

VALENTINA PEREDA & WILFREDO GOMEZ THE REFORMATION OF AN 18TH STREET HITMAN

DEFIANCE #031
WITH PETER MCCORMACK



DEF031 - VALENTINA PEREDA & WILFREDO GOMEZ INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

THE REFORMATION OF AN 18TH STREET HITMAN

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Peter McCormack 00:02:54:

What's the accent there? Is that LA accent?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:02:57:

Yeah. I grew up in the states, California, Los Angeles.

Peter McCormack 00:03:00:

You were born there.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:03:02:

No, I was born down here in El Sa...

Peter McCormack 00:03:03:

You were born here.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:03:04:

Yeah.

Peter McCormack 00:03:05:

When did you move out though?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:03:06:

I was 11 when I left.

Peter McCormack 00:03:09:

Okay. Do you remember much of that when you're?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:03:11:

Yeah, I remember some.

Peter McCormack 00:03:13:

So what was the change like, from here to LA?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:03:16:

Well, it was chaos, poverty, extreme poverty. And then to a wannabe dream, I guess, American dream.

Peter McCormack 00:03:27:

Which part of La was that?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:03:29:

West Los Angeles, and South Los Angeles.

Peter McCormack 00:03:32:

Okay. West is in. How close to Venice?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:03:36:

Not too close. That's the beach area. I'm talking about like, Staples Center.

Peter McCormack 00:03:40:

Okay. All right. Okay. Where the Lakers play.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:03:43:

Yeah. Pico-Union, Latino area.

Peter McCormack 00:03:46:

Latino area. Okay. And then south, which regions?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:03:51:

South Central Los Angeles 82nd and fifth row.

Peter McCormack 00:03:54:

Okay, that's pretty dangerous down there. Right?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:03:55:

It used to be. Not anymore.

Valentina Pereda 00:03:56:

Not anymore.

Peter McCormack 00:03:59:

But they've redeveloped it. There's some nice restaurants there.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:04:02:

Well, back in the days it used to be ghetto.

Peter McCormack 00:04:04:

Yeah. Okay. And then when you first moved across, so you were 11, did you settle into school okay?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:04:12:

Well, actually, it was a pretty shocking experience going into a different country, different culture, different language, discrimination, a lot. Trying to fit in into a new culture.

Peter McCormack 00:04:30:

Did you speak any English when you moved?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:04:32:

No. Not one bit.

Peter McCormack 00:04:34:

Did you move with both your parents?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:04:36:

Yeah. Both of my parents.

Peter McCormack 00:04:38:

Did they speak any English?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:04:39:

My dad? Yeah.

Peter McCormack 00:04:41:

He did.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:04:42:

Not so my mom.

Peter McCormack 00:04:43:

And by what age were you speaking English?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:04:46:

Maybe when I was like 14, 15.

Peter McCormack 00:04:49:

So a few years to settle in.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:04:49:

Yeah, I was fluent.

Peter McCormack 00:04:51:

So with that, does that mean you were naturally drawn to a Latino crowd of people who, culturally were the same, you could talk to, knock around with the same kids.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:05:02:

I guess, somehow I was, I wouldn't call it forced. But I was attracted to it because I was trying to fit in, in a different culture. And gangs were like a big thing back in those days, and their style, the way they looked, their popularity, that kind of attracted me and I saw that a way of fitting in, being accepted.

Peter McCormack 00:05:31:

Right. Okay, I get it. So, before we jump into that, I also want to talk a little bit to Valentino about the film because this is the connection. You're a lot more into this than I am. My experience of El Salvador is very small right now, what happened, all right. In December, I was in an event in Uruguay and Michael said, "Oh, you should come check out El Salvador."

Peter McCormack 00:05:51:

And two days later, I was there. And then I went away. And after my experience coming in, because my only knowledge of El Salvador is, not the capital of the world, most dangerous in the world. So I expected to come into a war zone. And actually I didn't feel, I felt relatively safe.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:06:10:

Much threatened.

Peter McCormack 00:06:11:

No, I didn't. It's a beautiful place as well.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:06:13:

Yeah, it is.

Peter McCormack 00:06:14:

And that reputation actually is a shame because a lot of people would visit here. So I wanted to learn a bit more. I did go down the gangs rabbit hole, because I've been looking at UK gang crime in Scotland and in London trying to look at the patterns. There are some differences. There are some similarities.

Peter McCormack 00:06:33:

And then I've got a broader interest globally, but I'm very early. So there's a lot I don't know, the depth of my knowledge is, I know of the two primary gangs, 18th Street and MS-13.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:06:43:

MS-13.

Peter McCormack 00:06:44:

But I have a cliched view that everybody is covered in tats, big white t shirts, long blue shorts, and the white socks, right? And I didn't see anyone who looked like that, when I came to Los Angeles. But I want to learn a bit more. So yeah, thank you both for joining us.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:07:01:

Thank you.

Peter McCormack 00:07:01:

So let's talk a bit about the film first. You are a journalist. How did you come to start making the film? And was there an original plan? Or did you go into just to find the story?

Valentina Pereda 00:07:15:

So I moved here at the end of 2016. I used to live in Washington, DC, I worked at the Obama White House, part of the communications team. And I was doing all of their Hispanic press, and part of my portfolio was Latin America, and specifically the northern triangle. And when I was at the White House, I remember there were of course...

Valentina Pereda 00:07:42:

I wasn't at the White House in 2014. But in 2014, there was a big crisis at the border with a lot of minors coming from Central America. And then there were subsequent waves of migration. I mean, there's always been irregular migration from Central America to the U.S. But I just remember sitting there in the meetings with all of the top, top top level government people, all of the intelligence that you could possibly imagine, and everything was basically boiled down to the gangs.

Valentina Pereda 00:08:12:

It was everything we ever talked about in Washington that these people, there was a

humanitarian crisis. These people are fleeing a war zone. The gangs are just completely destroying everything, right. And I remember at the time, of course, there was the Clinton Trump election and I remember joking, saying that if Trump were elected, I would move to El Salvador and kind of study the gangs myself.

Peter McCormack 00:08:37:

Because you didn't think you would.

Valentina Pereda 00:08:38:

I never thought.

Peter McCormack 00:08:38:

Nobody ever thought you would.

Valentina Pereda 00:08:40:

I never ever thought that that was going to happen. But I told enough people by then, and then he got elected. And so I said, well, I guess I'm going to move to El Salvador. So that's what I did. And I've been here ever since.

Peter McCormack 00:08:55:

Are you El Salvadorian?

Valentina Pereda 00:08:56:

No. Actually I was born in New York, but I'm a Venezuelan dissent.

Peter McCormack 00:09:00:

Oh, Venezuelan dissent.

Valentina Pereda 00:09:01:

Yeah.

Peter McCormack 00:09:01:

Interesting.

Valentina Pereda 00:09:02:

I know. You were just there.

Peter McCormack 00:09:04:

We were just there for two days. Well, we could have a whole conversation about that. I'll talk about that at the end.

Valentina Pereda 00:09:08:

I know. I was there in 2017, covering a bunch of different things over there. But Venezuela's different.

Peter McCormack 00:09:15:

Yeah, I've got so many different thoughts about Venezuela and a wide range of topics. But again, I mean, we had a great time. I loved it. Food.

Valentina Pereda 00:09:26:

Yes. Amazing.

Peter McCormack 00:09:26:

Food was really good, really good. Okay. So we'll come back to that. So why was it El Salvador though?

Valentina Pereda 00:09:30:

Because El Salvador, from my view was the epicenter of the disaster. I mean, you do here of course, there's gangs all over Central America and Guatemala and Honduras, et cetera. But it always seemed like El Salvador was the worst. And I wanted to go to the place where people feared the most and said that things were at the worst. So I moved here.

Valentina Pereda 00:09:56:

I mean, everything we ever heard was El Salvador, El Salvador, El Salvador, so that's why I moved here and I wanted to see and Just like you just said, I was expecting to roll up here and see these tatted up people everywhere almost like, just AKs or something. And when I moved here, in fact, the first year that I was here, knowingly, I didn't come across a single gang member almost the first year that I came here, and I was frustrated. I was like, "Well, where's the gang?" Nobody wanted to talk about it.

Valentina Pereda 00:10:22:

I mean, very naively, I'd go ask people, like, "Can we talk about the gang?" And they'd be like, "What are you talking about?"

Peter McCormack 00:10:31:

What are you doing here?

Valentina Pereda 00:10:31:

You know. Everyone was like, "You're crazy." And so I didn't get the access that I needed the first year. And then by the grace of God, as some of us would say, I stumbled across this church, and it's been ever since. That was in October of 2017. And right around the end of that I started very... it was very low budget filming with NAS7-S2, back then I had a partner that was helping me, a little bit at the beginning.

Valentina Pereda 00:11:02:

But then from that, it's just been me with my camera, with Will, and following Will's life, and following the evolution of this church, and it's completely different than what I expected that I would encounter.

Peter McCormack 00:11:21:

So I've seen the trailer.

Valentina Pereda 00:11:22:

Thank you.

Peter McCormack 00:11:24:

I just want to see the film now. But I've seen the trailer, just cards on table, I'm not an overly religious person. But quite interestingly, I'm very supportive of religious projects, because if that is a tool to bring people together, to change their lives, I have no problem with that. That I think is a good idea. But I saw the trailer.

Peter McCormack 00:11:44:

Well, you'll probably know this, but during my research, expecting the cliché and the tattoos and everything, somebody actually said to me, the thing about the tattoos is that most people don't get them here because they identify you as a potential gang member. And you don't want to be identified as a potential gang member.

Peter McCormack 00:12:02:

So starting at that point, where the clichés start, let's go through some of the myths as well. But the cliché appearance of a gang member is... That comes from me seeing footage in prisons, and also seeing footage in America. So why do we have this kind of cliché view of how gang members will look when here in El Salvador it doesn't appear to be that?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:12:28:

Well, I guess, an American Gangster is something totally different than a Salvadorian gangster. It's two different worlds, two different cultures, nations and you got to take into account the poverty that this country has. Back in the States, wearing a pair of Nikes, a white T. That's the thing to do out here. People can't afford a pair of Nikes.

Valentina Pereda 00:12:54:

Right. Can't afford tattoos.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:12:56:

Can't afford tattoos. And I guess one of the reasons why, not a lot of people get tattoos. Well, now a lot of people get tattoos, it's part of the culture now, it's growing. It's becoming more accepted for you to have tats, and for you to express yourself that way. But, probably about three to four years ago, it was like a taboo for you to get tats. It was like you putting your life in jeopardy, because you could be targeted as a gang member, and therefore be discriminate as one.

Peter McCormack 00:13:34:

Right? How connected are the gangs here, MS-13 here to MS-13 in the U.S. and 18th

Street here to the... Are they actually connected in terms of structure of the gang, or are they just identifying themselves as being associated?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:13:52:

I feel that, that's part of the history that both gangs have. 18 and Ms both of them were born in America. They were created in LA.

Peter McCormack 00:14:07:

I did not know that.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:14:07:

Yeah. And then MS and 18 were deported, members, there were Salvadorians that fled this country during the Civil War. Eventually got in trouble back over there in America and therefore got deported, came over here and became founders of these gangs, these groups. So somehow they identify themselves with America because that's their roots.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:14:35:

Now, as far as being connected, I feel that... Yeah, they probably have some type of communication, but they don't share the same ideology. They don't have the same rules. They don't have the same structure. As a matter of fact, they don't really sympathise with each other.

Peter McCormack 00:14:53:

Okay, let's deal with both gangs first. There is actually more than the two gangs I am aware but these are the primary two.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:15:00:

The biggest.

Peter McCormack 00:15:01:

What is the difference between the two gangs? Why would you join one or the other? Was it just purely based on geography? What are the differences between the two?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:15:10:

Well, back in the days, one was thought to be a original Salvadorian gang, which is MS-13. And in the other one was thought to be a Mexican American gang, which is 18th Street. So maybe that's the only difference there is.

Peter McCormack 00:15:30:

Right?

Valentina Pereda 00:15:31:

I mean, 18 has always been known to be a much more open gang. They've had black 18th Street members. They've had people from all different-

Wilfredo Gomez 00:15:39:

But so has MS.

Valentina Pereda 00:15:39:

Yeah.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:15:40:

They had Oriental people.

Valentina Pereda 00:15:42:

Now. Yeah.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:15:44:

Asian people.

Valentina Pereda 00:15:44:

But before MS was exclusively Salvadoran in its origins, and then it has expanded.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:15:53:

Yeah. Because it wasn't a gang at the beginning, it was more like a crew, like a bunch of stoners. People with long hair, heavy metal t-shirts and smoking pot and just hanging there.

Peter McCormack 00:16:03:

Sounds like me at 18.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:16:08:

Yeah, kind of.

Valentina Pereda 00:16:08:

I think it used be called Mara Salvatrucha Stoners, MSS, it used be the original name.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:16:10:

It was just like a little crew, a little group of people just hanging out and smoking pot, listening to heavy metal music.

Valentina Pereda 00:16:16:

Yeah. But then, of course, when they started going to the California prison system, and they started meeting Mexican cartels and stuff, and in the prison system is where they really learned the violent way.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:16:29:

Well, they had the structure. If not, they were going to become victims in prison.

Valentina Pereda 00:16:34:

Exactly. So there they got very, very violent, inside the prison system.

Peter McCormack 00:16:38:

Almost radicalised.

Valentina Pereda 00:16:39:

Yeah.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:16:40:

Exactly.

Peter McCormack 00:16:40:

Right. Okay. What period is that in the history of the gangs and where did you come in? Did you come in at that period of time? Or did you come in after they had become more violent, more coordinated, more criminal?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:16:53:

Well, when they got to the U.S. MS-13 was MS Stoners. Because I was Salvadorian, I kind of liked that group, the MS Stoner. But because I lived in a 18th Street area, I became more aware of the local gang. Me going to the park and going to the school, hanging out with friends that had brothers, that were involved in the gang, I became more like a sympathiser of 18th Street.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:17:27:

I didn't become a member right away. I was just more like a kid that was hanging out at the park and I used to talk to them all the time. And then that school that I used to go to had both gangs, had 18 and had MS Stoners. But like I said, MS Stoner wasn't a gang yet. I guess it was just a part of my life. I guess I was destined to be 18th Street. I don't know.

Peter McCormack 00:17:54:

Yeah, but it doesn't sound like at the time that was too much trouble, anything for your parents to be worried about. I imagine a family from El Salvador now moving out to the U.S. Their 12 year old, 13 year old kid hanging out with a 18th Street or MS-13 is a scary thing. It's a scary thought, something you want to keep them away from, but for you at that time, I mean...

Wilfredo Gomez 00:18:14:

No, it was more like part of culture like I said. Me, living in a Latino area and having a lot of rejection, I guess. Going to school, I was bullied sometimes because of my accent. Because I was a kid that had just arrived from El Salvador, and people used

to try to bully me, clown me, make fun of me. So I saw the gang as a refuge, as protection, acceptance, belonging, as a way to fit into the American society.

Valentina Pereda 00:18:51:

And I think that brings us to an important point because a lot of the reason this came to be was, when all of the Central American refugees were going to LA, to different parts of the U.S. they had to face the local gangs that were already there. There was the Black gangs there, the Asian gangs were there. And then the Mexicans were there too. So I think that a lot of them were, they were getting harassed, robbed, bullied, et cetera.

Valentina Pereda 00:19:19:

So of course, then the Central Americans, starting by the Salvadorians, had to unite and create their own form of protection.

Peter McCormack 00:19:27:

Well, that was supposed to be my next question, does it then become protection? Do you have to roll with a group to ensure that if you do bump into other groups that you've got to protect yourselves?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:19:39:

That's the idea. When you join the gang, you join the gang thinking that you have protection, that you have friends, homies, that now you have family. That now you have someone to back you up. But it's not until you are in the gang that you find out that you just walked into hell. It's very complex.

Peter McCormack 00:20:05:

Why have you walked into hell? And you say you've walked into hell, but you said the starting bit was listening to music and getting stoned. What's the hellish part? When did that start?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:20:15:

Well, when you first go in, you're like the baby in the gang. I was 14 when I joined 18. So I was like the baby. Everybody liked me, and everybody wanted to have me around them. Everybody wanted to buy me shoes, clothes. They wanted me to ride with them in their cars or whatever. But it became hell when I was asked to do little favors.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:20:45:

I run away from home because my parents, when my mom found out that I had joined 18. So she had my father come pick me up and take me to live with him. They have divorced by then. So I had to move in with my dad and he lived in a totally different area, polluted with gangs as well. And it was kind of a big deal for me to be going from his home to my school that was in a different area.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:21:14:

So me staying in there, I was already in danger, because I attended a different school. And I was known to be a gang member from a different gang, not from that area. So when I was like around 16, I became one of the hitmen for the game.

Peter McCormack 00:21:31:

Okay, that's no small big deal. That's a big jump. Can we do the in between steps. The small little jobs?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:21:39:

Yeah, well at first you're asked to sell drugs, pick up little packages, drop them off, hold the gun, pistol, maybe steal a car, a G ride. But then I guess when you are growing in the gang, when you are developing inside the gang, they see potential in you. They see that you could be useful. Me coming from El Salvador and having knowledge of war and violence, to me seeing someone shot or someone laying on the streets dead wasn't a big deal.

Peter McCormack 00:22:25:

When did you first see that?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:22:26:

Over here in El Salvador.

Peter McCormack 00:22:28:

Prior to going.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:22:29:

Yeah. Before I went to the U.S.

Peter McCormack 00:22:31:

So had you seen that a lot?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:22:32:

During the Civil War.

Peter McCormack 00:22:33:

During the Civil War?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:22:33:

Yeah.

Peter McCormack 00:22:36:

I don't know a lot about the Civil War. I know it was brutal. I know I have a really, really... It was a tough time for El Salvador as a country.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:22:46:

It was.

Peter McCormack 00:22:47:

But I don't know the history of it. And so I'm not going to ask about it now, because it's something I need to research. But just paint a picture of what it was like during the... Living in a civil war.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:23:00:

It was crazy. I mean, rumors of war. I was down here with my grandmother, she was the only parent I had. And what I remember was just running. Running on the streets, because they were dropping bombs. People shooting from helicopters, and people dead on the streets. A lot of recruitment going on back in those days. Teenagers were being recruited to be part of the army, or the other group.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:23:36:

And that's one of the reasons why my father came back for me, because my grandma was worried that I was going to get recruited to be either a soldier or the other group.

Peter McCormack 00:23:48:

Your face has really changed as you talk. I will be looking forward to looking through back in the video just to watch that again. It's obviously got some quite ingrained memories in you.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:23:58:

Of course, a lot of pain.

Peter McCormack 00:24:00:

Yeah. Okay. So you were desensitised to death and the brutality, the brutal side of this. So when you first started seeing things out in the U.S. it was no big deal though.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:24:18:

Not a big deal.

Peter McCormack 00:24:19:

Okay. And then you became a hitman.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:24:22:

Well, I guess as I grew up in the gang, they saw that I wasn't the typical youngster. I was always very active, very violent. And they saw that as a potential.

Peter McCormack 00:24:39:

You don't now, though, are you?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:24:40:

Of course not. Not anymore.

Peter McCormack 00:24:43:

Can I ask about your role as a hitman?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:24:46:

You may.

Peter McCormack 00:24:47:

Okay. Have you killed a man?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:24:52:

Oh, well, my job had a lot to do with that.

Peter McCormack 00:24:57:

Okay. Do you live with a lot of things you have to process that you've done that bother you, and are things stuck with you now that you've done that you can't get rid of in your mind?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:25:18:

I used to.

Peter McCormack 00:25:19:

You used to.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:25:20:

I used to blame myself a lot, and I couldn't forgive myself for a lot of things that I did in the past. But, now I don't live with that anymore. I know that I've been forgiven, and I forgive myself as well.

Peter McCormack 00:25:37:

Okay. Why do you think it is so easy for young people to get involved in such violence? One of the patterns I've noticed, I was covering in the UK, and I covered in Scotland. One of my fascinating interviews I actually did was with a surgeon, a surgeon who worked at Glasgow Royal Infirmary. And he talked to me about the range of injuries he dealt with. Kids coming in with multiple stab wounds or single stab wounds, explaining that someone could be stabbed in the heart and survive, and a small one in the butt could kill them, because people don't know what's going on, and then the impact, not just on the victim, also the perpetrator and the family, he took me through so much.

Peter McCormack 00:26:17:

And the injuries and showed me photos, and we're talking unbelievable, something like the machetes. So I spoke to him and I looked at what's going on in Scotland, but

I also look to what's going on in London. Kids, they're all teenagers, running around with guns and knives, and killing each other. There's no other way of putting it. Why do you think these kids, it doesn't matter what part of the world they're in, are so desensitised to violence and find it so easy to just go out and kill and harm someone?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:26:52:

Out of my personal experience, I could tell you that one of the reasons why I joined the gang is because I needed attention.

Peter McCormack 00:27:03:

Right? Love.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:27:04:

Love, I guess, you could call it. Another reason was because I didn't want to be at my house, because everything that was taking place in my home. My parents used to fight a lot. And they were always talking about divorce. And it was like my dream was being shattered. Everything that I always wanted, a family, a mom, a dad, brothers, sisters, which is disappearing. And that generated a lot of anger within me. And I didn't know how to express that.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:27:43:

I had no one to listen to me, no one to talk to me. And I accepted responsibility at a very young age. I mean, I used to take care of my little sister all day long. I used to cook for her, take her to school, pick her up. Basically I had no time for me or no one interested in what I was going through.

Peter McCormack 00:28:07:

That is consistently, something of those come up as a problem, is a lack of love, which is... It's strange when you think about it, because we're talking about really tough kids going out and killing each other and fighting each other, really tough desensitise. But one of the root causes is a lack of love in the home. There is also the break off for parents or abuse issues in the home, whether that's substance abuse or physical abuse, lack of identity, poverty.

Peter McCormack 00:28:39:

But the one thing that kept coming up is that the main thing is, missing ingredient is love.

Valentina Pereda 00:28:46:

I would add though, that it's the thing about migration that people forget about, they don't talk about it as they should and people think of migration as such a positive thing, which it could be, right? Of course, when you're living in extreme poverty, to be able to go to the U.S. and work and provide for your family, it's important, it's for survival, right?

Valentina Pereda 00:29:10:

But what we see here in El Salvador, in the northern triangle, is that migration has had the adverse effect of complete family disintegration. So you have a lot of young children that are growing up without their parents because they've been forced to migrate to the U.S. like Will's parents did. And so they grow up with a grandmother or whatever.

Valentina Pereda 00:29:31:

And ultimately a lot of them just end up in the streets somehow. And then step two is when the parents come back and get the kid or have the kid be sent over up to the U.S. We're talking about separations that have been of five, 10, 15 years. So the little kid that was two, three years old when they left is now 14, 15 years old.

Valentina Pereda 00:29:53

I mean, it's your family, but are you family, right? You're complete strangers. And then there's all the emotional stuff of the resentment of why did you leave me. And then on top of that, you're going to a new country, new language, almost no family. I mean, it seems like logical that this is exactly what would happen. And it's precisely what happens to so many Central American youth, whose parents have been forced to leave them.

Valentina Pereda 00:30:22:

Of course, nobody wants to leave their child, right? What would force a parent to make the decision to leave their child? It has to be an extreme situation. And then when you are-

Wilfredo Gomez 00:30:33:

I always ask my mom that.

Valentina Pereda 00:30:34:

Yeah.

Peter McCormack 00:30:35:

What's that you ask her?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:30:36:

Why she left me.

Peter McCormack 00:30:37:

And what did she say?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:30:40:

She just cry.

Peter McCormack 00:30:43:

Yeah.

Valentina Pereda 00:30:45:

That's exactly it. Nobody wants to leave their child. Absolutely nobody wants to leave their child unless they see that there's no other way out. And when they are reunited with this child, the parent feels a lot of guilt because they left them. The child feels a lot of anger because he was left, right? So then there's a lot of confusion of how to reestablish the bond. And then this is when the gang comes in as like the family.

Peter McCormack 00:31:13:

How many years was your gap with your grandma, and your parents away?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:31:17:

It was like eight years.

Peter McCormack 00:31:22:

You saw them in those eight years? Not once.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:31:25:

Not once. I just knew that they were in the U.S. because my mom used to send my grandmother \$100 a month to take care of me. And after a minute, I guess she disappeared, my mom disappeared, and it was just my grandma taking care of me. And those were the most difficult harsh years of my life.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:31:55:

We used to live nearly on nothing. I used to watch the other kids have toys and have their parents come pick them up after school and go to the park, hang out and I was always on my own.

Peter McCormack 00:32:15:

Had a strong relationship with your grandmother? Or did you give her a tough time?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:32:19:

I used to give her a tough time, but I loved her. I mean, she was like my mom.

Peter McCormack 00:32:24:

She's gone now?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:32:25:

Yeah, she died. She passed away.

Peter McCormack 00:32:27:

About how long ago was that?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:32:29:

Back in 1998, '97, something like that.

Peter McCormack 00:32:33:

Okay. Was that when you were in the U.S?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:32:35:

I was in prison.

Peter McCormack 00:32:36:

You were in prison.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:32:37:

Back in the U.S.

Peter McCormack 00:32:38:

We keep doing these leaps, where there's like, oh, I need a bit of that story filled in. Okay, so when you first went back to the States, you hadn't seen your mom for eight years. You were 11?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:32:49:

11.

Peter McCormack 00:32:50:

So you pretty much didn't know her.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:32:52:

No, I didn't know her. I didn't even know I had a little sister. I found that when I got older.

Peter McCormack 00:32:58:

Did you bond with your mom straight away.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:33:01:

No. Not really.

Peter McCormack 00:33:01:

No.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:33:03:

It was more like with my dad.

Peter McCormack 00:33:04:

Right? Dad's a hero. Mom is mom.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:33:08:

Yeah. I guess because he came back and picked me up and took me back over there. He was just very awkward I guess.

Peter McCormack 00:33:18:

Was your dad just a hard working father or was he involved with some of the wrong kind of people?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:33:29:

The first person that I ever saw smoke pot was my dad.

Peter McCormack 00:33:34:

Okay, but that can just be a cool dad.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:33:37:

Well, back in the 80s, that wasn't a cool dad.

Peter McCormack 00:33:40:

Back in the 80s. That was like, I don't know, cocaine now.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:33:44:

And then sometimes he will act abusive with my mom. And that kind of messed me up in the head. And I would just grab my little sister and just hide in the room. We still live in this one bedroom apartment. And he was crazy.

Peter McCormack 00:34:09:

Okay. So you end up in jail. I'm assuming this is something that happened a few times. Am i right?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:34:19:

Yeah. I went to juvenile halls for the first time when I was 14.

Peter McCormack 00:34:22:

Brutal?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:34:23:

I got arrested for a G ride. I got out, went back for a pistol. Got out, went back for robbery. Got out, went back for an attempted murder. Got out, went back for murder. Got out, went back for selling drugs. And I made a criminal career on my life.

Peter McCormack 00:34:43:

Okay. You spent a lot of time in prison.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:34:46:

A lot of time.

Peter McCormack 00:34:47:

How did you get out for the murder?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:34:49:

I didn't get convicted for it.

Peter McCormack 00:34:51:

Okay. For you.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:34:53:

It wasn't me.

Peter McCormack 00:34:56:

It wasn't me. But every guy in prison says that, right? I didn't do it.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:34:59:

Well, I believe that they practice justice in America. So if there is no evidence, you're not going to get convicted.

Peter McCormack 00:35:08:

What do you make of the federal prison system?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:35:13:

I'd never been to federal.

Peter McCormack 00:35:14:

Oh, you didn't get to federal.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:35:15:

No. Only state prison.

Peter McCormack 00:35:17:

Okay. Okay. Because I've been looking at the federal prison system because of a story of a guy called Russell Holbrook. Do you know Russell Holbrook. He's created a website called Russell Brook. But anyway, it's not important for now. So what was state prison like? Brutal?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:35:32:

It was. I learned that if you're a Hispanic gang member in prison, you supposed to show no feelings. Like you said, when you're a little boy, all these little kids joining the gangs nowadays, they show this hardcore part of them. They're willing to fight. They're willing to stab someone. But in reality, they're just babies inside.

Peter McCormack 00:36:00:

You can tell. You carry a lot of emotion and feeling now, I can see it. When you were

making the film, was there a lot of consistency between the people you spoke to and the people you interviewed and the gang members you'd met?

Valentina Pereda 00:36:16:

In their stories? In their life stories. Yeah, I mean.

Peter McCormack 00:36:19:

Just the same.

Valentina Pereda 00:36:20:

They're all very similar stories. I mean, we're talking about young people that have been abandoned by their parents somehow live in extreme poverty situations. And frankly, when you go to these communities, at this point especially, the gang is all they ever know. There are no positive role models, right? Maybe there's a little church but really the cool kids are the gang, the kids that are offering the support and the respect, and the friendship is the gangs.

Valentina Pereda 00:37:04:

When I started filming this I had a very square notion of I would never ever be somebody like them. It's very much us versus them kind of thing. And then the more you go to these communities and you live with these people, interact with them, the more you're like, well, possibly, if I was born in this community, under these conditions, possibly I would have also ended up in a similar situation.

Peter McCormack 00:37:27:

Yeah, I mean, these cycles happen for a reason.

Valentina Pereda 00:37:32:

Exactly.

Peter McCormack 00:37:32:

These patterns happen for a reason.

Valentina Pereda 00:37:32:

Exactly.

Peter McCormack 00:37:33:

What's all this noise in the background.

Valentina Pereda 00:37:35:

It's probably that church service.

Peter McCormack 00:37:35:

Is it. Well, we're going to have to come to that. But there's a bit more to cover, still.

But I do want to touch on the faith side of things with you. So you spent a lot of time in prison. And then you end up here back in-

Wilfredo Gomez 00:37:51:

El Salvador.

Peter McCormack 00:37:51:

El Salvador. Were you deported?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:37:53:

Yeah.

Peter McCormack 00:37:53:

When were you deported?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:37:54:

Back in '07.

Peter McCormack 00:37:58:

I mean, this has been going on for years, but I was aware more of it recently because Human Rights Watch post an article about the dangers of people being deported. There are people being deported who've never lived here. They have no family here. And they have no connections. And they've been deported from the U.S. And their risk of being lured into the gangs, tortured, abused, et cetera, et cetera.

Peter McCormack 00:38:28:

I mean, you obviously got strong opinions on this, but why is it only El Salvador I hear this about? It can't just be El Salvador.

Valentina Pereda 00:38:35:

No, it's not. It's all of them.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:38:37:

No, it's taking place all over, the whole region. I mean, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, South America.

Peter McCormack 00:38:47:

But are there any ways to appeal these decisions? If you've spent your entire life in the U.S, you're conditioned to the U.S. you've never lived in El Salvador. How is this happening? I don't understand this.

Valentina Pereda 00:38:59:

You can appeal. The thing is, for example, cases like Will, and a lot of people, when they get taken into custody by immigration, a lot of people spend at least a year just to wait for a hearing before a judge, and then they give them the opportunity to

appeal and they're like, "Well, you can appeal but you might be here for another five years, six years-

Wilfredo Gomez 00:39:23:

Seven years.

Valentina Pereda 00:39:24:

Seven years, whatever, right?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:39:24:

And still get deported.

Valentina Pereda 00:39:25:

And still get deported. So people are like screw that, just deport me. I don't care, I don't want to be here.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:39:30:

You sign the voluntary deportation.

Valentina Pereda 00:39:31:

Exactly.

Peter McCormack 00:39:32:

Get the process going.

Valentina Pereda 00:39:35:

So a lot of people just do sign a voluntary deportation because frankly, they just don't want to be in prison anymore, basically. They don't want to be in detention anymore. So it really gives them no way out. I think that the fear, and Will can tell you his story, because he also was deported with no fam... Really, no family, nobody. I mean, and he'll tell you his story on how even when he was on the deportation plane, he wanted to change, he didn't want to be a gang member anymore.

Valentina Pereda 00:40:02:

But then when you're here and you have no resources to support you with a transition, folks that do have criminal histories do just, they eventually have no choice but to seek the gang for survival, right? And I know that a lot of people when they're getting deported, they're terrified that the first thing that's going to happen is they're going to be executed and stuff.

Valentina Pereda 00:40:27:

But I think more than that, more than the risk that they face of death, which is what Human Rights Watch publishes. I think the bigger story here should be, why are there no resources for deportees? Why are we deporting people-

Wilfredo Gomez 00:40:41:

To nothing.

Valentina Pereda 00:40:43:

... to nothing, right? Not giving them a place to stay. A lot of people don't have a place to stay, not connecting them to possible job opportunities, we're just like, thank you, like go deal with it.

Peter McCormack 00:40:55:

So you think the U.S. should be providing something here to pay people back. Because we know the resources of the El Salvadorian government are limited.

Valentina Pereda 00:41:08:

Well, it's interesting that you said that because the U.S. already provides hundreds of millions of dollars in security aid to fund the police and fund all these things. So we're already funding a lot of things here. Why aren't we funding? Why isn't there a clear policy on how to deal with deportees? It's incredible.

Peter McCormack 00:41:27:

Well, we are talking about political money flow here, it would always never been in the way that you and I would think money should be spent.

Valentina Pereda 00:41:35:

Absolutely, I mean, that's true. But the reason that it's not being spent is because the story, the narrative is wrong. I mean, the narrative is wrong. The narrative is that El Salvador, the problem is just the gangs. The gang members are the ones that are doing everything. And that's part of the problem. We also have a problem here with incredible human rights violations by the police, and the military so then people aren't trusting of the police and the military, they go into these communities, roundup young people, throw them in prison, beat them, kill a bunch of them really, right? So we have a problem with impunity.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:42:13:

And missing.

Valentina Pereda 00:42:14:

Yeah, a lot of kids... You hear a lot of El Salvador, or the homicide rates are down but the disappearances rates are up, right. So where are these people disappearing to? That's an issue. And then corruption. I mean, before the last person, we haven't gotten his corruption numbers out yet. But we had three-

Peter McCormack 00:42:33:

So when I came over, somebody said to me his election manifesto was we've got enough money, we need to stop stealing it. Is that right? I mean, I might be wrong.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:42:44:

Yeah it's true.

Valentina Pereda 00:42:44:

Yeah, before Sanchez Ceren, which was the president before Bukele, I mean, those three presidents I think, collectively they'd stolen close to a billion dollars.

Peter McCormack 00:42:55:

Unbelievable.

Valentina Pereda 00:42:55:

I mean, it's unbelievable.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:42:55:

Crazy.

Valentina Pereda 00:42:56:

Like each of them were stealing upwards of \$300 million dollars in a country the size of El Salvador. I mean, that's tiny. All that money so, this country would be like Switzerland basically.

Peter McCormack 00:43:07:

Where are they now? Where's the money though. Does anyone follow the money?

Valentina Pereda 00:43:11:

Yeah, well, the money's missing.

Peter McCormack 00:43:12:

Of course.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:43:13:

And so are they.

Valentina Pereda 00:43:14:

They are missing. One of them is in Nicaragua. One of them is in prison. I mean, in beautiful conditions, in a really nice fancy prison. Really what the government here does to the people is laugh in their face, basically.

Peter McCormack 00:43:30:

El Salvador is not isolated. Just to South America. Everywhere you go you see this.

Valentina Pereda 00:43:39:

But the corruption levels you see here, and in other countries, maybe I would compare it to Venezuela and stuff like that. I mean, it's just mind blowing.

Peter McCormack 00:43:46:

I was just reading today about Chavez, his daughter is the richest person in Venezuela. She's worth \$4.2 billion. And we still have people marching on the streets celebrating Chavez's populist policies. So look, I get it, these patterns are everywhere. Well, what I did want to ask is something very interesting Valentina said there, it was that you are already thinking of leaving the gang when you go on the plane.

Peter McCormack 00:44:17:

My assumption based on historical kind of readings and documentaries about gangs is that you can't just leave a gang, right?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:44:25:

Yeah, I mean, I had the idea of leaving the gang because when I was back in the U.S. I used to watch a lot of documentaries about what gangs were like down here. And I used to tell myself, I don't want to be a part of that. Like I said, different rules, different codes, different structure.

Peter McCormack 00:44:47:

What worried you?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:44:49:

I was in INS and I used to watch these documentaries about people getting chopped off, chopped up, women and children being killed. Extorting the poor. And that's not something American gangsters do.

Peter McCormack 00:45:10:

The American gangsters was mainly gang on gang crime.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:45:13:

Gang on gang or just drug trafficking.

Peter McCormack 00:45:17:

Drugs, robbing, stealing cars.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:45:18:

Or just taxing the drug dealers. The people with money, not the poor.

Peter McCormack 00:45:25:

Whereas here it's going a step too far, is crossing the line for you.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:45:31:

Yeah, it's a different scale. It's different level. Something so not gangster.

Peter McCormack 00:45:38:

Well, also in talking to Danielle here, do you know Danielle from previously. Danielle joined this place. So when I did my interview with them, one of the things I found most shocking was also they talked about the ages of the girls being dragged into sex trafficking. 12 years old. This isn't even. This is two years older than my own daughter. Right? This is ridiculously young. This isn't like 15, 16, 17 teenagers you would be highly concerned about. I was shocked about that.

Peter McCormack 00:46:09:

There seems to be a strong moral compass and a moral code between gang members and the rules and the laws by which they follow. There seems to be a very low moral compass with the things they're willing to do. And I find that really confusing.

Valentina Pereda 00:46:26:

Yeah, it's very contradicting. I mean, you have... Listen, the truth is that every gang member has family that they love as vicious as the person, maybe he has a mother that he loves, or a father that he loves, or a sibling that he loves. So I think that, and Will can of course speak this from firsthand, I think that gang members are always in conflict with what they do and what they feel, and what they do and what they really believe.

Valentina Pereda 00:46:53:

But then the whole group mentality thing comes into play, right. So if the whole group is doing something, then the individual gang member will start participating. And in the U.S. you don't have to extort the poor little Pupusa lady because there's good drug money, you could get a job that pays well, or whatever. There's money up there that there isn't the need to really target the poor.

Valentina Pereda 00:47:19:

But in El Salvador, there isn't that much money. And I mean, the gang has money to a certain degree, but it's not like the Mexican cartels that are billionaires. I mean, the gang, you still when you go to these communities, and you talk to active gang members, you're like, "Why do you look so poor? Why do you look so raggedy?"

Valentina Pereda 00:47:40:

I mean, the leaders are very well dressed and stuff like that, but the lower ranks, the foot soldiers are very, very poor, right. So when there isn't a good flow of money, then you start extorting your own people that have nothing. And so it starts creating this whole, complete breakdown of the social and moral fabric of a place, and that's what is happening here.

Peter McCormack 00:48:06:

So, you're coming back, you've already made a decision that you want to leave the gang. Well, you still were attracted into the gangs when you first got back.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:48:14:

No, no, no, definitely not. I had a change of mentality, I guess, when I was facing deportation, because I was gonna lose my life. I mean, I had a girlfriend back in the States, a five year old little boy, my family, my friends, my house, my car, I was going to lose everything. So I thought to myself, I'm just going to go down there, turn around and come back, like many legal people do.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:48:44:

But once I got down here, I found out that it's very expensive to do that. And I was basically homeless out here. No family, no relatives, no home, no nothing. I was staying on the streets.

Peter McCormack 00:49:00:

You literally just left to get off the plane goodbye?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:49:06:

Yeah.

Peter McCormack 00:49:07:

The airport.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:49:07:

Just like that.

Peter McCormack 00:49:08:

They don't give you a taxi, they don't give you any money.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:49:11:

No, no.

Peter McCormack 00:49:11:

Nothing.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:49:11:

They gave me my little box that I had in prison. An extra pair of jeans.

Peter McCormack 00:49:16:

Are you deported because you're in prison?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:49:17:

Yeah.

Peter McCormack 00:49:18:

Right. Okay.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:49:23:

Because I was in prison.

Peter McCormack 00:49:24:

Okay. As bad as the process is, I don't have to, I feel I can say to you, I can understand why they do this, right? If you're a career criminal, you're up into 11 URL Salvadorian. I can understand that. Maybe the process is awful. You understand that?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:49:46:

Of course, of course.

Peter McCormack 00:49:47:

So that's almost like part of the punishment, right. Serve your time.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:49:52:

I know there's consequences to every decision you make, whether it's good or bad. You're always going to have consequences. So, I believe that me coming down here was a consequence of my bad decisions, bad behavior, criminal life that I had. But looking at the human side of it, it was very shocking for me, just losing everything, it was part of the punishment, like you said.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:50:26:

And facing the reality down here, different culture, different economy, different standards, different everything.

Peter McCormack 00:50:37:

What's your son now? 18?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:50:38:

No, he's 21.

Peter McCormack 00:50:39:

21 now. You're in touch with him?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:50:43:

A little bit.

Peter McCormack 00:50:44:

A little bit. Okay. Okay. So that must have been very hard for you.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:50:48:

Yeah, it was heartbreaking.

Peter McCormack 00:50:52:

And he's essentially gone through a similar cycle.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:50:55:

Same process.

Peter McCormack 00:50:55:

Same process.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:50:57:

Same story within itself.

Peter McCormack 00:50:59:

Do you know if he's doing okay? Do you know if he's avoided the same mistakes? Or is this just a cycle?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:51:04:

It's a cycle.

Peter McCormack 00:51:06:

Are you a granddad yet?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:51:08:

I somehow feel guilty for what he's going through.

Peter McCormack 00:51:15:

Do you know what he's going through? You know enough.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:51:17:

Of course, of course.

Peter McCormack 00:51:19:

But has he made you a granddad yet?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:51:20:

No. Not yet.

Peter McCormack 00:51:21:

Not yet.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:51:23:

But I feel guilty because of his behavior. I feel that I have some kind of responsibility in that. Because I'm doing the same thing my dad did. Abandon me.

Peter McCormack 00:51:39:

Yeah, in a different way.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:51:41:

In a different way. Yeah.

Peter McCormack 00:51:43:

You would have stayed, but then maybe, there's no guarantee you would have been a great father there, right? Do you know if you're still in that mentality of running the gangs and get involved in stuff.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:51:55:

I had the chance to change many times, but I chose not.

Peter McCormack 00:52:01:

Okay. So do you feel like the deportation in some way was like some divine intervention for you to get your shit together?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:52:08:

For me it was. For me it was.

Peter McCormack 00:52:11:

So how do you picture your life back together when you're pushed off a plane with a box? And how's that happened?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:52:17:

I guess I hit rock bottom. Completely alone. No money, no nothing. Just my life broke into a bunch of pieces. And suddenly someone speaks to me about hope, faith. Someone that loves me the way I am and is willing to forgive me. And I'm hearing this message in prison again, down here in El Salvador.

Peter McCormack 00:52:50:

So you ended up in prison here. How quickly was that?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:52:54:

Within the first three months.

Peter McCormack 00:52:55:

Woow! For robbery?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:52:58:

For robbery?

Peter McCormack 00:52:58:

Because you didn't have anything.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:53:00:

I didn't have any money.

Peter McCormack 00:53:02:

I have not met you but a lot of this stuff is so predictable.

Valentina Pereda 00:53:06:

It's so predictable.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:53:06:

I mean, it's so obvious.

Peter McCormack 00:53:06:

Is so obvious.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:53:06:

You try to look for a job, they don't hire you. You look different. You speak different.

Peter McCormack 00:53:13:

So do you get racism coming back here? You had it in both directions.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:53:17:

It's discrimination, because of the way you look, just because you are a deportee.

Peter McCormack 00:53:27:

So much like you never truly had a home, because once you went to America, and you were different. You got settled. You came back here and you're different.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:53:37:

Exactly. Both worlds.

Peter McCormack 00:53:40:

Yeah. You feel more home here. I'm guessing now.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:53:42:

Yeah. Now my life is different. I'm married now. I have a wife. A beautiful little girl.

Peter McCormack 00:53:48:

Yeah. Congratulations.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:53:48:

I have a church. And my life is different.

Valentina Pereda 00:53:52:

But you miss LA sometimes.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:53:55:

Definitely.

Peter McCormack 00:53:56:

I love LA. I'm a massive fan.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:53:58:

It's beautiful, I love it.

Peter McCormack 00:53:59:

I like Venus a lot.

Valentina Pereda 00:54:00:

Yeah, it's nice.

Peter McCormack 00:54:01:

That's the bit I like. I like the beach, I'm a big fan. So I get that. But I like El Salvador, is growing on me.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:54:07:

It's good. It's a beautiful country.

Peter McCormack 00:54:08:

So, talk to me about the faith bit. You obviously met somebody, somebody is going to come into your life and introduce this to you. How does that go from being an introduction to you to starting to... I don't know, how do we say this? Started to define this part of your life?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:54:29:

Well, I was in prison down here in El Salvador dying of tuberculosis. I was in there with no family and no income, no nothing, and I was dying. No medical aid. And suddenly someone comes around, evangelising, spreading the gospel. They asked me, let them pray for me. And my answer was no. Like, I don't want to know anything about God. Where is God, I mean, where was God when I got deported?

Wilfredo Gomez 00:55:04:

And so my answer was rejection. But they were so persistent. They continued to tell me, he loves you and he knows what you're going through blah, blah, blah. So then I told myself, okay, I'm just going to let these people pray over me and then I'll buy a piece.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:55:24:

And something supernatural happened when they prayed over me. They asked me to kneel down, they were like, "Get on your knees so we could pray over you." And I was like, "No, I don't do that. I don't get on my knees." I'm this proud, tough gang member. I don't show my emotion and never show any weakness. Gang members don't do that.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:55:53:

So I was like, "Just pray over me like this, standing up." But the minute they started praying for me and put their hands over me, on me, I just had this weird feeling, like, I felt this warm feeling just descending upon me just from the top of my head running down to the bottom of my feet. And I felt like crying.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:56:21:

And I'm fighting with this feeling. They praying over me. People just saying, "Forgive him Lord for all his sins." And I'm over here fighting with this feeling. I'm telling myself, "Don't cry." You're not supposed to show any feelings. Come on now, you're better than this. You've been to California State Prison. You show no weakness. But I couldn't help it. I ended up falling on my knees, crying, sweating, crying with this warm feeling all over my body.

Wilfredo Gomez 00:56:58:

And suddenly one of the guys who was praying over me asked me if I wanted to receive Jesus as my Lord and Savior. And my answer was, "Yes, I do." And so I confessed Jesus name, and I accepted him as my Lord and Savior. I went back to my cell, sick. And I couldn't stop crying. The whole night I was crying and crying and crying. It's like I felt that someone had given me an opportunity. Like someone had really taken their time to know what I was going through. After that my life changed. My life just completely changed.

Peter McCormack 00:57:50:

How long into your filming did you meet Will?

Valentina Pereda 00:57:52:

Well, I met him at the beginning, right? It was an accident how I came across the church. It was for a separate, just an interview for an NGO, I believe. And then I went back and I said, "Hey, I'm really interested in your story, can I can I keep filming?"

Valentina Pereda 00:58:10:

And so we kind of kept filming on and off. And then I sold a smaller video to the economist. And that video went viral. It exploded.

Peter McCormack 00:58:20:

Is it the one in the room where they're all together?

Valentina Pereda 00:58:23:

There's one I mean...

Peter McCormack 00:58:23:

There's one where there's a whole room of people praying together, but inside...

Valentina Pereda 00:58:29:

Inside of prison.

Peter McCormack 00:58:30:

Inside of prison.

Valentina Pereda 00:58:31:

Yeah, yeah, that one.

Peter McCormack 00:58:31:

That one.

Valentina Pereda 00:58:32:

Yeah.

Peter McCormack 00:58:32:

That's a very powerful bit of video.

Valentina Pereda 00:58:34:

Yeah. So that video when we went to... We arranged, so Will would return to the prison where he had spent most of his sentencing, for the first time it was his return. First time they had had a church service of that sort, especially for somebody coming from the outside world back in. So then they let us film that. And that video went viral and then a bunch of international media started going to Will's church and his profile just exploded.

Valentina Pereda 00:59:04:

But even with that, I knew that my intention with the church wasn't over just because of that one news video that we'd published. I knew that there was a larger store... I knew there was a movie there. So as news came and went and all of the fanfare came and went, I've always stayed there, on and off, right?

Valentina Pereda 00:59:25:

Because I don't live here full time, I come here film for a little bit then leave and the movie has become so much more than the church. I believe this movie is a, I don't want to say like a social protest. But it's more of like an exposure of what's happening in this country. I mean, El Salvador is a product of everything that goes wrong with American foreign policy, from the very beginning up until this point, everything step by step that could go wrong with American foreign policy is happening here in El Salvador.

Valentina Pereda 01:00:04:

And I'm not saying that all American foreign policy to El Salvador is wrong, because USA ID and stuff they are... I think that now they're opening their eyes and they're seeing, oh my god, we need to fix this mess beyond just giving money to the police

so they could go and control the communities, which is really complete repression, right?

Valentina Pereda 01:00:22:

So I think that they're trying to change it, but the damage is there and the damage is done, right? So now to get this country out of this mess, it's going to take a lot. And I think, specifically, the first step is it's going to take the perpetrators of the pain, which in this case, were the gang members to step up and say, "Okay, enough is enough. We need to put an end to this violence." And it really has to start with them. Because only they can persuade other people to stop killing.

Peter McCormack 01:00:54:

Were you religious yourself?

Valentina Pereda 01:00:56:

I'm very spiritual. I mean, I definitely, I believe in God. I'm not evangelical. I'm not even baptised in that, but I'm a very, very spiritual person. And I do believe that people, spirituality in whatever way it means to you, to some people, it's their relationship with God, some people, it's a different type of relationship. But I do think that there needs to be something there that's unexplainable that gives you hope in a time of complete despair.

Valentina Pereda 01:01:24:

Because when you are in the depths of despair, as we've all been, especially Will and folks in his situation are, it's unexplainable. Only God can do these sorts of things. Only spirituality can really move somebody that has done so much wrong, has caused so much pain to then say, okay, not only do I want to stop, but I'm sorry, why did I do this? So it's unexplainable.

Peter McCormack 01:01:52:

And how much success have you had? Obviously it has been successful, but how successful has it been in getting people out of the gangs, and profile wise, is it all ages?

Wilfredo Gomez 01:02:04:

Yeah.

Peter McCormack 01:02:05:

Because people do secretly. If you get most gang members, I've been told, you get them on your own. And this might be something that's consistent between the UK and here. If you can get them in a private conversation, they want out.

Wilfredo Gomez 01:02:16:

Yeah.

Peter McCormack 01:02:16:

Nobody's enjoying it.

Valentina Pereda 01:02:17:

They do.

Wilfredo Gomez 01:02:17

Definitely, it's a big movement taking place in our society, especially inside the prisons. When I first converted to Christianity, it was a small group of Christians. And for some reason, I had this urge, this one of telling people what God had done in my life. My experience, my spiritual experience, I wanted to tell others about it. And so I started preaching inside the prison, telling people about God. And that little small group of Christians it multiplied. It was maybe about 40 or maybe less, when I converted to Christianity.

Wilfredo Gomez 01:03:02:

But then those 40 became 100, then those 100 became two then 500, then 1000. Now it's a Christian movement inside the prison. It's a total of 1600 men.

Peter McCormack 01:03:16:

And the gangs operating within the prisons, are you getting any pushback from within the prison? Because it's almost like you're doing the opposite of recruitment, you're taking people away. Is that causing problems?

Wilfredo Gomez 01:03:27:

Of course.

Peter McCormack 01:03:28:

Okay.

Wilfredo Gomez 01:03:29:

Of course. I'm not a very popular person with the gangs down here. But they know the work that I do, and somehow respected.

Peter McCormack 01:03:40:

Well, it's a bit like here. I know the work that's being done here is respected. And John and Danielle told me in my interview, they had to talk to gang members, but they supported them in the end and actually they can also be helpful and same with Michael. He says that there are gang members, they don't want their kids in the gangs, their little brothers in the gangs. So you have that mix of...

Valentina Pereda 01:04:03:

Plus El Salvador here, especially it's a very, very Christian country by nature. Gang members are God fearing, believe it or not. There's a saying you don't mess with God and you don't mess with the gang. Those are the two things that you don't mess

with. So even though, like we said earlier, it's very contradictory, their actions, but a lot of them I would say, believe in God, very much.

Peter McCormack 01:04:25:

They're God fearing.

Valentina Pereda 01:04:26:

They're very, very God fearing. So that gives Will's work a little bit more support.

Peter McCormack 01:04:33:

So we'll close out, but I'd like at some point to come and visit the church. I'd like to see it myself.

Valentina Pereda 01:04:39:

It's nearby, it's next door.

Peter McCormack 01:04:41:

So a couple of things to just finish out. Will, people want to follow more of what you're doing here, they want to find out more about the church. Can you explain to them where they can go, and then afterwards, if you can explain where the state of the film is, and if people want to find out more of that, where they should go from that as well, and I think I've got a feeling we're going to do a follow up on this at some point.

Wilfredo Gomez 01:05:01:

Yeah. Well, we are a self funded church, we receive no international help or aid. So we don't even have a web page and then like that. We have a Facebook page.

Peter McCormack 01:05:15:

That's all you need these days, Facebook and Instagram.

Wilfredo Gomez 01:05:17:

Facebook page. The name of the church is Ebenezer and the name of this program, it's footsteps of hope. And like Valentina said right here, if you want to hear more about it, just watch the videos. My email address is on the videos. My phone number as well, and just contact me, even through you.

Peter McCormack 01:05:39:

Yeah, well, I'll share all out on the show notes as well.

Wilfredo Gomez 01:05:41:

Of course.

Peter McCormack 01:05:42:

And the film, when do we get to see that?

Valentina Pereda 01:05:44:

Well, we are right now in post production.

Peter McCormack 01:05:47:

Okay, the tough part.

Valentina Pereda 01:05:47:

Of course. Always need money for post production. So if you want to see this film, help us edit it. And this film has taken a while to make because it's such a complex topic, and things change. And even Will's mission has changed, ever since we started filming. And I don't know if I can share this Will.

Peter McCormack 01:06:07:

Go ahead.

Valentina Pereda 01:06:09:

At the beginning, Will was just catering 18th Street gang members, and now his vision and he's starting to do this work. Now he's trying to do 18 NMS, and for the first time, the church where he started evangelising people, I mean not the the church, the prison where he started evangelising people, it became so successful. So many people converted. It was originally an 18th Street prison.

Valentina Pereda 01:06:33:

So many people converted that prison authorities said, "Well, let's try to bring in MS members into this prison, mind you, they had to separate them because they were killing each other and everything. So they started bringing MS members into the prison to see if they could coexist, and it's been successful thus far.

Valentina Pereda 01:06:49:

And so the rivalry, the MS 18 Street rivalry that has caused 10s of thousands of deaths.

Wilfredo Gomez 01:06:57:

So many deaths.

Valentina Pereda 01:06:57:

So, so many deaths. This rivalry, this hatred for one another, now we're starting to see tiny little lights of hope when you have somebody like Will, and a former MS person come together and talk to their own people.

Wilfredo Gomez 01:07:10:

Embrace each other.

Valentina Pereda 01:07:10:

Hug each other and talk to the people and say-

Wilfredo Gomez 01:07:12:

Worship together.

Valentina Pereda 01:07:13:

... "Hey guys, we need to stop." And that's why I say that, yes, these missionary programs are important.

Wilfredo Gomez 01:07:19:

There is hope for El Salvador.

Valentina Pereda 01:07:20:

Yeah, like USA ID's importa... All that stuff is important, but the change is going to come from the gang itself, period, end of story. If the gang does not decide to change and put an end to this, nothing, no amount of money programs, which I think are important, because one point I would like to make is that Will is doing the work on the...

Valentina Pereda 01:07:42:

These churches are doing the work on this on the spiritual side. But these kids, they need work, they need to provide for their families. So this is when the state and everyone else needs to step, and society needs to step in and say, okay, we're going to hire you. Nobody's hiring former gang members.

Valentina Pereda 01:07:59:

So inside of prison, it's a controlled environment. They can be Christian all they want, they can be reading the Bible all they want, but then when they come here, and they have families that they need to feed, and nobody wants to hire them, the police is beating the-

Wilfredo Gomez 01:08:11:

Harassing.

Valentina Pereda 01:08:11:

Harassing them and beating the crap out of them and disrespecting them. Nobody's giving them support. Will here's with the Bible saying, "Please keep believing. Things are going to change. Things are going to change." I tell you, man, they're hanging in there. They're really, really trying to change, but then they're faced with a society frankly right now that completely rejects them.

Wilfredo Gomez 01:08:30:

Rejection, unbelief.

Valentina Pereda 01:08:31:

Like complete disbelief. Nobody believes them and complete rejection. So my point is, religion can only go so far. Then we need the government and society and

everybody to come and also do their part of the work, so then this can really put an end to it. But war is profitable, and it's profitable for El Salvador for this thing-

Wilfredo Gomez 01:08:53:

To keep the reputation of being a violent country.

Valentina Pereda 01:08:56:

Exactly. So if there are no gangs in El Salvador, will there be international aid, right? What's the purpose then of governments sending money to El Salvador if there's no problem to fix? If there's no war? So we have to also be honest of, like you said, follow the money. I mean, this is a very, very profitable situation for some people that don't want things to change.

Valentina Pereda 01:09:17:

And in the meantime, there's thousands of collateral lives being lost, thousands of people caught in the middle, that's why we're where we are. But the fact that the gang wants to, there's lights of hope within the gang that they want to change. And a lot of them, Will will tell you, a lot of them will tell, like you said, will say, "I don't want to be in this life anymore. But what else is there for me?"

Wilfredo Gomez 01:09:43:

They want something to look forward to. A lot of the active gang members that I interact with, they tell me, "Okay, Will, you're asking me to abandon the gang. But what you got to offer?"

Valentina Pereda 01:09:53:

Where's my job?

Wilfredo Gomez 01:09:54:

I need a job. I have two kids. I have a wife. I got to pay rent. I got to pay my bills. You know what I'm saying?

Peter McCormack 01:10:05:

God, it's a big story.

Wilfredo Gomez 01:10:05:

Exactly God.

Peter McCormack 01:10:08:

I could, yeah. That's me without thinking about it. Is fascinating. And I'm sure if I'd met you 25 years ago, I'd probably should have been shit scared. Now you just seem like a really lovely guy.

Wilfredo Gomez 01:10:21:

Thank you.

Peter McCormack 01:10:21:

Really chilled. I could sense a lot of emotion through that. So thank you for sharing that with me. I'm really looking forward to this film.

Valentina Pereda 01:10:27:

Thank you.

Peter McCormack 01:10:27:

How long do you think press production is going to take?

Valentina Pereda 01:10:29:

I mean, depending how fast the money comes in, but our hope is that the film will be out by the end of the year.

Peter McCormack 01:10:36:

How much do you need?

Valentina Pereda 01:10:38:

We need money. We need money. I mean, we're in very, very early stages of editing right now. I've actually had to edit a good chunk of it myself, but I'm not an editor. You know what I mean? And it's funny because I've been shooting this whole thing pretty much on my own up until last December when a production company came in and they said to me, they were like, "This is wonderful, but we need nicer glass, and we need a whole this and that."

Valentina Pereda 01:11:04:

And so I was like, "Okay," I did the experiment of hiring, they gave me money to hire a crew and all this, and we had this beautiful Alexa camera, and this beautiful glass and stuff. And then it was ruined, because when I showed up with a full crew to the church, to the people that have known me for three years, people that trust me for three years.

Valentina Pereda 01:11:25:

Here I come with like three other additional guys that they've never seen before. And the whole dynamic of the film changed. Everything was acted, it wasn't real. So I think that, I mean, what I would say to a lot of filmmakers is trust your instinct specially when you're making these movies. Yeah, it's nice to have very nice cameras and very nice image, the quality of the image.

Valentina Pereda 01:11:48:

But what matters is the content, is the rawness of the emotion, it's that intimacy that you can only get after so much trust, and so much time. If I wanted to make a film about the gangs in a month, I would have come here with a big production and done, gotten the tour of the homicide sites and gotten the tour of the drugs and all this, like all of that has been done.

Valentina Pereda 01:12:12:

But the images that I have, for example of a heavily tattooed guy with his 10 year old son doing homework, playing basketball, caressing his face, and you're like these hands have killed... You know what I mean? That intimacy, which I think is going to make people very uncomfortable, because I know, I already know what they're going to say to me, like, "Oh, why are you being friends with these people?"

Valentina Pereda 01:12:32:

But the point that I want to make is, we're more similar than we'd like to believe. There's a very thin line between a murderer and an honest person. We're very, very similar in our emotions, in our thoughts, in our aspirations. We have family that we love, we're very, very similar. So we need to find common ground on that front and work to heal the wounds of what was caused for an array of issues.

Valentina Pereda 01:12:57:

And one last point I'd like to make is these kids that are in prison right now, these kids that are gang members now, they're being judged for a decision that they made when they were very young. A lot of them were 12, 13 years old when they started being involved, and they're paying for that price much later in life.

Wilfredo Gomez 01:13:15:

As adults.

Valentina Pereda 01:13:17:

As adults. So it's also looking at that. How can you judge a person for a decision they made as a child, right? So it's a lot of... Man, I'm telling you, El Salvador has a long way to go. This society is not open arms, Kumbaya, like let's all have peace. That's not the case, like they did in the Civil War, where they signed the peace treaties. That's not the case now. We have a society that's very, very rejectful of the gang.

Wilfredo Gomez 01:13:42:

And close minded.

Valentina Pereda 01:13:43:

And very close minded, because they've suffered a lot but which is is.

Peter McCormack 01:13:48:

Well, it is fascinating. I will come back, we'll come see the church, but I would like to know a bit more about the work you do inside the prison. I think that seems interesting.

Wilfredo Gomez 01:13:58:

You're welcome.

Peter McCormack 01:13:58:

But I'll have the film's out soon. But I appreciate both of you giving me your time.

Wilfredo Gomez 01:14:02:

Thank you.

Peter McCormack 01:14:02:

I'm sorry it's such a short visit. But I think people will be fascinated to hear this. So good luck to both of you.

Wilfredo Gomez 01:14:07:

Thank you.

Valentina Pereda 01:14:07:

Thank you.