

-Article about Donnell Wilson and *Hypocrites In His Midst*

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by columnist Stephen Baumann

LIFE STORIES by Stephen Baumann

Life not 'neat,'

but interesting

By looking at him, you wouldn't think Donnell Wilson was ever a gang tough who grew up in the projects.

He's a 74-year-old, 200-pound fireplug.

"I used to be 5-foot-8," he tells me with a laugh, which he does a lot.

Gray hair, bushy mustache and dressed — de rigueur for these parts — in sandals, knee-length shorts and black Hawaiian shirt with white and blue flowers. Hibiscus, I think.

Donnell's now a published author, having just completed his first book, a "fictionalized" account of his life from the "rude and crude" housing projects of St. Louis to the sunsets of South Gulf Cove.

Fictionalized, he notes, "to protect the guilty."

The 474-page book is called, "Hypocrites in His Midst — A Story About Flawed Human Beings." It is published through Amazon and available through the website, or Donnell.

Driving the narrative is his mean-streets youth and an upbringing by remote, evangelical parents.

"I, like a lot of kids, ended up in a street gang, because they become your friends, they cover your back and everything else.

"But you make a lot of mistakes. As I said in here" — pointing to the book — "a non-boring life is full of mistakes, and I made a bunch of them."

Donnell dropped out of high school, and by the time he was 21 had four kids.

With the gang, he says, "Basically you steal cars, you pick on people who are vulnerable, which is not right. And you fight. You fight other gangs.

"One of the guys who beat me up in this book later shot some guy and the guy he shot stabbed him in the heart. A couple of guys I know are dead and a couple went to prison.

"It's a stupid way to spend your life."

But he was smart enough to bail from the dead-end kids when the chance arose. In his early 20s, Donnell was hurt in a factory job and used the payout money for trade school. He learned auto body work and moved his family to Colorado, where he eventually earned a living as an insurance estimator.

Still, life didn't turn rosy right away.

Divorce, friends dead by suicide and murder along the way. But he made it.

"I have no idea why. I've been shot at, knifed and beat half silly, and that's why I laugh and cut up a lot," he says.

"It's all in the book."

Thirty-four years ago, Donnell met Mary, his second wife (or "Katie" in his fiction). She "took me on as a project," he says, "and I've been in training ever since."

Also, for many years he had had the itch to be a writer. Donnell took Bennett Cerf's Famous Authors correspondence course when he was younger, then courses at community colleges and workshops.

"I knew I wanted to write because I knew the life I was living, if it wasn't neat, at least it was interesting," he says.

Drugs, drinking, fighting, etc.

"It was like the old adage, in the book, when I was at the evangelical church, they would go, 'Thou shalt not,' and that would make me be the first in line to find out why."

This provokes a laugh.

"I mean, if they would have said, 'We'd really rather you didn't,' I may have not had as much of a compulsion."

One final piece of the author's guiding philosophy:

"If there is a God, I'm a product of his malfunctioning."

Contact Stephen Baumann at [941-681-3003](tel:941-681-3003) or sbaumann@sun-herald.com.

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Stephen W. Baumann
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