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# From Liberia, a call for help

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Providence police Patrolman Jesse Ferrell, left, a school resource officer, helped bring Willy Welton, right, back to Rhode Island from Liberia after he was tricked into flying there and had his identification and green card stolen.

The Providence Journal / Mary Murphy

A teenage boy from Providence was left stranded in the war-ravaged streets of his native Liberia, without his passport or U.S. green card.

There was only one person whom Willy Welson believed could rescue him.

Welson hadn't stood on his country's soil since he was a little boy. He had been living with a cousin on Althea Street in Providence, a rough neighborhood in the West End, since moving from Minnesota three years ago. They had a falling out and late last year, Welson was taken in by a neighbor.

In the midst of this turmoil, while he was a junior at Dr. Jorge Alvarez High School, Welson made a friend who would become his lifeline.

Jesse Ferrell was raised in the Wiggin Village projects, where police kept vigil on the kids hanging around on the streets. When Ferrell became a Providence police officer 12 years ago, he was chosen to look out for inner-city kids.

As a school resource officer at Alvarez and Feinstein high schools, Ferrell met Welson last fall and liked the teen's respectful manner. Welson wasn't a typical 18-year-old, Ferrell says. "He's a genuine kid, old-fashioned, the kind you don't see too much of all the time. You try to look out for them."

The officer knew about the problems in the teen's home life. He knew of his problems with reading and writing and his struggles with epilepsy and heart trouble.

Ferrell hired Welson as a counselor and youth coach in an after-school program and saw the teen thrive.

He says Welson began to rely on the friendship, calling on weekends to say hello and ask about Ferrell's family.

Ferrell has seen a lot of struggle in the lives of Providence teens. That's why he gives them his cell phone number. They may need him someday.

On June 15, his cell phone rang with a strange number. It was from Liberia.

THAT PHONE call set off a month-long odyssey involving a small group of people working secretly to get the teen home.

Ferrell says Welson was tricked into thinking he was flying to Minnesota for his brother's wedding. Instead, Welson told the police, he was introduced to a Liberian man who escorted him on flights that took them to Monrovia, Liberia, and then the man took off with Welson's Liberian passport and U.S. green card.

Providence police say they are investigating how the teenager ended up in Liberia; the attorney general's office and federal immigration agents have been notified.

Worried about jeopardizing Welson's safety, his rescuers kept their mission quiet. They did not contact leaders in Rhode Island's Liberian community, which at 15,000 is the highest per-capita Liberian population in the country.

Ferrell says the police believe the boy was dumped in the West African country, but they don't know why.

FERRELL HAD seen Welson at school on June 11, four days before the call from Liberia. The boy was excited about going to the wedding in Minnesota that weekend; the officer had helped arrange for Welson to make up class work he would miss.

Welson hadn't seen his family since moving to Providence, but he stayed in touch with his older brother by phone. He says his brother called to say he was getting married. Welson says his cousin in Providence offered to send him to the wedding, on June 13. He was to fly out of Boston early on June 12 and return a few days later.

Welson says they left for Logan Airport before sunup and another man, who had a Liberian accent, drove with them. Welson says this man was to accompany him to Minnesota and that he held all the paperwork — including Welson's Liberian passport, his green card and his plane tickets.

On the flight from Logan, Welson says he realized something was wrong. It was taking too long. They landed at another airport — Welson doesn't know where, but people were speaking another language. He says they took two other flights and that the man kept telling him to shut up when he protested to ask where they were going.

Welson says he was scared, but he didn't know what to do.

It was dark when they landed at Roberts International Airport in Monrovia. Welson says they got their luggage, went through customs and walked outside the airport, which is about 35 miles from the heart of the city. He says the man still had his documents.

The man told him to wait there; he'd be back. Welson says the man walked down a street across from the airport. He never saw him again.

Welson was standing outside, in tears, when he says two young men approached.

What are you doing here? Don't you know anybody? they asked him.

"I told them, 'I don't know nobody over here. I can't do nothing,' " Welson says.

He says he told them he needed to get to the U.S. Embassy.

Don't tell anyone you're from America, he says they responded; it's not safe. Someone could hurt you.

One man told Welson his name was Kelvin Trinity; the other was David. He says Trinity told him he works with police in Monrovia and offered to take him to a police commissioner.

Both had cell phones and Welson says they asked whether he wanted to call anyone.

He had Officer Ferrell's cell phone number in his wallet, but says he didn't need to look at it. He knew the number by heart.

WHEN FERRELL'S phone rang as he was driving to work that Monday morning, he was unaware that he had missed several calls overnight from Liberia, he says. The caller said he was Commissioner Dunn in Monrovia and that he was with Willy Welson, who said he had been kidnapped.

Ferrell told him to put Welson on the phone. He heard the familiar voice, "I've been kidnapped, Officer Jesse."

Ferrell was outraged. “He was lied to! ... The kid’s all the way in Liberia, just dropped off at the airport. That’s mean. I can’t even think past that.”

Ferrell says he got a second frantic phone call — from Sandra Marrow, the neighbor who had taken in Welson last winter. The teen had called her from Liberia when he was unable to reach Ferrell.

The officer turned to Hillary Salmons, executive director of the Providence After School Alliance. Ferrell told Salmons about Welson; he wanted to get the boy home.

Ferrell was one of the first officers to join PASA, which coordinates after-school activities. He’s well-loved by the staff, says Salmons. “There are so many lonely, desperate situations for these kids and having these police officers connect with them is important to their survival.”

Ferrell had called the right person. Before joining PASA, Salmons had worked in Southeast Asia with Refugees International. She says she understood how a young, unworldly immigrant like Welson, raised in a culture that emphasizes respect for elders, could be misled.

Salmons dropped what she was doing to help Ferrell, who says he was unable to get through to the Liberian police commissioner or Welson on the borrowed cell phones.

“Holy smokes! Street people are letting him use a cell phone — how long will that last?” Salmons remembers thinking. “Using that is expensive, unless they get something out of it. We don’t have much time.”

Salmons called U.S. Sen. [Sheldon Whitehouse](#)’s office to help get Welson into the U.S. Embassy at Momba Point, Monrovia — a tough task without an advocate. She says Whitehouse’s office made arrangements for the next day. But by late morning, Consular Officer Alma Gurski at the embassy delivered bad news.

Welson had a green card, which gives him lawful permanent residency in the United States, but he was not a U.S. citizen and the embassy would not get him home.

Gurski told Salmons that Welson needed new papers, which would take time and money — \$165 for a travel letter, \$65 for a replacement Liberian passport, plus a plane ticket for \$1,500 to \$2,000.

Salmons says they were stunned; she looked over at Ferrell to see his eyes welling up.

“I said, ‘I’ve got a lot of contacts. Let me see what I can do.’ ”

Salmons says she stayed up that night calling former colleagues from Refugees International, the International Institute of Rhode Island, and World Concern — to see whether she could find a safe haven for Welson. Nobody could help.

If left in Liberia, she was told, Welson will not survive.

“I said to my husband that night, ‘We’ve got to get him out and I don’t have time to raise money with a potluck dinner,’ ” Salmons says.

She called Gurski the next morning and said she would pay to get Welson home.

Salmons said she barely knew Welson; he was just one of the many youths in the after-school program.

She was motivated by Ferrell.

“That’s what inspired us — that this young man and this police officer had such a bond.” Salmons says, her voice choking up. “I don’t know if we would have rallied so much if it wasn’t for seeing how much this officer cared for this boy.”

THE RESCUE would not be easy.

Because the country’s infrastructure is still in ruins from the civil wars, communication was difficult.

Welson says he lived in Trinity’s small house in Monrovia. The men took him to a barber to shave off his Afro — to help him cope with the African heat, and to blend in. They wouldn’t let him go out at night, he says, because the streets were dangerous.

Welson trusted the two young men who had taken him in, but Ferrell and Salmons say they were wary. Trinity asked for money to get Welson new documents. Salmons says the embassy warned against sending money to any strangers in Liberia, a poor country where work is scarce and the average civil servant is paid about \$80 a month. But she worried that they would lose their only connection to Welson.

She says she wired \$40 in “good faith” money to Trinity and worked with the embassy to find a more stable place for Welson. Gurski arranged for Joseph Geebro, Liberia’s deputy minister of social welfare, to take Welson into his guarded home until the paperwork was ready.

Salmons wired \$265 to Geebro for Welson’s travel letter, replacement passport and other expenses. She says Whitehouse’s office pushed to get the paperwork completed quickly, and by July 1, the documents were ready.

It took three tries to get Welson on a plane.

The first one-way ticket for July 6 wasn’t confirmed, and Welson was turned away at the airport.

The second time, on July 8, a Brussels Airlines official pulled Welson out of line after reading a letter from the embassy stating that he may need a wheelchair. Welson had some epileptic seizures in Liberia, and Salmons had asked the embassy for a letter to identify the teen in case he needed medical attention.

The manager told Salmons that the airline required a doctor’s note. She pleaded with him, until he agreed to apply the \$1,300 ticket to a flight on July 10.

“He said, ‘Boy this Willy Welson is quite an important man,’ ” Salmons says he told her. “I said, ‘No, he’s just a kid, and we’re ordinary Americans trying to help him.’ ”

The third time, Geebro drove Welson to the airport but left the travel documents at home — two hours away. Welson says Geebro made a hurried phone call, and the papers were delivered with 20 minutes to spare.

The Providence police had arranged for law enforcement officers to meet Welson at every connecting flight.

Ferrell wanted to be the one who brought him home.

On July 11, as an American Airlines attendant stepped off the plane with the slight young man, Ferrell and Officer Chris Owens were already walking toward them on the jetway.

Welson was thinner. Exhaustion was written on his face. He hadn't slept since boarding the plane in Monrovia 24 hours earlier. He was afraid he wouldn't make it home.

Ferrell handed the teen a Providence police baseball cap. The officers settled him in the back seat of their unmarked car and told him he was safe.

WEEKS AFTER his return, Willy Welson and the police still have few answers.

Federal immigration authorities have been notified about the missing passport and green card.

Those documents are valuable in human-trafficking rings, says Niurka Pineiro, a Washington-based spokeswoman at the International Organization for Migration. One stolen green card can be sold for thousands and used to traffic others into the United States, she says.

Pineiro, told about Welson's story, said: "It has all the trappings of smuggling or trafficking. He was an easy target."

The memory of the ordeal pains Welson.

On a blistering August day, he met Ferrell for pizza at Alvarez High and tells the officer how he keeps thinking he was betrayed.

Ferrell held the boy's gaze. Bad experiences can teach us lessons, he tells Welson. The lesson is, when something seems wrong, speak up, ask questions, even make a scene. People will help you.

I want to pay you back, Welson says. Ferrell answers: Pay us back by doing well in school. Graduate in June. Send pictures of yourself getting your diploma to Kelvin Trinity and David, in Liberia, to thank them and pass along your blessings.

Welson listens intently to the one man he trusts.

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