

THE WIRE

Series Wrap-Up

A Visit to Viva House Soup Kitchen

Welcome to a special series of podcasts from the Center for Emerging Media.

I'm Marc Steiner.

As the final episode of the hit HBO series THE WIRE approaches, I'm sitting down with writers, actors, directors and others who have been involved in the production of the show since it premiered in 2002. I'm asking them to share their experiences and to talk about what they think the wire is all about. What lessons they think the wire has to teach us about America.

One of the greatest things about The Wire is how real it is, and how it almost slavishly weaves truth into the fiction. Some of these are things only people familiar with Baltimore are able to pick up on. Like when a former governor makes a cameo, or just how much the fictional mayor Carcetti resembles the real mayor Martin O'Malley. But there are some things that even people familiar with Baltimore don't pick up on.

In this scene, a newly sober Bubbles visits a local soup kitchen to find out if he can volunteer.

<clip from the wire>

That man with the Bronx accent is Brenden Walsh. He and his wife, Willa Bickam, run a soup kitchen called Viva House. It is part of the Catholic Worker movement. They run it out of their own home, and have been doing so for decades. It's not a normal looking soup kitchen. It isn't depressing, or institutional. It's actually kind of beautiful. Artwork covers the walls, which are painted warm and inviting colors. A gleaming piano sits against a wall.

BRENDEN: The wire did come one time for other seasons, and they looked and it and decided not to do it here. To small or whatever. It didn't look like a soup kitchen. We told them, that was the point. We don't want it to look like a soup kitchen. We want it to look like a house, because that is what it is. So we ask people when people come in, like we'll try and sit whole families together or people who want to sit with someone. So we have it broken into smaller spaces. And we have music and flowers. So we try and make it as family like a we can.

WILLA: Mill Fleur Florists in Roland park gives us flowers every Tuesday. Gorgeous. I mean last week we had more roses than we could give away. And then we give them away at the end of the meal, at the end of the week.

BRENDEN: On Thursday when we aren't doing it, we ask, who is having a hard time at home? And then they get a whole bunch of flowers.

A soup kitchen that gives out beautiful flowers along with food. Who has ever heard of such a thing? It's clear that Brendan and Willa care about the people they serve. Along the artwork and quilts hanging on the wall are pictures of they visitors they get.

WILLA: Jessica you might enjoy, here are some of the people who come into the soup kitchen. These are people making the plates. We have about a 100 volunteers who make plates. And people come to eat, and this is our stone of hope.

BRENDAN: Oh yeah, see originally we were going to make it a tombstone, and then we said, that is too depressing. This was the year of the 300+ murders. So rather than have it so depressing we made it a stone of hope. So on the stone is says, we will yew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. And this mural says the world will be saved by beauty.

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It's clear that Brendan and Willa are doing much more here than running a soup kitchen. Yes, they provide food, but....

BRENDAN: But the main thing we do is provide a sense of community. So when you come we do as best we can to make this as nonviolent a place you can come as possible, and try to make it as best we can completely different from the violence of Baltimore city. And so, it's the way we envision the way the society could be...where people could treat one another as real people.

Brenden and Willa have been feeding their neighbors out of their house since the 1960's.

WILLA: see we started this before there was soup kitchens. We never wanted to do this. It took us 25 years to put a sign on the door. We just wanted to be neighbors and invite our neighbors here and had neighbors staying with us. And the housing department gave us a hard time what it was was the neighbors complain because we had black and white people living together. That would be 67, 68, 69. this was a white area, black people lived on the other side of Baltimore street so it was very racially divided, as it still is. We chose to live here because it is on the boundary line. It is a perfect place to be. We chose to be here because it was the poorest white community in the city. We moved here shortly after the assassination of MLK and we knew we better be in a community that was a little integrated.

In the 40 years since they have moved to West Baltimore, Brendan and Willa have only seen things get worse.

WILLA: just 40 years ago is not long ago. There was treatment on demand. So for example the guys who lived with us or came to the soup kitchen they could check themselves into spring grove. When they hit bottom they could go check in. Nowadays, it is years. There was a woman in the kitchen a friend, who was here to eat. And she was so thrilled, she got into a treatment program. She got into a program, and she was flowing about it. And the people in the kitchen didn't pick up—one day inpatient, and 7 days outpatient. Now that is not going to work. What we are doing?

BRENDEN: the idea of the common good is gone. The more and more we privatize, deregulate..the harder and harder it is. Even tearing down public housing makes it harder to organize. And this isn't to say keep the high rises but it does mean that when these people got thrown out and scattered there was no one there to help pick up. What has happened in this neighborhood is that people double up, and all these vacant houses doesn't mean that people don't live there. They have started cementing them up but people still get in.

Brenden and Willa have watched as vacant homes in their community increase. The population has plummeted. What happened?

BRENDEN: In Baltimore we have lost over 150k blue collar jobs since I have been here. And we have lost since 1950 a third of the population. So you only get work here that you can support your family on if you have a college degree and you are in tourism, finance or medicine. See this neighborhood used to have Maryland cup, Montgomery wards, coppers was here. A lot of light factory work. It was a big difference. Now we have over 50% unemployed around here and we don't see anything that is going to change in regards to education or employment and that is a hard thing to say.

Brenden says that the reason that he appreciates the wire is that in all of it's five seasons, it has dealt with these issues. And that is why when they were asked to be a part of season five, they agreed...though maybe they didn't know quite what they had signed up for.

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BRENDEN: we really had a good time. It was a lot of work. Bubbles only scrubbed one pot. They told us to make it look like a big job. And we did, like dummies. And then after he finished the pot, everyone left! And so the next time we had to have pots, we just had one dirty pot.

There were some instances where Willa and Brenden were forced to depart from reality. Here's a scene where Willa tells a young mother to stop hitting her baby

<clip from wire>

WILLA: I do not like that scene, they knew it. So the scene that happened before is that I am usually working in the kitchen and so I can see what is going on. And in this scene in the wire, which has happened before, there is a woman sitting at this table and she is high, she is known to us, she is an addict, and she is berating her child for eating off her plate and slaps him. And at that point I come in from the kitchen and ask her what is going on, can I help you. However in the script....i wasn't allowed to sit down, I did I tried to change it. And I sat down to talk to the mother like any of us would do. You always maintain eye contact, you don't stand above someone. So I sat down. CUT. What are you doing? See this tape, stand there. But id rather sit! Didn't go over too well. We did this late at night. It started early and then they have twins of course, the 18 month old child was put back and forth during this. But by the time they did this scene both twins were screaming, the mother was in the kitchen crying. I did my best to humanize the scene but it comes off as I was very hard on her. Now I will always be hard on someone who hits her child and calls them these names for eating off her plate, but I wouldn't do it in that manner. It is a very hard woman who portrays this scene but that is not characteristic of me.

BRENDAN: once the line is written, you have to say that. In the scene I was doing with Andre, bubbles, I was telling him that we really needed helping working the tables in the back. But the line was, waiting the tables. So I was, this is a catholic worker house, so we would say working. I kept screwing it up, and Andre said, say it the way it is written or we will never get out of here!

WILLA: He said it a little more profane!

You did have to say the lines they way they are written! Not a lot of Ad libbing

WILLA: at the end of the scene, you had this baby, she was a mess. So what would you do but put your hand on his shoulder to try and comfort him. Cut! What are you doing? Don't touch the child.

BRENDAN: when a fight breaks out you have to get yourself in the middle of the two people. You cant grab people. Willa was trying to sit down so she could see the mother eye to eye and say, can I help you? Can I hold your baby while you eat?

WILLA: Standing between someone is the Gandhian principle of interposition and so they try to anticipate. We have worked all our lives for a world of nonviolence so you anticipate what might happen. As she raised her voice I would have anticipated there would be trouble.

BRENDAN: So it wasn't realistic that Willa would do that. If you did that, the woman would have gotten ticked and maybe belted you.

WILLA: Her line was, the last line to me was to be delivered with " a good eyefuck" as it was written in the script by David Simon. That is his favorite word he said. (laughs)

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In the end, Willa and Brendan believe in THE WIRE because the WIRE stands for the same thing they do: for the losers of the world and the important of their struggle.

There is a great article in IN THESE TIMES on the Wire. And the guy pointed out that what he liked best about was the stories of people who are struggling. Whether or not they are struggling for good or the bad, they are all in a struggle. And then he says, but most of us lose, all throughout our lives. And here is the quote. The only kinds of fights worth having are the fights you are going to lose. Because somebody has to fight them and lose and lose and lose until some day, somebody who believes as you do wins. In order for someone to win an important major fight one hundred years hence, a lots of other people have to be willing, for the sheer fun and joy of it, knowing they are going to lose. You mustn't feel like a martyr, you have got to enjoy it.

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