed with machetes and other weapons. They took us completely by surprise. When Wilkens saw what was happening, he called someone on the radio. After waiting for ten minutes for the signal from the councillor to start the killings, we saw the councillor come and stop them. We didn't know why he made this decision. Normally Wilkens would go straight home after giving us the water, but that day he stayed with us.

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<sup>12</sup> Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), a private station, was a primary vehicle used to transmit messages of hate during the genocide. Several men who were closely associated with RTLM have been charged with incitement to genocide by the ICTR.

At the ICRC, Gisimba was unaware of what was taking place until a telephone call from Carl.

An ICRC employee came in with a call for Philippe. It was Carl calling; he was inside the Centre. Philippe passed me the phone and Carl told me to stay exactly where I was. He said: ‘Don’t move, stay with Philippe. The orphanage is surrounded by no less than 100 militiamen. They are waiting for me to leave; they can’t do anything while I’m here. I’ve spoken to them. I’m going to stay. I can’t leave.’

With Carl at the orphanage, Gisimba made his way to the Parish of Saint Michel. Carl stayed put at the Centre until he found four gendarmes to keep guard. Entrusting the orphanage to them, he set out in search of the préfet, to ask him to intervene. When he reached his office, he was told that the prime minister, Jean Kambanda, happened to be in the office at that time. He was sceptical, knowing that the prime minister was one of the primary figures responsible for planning the killings, but taking his chances, Carl introduced himself to the prime minister on his way out of the building.

When you’d get into situations where you’d look for an ally, you’d look around for some sign of sympathy, whether it was just a look or a glance, and you’d appeal to that part in them. And so, when the prime minister comes out with his entourage, I stand up and say: “Mr. Prime Minister, I’m Carl Wilkens, Director of ADRA.” And he looks at me and says: “Yeah, I’ve heard about you and your work. How’s your work going?” I say: “Not well sir, all the orphans are going to be killed.” He stops and confers with assistants. Turns back to me and says: “I’m aware of the situation and we’ll see to the security of your orphans.” And he was gone.<sup>13</sup>

Kambanda made a phone call, calling off the ambush. Whether it was out of respect for Carl’s work, or for some other motive, is unclear.

Afterwards, Carl went to find Gisimba, to brief him on what had happened.

That day, he promised me that he would try to evacuate the Centre.

“That” said Alphonse, “was a tough day.” And he knows that it would have ended in tragedy for them but for the unplanned presence of Carl Wilkens.

We thank him very much for what he did for us that day, since anyone else would have deserted us. He gave us so much, as the situation was very precarious because of the war. The roads from Nyamirambo were blocked; there was a lot of shooting and bombs were falling everywhere like rain.

Fearing another attack, and worried that he might not be there to stop it, Carl approached the authorities and began to arrange for the children and the refugees to be relocated to Saint Michel Cathedral. It was not, commented Gisimba, an easy process.

He met the préfet to ask for authorization. Carl persevered for ten days and in the end he managed to get two buses to transport them.

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Montgomery, Michael and Smith, Stephen, ‘The Few Who Stayed: Defying Genocide in Rwanda.’ American Radio Works. NPR News.

After Kanombe military barracks fell to the RPF in late May, many of the soldiers relocated to Nyamirambo. In June and early July, they combed the area for Tutsis who might still be alive. Richard was therefore relieved when Carl told them they were going to be taken to Saint Michel.

He told us that it was for security reasons because there was fighting in Nyamirambo. We were glad to be going there because some refugees at the Parish of Nyamirambo had recently been killed. The interahamwe were nearby and we thought we would be next. When we left the Centre, I wasn't sure whether we'd be killed or not.

Under Carl's watch, the children and the refugees were taken on buses, which Carl had organized. Accompanied by one of the leaders of the interahamwe, the buses were escorted to the Cathedral, passing through roadblocks without incident.

Gisimba credits Carl as the driving force behind the move.

Carl organized the entire operation on his own; he accompanied the bus, and he himself negotiated with the head guards at the roadblocks all the way until Saint Michel. I knew nothing about it, except that I recognize Carl's utmost courage during these difficult moments. He even carried on afterwards. He never left us.

Carl later discussed these events at the Centre with Emmanuel.

He told me that saving the children from Gisimba's orphanage was really not easy because he had to face the soldiers directly and had to ask permission from Kambanda. By then, people had become insensitive to the killings, making such a request even harder.

Caring for the orphans and refugees at the Gisimba Centre was a task in itself, but Carl nevertheless found the time and energy to look after other groups of refugees and of orphans sheltering around the city.

## **VAITER ORPHANAGE**

An orphanage in Gitega, run by a Frenchman named Marc Vaite, is another place where Carl Wilkens is remembered for his kindness. Prior to April 1994, the orphanage looked after 16 children orphaned by HIV/AIDS, providing them with a mid-day meal. Plans had been made to add a dormitory where the orphans could sleep. But during the genocide, the number grew to 98 children, sharing a modest house with four rooms. Some of the new children came to the orphanage on their own, others were picked up along the road, and some had become separated from their parents by the war and genocide.

The sudden arrival of so many children placed an enormous strain on resources, as Jean Vianney Nduwamungu, who worked there, pointed out.

We didn't have anything to eat; we didn't have water.<sup>14</sup>

The staff, which included Anne-Marie Niyonshuti, was overwhelmed by the influx of orphans, and were thankful when Carl appeared.

The first day that I saw Carl, he came in a white truck with blankets for the children, plastic containers for water, different kitchen materials, and a lot of other basic things that the children needed.<sup>15</sup>

When there was nothing left to drink or wash with, it was Carl who volunteered to go in search of water and firewood.

I honestly don't know where he found them because no one dared to go out. He was very brave and he also encouraged Marc to not give up.

Jean Vianney was uncertain how Carl came to know about their orphanage when he first turned up in April.

He was in a white Toyota Corolla with ADRA SOS written on it. He only spoke English. None of us spoke a word of English. Marc had to find an interpreter. At first we didn't know his name and we called him ADRA SOS.

The need for food was so evident that the lack of a common language was not a barrier.

Carl brought us biscuits, vitamins and canned food.

With killings taking place all around, anyone thought to be hiding Tutsis, or associated with them in any way, courted trouble. Jean Vianney described how Carl nevertheless continued to deliver food and other items to the children.

Our children regarded Carl as their saviour, the man who wanted to keep them alive and to appease their hunger. Almost all the other foreigners returned to their homes at the beginning of the genocide. Wilkens could have done likewise. But he decided to put people's lives first. Only a hero could make such a decision. He was truly exposed, for example at all the roadblocks guarded by the militia. Also, to shelter a Tutsi was to save the enemy, and therefore one also became an enemy. He, alone in his white car, was able to save lives and circulate at a time when UNAMIR,

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<sup>14</sup> Interviewed in Kigali, 19 October 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Interviewed in Kigali, 3 November 2004.

although they had more means and were there for this purpose, was not able, or was not willing, to fulfil its mission.

As the fighting escalated in the area around the orphanage, the fate of the children and staff living there became uncertain. According to Anne-Marie, Carl took the initiative, at this crucial time, to relocate the residents to Saint Michel Cathedral.

A shell had just been thrown at our house and a part of it had been damaged. When the bomb exploded, all the children were outside the house. A child and I were the only ones who were affected.

Carl gave us everything, and did everything for us in a war where it was nearly impossible to filter news out to the world. He too could have been killed, but he took a chance, for the sake of others.

To effect such a transfer, Carl was obliged to ask politicians and local officials to pave the way, as Jean Vianney recalled.

Carl went to negotiate with a deputy préfet charged with social affairs in the office of the préfecture in Kigali named Aloys Simpunga. Simpunga made it possible for us to make our way to Saint Michel.

At Saint Michel, Jean Vianney worked with Carl as he continued to make food and water available to the orphans and staff.

Carl had to redouble his efforts and take even more chances. We didn't have food or water. To find water, we had to search for it in a very dangerous place, in Nyarugunga, under the bullets and the shells coming from the two sides at war. The RPF was in Rebero, and the FAR was in Mburabuturo. Carl never complained and never hesitated. He went straight there without fear. Imagine that we had to fill ten barrels under this rain of bullets and bombs while taking care not to be killed!

With the advance of the RPF, the fighting became more fierce. I was afraid to go out, but Carl didn't stop bringing us water, biscuits, vitamins and canned food. One day, when nobody could go out, he brought us water. I don't know how he succeeded in filling the barrels and transporting them because he was alone. Later I learned that the favours he did for us, he extended to a lot of other refugees holed up in their hideouts.

The children and employees of the orphanage remained at Saint Michel Cathedral until the end of the genocide.

## **“CARL WAS THERE, WAITING FOR US” From Nyamirambo Adventist Church to Milles Collines**

Feeling unsafe in their homes, many Tutsis throughout the country sought sanctuary in churches. Though some pastors and clergy defended the refugees who came to their parishes—many of them their parishioners—some churches became sites of horrendous massacres.

When the genocide began, a small group, most of them women, made their way to the Adventist Church in Nyamirambo, including Emmanuel Niyindorera, ADRA’s finance director.

Esther Ntabana lived in a house on the church property. With one roadblock at the church gate and one just to the right of her house, there was, she said, “no way out.” She hid in her house with her daughter, Caroline, enduring harassment and assaults by soldiers who ransacked her home. She was joined by others who had first gone to the church and “waited for death.”<sup>16</sup>

Marguerite Mukarugwiza<sup>17</sup>, Esther’s niece, was studying at an Adventist hospital in Ngoma, Kibuye. She came on a visit to Kigali on 5 April, staying with Catholic nuns in Nyamirambo. She lived in their convent for nearly two months, and became increasingly apprehensive as one by one, the Tutsis who had assembled there were taken away to be killed. Others, including Marguerite, suffered beatings.

On 30 May, she left the church to find Esther’s house. By the time she arrived, she was dehydrated and exhausted.

Carl learned about the refugees at the Adventist church in Nyamirambo when he sent an ADRA employee to check on Emmanuel.

Carl dispatched Dassan Hategekimana, who worked for ADRA, to find out if I was still alive. He realized, in advance, that I would probably be very hungry, so he gave the man some money, which reached me by way of people who knew where I was. He never stopped sending me money to buy food, through the channel of an ADRA employee, Elisée Gasigwa.

Françoise Umulisa paid tribute to a Hutu pastor, Jonas Baramé, who she said alerted Carl to their plight and did what he could to ease their hardship. But with almost no water or food, daily life was a continuous struggle.

Esther had about five kilos of beans and three kilos of flour in her house that we lived off. We ate very little. We would drink the water from the beans. We used the water that was meant for baptisms in the church. It was dirty but it enabled us to survive.

Their hunger and thirst was compounded by fear as the interahamwe militia came in search of Tutsis to murder and items to steal. With each visit, they became ever more aggressive and, on a number of occasions, led people away to be killed. Françoise recalled an occasion when two women and five men, including one called Elie, were dragged out and shot.

Because Carl had been sending ADRA staff to monitor developments, he knew just how desperate the situation had become within the church. Béatrice Mukamurengera, then 18, was

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<sup>16</sup> Interviewed in Gitwe, 23 March 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Interviewed in Kigali, 27 March 2006.



living at Esther’s house. She described how Carl continued to check up on them and to make preparations to resettle them somewhere out of the reach of the militiamen.

Although I was young, I was convinced that we would make it, thanks to Carl.<sup>18</sup>

The telephone conversations between Carl and Pastor Baramé, during which Carl sought their news, were a chance for Baramé to ask for intervention on their behalf. These phone calls, along with the messages passed along through the ADRA employees, bolstered the refugees’ hopes.

Carl often sent Gasigwa who told us: “Carl asked me to tell you that whenever he can find a vehicle, he will come for you.”

Afraid that the militia intended to kill everyone in the church, and buoyed by the news that Carl had succeeded in evacuating the Gisimba Centre, Esther decided to send a message to Carl.

I wrote Wilkens a letter. In it, I said: “If there’s anything you can do to help us, now is the time.” I gave it to Dassan to take to him. Wilkens sent a reply with Dassan, saying: “I’m going to try. I have no way of moving around myself, but I’ll do my best.”

Things came to a head a few days after Marguerite’s arrival on 30 May. When the militia descended on the church the night of Friday 3 June, the refugees refused to let them enter the premises. Undeterred, they returned the following morning, angry and armed. Marguerite had little doubt that they were going to die.

Six of them came in and stationed themselves at all the doors and then Fidèle, an interahamwe who was the son of Pastor Bitusha, came and told us to pray with him.

Just then, Pastor Baramé said he wanted to speak to Esther and asked us to come outside. We were so close to death that we didn’t care anymore. We went out and I took my bible. We found a truck waiting with soldiers inside. I had no idea where we were going; I thought maybe to the Nyabarongo River to be killed.

When Béatrice saw the soldiers, she too was convinced that they had come as backup to the militia. But the way Pastor Baramé spoke to the interahamwe left her uncertain.

Baramé came in and asked the militia: “Are you going to kill these people when there are soldiers outside who were sent by Renzaho to take them away?” We didn’t know where the soldiers had come from, or why they were there.

It was only when Baramé told Esther of their mission that her fears were allayed.

He said the soldiers were there to take us to where Carl was. He then went to look for those in the baptism pool, and he gave them cloths so the interahamwe would not know they were men. Once we were all in the vehicle, they covered us with a tent so that we would be able to pass through the roadblocks. There were about 12 of us.

Assured by the pastor’s explanation for the presence of the soldiers, Esther watched the reaction of the interahamwe.

Baramé also told the men to come out as soldiers had been sent. When the interahamwe saw the soldiers, they just stood there, completely still, because they didn’t know what was going on.

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<sup>18</sup> Interviewed in Nyamirambo, 27 March 2006.

There were six soldiers in a Toyota pick-up. They told us to sit in the pick-up and they sat around us because the interahamwe wanted to kill us right there.

The ride through Kigali was a perilous journey because of the numerous roadblocks, which they could not have crossed but for the armed soldiers who accompanied them. The arduous journey, with its numerous stops, made Françoise feel as if they were travelling from “Bujumbura to Kinshasa.”

There were gangs of interahamwe with machetes along the road. They stopped us at Gitega and said: “Are these the Tutsis going to the Mille Collines Hotel? We’ll go and kill them even at the Mille Collines.” The journey felt like such a long way. All along the roadside there were bodies; I never thought that we would get out alive. But somehow we reached the Mille Collines. Carl Wilkens came through for us at the last possible moment. This was God’s work.

The sights and sounds they saw and heard reinforced their apprehensions, as Emmanuel noted.

All over the road you could see dead people and there was a lot of shooting. There was a roadblock every five metres. The really menacing roadblocks were at Gitega, CHK [the main public hospital], Cyahafi, Radio Rwanda and the office of the military tribunal.

When they reached the Mille Collines, they found Carl waiting for them. He gave them clothes, food and water and obtained rooms for them at the hotel. Guarded by UN soldiers, it was one of the few places in the city where Tutsis were safe.

Béatrice spoke tearfully of their reunion with Carl.

When Carl saw us, he began to pray, saying...

Unable to continue, Béatrice was overcome with emotion.

I couldn’t understand how a stranger like Carl could take pity on us, while our fellow countrymen were chasing after us with machetes. I just couldn’t comprehend that at all. I thought that he was an angel who had come from heaven. Imagine finding someone who was not carrying a machete, when you had just spent time living in fear of being killed. I remember that he gave us a big box of Nido [powdered milk] and some clothes. He even gave me a pair of his wife’s pants to wear. Carl gave us everything he could.

The refugees later discovered that Carl had been responsible for organizing their escape. Esther learned the details after speaking with him.

He told us that he first went to look for some people who were in charge of human rights at UNAMIR. But they said they couldn’t do anything because whenever they tried to evacuate people, they were killed right in front of their eyes. So then he went to see the préfet, Renzaho, the very same man who used to torture us mentally, saying that he would kill us. Carl said he told him: “I heard your voice on the radio saying that people shouldn’t be killed anymore and that the interahamwe should stop killing. So I’m asking you to evacuate my workers.” The préfet then apparently asked where they were, and Carl told him in Nyamirambo church.

Emmanuel also discussed the operation with Carl.

He made use of the fact that his organization’s services were well known in order to get authorization for some of his employees to carry out his humanitarian work. He convinced the préfet to send a vehicle with a convoy of a major and seven armed policemen to collect us from

*“A True Humanitarian”  
A Tribute to Carl Wilkens*

Nyamirambo. I doubt he told them it was a plan to save us, but perhaps that he needed some staff to help in his humanitarian efforts.

Thanks to Carl, the 12 refugees in the church narrowly eluded death.

## **THE END OF THE GENOCIDE**

After three months of intense fighting, Kigali fell to the RPF on 4 July, and the interim government and FAR soldiers fled south<sup>19</sup> or across the border into Zaire, Tanzania and Burundi. Many of the survivors, including those at the Mille Collines, were taken by the RPF to Kabuga, on the outskirts of Kigali.

As one of the very few people providing humanitarian support within the war zone in Kigali, RPF soldiers asked Carl to help them find water sources and to organize relief efforts for the residents of Kigali, where much of the infrastructure had been destroyed. Emmanuel, who worked alongside Carl to carry out this task, said they went to Rubunga, Greater Kigali, to search for food and water.

Emmanuel was moved to see the efforts that Carl made, though exhausted by his work over the preceding months, to get urgently needed food and water to as many people as possible.

He did what he could to quench the thirst of the refugees at Saint André, in Urugwiro village and elsewhere. He also tried to supply the camps in Nyamirambo and Kacyiru for the internally displaced, distributing water and biscuits.

Thomas Kayumba and other survivors from his area were taken to St. André College in Nyamirambo. Because of the contact they had established through intermediaries, Thomas was not surprised when Carl came to look for him on 4 July, the very day that Kigali fell.

Wilkens came to see if people he knew were still alive. He'd bring us water at St. André. There were 12,000 of us. He'd bring a huge truck with Gasigwa to supply everyone with water, and food too when he could. He'd come, offload the water and go straight back for more.

He also gave us clothes and a bit of money, since our funds were depleted. He helped us right up until the day we left for Kabuga.

He did not lose sight of the refugees even in Kabuga, but checked on their well-being and facilitated their return to Kigali, as Béatrice described.

We were brought to Kabuga by UN soldiers. There, as well, Carl did not desert us, but came to visit us several times. Even afterwards, when we returned to Kigali, it was Carl who made arrangements for our journey. He transported us from Kabuga to the regional stadium in Nyamirambo.

Carl had tried to reach as many ADRA employees in hiding as possible during the three months of the genocide, as described earlier. For those who had spent the genocide outside Kigali, he travelled to check up on them as soon as the killings came to an end. Carl did what he could for them as they dealt with the aftermath of the genocide, facilitating reunions with their missing relatives and helping them to patch their lives back together. Thomas described how he and Carl set out together to trace his family.

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<sup>19</sup> In June 1994, the French Government established a safe zone in the southwest of the country, as the RPF forces captured more and more territory. Known as Zone Turquoise, it was intended to create a contained area of the country in which peace could be secured and humanitarian aid provided; yet, many of the government officials who had orchestrated the massacres were allowed to flee to the area.

My wife and kids were in Gitarama. Wilkens and I went to look for them there after the genocide. We found them somewhere in commune Ntongwe where the *inkotanyi* had gathered together all the survivors in the region.

It is little wonder, he said, that Carl “had become so thin when he left Rwanda.”

Norah Bagirinka first got to know Carl Wilkens in 1992 when she was working at the dental clinic affiliated with the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Kigali. During the genocide, she and her husband were stationed at the Adventist Mission in Gitwe, Gitarama. Immediately after the genocide, Carl went to Gitwe to look for her.

He was very surprised to see me because he thought that I had died along with the many killed at Gitwe.<sup>20</sup>

He then gave her money “to start life again”, and channelled food and utensils to the community in Gitwe through ADRA programmes.

With people displaced all around Rwanda, and given the confusion and practical impediments in the wake of the genocide, it was not easy for Carl to locate all of his staff. Yet he persisted, driving around the country to find out what had happened to them. For Amiel Gahima, who spent the genocide in his home village, the unexpected encounter with Carl after the genocide was an emotional reunion.

As we walked past the town of Gitarama towards Kigali, I abruptly saw a pick up truck with the ADRA flag. The vehicle suddenly stopped as it approached us. I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw Carl Wilkens coming towards me from the vehicle. As he saw me, emaciated and frail, carrying my three-year-old son on my shoulders, he was in tears.

Amiel’s astonishment grew when he saw his younger brother, who he thought had died, standing next to Carl.

It was such a happy, startling and tearful reunion for us. Wilkens had been looking for me and found my brother. My other brother received medicine and food from Wilkens as he searched for me.

Carl then turned his attention to ensuring that Amiel and his family, and other survivors who were with them, had the means to begin their recovery.

He then took me and my two kids, my brother and many other people, back to our village. He brought food, clothing, money and other necessities for us for a couple of months while I recuperated.

He would drive from Kigali to my home village to come and console me in the cool evening hours. He sought me out years after the genocide, and came with his family, to comfort me, knowing how much I went through. I know for sure that he cares a great deal about me, and about many other people.

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<sup>20</sup> Written testimony sent to *African Rights*, 10 April 2006. For more details about the massacres at Gitwe, see *African Rights’* Witness to Genocide Issue 16, “*Jean Damascene Rutiganda: A Free Man in Belgium?*” June 2006, 43 pages.

## **TRIBUTES “A True Humanitarian”**

The survivors who owe their lives to Carl Wilkens found it hard to express their feelings, to articulate the full significance of what he did for them, and to measure what he has come to mean to them. Searching for words, many spoke with tears in their eyes, or broke off in mid-sentence. All of them welcomed the opportunity to speak about Carl, not only to record their memories of him, but also to make his contribution to resisting the genocide better known.

For many of those interviewed for this report, the relevance of Carl’s actions go beyond individual acts of altruism and courage; they reflect the core essence of humanity. For others, they embody what it means to be a Christian in an overwhelmingly Christian country. The following words of tribute are indicative of the appreciation of the hundreds of Rwandese people Carl rescued, for whom his example of compassion, generosity and determination live on as a lesson for others.

But for Carl Wilkens, Emmanuel Niyidorera knows that he would not have been one of the lucky ones. He wishes that “everyone could have done as Carl did.” If they had, many of his relatives, friends and colleagues would be alive today.

People have good memories of him. The reason that I’m here today is thanks to his intervention. If he hadn’t taken us, we would have perished, as so many others did. The day that I was evacuated, the other Tutsis in my area were killed and thrown into mass graves. I would probably have been among them if it weren’t for Carl. If all missionaries had been as firm, and had brought a strong message to stop the killings, I think they could have changed things.

He can feel proud now to know that so many people are alive today because of him. He must feel traumatised by knowing that so many died. But at least when he comes back to Rwanda, he can find joy in seeing all those who survived.

Emmanuel attended a sermon given by Carl in the Remera district of Kigali in December 2005 where the fruits of his labour in 1994 became apparent.

A man stood up and said: “I’m glad to see you because thanks to your work during the genocide, my daughter is alive today.”

His presence during the tragic events of 1994 has crowned him a hero in my eyes. He sacrificed himself entirely and for that, he deserves our respect. It is our duty to count him among Rwanda’s friends.

Personally, I praise God who used him to shield me. I want to express my utmost gratitude to him. And I wish him and his family all God’s blessings.

Valence Nsengiyumva attended another sermon given by Carl that same month, this time in Nyamirambo, one of the sites where he had concentrated his efforts in 1994. He was not surprised by the turnout and the warm welcome he received.

There were so many people who wanted to meet him and shake his hand. There must have been about 3,000 people at his service. Everyone here in Rwanda should congratulate him and show him their appreciation. Everyone.

He has a good heart. It’s not something studied, but rather his way, his character. He’s now a pastor and I think he should continue to be a pastor.

The violence directed at them by fellow-Rwandese—including hostility from relatives—in contrast to the concern and compassion from a foreigner who did not even know them personally is what Françoise Umulisa struggles to make sense of.

Wilkens did everything to help us. He did this because he has a heart. Or it was God working through him. There were a lot of foreigners here who didn’t do anything, but he suffered a great deal on our account. He gave money so we would not be killed. Every time I think of it... He didn’t even really know me, or some of the others... It’s hard to explain.

Unable to contain her emotions, Françoise broke down in tears. When she was able to speak again, she returned to the contrast between the actions of a man who did not know her and the stance of friends, neighbours and relatives who did.

There are so many Rwandese who were here who could have helped, but when we went into their homes, they’d say “get out” and we had no choice. But Wilkens... he’s white and I’m black and yet he was there for us. Maybe he doesn’t grasp what he did himself. When I think of those days, I pray. And every time I pray, I pray for him and I think of him.

Béatrice Mukamurengera, one of the refugees at the Adventist Church in Nyamirambo cannot imagine a gift to offer Carl which could reflect the weight of his actions, or the depth of her own feelings.

When I think of him, I realize that there is nothing I can offer him to express what I feel. What can I give him? Nothing. It’s possible that he doesn’t even remember me any longer, but I have a lot to say about Carl.

It is rare to find a person who chooses to endanger his life, literally put himself in the path of bullets, simply as a gesture of love, for the sake of human lives. I can give him nothing. God alone can give him what he deserves. God will judge his actions on earth, and will offer him eternal life.

She would like someone to put her in direct contact with Carl.

I could then at least greet him and tell him what he represents to me. If he hadn’t been there for us, we would have all been killed as we had no way to elude the killers.

Carl recently came here to the church in Nyamirambo. And each time he preached, he would cry. We all cried as well, for we understand just what Carl means to us. In our eyes, he is an extraordinary man.

Aware of the wider implications for Rwanda, she asked the government to make a gesture that pays respect to “those who sacrificed themselves in the name of a cause which brought them no personal benefits.”

This sentiment was echoed by Amiel Gahima, who called for his government to officially honour Carl.

Carl Wilkens should be recognized nationally as a hero. I’ve been saying this for more than ten years now.

He spelt out his reasons.

He put his life on the line, committed his own family to God’s care, and left the comfort of his home to serve the people of Rwanda at the risk of his own life. I doubt in fact that you will hear all the stories of his bold and life-saving interventions. He saved so many people, and in so many ways, that the exact number will never be known.

But he himself “is sure about two things.”

The first is that God Himself will reward him for his sacrifices. Two, the people of Rwanda, whether they know it or not, owe Wilkens so much for his unequalled service to our country at a time when the whole world deserted us. He must be held out as a national hero and be treated in a manner which shows the world that what he did was worthy and praiseworthy.

Amiel welcomed this report as a platform for discussing a subject close to his heart.

There are so many things I could say. What I can tell you is that every time I think of him, I remember something special. So thank you for the opportunity to tell you about the man I admire most, a true hero and a wonderful friend of mine.

Thomas Kayumba wants to “do more than merely thank” Carl.

Very few people did what he did, despite the fact that there were many with greater resources. Only God knows the reward that he merits, and God will bestow it on him on our behalf.

When a person does something good without any thanks, they can never quite know the true value of what they have done. Wilkens’ actions should therefore be hailed; they should be made known to inspire others to be as good-hearted as he was.

He drew out the lessons inherent in how Carl chose to confront the genocide.

His actions teach us a lesson in devotion to others.

This is why, he argued, it was critical to publicize his deeds.

It is discouraging if we allow what he has done to be forgotten. We need to support good people with a little recognition. He should be written about in the newspapers. He did something great because he reached out to the people who were abandoned. We can’t give him what he deserves, but we can pray that God will.

In a way I don’t quite understand it myself. He said: “I can’t leave Rwanda. I’m staying with them. If they die, I die with them.” Carl had nothing to gain by what he did. Yet he offered us his life. He’s a hero, a true hero. I wouldn’t know what he deserves as a reward.

Thomas spoke at length about the particular responsibility of the UN to acknowledge Carl Wilkens’ enormous contribution to challenging the genocide.

He took on the responsibility the international community was not able to shoulder. Personally, I had lost faith in the international community. I was therefore astonished to see that there was a foreigner who cared about Tutsis in danger.

He carried out UNAMIR’s mission alone. If there had been five or ten people like him, they would have accomplished UNAMIR’s work. He rescued people even though he had no weapons.



The Security Council should do something for him, because he succeeded where they failed. He took on their work, except that he was alone. He did something great.

Comparing the spontaneity and steadfast nature of Carl’s decisions and actions, with the constraints and confusion that hampered the international community’s involvement in Rwanda, Damas Gisimba commented:

Carl has the heart of a true humanitarian. This single individual, acting on his own, made the decision to stay, without a gun, with no weapon with which to defend himself but his inner strength. This is true proof of his bravery. This needs to be strongly emphasized.

He praised his strength of character and his dedication to others.

He is fearless in the face of every obstacle. He battled against just about every hurdle he encountered. He is afraid of nothing and takes chances for the sake of others. He cares about other people, not just about himself; he is an extremely generous man. It’s not easy to put into words the kind of person that Carl Wilkens is. He is a good man. He is emotional but always has a smile on his face. He brings hope to everyone.

Aged only 12 in 1994, Jean-Baptiste Habyarimana, an orphan living at the Gisimba Centre, saw Carl as the man who brought them water. With the passage of time, he has come to realize the significance of his visits to the orphanage.

As I’ve grown up, I’ve become conscious of the fact that he acted very differently to others during the genocide. While Rwandese were killing each other, he, a foreigner, gave his life for us. To be a good person has nothing to do with the colour of someone’s skin or religion. It’s in the person’s soul. What he did can’t be measured with money.

Unlike other foreigners who saw what was going on and who left, Carl saw the injustice and stayed. He could have left with the others, but he didn’t. He remained and did what he could without an armed force. If he had had one, he would have stopped the genocide.

Time has also taught Richard Cyubahiro, another youngster living at the orphanage, to grasp what was at stake in 1994.

I feel indebted to him. But since I myself can’t show him just how much, I hope he wins the Nobel Peace Prize! I can’t put a value on what I owe him, so the Nobel Peace Prize would just be a symbol of his efforts so that everyone can be aware of what he did.

Alphonse Kalisa, also from the Gisimba Centre, has taken the point made by Thomas to heart, and dwelt on what the world should learn from Carl’s example.

In this world, the normal thing is for everyone to look after themselves and their own personal interests. But I saw Carl’s actions with my own eyes, and they were truly heroic.

Few people dared to do what he did. Firstly, he was a foreigner. While other foreigners left with their families, he preferred to rescue people, even if it would cost his life. He had a true human heart. Wilkens had options, but he stayed and consoled us.

I wouldn’t know how to describe what he did for us. When I compare him to other people, I realize just how humane he was. He came to visit us again after the genocide and we were all very happy to see him. He is amongst the first people that I would put in the category of heroes.

For a number of survivors, including Marguerite Mukarugwiza, the conversation turned to a discussion about Christian values. Marguerite could list 58 members of her family from before the genocide; now only a handful are alive. In her mind, Carl epitomizes the Christian values that are important in her life.

I can see now that Wilkens was God’s messenger. I don’t know if someone who was not guarded by God’s spirit could have done what he did. He didn’t want to go abroad despite the trauma that he and his wife had faced, despite what he witnessed on the roads.

A lot of priests and people of the Church did nothing, not even for their own relatives. But Wilkens stood by us even though he wasn’t even from the same race. He practised the love of God.

I don’t know how to explain him. I saw bad men. I saw others who were not as bad. But I’ve never met anyone like Carl. If you think about the fact that even in the hospitals, there were white people who walked out on their workers, then you see that he’s a true Christian. By that I mean someone who practices what he preaches.

The stamina and physical courage shown by Carl, and the toll it took on him, is what Anne-Marie Niyonshuti remembers above all.

Carl waged his own battle for us. The fact that he allowed himself, a foreigner, to walk outside with all the horror and danger, is incomprehensible for those who didn’t live through the situation. Very few people took such risks. And he himself certainly faced threats as everyone knew that he brought aid to those who were called “the enemies of the country.” To persevere, as he did, required exceptional bravery. He himself didn’t have time to eat because he was taking food to others. There was a moment where he appeared physically worn-out.

## **“Rwanda is Part of Who He is Now”**

After the genocide, Carl Wilkens went back to America. He returned to Rwanda with his family in February 1995, to work again with ADRA and the administration of the Adventist Church. He spent another year and half in Rwanda and said: “It was both a privilege and healing to be a part of the rebuilding process.” In September 1996, he moved to the hills of southern Oregon, in America, where he became an Adventist pastor. He now works as a chaplain at the Milo Adventist Academy in Days Creek, Oregon.

His experience in Rwanda shaped his decision to become a pastor.

In Rwanda, [I] began to see that I love building stuff with my hands, and I love doing construction and I like building schools and clinics. But in Rwanda, you’d see those things destroyed; and you recognize the only thing that really lasted was relationships and what was happening between people.

Up till the genocide I was very much into building and development, especially on the physical side of things. It was extremely satisfying to install something as simple as a grinding mill at a clinic that would encourage a mom to come and get her baby vaccinated while having her life made easier by not having to pound her grain by hand. Then comes the genocide with its horrible episodes of betrayal. Betrayal among family, friends and community. It was made painfully clear that while grinding mills are great, relationships have been tragically undervalued in terms of intentional planning, guarding their integrity, and plain old time—giving them the time they deserve. So while I still recognized the huge needs on the physical development side of things, I felt strongly called to the relationship side of things. An individual’s relationship with God, his/her understanding of their own identity, and our relationships with family and community, have all now become the focus of my life. I get plenty of opportunity to impact these areas in my work as pastor/chaplain at a high school. Put that together with the fact that I love being with people of all ages and I can honestly say I’m living my dreams.<sup>21</sup>

For the past two years, Carl has been travelling around America, visiting schools, universities and colleges to speak about his experiences in Rwanda, raising awareness about the genocide as well as fundraising for projects in Rwanda. From time to time, he returns to Rwanda, to visit friends and former colleagues, and to spread a message about reconciliation based on his own experiences and his faith. Those who knew him in Rwanda before and during the genocide, like Emmanuel, find him unchanged. They are clearly very pleased, if not surprised, that he has maintained a strong link with Rwanda. But they also worry about the toll that the genocide must have taken on him.

Emmanuel met up with him during his last visit to Rwanda in December 2005, and his delight, as well as concern for Carl, is evident from his words.

I was so happy to see him again. He is still the same man.

Whenever he refers to the story of Rwanda there is emotion; he tends to cry. I hope the level of trauma didn’t affect him too much. What he saw was abnormal. Any time that he refers to the genocide or to the story of Rwanda, you can see that it’s very hard for him to talk about it. You can see he has memories.

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<sup>21</sup> From a note written to *African Rights*, 2 December 2006.

When Damas and Carl meet in Rwanda, their conversations inevitably turn back to the momentous events of 1994 that brought them together.

Carl is like a brother to me. We are good friends and will continue to be for the rest of our days. We lived through a great deal together, so we remember a lot. Those of us who are alive have a duty to tell the world what happened. We want to talk. Not just because it’s important to tell our children, but it’s also a kind of remedy, a therapy.

From talking to him, he believes that Rwanda has now become part of what defines Carl.

Rwanda is part of who he is now. He was here in December to make a documentary, but it wasn’t the first time he came back. He returned with his whole family to show them all that we had lived and seen together.

Even though Carl does not live in Rwanda, in Amiel’s words, “part of his heart remained in Rwanda.”

He must now be convinced, more than ever before, that he did the right thing. His experience with Rwandese people changed his life and will affect his life forever.

Like the other men and women who took a stand against the genocide, Carl Wilkens’ contribution is a powerful testament to the fact that a single individual can, even under the most daunting circumstances, make a critical difference in the lives of others. Amiel, who continues to find inspiration in the example he set, best summed up the symbol that he represents.

What Carl Wilkens teaches us is that if we dedicate our lives to loving and serving others, as we would have them do unto us, no power can overcome us. And even if it did, at least we would have done what is right for us and for others.