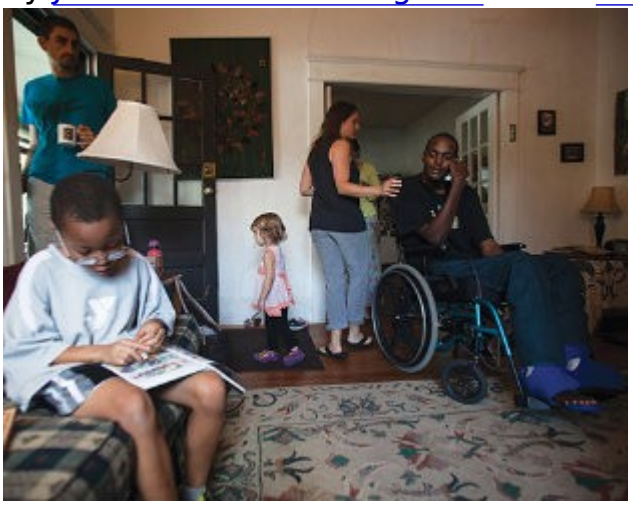
Costly hospitality: Learning trust at Rutba House

by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove in the October 30, 2013 issue



STRANGERS WELCOME: Residents—including author Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove (far left) and a community member wounded by a gunshot—relax at Rutba House. COURTESY OF JONATHAN WILSON-HARTGROVE

After an experience in Iraq with Christian Peacemaker Teams, Jonathan and Leah Wilson-Hartgrove were inspired to minister to strangers. They founded Rutba House in Durham, North Carolina, and over the last decade have welcomed scores of guests—some for a few weeks, others for life.

Leah and I move to Durham's Walltown, where we're white outsiders in an African-American community. She takes a job as director of the only after-school program in the neighborhood. It seems like a good way to get to know the neighbors (through their kids, whose defenses often are not as sophisticated). The program is housed in an old elementary school building that a church owns and operates. Leah supervises 40 kids in a fellowship hall for three hours a day. Her job is to feed them, try to get them to do their homework and keep them from killing each other. That last task is not always so easy. One afternoon I lay all 200 pounds of my six-and-a-half-foot frame on a 12-year-old kid until he agrees to let go of a butcher knife.

The entrance to the room where Leah works is directly across from a corner where a few guys in their mid-twenties, dressed in long white T-shirts, stand around for eight to ten hours a day. These guys greet passersby at car windows, making quick exchanges while looking over their shoulders. Leah and I talk about how we might get to know these young men. We're strangers to them and they to us, but we're about the same age.

As we go in and out of the church, they seem to be glaring at us.

We learn that one of them is named Quinton. We find that out because he comes into the church to use the phone. The people who work there seem to know him. He doesn't bother to introduce himself to us, but Leah tries to make small talk. To connect, somehow.

Then one day Quinton says to Leah, "So how come you so stuck up?"

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"I mean, how come y'all always passin' us out on the corner and never stop to say, 'What's up?'"

"Well, I didn't know y'all wanted to talk," Leah says. She's dumbstruck by the confrontation and isn't sure how to ask the question that's on her mind. Why does this guy who sells drugs on the corner think he can walk into a church full of kids and use the phone to arrange his deals? Leah and the phone user stare at each other, two strangers with a brick wall between them.

Years later, after Quinton has decided to stop selling drugs—after he has eaten a couple hundred meals with us and has lived in one of the hospitality houses—he will laugh about all this. We will be together, telling the story over and again to soothe the pain, to begin to heal.

"Man, things was crazy back then." That is how Quinton will characterize those early encounters at the church. What he means is, "I trust you now," which changes everything, because none of us is Superman, leaping over the walls between us in a single bound.

This opening ourselves to one another takes time. But love is a prisoner who stays up night after night with a sharpened toothbrush, working away at a crack in the wall until finally breaking through. A way opens, not over the wall but *through* it. It

helps, of course, to have someone working from the other side—to meet you in the middle. But wherever the encounter takes place, this opening in the wall of suspicion and fear finally makes a relationship possible.

This opening is trust.

We move to Walltown knowing that we'll be strangers with white faces, because we know something about the invisible walls that partition southern towns. I was raised 90 miles away in a town that doesn't smell much like the "New South." Driving into Durham from my hometown, we see the welcome sign on the highway that says the city was established in 1869. That's postbellum in southern history—after the war that ripped this land wide open, exposing the hidden wound of our nation's original sin.

Walltown got its name from George Wall, one of many freed slaves who found his way to Durham. Wall did janitorial work for Trinity College, which was later named Duke University. A community grew up around Wall—a tight-knit extended family of other black folks, most of whom also worked on campus. They called the community Walltown.

We learn that there is a storefront on Knox Street called Walltown Neighborhood Ministries. It's an office that's open nine to five, with a receptionist by the door and a steady stream of people coming in and out. Between answering phones and watching the door, the receptionist greets us and makes small talk. We learn that on the side she designs programs for funeral services. She hands us a sample and invites us to meet director Sylvia Hayes, who is also a minister.

After hearing the schedule of food bank days, neighborhood block parties, community safety meetings and home-ownership seminars, we introduce our idea of opening a hospitality house. We tell Hayes about the Good Samaritans in Rutba, Iraq, who picked up friends of ours after a roadside crash and carried them to a doctor. "Three days ago your country bombed our hospital," the doctor said. "But we will take care of you." We want to practice the hospitality we received in Rutba, I say. We want to "go and do likewise." I realize as I'm saying this that Hayes is the first person in Walltown to hear our hospitality house idea. She cocks her head to the side, her eyes quizzical.

"You mean you want somebody that ain't got no place to stay to come live with you in your house?" We see that she gets the point—and that she's never heard

anything like this before. Hayes starts to laugh. “OK, when you want to start? I can introduce you to somebody right now.”

Soon Hayes is knocking on the door of a duplex. After a while a short, dark-skinned man named Ronnie answers the door, smiles at the reverend and invites us in. These duplexes are called shotgun houses because the three or four rooms on each side are lined up in a row with a doorway in the middle of each. If all the doors are open, you can stand at the front door and see clear through to the back. All of Ronnie’s belongings are boxed up in a corner; otherwise, the place is empty.

It’s a friend’s place, Ronnie tells us, and he’s been sleeping on a couch in the front room. But his friend was evicted and had moved all the furniture out. She doesn’t know that he’s still here. Neither does the landlord, apparently. This is why Ronnie was slow to answer the door.

We give our speech about Rutba House. I find myself choosing my words carefully. A quizzical, disbelieving look crosses Ronnie’s face as he listens to our story, but he doesn’t laugh because this isn’t a story about someone else. It’s a story he can be part of, and it’s about a place to sleep tonight. Ronnie starts nodding yes to every question, and we carry his belongings to our car.

In so many ways Ronnie is the ideal guest. He’s conscientious about cleaning up after himself. He helps with household chores. And in the first few weeks he borrows a pair of shoes for an interview and lands a job. Ronnie is all smiles and so are we. This being a hospitality house feels like pure gift.

Then one weekend Leah and I go out of town with Isaac, the only other member of Rutba House at the time. Ronnie stays behind because he has to work. We make sure there’s food in the refrigerator and leave the phone number of the place where we’ll be. Smiling, Ronnie waves good-bye as we drive away in Isaac’s car. He is our brother. We trust him. When we return, Ronnie gives a report on his weekend. It was mostly work and sleep, he says. Ronnie says we’re a blessing.

But when Leah gets in our car on Monday morning to drive to work, she smells cigarette smoke. *Odd*, she thinks, *neither of us smokes*. She has to adjust the driver’s seat and turn the music down. It’s blaring a song she doesn’t know from a CD she’s never seen before.

We talk this over later with Isaac. We feel awful—like we've been lied to, like these months of life with Ronnie have all been fake. Maybe we should give him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he just assumed we'd be fine with him borrowing the car.

We sit down with Ronnie. Leah walks him through her Monday experience in the car, says we're not angry but need to communicate about things if we're going to share a home. I tell him it makes me feel bad that he took our car without asking. I mention that I'm allergic to cigarette smoke. But I try to emphasize that we want to reconcile, we want to be able to trust him.

His elbows on his knees, Ronnie hangs his head, slowly shaking it back and forth. When we're done talking, he looks up. Ronnie's smile is gone. "I know everything looks like I took your car," he says. "But I didn't. I couldn't stand to live with people if I did something like that."

His words prove to be prophetic. After work the next day he doesn't come home. A couple of days later we call his girlfriend's house to make sure he's OK. "Oh yeah, I'm fine, I'm fine," Ronnie tells us. Then one day when we're gone he comes by to pick up his stuff.

A couple of months later Leah is driving down a street near the house when she sees Ronnie walking the other direction. She blows the horn and waves. He looks but doesn't seem to recognize the car. He keeps walking—all smiles—and we never see him again.

When I was growing up, if my momma didn't trust something that my brother or I said, she'd ask, "Can you look me in the eye and tell me that?" She seemed to know when the fabric of truth that held our world together was being stretched. My older brother taught me early on that there was no sense lying to her. If you weren't going to do what she said, it was best to go ahead and say so.

After being lied to a dozen times by folks like Ronnie—people with whom I've shared a bathroom—I realize that the frankness that characterized the home I grew up in was based on a basic trust. My momma didn't have any super power. She simply knew her boys, loving us and paying attention to our every need. Beginning in the womb, I suspect, we learned that we were loved, that someone would always take care of us, that there would be enough, that we could trust the universe. But this isn't the case for everyone. It certainly wasn't for Ronnie.

In his study *The Homeless*, social analyst Christopher Jencks looks at the explanations that were offered in the 1980s for the growing numbers of people who were living on the streets of urban America. “Those who end up on the streets have typically had all the disadvantages,” he notes. “Most started life in families with a multitude of problems; indeed, many came from families so troubled that they were placed in foster care. Many had serious health and learning problems. A large group grew up in dreadful neighborhoods and attended mediocre schools. After that, most had their share of bad luck in the labor market, the marriage market, or both. It is the cumulative effect of these disadvantages . . . that has left them on the streets.” Ronnie’s experience never taught him a basic trust. Lying was the habit he learned to get by in a world that has no place for him.

This realization does not make it any easier to be lied to. It does not lend clarity about what to do when you’re not sure which parts of a story you can believe. You wish you could be like your momma—you wish you could go back and love from the start, teaching them to trust, asking them, “Can you look me in the eye and say that?” But you can’t, because time hasn’t healed the wounds of history, and you can’t either.

You begin to realize that it must feel awful to be Ronnie. You imagine, for a moment, the fears that must have stirred in Ronnie’s soul when he peeked through the blinds of that empty shotgun house and saw your white face, out of place in his neighborhood. You realize that you were the one who came knocking, Ronnie the one who trusted Rev. Hayes enough to open the door, grab his few belongings, get into your car, be your guest.

After you’ve been at this for awhile, people will sometimes ask whether you’re afraid. Eventually you realize that it’s people like Ronnie who have every reason to be afraid. It is the stranger who offers you his trust when he comes knocking at the door. And you have the chance to open it, welcoming someone who you know will change you.

When we meet Gary he is 17, his uniform the baggy jeans and long white tee that all the guys on the corner wear. His is another face in the crowd of those who glare when we pass by. All they know is that we’re not customers and our skin is white. Between us stands a wall of misunderstanding, suspicion and fear.

His brother, Ant, is in the Walltown Neighborhood Ministries summer camp. When we learn that it's Ant's 16th birthday we invite him to come by that evening after work. I run to get a tub of the chocolate ice cream Ant likes. Ant is at the house and Gary is with him. Ant has vouched for us. He's told Gary, "Listen, they're all right." Gary has walked through our door not because he trusts us but because he trusts his brother.

Later that summer Ant comes to our house to recover from an appendectomy and ends up staying until he's completed four years of college and has a full-time job. Through Ant we learn that his father killed the boys' mother and dumped her body in a field. We hear about abusive foster families and about orphanages where Gary fought to protect Ant from other kids. Gary seems cursed to wander the earth. He has learned to be a fighter, his defenses always up.

Sometimes Gary comes to a dinner that we serve for any neighbors who want to stop by. He doesn't talk much, but we start to get to know him on his terms—the foods he likes, his peculiar sense of humor. We make pineapple upside-down cake for his birthday because it's his favorite. He smiles a sneaky smile and says, "That's almost good."

Yet he keeps his distance. When we try to talk to him about finishing school or trying to get a job, he changes the subject. Gary is his own man, doing things his own way. He gets picked up by the police on a drug charge and we visit him in jail. We write letters and call out his name at morning prayer. When he gets out we introduce him to a friend who runs a construction crew and he goes to work on a demolition job. But three days into it Gary quits. He says our friend is racist to the core.

We start to notice a pattern that's repeated by dozens of guests and friends from the street. These are people for whom relationships are difficult, people who've been disappointed more times than they can count. Having been rejected on the dance floor of life, they greet an open door or an extended hand with suspicion. They are desperate to connect. They have fantastic, romantic illusions about the wild fun that everyone else must be having. But how can you trust an invitation to join the rest of the world when everything you've experienced suggests there is no place there for you? What if the white guy holding a pineapple upside-down cake is just one more person who's going to let you down?

But what if you're on the other side—what if you're the white guy who's convinced that the gangsters who stand on the corner in white tees are a threat to your

children, a plague on your neighborhood, a menace to society? What if, even though you don't want to believe it—even though you left work early to bake a birthday cake for a young man who wears the white T-shirt—you still feel suspicion? What if you find yourself worrying that guys who carry drugs in their underwear and guns in their belts might do something stupid in your house, around your friends and family? Such a thing is not outside the realm of possibility. You worry because you are not in control, but you do everything in your power not to let it show.

One evening at dinner a couple dozen of us are passing plates of potatoes and greens when the back door opens. Gary walks in with his friend Slug, slouches down in a chair and asks what's for dinner. Only he asks extra slow, his eyelids almost closing before he can finish his sentence. We have a rule at Rutba House: anyone is welcome most any time, but no drugs and no guns allowed. You don't come to dinner high. Everyone knows this. I tell Gary and Slug that I need to talk to them in the living room, that I'm not kidding, that they need to get up. Now.

My blood pressure is up, and I say more than I need to. I'm not just naming a boundary, I'm wielding words like a sword, rallying the troops to defend the castle. Gary and Slug want nothing to do with me. They storm out the front door, cussing my "cracker ass," insisting that I'm making a big deal out of nothing. In their view, I've only confirmed what they already knew: you can't trust white folks.

For months Gary refuses to speak to me, but eventually he starts coming around again. I apologize for being too harsh that night. We engage in the dance: come close, push away, come close, push away. We're trying to learn to trust each other.

Then one spring morning we get a call from a neighbor who says Gary has been shot. We find him at the hospital in the ICU with a gunshot wound to the throat. He is breathing through a tracheotomy, unable to move or speak. He can open his eyes enough to glare at anyone who walks into the room. Gary has survived but is paralyzed. He may regain some use of his arms, but he cannot sit up, stand or walk. He's not likely to ever live independently. He even has to press a button to get a nurse to suction the saliva he can't swallow.

All of this is too much for Gary. He is alive, but he is living in a state of rage. Doctors and nurses are appalled by the way he talks to them when he regains the ability to speak. They call in social workers and psychologists. The hospital administration people call his case one of the most difficult they've ever handled.

Meanwhile, a lieutenant from the local police district assures our neighbors that many of our problems have been resolved because one of Walltown's most notorious criminals has been shot and is paralyzed. The criminal won't be causing any more trouble.

At the hospital a staff member calls the police, who arrest Gary in his hospital bed, wheel him before a judge, then drive him 30 miles away to the state prison hospital. His court-appointed lawyer does not return our calls. We cannot get the prison to approve a visit. Gary has disappeared down a black hole.

Four months later a judge drops the charges. The county social services department gets a call from the prison saying that Gary is being handed over to the department's care and invites us to an emergency meeting where we try to figure out what we can do. Gary is delivered to a sister's apartment. He is smiling, his voice stronger. "I'm just happy to be alive," he says. "I watched them wheel a lot of people out of there cold."

A doctor comes to remove bandages from his feet and unleashes the odor of rotting flesh. Skin hangs from Gary's heels like the limp stems of a tomato vine at the end of long, hot summer. The doctor says Gary should have been turned every four to six hours. She asks us to help roll him over to see a wound at the base of his back that's so large I could put my fist in it. "This is a disgrace," the doctor says, shaking her head.

It takes a while, but the doctor gets Gary into a rehab program. They put him on a pressure-relieving bed, begin treating his wounds in earnest and start to get him off his back for the first time in eight months. The physical therapists are amazed by his progress. They start to talk to him about going home, but Gary doesn't have a home. The sister is nowhere to be found. Gary asks if he can come to Rutba House.

"I know y'all gonna have to have one of your meetings to talk about it," he says. We do. His physical needs present a set of daunting challenges: we would have to rearrange one of our houses, build a handicap ramp, take shifts to make sure someone is always home. Logistically complicated, but doable. The bigger challenges, it seems, are relational. Someone in our neighborhood tried to kill Gary. Can he be safe in our home? Can we? We decide we cannot know, that this is a risk that love may compel us to take.

But what about Gary’s relationship with us? We’ve had eight years of this complicated dance to reflect on—seeing him come close, then watching him leave. Can we trust one another enough to take this step? This isn’t just a matter of stopping by for dinner.

After we have said yes, Leah goes to a meeting with social workers at the hospital. They sit with file folders open, reading the story in case notes and incident reports. As they talk about details, the tension grows. Leah senses that these women cannot imagine a future for Gary and feel that she is naive. They push; Leah pushes back. Finally, one of them states their skepticism. “Do you have any idea what you are doing?”

“No,” Leah says, and the social worker throws her hands up, as if to say that’s what she’s been thinking. “Finally,” the social worker seems to say, as if she can now get on the task of locating a nursing home to put Gary in.

But Leah is not finished. “Of course we don’t know what we’re doing. But neither did I know what I was doing when I had a baby. We got help from midwives who knew more than we did. We leaned on friends and family. We figured it out as we went. I don’t think we ever know what we’re doing in situations like this.”

No, we don’t know what we’re doing. As far as we can tell, this being a hospitality house—this experiment in welcoming everyone no matter what, in meeting Jesus in the stranger—makes you an expert at nothing. But the not knowing is itself a gift. It is an invitation, even.

When you cannot know for sure, you learn to trust. As it turns out, trust has its own way of being in the world.

This essay is adapted from Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove's latest book, Strangers at My Door, *and is published with the permission of Convergent Books, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House LLC, a Penguin Random House Company, New York.*