

Wilfredo Sallo Huallpayunca

by

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“Come to Willy’s 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday party.” The invitation from my friend Vicki says that Willy is Wilfredo Sallo Huallpayunca from Peru, who has been living with her family, working, and learning English. He wants to share his culture and his mother’s weavings. I am eager to meet Willy, but at the last minute am unable to attend. Willy receives accolades from all who celebrate with him, and I feel disappointed not to have been a part of it.

I contact Vicki to ask if Willy might enjoy an opportunity to speak at Pacheco Elementary School, home of a dual-language immersion program. She arranges a phone meeting for us, and Willy and I agree to meet later in the week.

How unprepared I am for Willy in person in spite of all I have heard. Although we have never seen one another before, like a magnet, I am drawn to him. We share enthusiastic greetings and a warm hug. Willy is very much Peruvian in appearance, with a strong, compact build, dark hair and eyes. His smile lights up not only his face, but the whole room. His joy travels from the inside out, and his love of life is written all over him—in his voice, in his gestures, on his face, and in the words he speaks. His English is a surprise, since after only a few months here, he conveys almost any feeling or idea, and he eagerly adds vocabulary as we talk. It is clear he is bright, and his enthusiasm for learning inspires.

Willy and I meet again another day at the San Luis Obispo Public Library, where it is obvious he knows his way around. He carries a new laptop wrapped carefully in a

blanket inside its case, evidence of how he values it. He will take this laptop to Peru in August to share with his family. Willy has already made full use of it with an impressive power-point presentation on the ancient Inca Civilization. He shares his material with me; I ask questions and learn. He seems surprised and happy when I suggest he include a great deal more about his family, his feelings, his life in Peru, and his impressions of our country. “Do you think the children will like that?” he asks.

“Yes, Willy, they will love knowing about you and your family.” He grins his happiest of grins and we part.

Two weeks later, we stand in the Pacheco School Library. Willy busily adjusts the projector while I wonder how he has mastered all this technology to create a presentation with special effects and how, with work and school, he has found time. Willy fine tunes the focus and disappears into an adjacent room while Vicki introduces him to the sixth graders who have assembled. Willy enters dressed in the garb of the Peruvian mountain people of his home.

It is clearly Willy’s moment. In his colorful poncho and hat, he walks to the front and greets the students. All eyes are upon him as he begins. Over the next hour, he holds his audience. He compares Peru and his home of Cusco with California and surrounding areas the children know. He shares his life and his pride in his nine successful brothers and sisters. He speaks of his father’s work, hours from home, restoring ancient ruins. Woven into all he tells us about his family is his great love and respect for his mother who has inspired her children to become the very best, working and saving to give them the opportunity to accomplish their goals and dreams.

The students hear how difficult life can be in Peru, how young people seldom have material possessions we take for granted. It is a struggle we can only imagine, but he focuses proudly on how every member of a family, no matter what age, works to help the others. He tells about herding sheep when he was five years old. He is in the United States after years of family saving; the second to the youngest, he is the only one in his family to have come.

Magically, we grow to respect and care for Willy and for his people. How proud his family would be of their son and brother. Willy is a natural in front of an audience. His voice travels a full and rich range as he speaks. The volume and tone bring his words alive. He moves and gestures, keeping every eye riveted upon him. Willy lovingly shares dolls, purses, and garments his mother has woven and lets students try them on as Vicki snaps pictures for his family. He tells the students he wants to share a poem he has written to express his love for his people and his life. He recites it in his first language, Quechua, and then in Spanish. Finally, he reads it in English. He begins, "I came from the highest mountain and the lowest valleys of my beloved land. One day was born a culture filled with mystery and richness." He concludes the poem and his presentation: "No one understands how they were able to accomplish all those things, but they will be remembered by telling others." Willy's unbridled emotion and deep love fill the room.

We are sharing the gift of Wilfredo Sallo Huallpayunca. He has lessened the distance between our two countries; he has spoken with his heart.