

Rich Wilkerson Offers Personal Look at 'Cousin David'

The Wilkerson family has more than 20 members in full-time ministry—and one of them is Rich Wilkerson, founder of Peacemakers, a non-profit social service organization, and senior pastor of Trinity Church in Miami. Wilkerson and his wife Robyn minister in the heart of Miami's inner city at two campuses.

Although Wilkerson was a successful evangelist by Church standards, the 58-year-old pastor says he never felt truly successful until he started working with the disenfranchised—much like he watched “Cousin David” do since he was a youth.

Following in the footsteps of his cousin, David Wilkerson, he has presented the Gospel to more than 1.5 million students in over 1,600 public school campuses across the U.S. and Canada. He has ministered to youth and families through evangelism and local church ministry since 1973. And his weekly Peacemakers television broadcast deals with tough contemporary issues with the Word of God.

Charisma News caught up with Wilkerson before he gave his Miami megachurch the news of David's sudden passing on Saturday night. Wilkerson shared fond memories of David, as well as moments that shaped his life and ministry.

“David had terrible ulcers when he was 28 or 29 years old. He would come down and stay at our home in Palm Beach for a week or two at a time. That's when everyone thought the best thing you could do for an ulcer was to drink milk products and ice cream because it was soothing and creamy. David would only drink milkshakes or tomato soup or something like that because

he was in so much pain," Wilkerson recalls.

"David would stay in my sister's room next to me and my sister would stay in our room. I would hear him in there weeping—not because he was in pain, though I'm sure he was. He was weeping for New York. As a young boy of eight years old that really stuck in my memory."

Another thing that stuck in Wilkerson's memory was the 16mm films David used to show in his dad's Pentecostal church. Wilkerson was among the first to film so-called "shooting galleries" in New York, dilapidated homes where six or eight people gathered to shoot heroin into their veins. The films showed addicts making heroin, using a tourniquet to make their veins pop out, and sticking a syringe full of the drug into their arms.

When Rich was 12, his father took him to New York every summer to work with Wilkerson. He recalls ministry outreach on Fox Street in the Bronx.

"Ten thousand people would live on that one square block. The tenement buildings were 25 stories high, or at least that's what it seemed like," Wilkerson says. "The police would rope off Fox Street on either end of the block and help David build stages and set up sound equipment. Then we would just work the tenement buildings all day, going room to room, to invite people to the meeting."

At about 9 p.m. David would start the meeting. Wilkerson recalls how the street was jammed with people. Others would hang out of the tenement windows to hear the message of salvation. After a few testimonies of the saving grace of Jesus Christ, Wilkerson would start preaching.

"He wouldn't preach long, but he would preach in your face the straight truth. Then he would tell the people if they wanted to accept Christ as their personal savior to step from where they were and come to the altar," Wilkerson says. "The altar

call would take about 30 minutes because people would come out of their apartment buildings down the fire escapes. The music would be playing and David would just wait and wait. There would just be hundreds and hundreds of people at the altar accepting Christ right in the middle of the street. That was imprinted on my mind."

Wilkerson isn't ashamed to admit that he lived for Wilkerson's approval—even though he was not David's son. Wilkerson was a cousin, but he felt more like a dearly loved nephew. Through the years, Wilkerson remembers times when David would reprove him, as well as when he would get checks from David in the mail to support his ministry.

"David was a unique guy. He could go off on you because he felt that you needed to tow the line and there was just no messing around. But he would support your work," Wilkerson says. "I would occasionally get a two- or three-lined note from him, and I really appreciated that. For our 10th anniversary here at Trinity in Miami we got the most wonderful letter from David and Gwen. When I found out he died, I decided to put that letter in safe deposit box because it is like gold to me."

Wilkerson, founder of World Challenge Ministries, was killed last Wednesday in a car accident in East Texas on April 27. Wilkerson was killed in a head-on collision with a tractor trailer while traveling east on U.S. 175. Read more about Wilkerson's life and ministry. The funeral is Monday afternoon in Tyler, Texas.