

Guillermo Galdos Part One Transcript

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Boom, boom. And this guy was shooting his gun behind the lamppost. And suddenly they hit him in the head, right in the forehead. And I remember thinking, what the hell am I doing here?

Ramita Navai: From *Aurra Studios*. This is **The Line of Fire** with me, Ramita Navai. I've been working in conflict zones around the world for nearly two decades. And in this series, I talk to fellow journalists about covering war and the life-changing moments of confronting death. Welcome to **The Line of Fire**.

Ramita Navai: My guest today is Channel 4's Latin America correspondent Guillermo Galdos. He's been covering the region for 20 years and as well as being an award-winning journalist, Guillermo is a BAFTA nominated documentary maker. He's known for his work investigating drug cartels.

Guillermo, welcome.

Guillermo Galdos: Hi Ramita, how are you?

Ramita Navai: Good, thank you.

Guillermo, why and how did you end up in journalism?

Guillermo Galdos: Well, I've always liked storytelling and I was born in Peru and because of Shining Path my family moved to Chile. And I remember in Chile, when I was finishing my school there, I won a contest about short stories in school.

And then after that I got into journalism and immediately, I started writing for the university newspaper. And I was always, quite keen telling stories and, you know, just liaising with people and dealing with people. That was what I liked.

Ramita Navai: Guillermo for our listeners, will you tell us about the Shining Path and why specifically did your family move because of the Shining Path?

Guillermo Galdos: Well, the Shining Path was a terrorist organization that appeared here in Peru at the beginning of the 1980s. They were incredibly brutal. They were killing a lot of people in the Andes and then they took the war back into the cities and

back into Lima. They started putting car bombs and they started assassinating quite a lot of policemen.

And at that time it was not a secure place to grow up. And my father had some business in Chile, a construction business. So we all moved down there. I remember Chile was coming out of a military dictatorship with Augusto Pinochet and a new president, President [Patricio] Aylwin got empowered just after we arrived.

But it was, I mean, the war felt like quite removed and quite, you know, far away from us until Shining Path started blowing up cars in Miraflores and in Lima. And I remember when we got to Chile, you know, I had this image of a massive car bomb that happened quite close to where we live and that marked me a lot actually.

And I remember, you know, looking at the journalists and thinking, why are they asking such stupid questions? Because I couldn't believe that they were interviewing people that were covered in blood and instead of helping them, they were putting the microphone to them. I remember I was quite impressed by that.

Ramita Navai: What was the first big story you covered?

Guillermo Galdos: I think the first big story - I arrived in London when I was 21 years old, it was 1996, I think it was. I was coming from Chile. I had done a BA in social science in Chile. And actually I left my university in Chile because I thought that they were quite closed for my tastes. They were very conservative and I was certainly not conservative at that time. And I decided I wanted to go to England and I got into the London College of Printing, actually...

Ramita Navai: Which was very well known for its journalism course.

Guillermo Galdos: Yes, it was very well known.

And I remember one day I saw on the university board, along one of the corridors, you know, that there were advertising jobs and I saw an internship.

They were requesting an intern for APTV at the time. And I remember I took the paper away and I went to APTV and I remember talking with a lady, she was Puerto Rican. We became really good friends after. And she became my boss for several years. She gave me the opportunity and I started working in the newsroom, dealing with Latin America.

And at that time, [Alberto] Fujimori was in power in Peru and there was a war between Ecuador and Peru. And I remember telling my boss, you know, you should send me to Peru. I said, I have good contacts. I can get things happen. And I can deal with the military and I can go up to the border with Ecuador where they're fighting.

And my boss said to me, "Oh, you're crazy. There's no way I'm going to send you there. You've just begun working here in AP." And I remember I said to her. "Listen, I'm going to quit and I'm going to go to Peru and I will call you from there." And that's what I did. I called her from Peru and she basically put me in contact with the AP TV person here in Peru.

And we went up north to the border. And that was like the first story I did myself for AP.

Ramita Navai: What propelled you to do that? Was it your thirst for adventure? Was it because you felt that this was your story because you were Peruvian? What was it?

Guillermo Galdos: Looking around in the newsroom, I felt I was the right person to do that story. Because, you know, I was Peruvian because I knew the north of Peru. And I was really keen to tell what was happening here, to the world.

Ramita Navai: Had you thought the risks through? I mean, this was a dangerous thing to do. You had absolutely no experience. Was that something you found attractive?

Guillermo Galdos: Yeah, at that time, I remember I was not thinking about risks. I remember just going there. And I went with the guy who was working for APTV at the time and he was a former Salvadoran army person.

Ramita Navai: A hard guy.

Guillermo Galdos: A hard guy. He covered the war in central America and for him going there it was like walking in the park.

And I remember seeing the helicopters, seeing the soldiers injured and all that. And I thought like, okay, this is a real war. Soon after that, Fujimori signed a peace deal with Ecuador. And I remember that when we left the border we went to a place in the north of Peru that Fujimori liked a lot and we went and spent some time with some shamans in these sacred lagoons, you know, up in the Andes.

And we did a story that had nothing to do with the war there. One of the shamans suddenly pulled out a picture of Princess Diana. And he said that she was not resting in peace and that her soul was moving around. So he did like a special thing where, you know, with Diana's picture. And he was like drinking, you know, hallucinogenic plants.

And it was incredible. I remember that show got lots of viewers. And I remember my boss saying to me, I think you've got something special to tell stories. I went back to London after my adventure in Peru and they hired me in APTV.

Ramita Navai: Was covering war as you expected it to be? Did you have any preconceived ideas of what it would be like?

Guillermo Galdos: Not really. I thought I was going to see a lot of military men walking around and patrolling with their weapons through the jungle, because I remember the area where they were fighting was jungle, you know? And I remember one of the soldiers saying to me, if you don't die because of a grenade or a bullet, you know, you can die because a Cayman can eat you or a snake can bite you.

And, I saw, you know, quite a lot of military people, a lot of helicopters moving around, some injured soldiers. And, you know, we did some filming there, but we didn't go to the frontline. The frontline was, you know, not that far from where we were, but we had a taste of what was happening at the border.

That was my first war encounter, I think.

Ramita Navai: What was it about that experience that made you think this is what I want to do? I want to do work like this, that's risky and dangerous.

Guillermo Galdos: I thought I had the means to be able to speak with people and to understand them and be able to tell their stories. And I always felt secure that I was not going to criticize or to - my main objective was to tell stories. I remember I read a lot of, you know, when I was in university, I remember falling in love with [Ryszard] Kapuściński and the way he told stories, the way you have to live the stories in order to be able to report them.

And that's why I've always done it. You know, I've always been traveling to places, trying to understand people instead of just arriving and reporting.

Ramita Navai: Guillermo, I want to talk about what it's like reporting in Latin America. And some of the times I've been most scared in my career has been covering stories in central America. It hasn't been in Afghanistan or Iraq. So it's been in countries where there is no war, but it's like a war zone.

Guillermo Galdos: Well, as you well put it, there are no declared wars here, not even when we had FARC, you know, in Columbia, it was, for the government, it was not a declared war. And, I think that's one of the main problems here that you don't have two different sides, you know, clearly fighting each other with uniforms. And yes, I think my experience, you know, that goes all the way from Mexico to Columbia, Brazil.

I think central America is one of the most dangerous places in the region to work. They inherited all this trauma from the war in the 1980s and 1990s. And the fact, you know, what happened after the war, all these gang members arriving back from the US to central America. And central America at that time was quite weak because they had these new governments that were trying to deal with problems inherited from the war and suddenly you have all these criminals that arrive from the north.

And they started setting up, you know, these different gangs in the region. They were brutal. I remember working in Honduras and I went to San Pedro Sula when it became the murder capital of the world. I remember driving from the airport to the hotel and the local fixer told me, "Look! Look!" And, you know, just through the window, I saw, you know, somebody lying in the street with a lot of blood next to him.

So we stopped the car and I started filming immediately. And I remember the mother of the person who had been shot was next to her son. And obviously she was crying. I filmed from behind, I didn't say anything. And when the police arrive, I remember the mother trying to hold the body of her son, and then she moved to the side and they approach her very quietly and they ask her, "Who do you blame for this?" And she said, "I don't blame anyone. Whoever did this, I forgive that person." And she was like speaking very quiet and she didn't want to mention the word gangs, neither the name of the gang. But I was so surprised by the fear engraved in the society in central America.

And yes, it was an inheritance of the war and then the brutality of the gangs. And then we've seen what central America is nowadays, you know, a trampoline for drugs to go up north.

Ramita Navai: When this mother said, "I forgive anyone, I forgive the person that did this." Did she mean it or was she saying it because she thought she might be overheard?

Guillermo Galdos: No, I think she meant it. And it was a mixture because there was quite a lot of people around us. And I remember her speaking very, very, very quiet. And, I actually used her soundbites on the report that we did for Channel 4 news about gangs. But after that, I was quite keen to speak with the gangs.

So, I made contact with them and the permission came out of the prison. So I had to go inside a prison to ask permission to film with the gangs outside the prison. And I remember the guy who was in charge of the prison, I mean, the authority, the government authority, he said to me, you don't need to ask permission of me. You need to ask permission from the guys inside.

So I had to walk in without a camera and speak with the guys inside. And they gave me permission to film inside the prison and to film outside. We did a report on the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13).

Ramita Navai: What did you think when the mother said, I forgive the person that did this?

Guillermo Galdos: It broke my heart because later on I found out that that was her only son. So, I couldn't imagine the pain, you know, and the scene was horrific. And, I was impressed as well by how natural it was. How, you know, everybody that was looking at these young men with their head blown off on the floor and pool of blood surrounding him. They were looking at it as if it was normal. I remember seeing kids and young people and they were all like very serious, but, you know, thinking inside

themselves, I think like, luckily it was not us. Because they knew it was very close. At that time, San Pedro Sula was the murder capital of the world by far.

Ramita Navai: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, it's extraordinary. I had the same experience covering gangs in El Salvador and Guatemala, where there was not a day that went by where I didn't come across somebody who had been murdered. And that's the nature of the conflict in these countries is that it's internal and it's everywhere.

How does that affect the way you work?

Guillermo Galdos: I think, you need to be careful obviously who you work with and that's something that you learn over the years.

And if you're working with somebody who is close to one side, you risk being hit by the other side, because there were more than two gangs or at least two, you know, very big gangs. The Mara Salvatrucha and the Barrio 18 [18th street gang].

And so it was complex. I remember helping my fixer after we worked. He called me one day, several months after he called me from Chicago and he said that he had migrated himself. He was threatened by the gangs. Not because of our report, but because he was quite close to a religious leader, to an Archbishop in Honduras. And he was dealing with the gangs and trying to negotiate a peace deal. And at the end, that backfire on my friend and he had to leave the country. And I actually spoke with him last week and it's been like, you know, I think eight years or 10 years since we filmed there for the first time.

And he's left his country. He's been living for several years in Chicago, alone, and his family still in Honduras. And I've been trying to help him with his case in order to ask for political asylum, because I know that death was, you know - the gangs wanted him dead.

Ramita Navai: These are incredibly dangerous places to work as a journalist.

I mean, the figures of journalists killed are extraordinary. I'm looking now at the figure from the International Federation of Journalists for those killed on the continent last year was 15, 10 of those alone were in Mexico. How do you continue to work knowing that journalists are a target?

Guillermo Galdos: Mexico is a special place. I will say.

I know at least four or five journalists that I've worked with that they have been killed in Mexico. And a couple of them actually quite close to me and I've worked with them a lot. And, yes, it breaks my heart. I think, you know, if you look at the situation nowadays, Mexico, since the beginning of the year, I think 8 journalists have been killed. Nearly the same amount of journalists that have been killed in Ukraine.

Ramita Navai: That's extraordinary.

Guillermo Galdos: There is no war in Mexico or at least no declared war. I remember a couple of years ago, we did a story about mothers that were looking for their sons and they were, you know, just looking for mass graves around the country. And it was a surreal scene where you see like 25 mothers, you know, digging around in places where informants have tipped them off that, you know, there's a mass grave there. And the mothers were digging and suddenly the authorities arrived, and they told the mothers, you know, you can't do this. This is a crime scene et cetera. And I remember the mother saying to the authorities, "Listen, we've been telling you about this for the last five years. You haven't done anything. And now you're telling me that I cannot dig with my own hands to look for the remains of my son?" That marked me a lot. But the person that we were working with there got killed two weeks after we filmed there. And I remember a friend in common, he sent me a picture of my friend sitting in his car and he had been shot in the head. He got into the car and then suddenly a gun appeared in the back and shot him in the back of the head. And he was lying on the wheel of the car. And I remember seeing that picture and, you know, it actually froze me for a couple of days. Because, you know, I went back to my WhatsApp messages.

You know, I had been messaging with him just a few days before, you know, we were talking about doing a sequel for the story that we did. He was telling me about the mothers, you know, how they were in all the places where they thought, you know, there were bodies lying around. And it actually destroyed me.

And another case in Mexico was a journalist that was killed in Culiacán, Javier Valdez. And that also surprised me a lot. I was filming in Venezuela when I found out and I remember I had to stop, you know, that day. First, you know, at the beginning I couldn't believe it because Javier was the kind of guy who will write stuff, but without names, he knew the deal very well in Mexico.

And he wrote something that El Chapo's kids didn't like and they sent a gunman to kill him. They shot him at midday in front of the newspaper where he used to work that was called Riodoce, Rio12, and they shot him 12 times. So it was like a message.

I remember speaking with his wife afterwards and thinking that if it happened to Javier, it can happen to anyone. And since then, you know, we've had dozens of journalists that have been killed in Mexico.

[FIRST AD BREAK]

Ramita Navai: Guillermo, I want to ask you about the friend you mentioned before Javier. The friend whose picture you saw.

Guillermo Galdos: Miguel was his name, yeah.

Ramita Navai: Can you tell me why Miguel was killed and how he was killed? Who killed him?

Guillermo Galdos: We think he was killed by one of the local cartels that was obviously trying to hide the amount (of killings from the) police. He was making quite a lot of noise with the authorities. He was like helping the mothers as well to organize themselves. And also he was basically taking people like us into those searches, you know?

So I think that he obviously became a target for the cartels and, you know, they shot him. It was night-time I understand when they shot him but, you know, it was just one shot in the back of the head.

Ramita Navai: Miguel and Javier were killed for work that you also do.

Did it make you stop and think whether you should continue doing this?

Guillermo Galdos: I always felt that because I was not living in Mexico, you know, that was an advantage. But yes, I think that at least in Latin America, it wouldn't be wise to do a lot of investigative work regarding drug trafficking, drug cartels if you are living on the epicentre. That's why in Lima, I felt quite removed until I realized that the drug cartels and the organized crime, they have managers, and they have operational people in Peru. Peru is one of the biggest cocoa producers in the world together with Colombia and Bolivia. And even though we don't have big criminal organizations here as they have in Mexico, we produce a lot of cocaine here. We don't sell it to America or to Europe. That's why the cartels here or the people in charge don't make as much money as the people in Mexico or the other organized crime in Colombia.

But I realized that if these guys want to hit you, they could hit you in Peru as well. Yes, it's been complex. I don't normally do interviews for newspapers and stuff like that. I remember I've done various programs that, you know, got awards in England and the newspapers in Peru pick that up on the internet and they call me and they want to interview, "Oh, the Peruvian guy who is interviewing cartels in Mexico. Who is filming the gangs in central America".

And I've always declined to do interviews or to do anything here in Peru because I always tell them, listen, I know that I might be a good story for your Sunday magazine, but, you know, I don't operate like that. I don't think that journalists should do stories about, you know, other journalists when you have a lot of subjects that you should cover.

Ramita Navai: Guillermo, how did the killings of Miguel and Javier affect you personally?

Guillermo Galdos: They did affect me quite a lot. Javier and Miguel they were both really good friends and I, you know, think about their families, you know, I think about their kids. I've been to see Javier's wife since he was killed.

And I remember her writing to me and saying that she feared for her life and she left Sinaloa. And you know all that I think you keep it in the back of your head and I think I used to dream quite a lot about my experiences in the field. And for some reason years ago, I stopped dreaming about stuff that happened to me or having nightmares and stuff that, you know, comes along.

Ramita Navai: So they were traumatic dreams?

Guillermo Galdos: Yes, I think there were traumatic dreams, you know, I think that there was an accumulation, you know, of trauma. Of stuff that I think that normal people - I think that human beings are not designed to watch stuff like that. And I remember because I have a big family, I have six brothers and sisters and they do different things. I mean, they are architects, teachers, engineers, you know?

And I remember my father asking me, "Why is that you enjoy doing that?" When I went to Iraq, I remember I called my dad and he said to me, "If they kill you, I will kill you."

[Both laugh]

Ramita Navai: Has your dad met my mum?

[Both laugh]

I think they've been talking.

Guillermo Galdos: So yes, I think in the beginning I didn't take into consideration all the stuff that my job could carry. And then that was something that I realized later in life.

Ramita Navai: How do you trust people, Guillermo, in these situations when you often have, to trust very dangerous people, people who can turn on you and kill you as they did with Miguel and Javier?

Guillermo Galdos: I think I don't trust anyone nowadays and I have this I consider it a special gift that I have, to read people.

And it doesn't matter if it's a president or, you know, hardcore delinquent. And my trick is I always look at people at the same level that they are. If he's a criminal, you know, you go to their level and actually speak like the same eye level. If you want to put it like that. If you speak with the president the same.

And after a few minutes, I can feel like the type of person I'm dealing with. But I normally, nowadays don't trust people and I don't trust them because of my experience and seeing how, you know, nowadays they can record you. They want you to say things that can be used against you.

So, you know, I just I tend to go and listen, but what I do as a journalist, and I think that's very an important part of my job, is that I submerge myself in the world that I'm reporting. For example, if I'm doing something about gangs in Rio de Janeiro, I don't stay in Copacabana.

I go and stay in the favelas.

Ramita Navai: Wow.

Guillermo Galdos: And that's for example, something that I recently did. I was working with a friend, the first two days I stay in Copacabana, and I said to him, I cannot cover this from Copacabana because it's too removed. You know, of course you go every night to your nice hotel to have your nice dinner, and you miss the gun battles in the barrios, and you miss, you know, the ladies that are looking for their kids, et cetera.

And I stay in the favela for two weeks. It was a completely different experience.

I mean, it was something that I needed to do in order to understand really well what was happening there. And I remember going out to film at three in the morning, you know, being up listening to all the gunfire at night and going out of the house and all the neighbours were out and they were complaining how they couldn't sleep and that they had work the next day.

So I think you understand things that you cannot understand if you are covering a conflict or you're covering a situation from a posh hotel room.

Ramita Navai: I mean, that's incredible dedication and that's dangerous work.

Guillermo Galdos: Well, it is. But I think it's part of my work. I enjoy going and actually living with different people. And the only way you can tell a proper story is by doing that because that's when people put down their guard, you know? They show you a different side of the story that you won't see on the internet or on previous articles or nothing like that.

I think you need to live stuff in order to be able to report it properly.

Ramita Navai: Guillermo, I'm really interested when you talk about being able to read people. You deal with incredibly dangerous people, people who can kill you, and will kill you very easily, like professional hitmen. Tell me what these people are like and what it's like dealing with them.

Guillermo Galdos: I've always been surprised by and amazed by people who kill people for a living. And I've always been - you know, I remember the first hitman I interviewed in Columbia. I was doing a story about gangs in Cali. Cali had become one of the most dangerous places on Earth. It was, you know, after the collapse of the Cali cartel and the Medellín cartels. All these gangs appeared in Cali and they

started fighting each other and they were related to the paramilitaries, other gangs were related to the guerrillas and drugs was in the middle of all of them.

I went to film with these boys because they were quite young and I remember arriving with the camera and they were snorting coke and drinking rum. And it was like two o'clock in the afternoon.

And we ended up playing football for like two and a half hours in the barrio. And after the football match, we went to a bar, you know, we were drinking a few beers and a shootout started. A motorbike came by and the guy on the back started firing his pistol. And he hit the guy that I had been filming. The guy was shot in the head.

Ramita Navai: Wow.

Guillermo Galdos: I remember I was quite impressed.

Ramita Navai: In front of you?

Guillermo Galdos: So, you know, when the shootout started, I moved inside the bar and these young cocky boys that I had been filming, I had been filming him and his brother, you know, this guy came out with the pistol and I remember hearing the bullets that were hitting the lamppost.

I remember hearing boom, boom. And the bullets were like bouncing as well. And this guy was shooting his gun behind the lamppost. And suddenly they hit him in the head, right in the forehead. And the guy dropped, his brother went, you know, there was a bit of a mess. I remember thinking, what the hell am I doing here?

And I was with a Columbian journalist and he was in shock as well. So what happened was they stopped a taxi, they put the guy in and they took him to the hospital. And...

Ramita Navai: Was he still alive?

Guillermo Galdos: No, for me, I think he was dead. Immediately I thought he was dead because of, you know, he was completely unconscious and he had a, you know, his face was covered in blood and I can see he had been shot in the head.

So they took him to hospital. In hospital they declared him dead, you know? And we were outside the hospital with 15 gang members. Several of them were armed, high on coke and alcohol. And I was thinking anything can happen here. Oh my God. And I remember they took out the body and took him to the morgue and I went with all of them.

We went to the morgue and it was like they had accepted me by that time. I think it had a lot to do with the football match, to be honest. Because we played football and

I remember we laugh a lot and then we had a few beers and that opened the door. I mean, that left me on their same level, I think. And the fact that I had been in the same place when this guy got shot, you know, and I tried to help because they saw, you know, I tried to move the guy, you know, I said, listen, we need to take him to hospital and all that.

They respected me because of that. So in the morgue, I remember, you know, they were carrying him and the guys inside the morgue were pretty scared of these bunch of young guys high with weapons inside. And in the end we left him there. I went with his brother back to his house. It was like six in the morning by then. He told his mum and it was the third son that this lady had got killed.

Ramita Navai: My god. In a shootout?

Guillermo Galdos: Yeah. I mean it was the third son she had lost in this war and all of them were under the 20, you know? So she only had one son left and I remember looking at him and saying, "Listen, you need to leave this life. You know, if not, your mother is going to die from the pain that she has inside, you know? From losing all..."

Ramita Navai: And that was the remaining son who was a gang member?

Guillermo Galdos: Exactly.

Ramita Navai: What did he say when you told him that?

Guillermo Galdos: He said to me that he was going to go and kill the people who did this to his brother.

And the next day I went to the funeral and it was one of the most amazing things I've seen in my life. First of all, we walk with the coffin with this guy in the barrio, you know, you have a hundred people...

Ramita Navai: The barrio is the district, yeah?

Guillermo Galdos: Yeah.

Ramita Navai: The neighbourhood.

Guillermo Galdos: This poor shanty town on the outskirts of Cali. And I remember, you know, all these guys shooting, you know, up in the air, [makes gunshot sounds] pow, pow, pow. They were all crying.

They were all snorting coke, drinking, carrying the coffin. We arrive walking into the cemetery. And I remember seeing the sign outside the cemetery "Beware they steal." They rob in this cemetery, you know? Like, and we went in and the security

guards they were so scared that they left running. And we went to the place where he was going to be buried.

I remember the police arrived and there was like a police cordon around because they didn't know what was going to happen. And I remember they opened the coffin. They threw a lot of cocaine into the face of this young boy that, you know, was a little bit like looked very plasticky because they've made his head again in order to bury him. He was shot in the head.

They put all this cocaine, they closed the coffin and they wrote with a knife on the coffin, on the top of the coffin, they wrote, "I love you." And then they bury him and he was - and I remember his brother saying to me, "I'm going to go and look for the guy who did this." And we stayed filming there for another few days and then we left. But then years later I found by coincidence I met this guy on the of Cali.

Ramita Navai: The same kid?

Guillermo Galdos: Yeah. The same kid. And I didn't recognize him at the beginning. I thought they were going to rob me and the guy, you know, I didn't have a recollection of his face. And it was simply because this guy who approached me had been shot as well in the face. And his face was all deformed.

So he looked like quite scary. And he said, "Oh, do you remember me?" And I was like, "No, I don't." "I'm this, this and that. Remember the film that you did in Cali?" And I said, "Oh yes." "I'm the brother of the guy that you filmed." "Oh, wow, man, what a, how incredible, what happened to you?" And he said to me, "They tried to kill me. They shot me in the head, but I survived." And I said, "What about the other guys?" And he said, "They're all dead." And I'm talking about guys who the oldest guy was probably 23, 24 from these bunch of guys that we filmed, no one was alive. And my feeling was like, you know, people don't know how dangerous it is to be born in places like that.

Ramita Navai: Just to be born there.

Guillermo Galdos: And to be a teenager. Yeah. Just to be born and it's luck.

Ramita Navai: Did he exact revenge on his brother's killers? Did he kill anyone?

Guillermo Galdos: Yeah. He said to me, he did. He did kill...

Ramita Navai: How many?

Guillermo Galdos: We didn't enter into specifics. But he said to me that he actually killed the person who had killed his brother. But I remember talking with him about something that impressed me more.

And he was like, I asked him if he was going to retire or if he was retired. And he said, "Yes, I'm retired now. But you don't know when somebody is going to come and kill you for something that you did in the past." And I asked him, I remember very clearly, "When was the first time that you killed someone?"

And he said to me, "When I was 15 years old they paid me to kill the girl who had been unfaithful to her partner." And this male partner paid this young guy to go and kill her. And he approached her on the street. She was with another guy and he shot them both. And he went back, he collected the money and I asked him, "What do you do with the money?"

Thinking that he was going to say, well, I bought 20 grams of cocaine and two bottles of rum. He said, "I bought a bed for my brother and my mother." So, you know, I was thinking inside a bed cost the lives of two people, because these guys were sleeping on the floor. That shows you the level of poverty they were immersed in.

Ramita Navai: *[INSERT] Hello, it's Ramita Navai here. Before we continue the conversation, I want to thank you for listening to my show. I hope you agree that these stories are not only powerful but important. As I speak to some incredible journalists from around the world about what they've learned from working in dangerous places and how it's changed their perspective it would be great to get your help in sharing their insights.*

So please do spread the word and subscribe, rate, and review wherever you get your podcasts. I hope you continue to be inspired by the series. And I look forward to you joining me for more episodes. Now back to the show...

Ramita Navai: And that shows you that often these are ordinary young kids who are not evil. They're just doing terrible things. Tell me what you've learned about human nature from hanging out with young kids who end up being hitmen.

Guillermo Galdos: I think that it depends a lot on the people that you grow up with. I think that a lot of people that grow up in these poor barrios of Latin America and end up, you know, getting involved in drug trafficking, in murdering people and all that, they do it at a very young age. And I've met, for example, people in Brazil who used to be involved heavily in drug trafficking and kidnapping and stuff like that.

And nowadays are completely reformed. One of them nowadays works in journalism. Somebody that I met and respect a lot. Because, for example, he was able to leave that world and he had the courage to confront the local criminals and say, I'm not going to follow up with this.

And it was because his father got killed and he felt that he had to change his lifestyle. And people like that I respect a lot because to live in the epicentre and to be able to avoid, you know, easy money and stuff like that it is difficult. It is difficult. I think that people are not born bad, you know? It's that the place where you were born in that makes you what you are.

And if you grow up in a poor barrio on the outskirts of a capital city in Latin America, you will probably grow up with your father, you know, getting drunk, beating up your mum. You will see a lot of violence around. You will know a lot of people who get killed, you know, on the way. And then it's something that you see everywhere here.

It's a matter of how you prove yourself. How you are more macho than the other guys. And you know, then you kill and then the more you kill, the more bravo you are, the more hardcore. And that's, you know, what you see in every single barrio in here. I mean, that's a story that repeats all over the continent.

Ramita Navai: Yeah. These cycles of violence and how ordinary people are affected by violence and absolute poverty. Guillermo, do you think evil exists? You say you don't think people are born bad. Have you ever come across evil?

Guillermo Galdos: Yes, I think it does exist. I think...

Ramita Navai: Tell me. Have you ever met anyone you thought?

Guillermo Galdos: I've been in places where I felt the Devil was there. Long time ago, there was a big massacre in Colombia and the guerrillas were fighting with the paramilitaries and the whole town went inside a church to protect themselves, mainly women and children. And FARC, they fire one of these gas cylinders that they use as bombs and they missed. And they hit the church. And it was a complete massacre. I arrived days later. But then I went back several years later to the same place to film a documentary with a dear friend of mine who is, you know, one of the greatest photographers that I know. It's a Colombian guy called Jesus Abad Colorado.

He's been kidnapped twice himself. And we did a film called The Witness, El Testigo. Because he's been taking pictures of the war in Colombia for years. And we went back to this place because it was a place that he had photographed and, you know, always, he was the only guy, I think, that got there.

And we went inside the church and the church was still destroyed. You know, the vegetation was overgrown and you can still see like, you know, stains of blood on the floor, years after. And I remember I was filming and I felt the presence of the Devil. Suddenly I felt somebody, something went up through my spine and actually it like paralyzed me.

And I felt like, of course, you know, more than a hundred women and children died in this small space. And I remember after that shoot, I came back to Peru and I felt completely overcharged. And it was like all the stuff that I had been seeing all over the years and that I was immune to suddenly hit me.

And after that trip, I remember I went to the Amazon and I did like a small retreat to try to, you know, to cure my wounds and to fix myself. And I went to speak with a shaman that I trust a lot and he looked at me and he said, "Oh God, you're full of

chapas." He said to me. In Spanish, chapas means like the things that you have (inside of you, but they're not yours.

And that you've acquired. And then the shaman he explained something very beautiful to me. And he was like, "Guillermo, you had a shield that you've been wearing out over the years. And now what happened is that your shield doesn't exist. So immediately you absorb things and you've been accumulating things." And I remember spending more than a week in the Amazon, you know, just by myself trying to lick my wounds and to cure myself.

Ramita Navai: And when you say cure yourself, did you take ayahuasca?

Guillermo Galdos: I did. Yes.

Ramita Navai: Did it help? Because...

Guillermo Galdos: Five days in a row.

Ramita Navai: Wow. And you did this, what, as a kind of therapy to purge yourself of the trauma that you were feeling in your body and your nightmares?

Guillermo Galdos: Yeah, completely. It helped me a lot. A lot.

Ramita Navai: Did it really?

Guillermo Galdos: I cannot explain to you.

Ramita Navai: Describe to me how it helped you.

I haven't done ayahuasca yet. I say yet, because I've been meaning to try ayahuasca. And for our listeners who don't know, you get it, it's an Amazonian plant. You have to boil up, don't you, the vine and the stalk together? And it's hallucinatory. A Shaman...

Guillermo Galdos: Yeah it has DMT. It's ayahuasca and chacruna, two plants that are boiled and then the ayahuasca inhibits your or stops these receptors that you have from inhibiting DMT. And then the chacruna is the plant that has the DMT. Which is a very powerful hallucinogenic that has been used for thousands of years in the Amazon to cure people. And the way it is, I describe it is the best psychiatrist that you can see. Because you see yourself. It's very introspective.

And of course you purge a lot. But I was able to see many things that I had in the back of my head, I think. And I remember drinking the first day and I thought, like, this is not for me. It was incredibly strong. And I actually I went to the shaman, and I said I'm leaving tomorrow. And he said to me I wouldn't recommend you to leave.

So the next day I woke up, they gave me this breakfast of plants or whatever. And the shaman said to me, you have to drink today again. And I remember I drank, I had a really bad experience. I was feeling really miserable and I drank five days in a row. And then after the fifth day, the guy said to me, "How are you feeling?"

And I said, I'm feeling wonderful. You know, I actually wanted to keep drinking. And he said to me, you need to watch out because that can change your personality, you know? Unless you're trying to be a shaman or something like that, it's not recommended that you drink it so much in a row.

And it helped me a lot. It helped me to purge my - I think, to clean my head and then to understand that you cannot expect everybody to have gone through the stuff that you've been through. And so that's, you know, how it changed my approach on people. Because for example, before it's quite difficult to, you know, when you arrive from a very miserable place that you've been filming and telling the story of a family that actually everything went wrong and then you arrived to your house and, you know, you go out with your kids and you go out shopping, you go to the supermarket, you go to the beach and life is all normal.

And you know, in the back of your head, you're thinking like it is not normal. I mean, you know, this is, you know, I'm so lucky to have this, you know, because I just been with people who have completely the opposite.

Ramita Navai: Guillermo, had you tried conventional therapy, talking to a therapist, before you tried Ayahuasca?

Guillermo Galdos: Yes. Yeah, I've spoken to a therapist before. Yes. It did help me. I think it goes hand in hand. Actually, the therapist, the psychologist said to me, I asked her, you know, I want to go and drink ayahuasca and she said to me, oh, I think it's a good idea.

If you know about that, about the trip, et cetera. She thought it was fine. And when I came back and she also realized what good it had done me, you know? I think I was overloaded because I think people like us, it's like, you know, your glass starts to fill up and you don't realize how full it is until it overflows.

And I think that's the case for a lot of people and yes, with that experience in the Amazon, I learned to appreciate more the simple things in life and not to expect anything from anyone. And then I think things are a lot easier.

Ramita Navai: And how did the ayahuasca in terms of dealing with trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder, how did the ayahuasca compare to traditional therapy?

Guillermo Galdos: I think that with ayahuasca you are the therapist, you have the answers, the answers are inside you. So you start, you know, answering those questions that you have, and you start seeing things that you've probably put in the

back of your head for so much time because you wanted to avoid them. And I think that was something that I did.

I consider myself, I grew up in this privileged family in a continent that is, you know, pretty fucked up. Sorry. And when you realize that, I think my main objective was okay, how can I help now? Because you know, it's, for me, it's all about we're in the same boat, you know? And it's a matter of helping other people.

And I think that's what my job has become lately.

Ramita Navai: Guillermo, you're talking about meeting kind of ordinary kids who get caught up in violence and gangs. What about the men who make it to the top? The drug lords. Tell me what it's like meeting them.

Guillermo Galdos: I've always been fascinated by those type of characters and I had the opportunity to meet several high-ranking drug traffickers. Some of them, you know, with millions of dollars on their heads.

Ramita Navai: Millions of dollars? Bounty money?

Guillermo Galdos: Millions of dollars of bounty money. Yeah. Bounty money.

And I remember I interviewed the head of the Knights Templar. The name of the guy was "La Tuta" Servando Gomez. And when I went to interview him there were more than 10,000 Mexican soldiers looking for him.

Ramita Navai: I mean, we're talking one of Mexico's most notorious drug lords.

Guillermo Galdos: Yes. He was the Mexican version of Breaking Bad. He was a teacher that ended up being the main man in methamphetamine production in Mexico.

Ramita Navai: We'll continue the story of when Guillermo met La Tuta and what happened when G got on the wrong side of cartel boss El Chapo's wife in Part 2. We'll also hear how a single moment coming under attack in Colombia changed G forever. That's in the next episode of ***The Line of Fire***.

In the meantime, if you want to learn more about G's work, check out his page on the [Channel 4 News website](#).

Thank you for listening to this episode of **The Line of Fire**. If you'd like to follow me, my Twitter handle is at @RamitaNavai.

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Until next time.

The Line of Fire is a podcast from *Aurra Studios*.

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