

# 30 MINUTES OF INNOCENCE AND A LIFETIME OF GUILT

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For Carmen Gwenigale, 30 minutes was all it took to signify the end of her innocence, 30 minutes was all it took to signify the beginning of her guilt, and 30 minutes was all it took to signify her life goal.

As a 13-year-old, Carmen Gwenigale and her older brothers discussed war every night before bed.

"So where would you hide?" Gwenigale said. "What's the best hiding place if the rebels were to come tomorrow?"

Eventually, the rebel army came in what was the longest Liberian civil war in the country's history. The fighting lasted from 1989 to 1996 with over 600 thousand casualties, while the effects lasted 16 years. Fortunately, the American embassy saved Gwenigale, her brothers and her mother because they had American citizenship. But the same wasn't true for the rest of her family and the community.

Having lived in Liberia throughout her childhood, Gwenigale experienced her share of civil disputes and was used to the family "vacations" to Puerto Rico, but this one was different. This one lasted 16 years. This one had lasting effects on Liberia.

This one completely changed Gwenigale and her family's dynamic.

In Liberia, Gwenigale lived in a missionary

compound established by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America - her father made a commitment with the church to go to medical school in Puerto Rico for free in return for his service in the compound's hospital later on. This commitment system served as an incentive for families from all around the world to stay in Liberia and to help the community. Through the

diversity in the compound, Gwenigale naturally developed powerful friendships and learned about varying cultures throughout her childhood.

"My beliefs in family and acceptance and diversity ... came from [the compound]," Gwenigale said. "We learned that family is not blood ... Family is more of that unity and that connection that you have with each other."

As a result, Gwenigale formed strong, family-like bonds with many of the people in the compound - bonds that were temporarily broken when the American embassy sent a car, giving an ultimatum of 30 minutes to pack up, say goodbye and leave for safety because of the imminent threat of the rebel forces.

"We understood the urgency of [the situation], but that didn't minimize the effect of it," Gwenigale said. "Leaving what we knew was home, leaving our family, leaving my friends, leaving all the people we'd grown up

with and not being able to say goodbye made me guilty ... Not knowing if I'd ever see them again was just like losing somebody I loved."

Over time, this feeling of guilt has compounded upon itself, especially after hearing her surviving family members' stories. For example, Gwenigale's adopted brother and cousin, Michael Gwenigale, couldn't leave



**ABOVE:** Gwenigale (second from left) and her mother, father, brothers, and cousin.

because he held Liberian citizenship. "He had a lot of behavioral issues," Gwenigale said. "There was a lot of defiance and anger because we were able to leave and he wasn't. He felt abandoned."

In order to cope and survive, Michael chose to side with the rebels instead of staying with Gwenigale's father. In his mind, this gave him a higher chance of survival. As a rebel soldier, he became reliant on drugs, lived in the streets and saw his family members get raped and killed. Like many other child soldiers, Michael's tragic experiences caused him to develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. This only added to Gwenigale's grief and guilt.

"All of those things combined change a person. Seeing him, knowing that he was living in the streets, knowing what he had suffered through over the years caused a lot of guilt," Gwenigale said. "The knowledge of what he had gone through still sticks with me. It was hard for me to accept that I didn't have to suffer what he suffered. For me that hurts. I cannot get rid of the fact that I was safe and he wasn't."

The majority of Gwenigale's other relatives also had to stay in Liberia. In contrast to the

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*- Carmen Gwenigale*



**TOP LEFT:** Gwenigale with her brother and cousin at a community picnic in Liberia.  
**TOP RIGHT:** A family portrait of Gwenigale now with her husband and son.  
**BOTTOM LEFT:** Gwenigale at her college graduation at the University of Puerto Rico.  
**BOTTOM RIGHT:** Gwenigale's family with their missionary Aunt Caroline from Burlington, Iowa.

soldier lifestyle of Michael, they were victimized in entirely different ways. For example, one was raped multiple times and is raising the child of a man who raped her to this day.

Once the war ended, the new government tried to help everyone that was affected by the war through a peace and reconciliation campaign, but their wartime experiences couldn't be so easily forgiven and forgotten. Although these programs didn't alleviate the pain of their experiences, Gwenigale's cousins have remained positive.

"My cousins tell me the story from a perspective of somebody who stayed ... but still managed to move on and embrace life," Gwenigale said. "Those are the type of people who are my heroes. Those are the people I can see true strength in."

Unfortunately for Gwenigale, she wasn't aware of what was going on with her cousins in Liberia at the time, as communication was limited. Consequently, the move to Puerto Rico flustered not only Gwenigale, but also her brothers. Another obstacle was the language barrier that came with moving. Although her family did speak

Spanish at home in Liberia, Gwenigale and her brothers never actually learned how to read or write in it. These obstacles ultimately made Puerto Rico seem like "a whole different world."

Even then, Gwenigale wasn't the most affected by the move. The language barrier forced her and her brothers to drop one grade level each, which was easier for Gwenigale because she started her education early, but was harder for her brothers because they were soon to graduate from high school and didn't want to drop a grade level. As a result, her brothers moved to the United States with their godparents while Gwenigale stayed in Puerto Rico with her mother.

In 1999, Gwenigale visited the University of Northern Iowa as an exchange student in what was another bittersweet move. With the move to Iowa, she was able to be closer to her brothers and further her education. However, being in the Midwest also meant that she was leaving her mother behind in Puerto Rico.

"My role as the only daughter is to take care of my mother, and not doing that, I feel like

I'm failing in that aspect of my life ... I call her twice a day, and it's hard to hear her say she had a really bad day and wasn't able to get out of bed, especially knowing that I'm not there for her," Gwenigale said. "The one thing that I'll never forgive myself for is if anything were to ever happen to my mother and I wasn't there. I feel that guilt all the time."

Even with the sense of guilt that came with moving away from her mom, finding a job was a necessity. Initially, Gwenigale studied wild-life management, hoping to become a veterinarian, but she later switched to an education major. Becoming a teacher allowed Gwenigale to have many more personal interactions and, thus, helped rekindle some of those connections that she has lost since moving from Liberia.

"My family is like my students - when my students are in pain, I'm in pain. In that way, teaching is something that just fits on a different level," Gwenigale said. "Teaching Spanish, I'm not teaching the language. I'm teaching the culture. I'm teaching home. I'm teaching myself."