

GUEST: BOB SEVEY (1 of 2)

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Aloha no and mahalo for joining me for another edition of *Long Story Short* – this time from the Pacific Northwest. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Bob Sevey, fondly remembered as the Walter Cronkite of Hawaii, gave me my first TV job in the old KGMB newsroom. It'll be a pleasure to talk with him about Hawaii television then and Hawaii television now. In Part One of this special, two-part *Long Story Short* – the former KGMB News Director and Anchor begins by sharing what only a close circle of family and friends has known... he has inoperable cancer.

Last time people saw you on television, you had gold hair; this very distinctive and very lovely blond —

Well, it's gorgeous, actually; yeah. I don't have much of it left, uh, Leslie, and it's um, not exactly by choice. This is a byproduct of chemotherapy. Uh, I do have cancer. And so I'm in chemo. The only side effect that I've suffered at all is a lot of the hair wound up every morning on the pillow. I'd have to sort of like you have a long-haired cat. And so I decided, well, what the heck; I'll look like I'm gonna join the Marine Corps, and buzz cut it.

It's a good look for you. And bald is in, right?

Bald is in; yeah. But otherwise, by the way, I'm doing fine, and we're under control.

And you're taking proactive means of taking yourself, or is it – I mean, how do you handle that?

Well, the thing I've found out about cancer is, you do take care of yourself. You make the decisions. Uh, you listen to the doctors, they give their advice, their opinion; but you've gotta decide yourself. You want to do this, you want to do this, you want to do nothing; you decide. And right now, for me, the chemotherapy I'm on is the, I think, the best way to go. If it works, fine; if it doesn't, we'll try radiation. Or a baseball bat upside of the head. Whatever.

You sound so matter of fact about it.

Well, there's no sense getting all clutched up. Um, I was first diagnosed thirteen months ago, at which time the doctor said that I probably had a year to live. Well, I figure I'm running on somebody else's time now for a whole month, and I feel fine. So I've just renewed my subscription to *Golf World Magazine*, and I still buy green bananas.

And he still has that commanding, comfortable camera presence.

Bob Sevey (news footage): *We will recall where we were and what we were doing when we heard the news the Challenger had exploded.*

You know, I think a lot of people never find what it is that they're meant to do. You know, you seem to have found at an early age, you wanted to do news and you were — and blessedly— you were good at it.

Well, I wanted, I wanted to do broadcasting. And I wanted to do that ever since I was a little kid living in Minneapolis. My dad had a good friend who had a fifteen-minute radio show every morning on WCCO Radio. And one day, I sat in the audience, and another day I sat in the control room. And I was just fascinated by the fact that here's this guy talking into this thing, and people all over the Midwest can hear him. And I thought, 'That's pretty magical.' And I think from that day on, being a broadcaster — and I was thinking radio, because if television had been invented, they weren't talking about it very much. That's really all I wanted to do.

And that's exactly what he did. In 1966, KGMB owner Cec Heftel recruited Sevey to run a top-quality news department — and authorized him to spend what he needed to do it.

When I had signed; I said, I suppose we ought to talk about budgets. And he said, It's been my experience with budgets that news directors never think they're enough, and owners and general managers always think they're too much. So your budget is whatever it takes to make this the best news department, not in Hawaii, but west of the Rocky Mountains. And that was the only budget meeting we ever had. Period. There were department head meetings weekly. And I never had to go to one. Some of the other department heads, I understand, were a little miffed about that, and said, How come Sevey doesn't have to come and get yelled at? And he said, "Cause Sevey's the only one who has to go on the air every night at six o'clock and represent this station to the public."

And when you say he gave you a blank check; you must have had some constraints in your head. I mean, how did you figure out —

Well, because he did it that way, he put the constraints in my head. Because suddenly, I was responsible. And the last thing in the world I was gonna do was go hog wild. And I would have felt that was somehow a betrayal of the trust that he had invested in me. And so I — you know, obviously, I didn't offer everybody a million dollars a year to come and play television news with me

– tried to keep everything within reason. But he, he didn't question it, and he — and I really want to emphasize this — he left us alone. Cec never once tried to influence the way we covered news. The only thing he ever said — I don't remember; he ran in I think 1960, he ran against Hiram Fong for the U.S. Senate. And did a pretty good job. He had moved out of the station all during the campaign. And afterwards, he grumbled that he wished he could have gotten as good coverage from his station as he did from the others. And I suppose we were probably very sensitive to it too.

And he grew that station and his media empire.

Checkers and Pogo, and the Sky Slide, and yeah, and the whole thing.

And you think the success was due to his entrepreneurial bent, as opposed to, 'Let's bring some consultants in and let's figure this all out?'

Oh, yeah. Cec's best consultant was Cec Heftel — is Cec Heftel. I mean, yeah. You know, other people may have contributed some ideas — but obviously, I'm very indebted to Cec. The eleven years I worked for him were far and away the best broadcast years of my life.

You know, that is just so different from what happens in television news today. Was it different from what happened at that time as well?

I'm sure it was different. And I found out how different uh, eleven years later, when Cec sold the station to a corporation. And now, I'm working in corporate environment. And uh boy, you talk about different ballgame, different rules.

You continued with KGMB for many years after that. How did life change for you? I mean, television news changes anyway.

A hundred and eighty degrees. And I think that was the beginning of the end for me. Consultants are, are people who devise news formats and things for television stations to do. And they tend to do it on a formulaic basis. The first thing they said was, 'We've got to put in a two and a half minute weather segment.' And if you'll recall, our weather was either the lead story, or it was the last fifteen seconds of broadcast. Weather tomorrow will be mostly sunny, a few mauka showers blowing occasionally makai, temperatures from the mid to upper eighties, trades blowing fifteen to twenty-five miles an hour. That's the news; good day. And that pretty well did it. And they said, 'You've gotta have a weather person.' And I — that's where I bowed my neck. And I think that's where I first got in trouble with corporate ownership. I simply wouldn't do it. 'Cause we only had twenty-two minutes anyway, out of the half hour.

When you consider commercials and sports.

Commercials and formats, and everything. And to throw another couple of minutes away on what I considered to be an unnecessary commodity — I mean, I understand they do weather there now, with, with all the bells and whistles, and I suppose it's great. Uh, I don't understand it, but I suppose it's great.

But that had worked in mainland markets, so that's why it came here.

Yeah. It works in Peoria, so it's gotta work in Honolulu. And that's sort of the consultant's view of things. And I hope my former colleagues and friends in the television business in Hawaii will forgive me for saying all this. But it's really the way I feel, and I feel the same thing when I sit and watch, as I do, the Seattle broadcasts each night. They've got some really good people there. But just watching, I can almost tell you which consultant they're using.

But why a consultant? Did there need to be a change?

No; nothing was, nothing was broke. We were still, we were just incredibly number-one in news.

And how number-one were you? Because this was in the age before cable stations and internet. And there wasn't a fourth broadcast station. How much of an audience did you have at that time?

Well, I mean, going by shares, we were, we were pulling fifty and sixty shares.

Which is unheard of today.

Yeah.

The market is so fragmented.

Yeah.

Sevey's best TV memories are from the days when KGMB, still owned by Cec Heftel, beat local news competitors by being fast, nimble and original.

I think our finest hour is the night that Apollo 11 launched for the Moon, and then the night it landed on the Moon. I had decided that it would be a good thing if somebody in our news department knew a little about the space program, and I decided that maybe it should be me, since all the other reporters had things of importance to cover and I didn't. So Cec allowed me to go back for Apollo 9 and Apollo 10 and then for Apollo 11. Well, if you recall, in those days there was one satellite, which meant that we couldn't take the CBS coverage, Channel 2 couldn't take the NBC, Channel 4 couldn't take the ABC. We had to take the NASA world pool. So we all had the same video. And we decided that having our own audio was important. So not only did I go to uh Kennedy Space Center for the launch, but we bought a position at mission control for the landing. The night of the Moon landing, the other stations were covering it, you know, doing audio from their studios. And I was doing it from mission control. And I didn't know they were gonna do this, but the sales people had decided to take an overnight Nielsen. We had a ninety-one share. Which was —

You blew them away on the other channels.

Absolutely beyond belief. Which I'm glad, because it cost Cec a heck of a lot of money to, to do all that.

Ninety-one percent. Have you ever heard of a number as big for another program?

No. I never had. It was totally unique. But that was just kind of the way we did things. And oh, I also remember when Channel 4 decided – when satellites became more readily available, they were still brutally expensive – Channel 4 decided to bring in the first ten minutes of the ABC Evening News. And they ran large ads in the newspapers and promoted it very heavily.

Oh, competition.

Yup. And we didn't say a thing. But the night they brought in the first ten minutes of the ABC Evening News, we brought in the entire Cronkite show and did it every night from then on. And that was Cec's idea, by the way. But he just wasn't about to be number two.

And was he – is and was a businessman. Was his goal making money

Oh, yes.. Oh, absolutely.

Or making quality? Or both? And in what proportion?

I don't know the proportion. Um, I never saw the books. All I know is that Cec seemed to do well. He paid Aku a tremendous amount of money. But I think Aku made him more money than he was paid.

Aku was reputed to make more money than any DJ in the country.

He was at one time reputed to be the highest paid DJ in the country. Yeah. He paid me a, a very handsome amount of money. And I assume that we made money for him. See, I never did know how much a spot or a sponsorship, or anything cost in our news broadcast. That wasn't my end of the business.

Did you even know when they were taking the ratings?

Oh, yeah; you always know...

A few months of the year?

You always know when the ratings are on.

And did you do special shows?

No.

For example, nowadays TV stations get accused of doing –

Oh, I know; yes.

-- blood and guts and sensational stories to grab people during ratings.

Well, not only accused of, but rightly so. They do. I mean, you know –

Well, let me ask you – when you started with Cec Heftel running the newsroom and anchoring the news – were newsrooms known to be a moneymaking operation?

No.

Or were they a public service?

No; in those days the news was not a moneymaker. The news was how you made your reputation; the news was how you served the public. Remember, broadcast stations used to be licensed in the public interest, convenience and necessity. I don't know if that applies anymore, given the state of the current industry and the FCC. But no; news was not a profit center.

So Cec Heftel was expecting you to make money indirectly by enhancing the product of the television station.

Sure. If we, if we came in with a fifty-share at six o'clock, that's gonna do real good things for the shows at six-thirty and seven o'clock, and for the rest of the evening. And then if we can come back with another good, solid share at ten o'clock –

And you know nobody does a fifty-share anymore, anywhere.

Well, I know; I know.

But you did at the time.

We did at the time; yeah. And it was neat, actually.

You had a very talented anchor staff. Any one of your anchors could have been a main anchor somewhere else. At one point, you had — it was you at six, it was Bob Jones and Tim Tindall at ten. Later, there was Linda Coble, there was Kirk Matthews.

M-hm. No, we had — we had really, really talented people. And not only were they talented—and they still are. And I was very fortunate that in a market the size of Honolulu — I mean, it's not the biggest place in the world, or Hawaii's not the biggest state in the world – we were able to get both from the local community, and from the mainland, really good people who were willing to commit to Hawaii. I mean, you know, Linda came from Portland, and you won't find a more kama'aina kama'aina than Linda Coble anywhere right now. So yeah, as I say, I'd love to go through all the names, but I'm just scared to death of the ones I'm gonna forget. And I don't want to do that. Uh, the people that I tried to hire, and the people I did — well, you're a good example. You were a very good newspaper reporter.

And knew nothing about television, by the way.

I know.

--when you hired me.

But it didn't take you long to learn. And you were still a very good reporter. And that was the main thing. Same with the late Doug Woo. Marvelous reporter. Bambi Weil.

The judge.

Now Judge Eden Hifo. Oh gosh; you know, if I start naming everybody, and then don't name everybody, I mean Carolyn Tanaka

and Elisa Yadao, Bart Fredo and Don Baker.

Matt Levi.

Matt Levi; oh, yeah. What an investigative reporter he was.

Linda Coble doing your features.

Linda Coble doing features, and at some point, co-anchoring. Kirk Matthews came along, thanks to Linda. And we had some pretty good sports guys too. Like we had a fella early on named Al Michaels — wonder whatever happened to him — as our sports anchor. The irrepressible and marvelous Jim Leahey.

Gary Sprinkle came out of your newsroom as well.

Gary Sprinkle came out of our shop; yeah. And I'm delighted that, you know, Gary is, is still going strong, as is Kirk. Linda sticks her toe back into the TV lake every once in a while. I'm just very proud of those people.

Incredible talent.

We had Bob Jones, another — another newspaper man that we converted to TV.

You know, I always wondered why you hired people like me because I didn't have TV skills; I didn't have performance skills. I had news gathering experience as a print reporter. Why would you take a chance on somebody like me, when you had the number-one station?

Well you know, we did talk a couple of times before I hired you. And it's pretty easy to see that, that you are an outgoing person, that you express yourself well, that you're not afraid to talk. The other thing you have to get over is the fear of talking when there's a camera aimed right in your face, and you can get over that real quick. And you suddenly start learning to verbalize your report, instead of just putting it on a piece of paper. You put it on the paper, it goes into your mind, you tell the camera what it is. You learn to edit, in those days film, and then tape, to visualize your story. And it's not that hard.

But to you, the news experience was the important part.

Oh, that was, that was, that was the essential, was — she's a good reporter, he's a good reporter. And that was the criterion number one.

What about Joe Moore, the sportscaster hired by Sevey, who switched to news on KHON and overtook Sevey in the ratings race? Bob has a lot to say about him — fondly — next week... in Part Two of this interview.

Let's go back a little bit to when you retired. You were doing, I mean, your station did not want you to leave. But you chose to retire.

I did.

And you weren't of retirement age yet. Why did you leave?

Shall I tell you the story about Goo's Golden Tire Shop?

I think I was sitting behind you at the time this all happened. But please do.

It was about twenty minutes to six, and a great, huge column of black smoke appeared adjacent to Nimitz Highway. And we heard the fire radio say that there was a fire at Goo's Golden Tire Shop. And we had the crash unit, the thing with the dish on it and everything, so we rolled that. And they got there pretty quick. And within the first five minutes of the, of the news broadcast, whoever the reporter was did a very credible job of telling us, 'This is a whole bunch of tires that are on fire, there are no people involved, there are no injuries. There's one little old lean-to in the middle that's gonna burn up, but other than that, nothing else is in, in danger. It's under control.'

No concerns about air quality.

The wind is blowing the smoke out to sea. Okay; I think we just did that story. About — I don't know — ten, twelve minutes later, I'm told we're going back to Goo's Golden Tire Shop. Well, okay; all right. I mean, 'cause there's still a lot of black smoke, and maybe some people didn't get the word. So we go back, and the reporter essentially does the same story, 'cause there isn't any other story. At this point, obviously, they haven't figured out what started it; that'll take time. And okay; we wrap that up. Now we're in sports. Gary's doing the sports. Linda and I were co-anchoring at the time. And the floor director relayed the message that we're going back to Goo's Golden Tire Shop again at the end of the broadcast. And I said, 'No, we're not.' Linda got down and crawled under the anchor desk and ran into the control room to tell them, 'No, we're not.' Well, the word was, 'Yes, we are.' The news director and the producer were both in accord; they were in the control room. We came back, and we had a monitor on a hydraulic lift. And all of a sudden, I heard the whir, and the monitor came up, and there was a picture of Goo's Golden Tire Shop and the smoke —

Meaning you as an anchor — you'd better talk about it, 'cause it's right there next to your head.

And I did my fifteen seconds of weather, and said goodnight.

And you were steaming.

I was quite unhappy. But not as unhappy as were the news director and the producer, who were all over me like a bad rash. And the next day, I was summoned to the general manager's office, and told that the producer was the final authority on the six o'clock broadcast, and I'd better understand that or else. And I explained that I had been the final authority on that broadcast for the last twenty years, we'd done fairly well, and no, I'm not going to accept that. And he made what I considered to be a threat, that I'd better, or else. So I went back and sat down, and wrote out my resignation, posted it on the board with two weeks notice. I had just signed a new, five-year contract. And the attorneys came flying out from Iowa to tell me that I couldn't resign, because

of my contract. And I reminded them that my attorney had written the contract; and yeah, I could resign. Yeah, it obviously cost me a lot of money, 'cause I, I'm just quitting, two weeks. And uh, my last day was July 4, 1986 — twenty years to the day.

Independence Day.

Independence Day; yeah. And uh, and I'm kinda sorry that it ended that way. Well we, we played it for the public as retirement. And it was; so it wasn't, that wasn't totally dishonest. But that's what happened.

It occurs to you me that you left Hawaii after you tried to help Cec Heftel, your former boss at KGMB get elected governor.

I did that in '86, when he ran for governor. And I was at loose ends, and he needed a volunteer, so I volunteered for the campaign.

And he was the target of a smear campaign, and it was a very bitter defeat.

Oh it was, it was brutal. There may be, there may have been uh, dirtier election campaigns sometime, somewhere, but I can't imagine it.

Did that make you lose a little faith, a little heart for Hawaii?

It did. It did. It was a scurrilous campaign of rumors, spread mostly on the neighbor islands, among the agricultural community. Much of what was being said out there was never heard in Honolulu. So we couldn't cover it. We couldn't go on the media and say, 'This rumor isn't true.' 'Cause most of the people had never heard it. But it's also a truism that if you don't win the neighbor islands, you're not gonna win governor of Hawaii. And we didn't and we didn't. And I took it, I think, a lot harder than Cec did. The primary was on Saturday, and Monday he left; flew to Los Angeles and founded a Hispanic radio empire.

Made a fortune.

Yeah.

Again. Yet again.

Again; yeah. A very resilient guy, Mr. Heftel. But yeah; that did, that did take some of the bloom off the rose of Hawaii for me. I knew politics was a dirty business; I just didn't ever believe that it could be like that.

More than two decades later, retirement outside Seattle involves serious health issues. Sevey's wife Rosalie has Alzheimer's; and he has cancer – lymphoma. The man known to his former colleagues as Cap – for Captain of the newsroom – is steering a course in changing conditions. You can see that Bob Sevey is a consummate communicator. And he has more to say. So we'll let our conversation spill over into another edition of *Long Story Short* – next week. Mahalo for joining us. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou!

When I started on July 4, 1966, the news staff consisted of Tim Tindall, photographer Ted Shibuya, photographer Tom Hisamura and me.

How did you cover the news of Hawaii with those few people?

Poorly. Uh, but Cec gave me, in effect, the blank check to do stuff. And so I started hiring people as fast as I could – guys like Jack Kellner, Jim Manke.

They were radio guys, right?

Yeah, but you were a newspaper girl, right?

Right.

I mean, news is news. It's just a different format that you're putting it in.