

GUEST: NACI KREIDMAN

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I haven't been a victim of child abuse, or spouse abuse, or sex abuse. I am just a woman who kind of fell in love with the idea of bringing liberation and freedom to families. I haven't had any personal experience that would inspire me to be on this journey.

Community activist and advocate for those living with domestic violence, Naci Kreidman, next on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. For the last three decades, Naci Kreidman has committed her professional life to ending family violence in Hawaii. Domestic violence is often a hidden tragedy. Naci has worked hard to bring public awareness to the issue and to establish innovative support programs. Along the way, she's seen terrible things that can never be erased from her mind's eye, and she's been part of many success stories as survivors find happier lives. She presses on with a relentlessly positive outlook, and the belief that social change is within our reach. Naci Kreidman is currently the chief executive officer of the nonprofit Domestic Violence Action Center in Honolulu. Born and educated on the East Coast of the United States, she grew up in a sports-minded household with her brother and parents in Englewood, New Jersey.

I come from a two-parent working family. My mother was kind of an executive assistant to management in various places; Rockefeller Center I. My father owned a shoe business in Manhattan. So we were kind of your average middleclass, living in what I thought at the time was a diverse community.

And were your parents role models for the way to behave in a domestic relationship?

Not really; not really. They did the best they could, but I don't think they had the personal resources, really, to take themselves to intimacy or close partnership. And I think that's because of the families they came from. But they did a pretty good job. My brother and I turned out pretty good. So, I think are were some things I could borrow. One thing that comes immediately to mind is my parents,

when they would have a fight or get mad, it would be silent, it would be the silent treatment for sometimes weeks. Which was very hard.

That's a long time.

Yeah, it was very hard. And when my daughter was a baby, small child, she would escalate into like a wild child rage, and then it would be over like that. And I remember saying to my husband, Oh, isn't that incredible, anger doesn't have to last so long. It's kind of like a fleeting—it can be a fleeting emotion. And that was life-altering for me.

When you were ready to leave the home, or go off for schooling, where did you go?

Well, I went first to Washington, DC, which was pretty exciting, but not the right fit for me. And then, I went to Rutgers, in New Jersey, the state university.

To study what?

I studied communication and journalism, and psychology. Which I use a lot.

[CHUCKLE]

You do. And did you know that this is the way you were going to use those—

No. No, I had no idea. I had no idea. I started out working a little bit in the cable television business, which was pretty popular in the 1970s when cable was first gaining momentum. And so, I worked for the Public Utilities Commission for a little while, regulating cable television. But I was working at a community action program, and so we did a lot of production of television documentaries. I was a young woman, and I thought, I don't want to live here my whole life, and if I don't leave now, I'll never leave, I'll get stuck here. So, where can I go, where I can do what I like to do the most? I'm a big outdoors person; I swim, I ride my bike, I like to camp and hike. And so, I thought, I'm gonna go to Hawaii. So—

Had you been there before?

No, I'd never been here before. No. It was pretty thrilling, and a little scary. Biggest part was the thrill. I got on the plane with my bicycle, and my camp trunk. I used to go to camp when I was child. I checked into a hotel for a few days, and I started looking for a place to live. And I rented a room in Manoa. And then, I started working in Waikiki, which is where everybody starts working. So I was working at the International Marketplace. So I'd ride my bike from Manoa to Waikiki, and back.

Did you feel comfortable right away living here?

I felt ... it was a little confusing for me. I thought I grew up in a diverse community; it was fifty percent Caucasian and fifty percent African American. I thought that was a mixed community. And then, I got here, and I was like, Wow!

We're truly mixed.

This is really diversity. So that was a little—I didn't know too much about Asian culture, or I don't think I knew anybody Asian, really. So, that was pretty thrilling, but a little unnerving, 'cause I didn't know how to fit in. But right away, I liked that I was different, and that it was different. I'm kind of a city person. So I loved that on one side of the street was the ocean, 'cause I'm a water person. And

across the street is like, Waikiki and buildings, and hotels, and so it was sort of combination of both. Since I came from Manhattan, I kinda liked both.

While in New Jersey, Nanci Kreidman helped create one of the nation's first shelters for battered women. In Hawaii, she continued to focus her energy on fostering public awareness to stop the emotional turmoil and deadly violence associated with domestic abuse.

And so, when I got here, I thought, Hm, wonder what they're doing about domestic violence here? 'Cause I was just becoming aware of the issue before I departed home. And of course, they weren't really doing anything here, like they weren't doing anything across the country. So I started working at the only existing shelter at the time.

Where was that?

That was in Kalihi. And so, I worked the weekend shift from Friday night to Sunday night. And, really, two things happened for me. I mean, I wasn't working at the shelter thinking, Oh, this will be my career, this is great. I just was kinda living in the moment. This is good work, I feel good about it, this is important. But while I was there that first year, a couple of things happened that were life-altering for me. One was, they would send me out whenever they got invitations to speak about domestic violence, because I was the one with the communications degree, and they figured I could talk. So, I would go, and I would bring the only existing film that the shelter owned, and it was a mainland produced film. And it had all White people, and maybe one Spanish person, and one Black person the film. And I could see that the community I was with looked at the film thinking, I don't know anybody like that. And I started thinking to myself, well, if we're gonna talk about this issue, we're gonna have to talk about it in a way that makes sense for this community. So, I teamed up with a director, and we wrote a small grant to produce a locally originated documentary; we called it Too Many Lickins, Spouse Abuse in Hawaii. And it was aired on Public Television, and we circulated it a lot, and it began the conversation here. But the other thing that happened was Sunday morning, the women would get up, very enthusiastic about a search for a new place to live for them and their kids. So everybody would be out with a newspaper, and they'd get on the bus, and you know, circle things in the paper of places that they were gonna go look at to see about relocating to get away from the abuse by their partner. And then, by Sunday afternoon, they'd come back, and maybe they'd start packing up their suitcases or their bags, and say they were going home.

Home to the abuser?

Home to the abuser; yeah. And that made me very nervous, because I fully understood that there was nothing that could have changed between the time she left and when she was going back. But the barriers to her finding a new place to live without any money or without any transportation, or too far from

her kids' schools, or whatever it was, was a big enough obstacle that she had to go home. So, I teamed up with a social worker friend of mine, and we wrote a different small grant, and started Broken From Batterers, called Komo Mai.

Before that, there were programs for women, but not for male abusers.

There weren't any programs, really. There was just this one shelter. We hadn't yet gotten to the place at the community level, where there were community-based programs or specialized support groups, or anything like that yet. And so, this was the first specialized program, and we really just made it up.

Were they court-ordered abusers, or were there batterers who said, Hey, I'd like some help, I'm seeking this help?

They were not seeking the help. We tried to reach out to community clinics and mental health programs, and social service agencies, and also the courts, and tried to advocate for the courts to mandate participation. Which they did. They could see the wisdom of that, and they could see the importance of requiring somebody to participate. But it was slowing going. We didn't really have the capacity to help lots and lots of people anyway. It was kind of an experiment. But it planted the seeds here in Hawaii, anyway. And of course, we didn't realize this at the time, but this is what was going on all across the country. So our challenge was really to get them to shift their behavior, and to shift their thinking that they had the right to hit somebody out of a desire to make them do what they wanted them to do.

I read years ago that this type of counseling just isn't that effective, that it doesn't permanently change behavior.

Well, the data on effectiveness is very mixed. It takes a lot to change behavior. Anybody who's ever tried to go on a diet or exercise more—

Quit smoking. Sure.

Quit smoking, stop biting their nails, whatever their thing is, it takes a lot of personal discipline, it takes a lot of commitment, and it takes a lot of reinforcement to stay on the path. So without that, it's very easy to kind of keep acting like, well, it's her fault, if she didn't this or if she didn't that, or if I had a better offer, if I didn't. So it's a lot of ways to minimize or excuse the behavior. We still have so many barriers in the path, for survivors anyway, to get to the place where they're self-sufficient. And until we as a community understand that everybody has the right to live free and safe, and we make that path wide open, and we invite people to live that way, they won't be able to. They will be forced to go back, and they will face their own community sanctions and their own religious sanctions, and their own personal and emotional ambivalence about what they've done, what they're doing. And if we continue to perpetuate the ideas that children are better off with two parents, and it's your fault, or somehow you've done something to provoke this, then it's gonna be difficult. And, I mean, I want to say I'd like to be here today to say that that mythology has vanished, but it really hasn't. That people are still, despite what we've done here, there's a lot to be proud of, for all of us who've been working in the community, media, policymakers, service providers, we've made a lot of

progress. But I continue to be amazed that people hold onto the same myths and misconceptions about who's done what to whom, and who deserves it, and why it happens, and this only happens to Brown people in Palolo, or people who use drugs, and we're still dispelling those misconceptions. And we just have to keep encouraging people and inviting people to get involved, because it is everybody's business. What's happening in your workplace or your neighborhood, or your family belongs to all of us.

Nanci Kreidman credits her friends and family with providing opportunities for her own personal growth. She met her husband, Bernie Paloma, a firefighter, at a Downtown block party celebration. He invited her to visit his fire station in Manoa Valley, which just happened to be located along Nanci's daily bike route to work. Couple of weeks later, she stopped by, and was invited to stay for dinner at the station. The rest is history, and as of the day of our conversation in 2011, the couple has been together for twenty-eight years.

My husband is very, very different than I am. He's a local male, quiet, who's sort of got the balance going of introversion and extroversion.

What does local mean?

Well, he's Filipino, from a large Filipino family. Grew up in Kalihi, nine children. And so, I have been able to understand local culture, and Filipino communities in Kalihi, in big families in a way that was really a precious opportunity for me, 'cause I could take that with me out into the community. Because in order to communicate with him, it was like practice of how to communicate with the wider community, and with his family. I mean, his parents, they loved me and welcomed me immediately.

Soon, it was Nanci Kreidman and Bernie Paloma, plus two; they had a daughter and a son. One day, Nanci learned that State Child Protective Services was seeking a permanent home for an eleven-year-old girl. Her children were reaching adolescence, and she thought, What's one more?

So I went home and mentioned it to Bernie, and he was open to the idea. And I thought, well, gosh, what do you do then? And so, I asked the attorney who was the guardian and whether we could meet her. Which is unheard of. I mean, you don't usually do that, you just get a foster kid, and that's kind of the beginning of the relationship or the moment the person joins the family. But to me, that just seemed—how do you do that? You have to at least meet this person. So Bernie and I had lunch with her; she seemed perfectly fantastic. And so, we talked it over with the kids, that we had met this girl and we were thinking about having her join our family, and how did they feel about it. And they were interested in the idea, but of course, it was difficult to absorb. And then the four

of us had Sunday dinner together, and sorted it out among ourselves, like how did we feel about it. And it was thumbs up all around. So she joined our family when she was eleven, and she's in between my biological children. Again, it's been a treasure having her in our lives, and it's a challenge. I mean, you don't just join somebody else's family. I mean, one day, she doesn't know us at all, and we don't know her. And then the next day, she's a member of the family. So we had to like rework all of our—how do we relate to each other, how do we make room for her to join the family, what were the relationships between them. I mean, it was obviously, it was a life-altering opportunity, and a way for us to do more of what we were already doing, the ways in which we were, you know, giving to the community. My husband was a fire captain, so he was a man of service as well as I. So we brought that service into our family.

And how does your family feel about your role in working against domestic violence? Do they comment on it, are they with you on it? Do they get sick of hearing about it?

Well, I mean, it's very much a part of our lives, obviously. It depends on many things—I mean, there's many moving parts. I'm always pointing things out, I'm always noting things that are going on. I have invited them to participate in many, many ways. Everybody in the family, nieces, nephews, children, have been in posters and flyers and materials. They are with me a hundred percent, and that's what's made it possible. There's no way I could have given myself over to this journey without them being there with me.

Over time, you've become close, you've seen in many different lights some of the people who've suffered abuse, and have been again and again in those situations. Do you go home hoping nothing happens to them that night? I mean, is it something that you take with you? Is it an anxiety producing thing to know that they're constantly in danger, or possible danger?

I've had to figure out along the way how to tap into my compassion, and my service, without being consumed by my anxiety about people's wellbeing.

That must be a very tough call for you. I mean, it's a boundary that's very opaque.

It was much harder before, than it is now. I mean, now, I don't work with people as directly as I used to. I mean, I have run hundreds and hundreds of batterers groups, and hundreds and hundreds of victim support groups, and that was harder. But that's when I really had to teach myself, otherwise I would have been a wreck, and I wouldn't have been useful or effective, grounded at all. And I know people always ask me that, Well, how do you do this? And I don't know that I've got a formula exactly, or even a way for you to do it.

But you've been able to last so long, and be so strong, because somehow, you can tilt your world.

Well, I try to take very good care of myself. I swim every day, I go out into the jungle, you know, in Manoa, or Makiki, or you know, up Mariner's Ridge, or someplace where it's sort of quiet, and bigger than I am, and vast. You know, the sky is vast, or the ocean is vast. And it helps me to put things in perspective.

And I rest well, I eat well, I surround myself with loving family and friends. I mean, I really try to stay whole myself. I know this all sounds sort of corny, but that's kinda how I do it.

Because otherwise, it would just eat—

It would eat me alive. Yeah.

Because there are some stories that are just—I mean, it's hard to even recite the details, because they're so horrific.

Well, the ones that probably have been the most torment for me are the women who I've gotten close to, who are mothers, who have lost their children to domestic violence. And the ragged grief they feel, and the helplessness, and the hopelessness that they feel, that I do have a little bit of difficulty ... walking away from their suffering. And that kind of loss is something that you really, really cannot understand if it hasn't happened to you. And so, to try to be present with somebody who is in that kind of suffering was also kind of art. It's a very delicate subject, and most people are very, very uncomfortable with it. So I have had to learn a kind of grace, so that people will listen to me. And of course, when I first got here, and when I first doing this work ... I mean, it doesn't come naturally, really, to figure out. I mean, I'm thinking, well, I'm just telling the truth, just saying what I know and what I see, and people should be willing and amenable to listening to that. But of course, people all have their own capacity to hear the truth. So, I had to learn how to do that.

You've been so outspoken on the subject. Has it put you at risk?

We take our safety very seriously at the agency where I work, the Domestic Violence Action Center. Sometimes, I'll be someplace, and somebody will come up to me and say, You're Nanci Kreidman, aren't you? And I will stop for a moment and think, Ho, I wonder if that's a good thing. And so far, it has been. People have said, Oh, I was in your class when you taught at Leeward, or I was in your battered women's group in 1982, or Thank you so much, or I was in your batterers group, you probably don't remember me, and it changed my life.

But if you're so needed, why doesn't the community support you more?

Well, there's a lot of competing needs, and this doesn't resonate for everybody. I would like to live in a world where they would say this is number one. Because families are at the root of communities, and if our families are not well and not stable, and not whole, our communities won't be. But that's a hard message for everybody to digest. So, my fantasy would be that people are throwing money at us to do this, because the work is so hard. I mean, we are wiping up blood, sweat, and tears of the community, and that's hard enough. But then having to beg for money to do it, some days it's heartbreak. You know how some kids or some young adults decide, This is what I want to do with my life. I never had that picture. So maybe the absence of that created the room for me to be the instrument that I have been.

You just followed the path and the doors, and looked for opportunities.

I just recognized opportunities when they presented themselves. It's not quite so much I looked for opportunities. I mean, here's an example. Way back when, I was, like I mentioned earlier, running batterers groups at the Waikiki Community Center. I did the paperwork, and set up all the appointments from my home, and then I would go to the center to run the groups. And one day, after you know, months, Gerri Lee, who was the director of the Waikiki Community Center at the time, came to me and she said, It looks like this is a fantastic program, and it would really benefit from having a program home, an agency, an organization to support it. Why don't you consider bringing Komo Mai and Maluhia O Wahine to the Waikiki Community Center, and they can become programs of the Waikiki Community Center. And that was perfect. I mean, how could I possibly have continued to do what I was doing all by myself? I needed an institution, I needed an organization. And so it was kind of like that, all along the way.

Some nonprofit leaders move from one agency, one worthy cause, to another. Nanci Kreidman's cause has always been ending domestic violence. In 2010, the YWCA of Oahu honored Nanci Kreidman as a community leader deserving special recognition. Nanci believes that her work is innately rewarding, giving her a spiritual benefit that's transformative and life-enriching. In 2011, the year of this conversation, she continues to engage and collaborate to create social change, and provide critical services through the Domestic Violence Action Center. Mahalo piha, Nanci Kreidman, for sharing your Long Story Short. And thank you, for watching and supporting PBS Hawaii. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit pbshawaii.org.

Abusers and perpetrators, they've got a lot to hide, and they've ...

They've learned how.

They've learned how, and they're very charming, and they can be very persuasive. And so, I mean, sometimes I'll go into a place and I'll think, mm ... that's not a good guy. And then other times, somebody I'd never pick out would be somebody who—and believe me, that has happened thousands of times. I don't go anyplace anymore where somebody doesn't come up to me and say, My first husband, my mother, my auntie, my next door neighbor, my daughter, my coworker. I mean, no place; I go almost no place now where somebody doesn't feel like they want to share that with me. Which is a remarkable thing.