

GUEST: CORBETT KALAMA

LSS 316 (LENGTH: 26:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 2/2/10

Every child on the beach, every child that's born—they all have dreams. I want people to be put in a situation where they can at least experience working toward those dreams.

He grew up in a family of 13...living in a 900-square-foot house...hand me downs got pretty worn out. He went on to become a top official of a leading Hawaii bank and a trustee of the Kamehameha schools. Meet Corbett Kalama—next, on Long Story Short.

***Aloha mai kakou*, I'm Leslie Wilcox. In this edition of Long Story Short, you'll get to know Corbett Kalama, First Hawaiian Bank Executive Vice President, Kamehameha Schools trustee, husband, father, and much more. Corbett Kalama grew up in Kailua in Windward Oahu...the 7th of 11 children! He describes his dad as a renaissance man and his mom as a Hawaiian cultural practitioner. From them he inherited a sense of responsibility to the community—something that has shaped his approach to business.**

You did something really unusual when we asked you, who are the people who have influenced your life. You named your family, and friends, and then you named the poor—and you're a banker, and then you named people who you've never even met. Could you talk about that?

I named the poor because the poor give you a foundation. And I spend time with the poor. And the poor help me appreciate all the different blessings that I've had in my life. The different opportunities, the different people that have crossed paths with me, that have said, Hi. It's the simple things. My dad would often say, Say hi to whoever you run into. The worst thing that could ever happen is that they won't say hi back to you. But you're not any worse off. But the reason why I say the poor is, when you go and you do work with the poor they teach—you learn so much from that group of people and you can get in there, and you hone your skills. Selfishly, you hone your own skills. We often, from a business standpoint, we push our people into the community. We push them out there, because it forces them to go ahead and really get uncomfortable, and to recognize that that's part of their *kuleana* and responsibility. But the poor are just at the forefront for me. Because when we lose the sense of responsibility for that part of our community, it's over. It's over.

It doesn't matter what economic programs we put in place, it's over when we lose that sensitivity working with the poor. And a lot of our leaders and future leaders, and the hope comes from that part of our community that we can't lose sight of.

Another person you mentioned has not been alive in your lifetime; Kekuhaupio.

Kekuhaupio, I can see him. You know, Desha wrote a book about Kekuhaupio, Kamehameha's warrior. Kekuhaupio was just larger than life, but he was real.

See, a lot of folks just know him as the name on a gym at Kamehameha Schools.

He was a protector of Kamehameha. Kekuhaupio was talked about in Hawaiian prophecy, about this individual that would come along. Kekuhaupio was the most developed lua warrior, in Hawaiian martial arts. There was no one that was better than Kekuhaupio. But Kekuhaupio is a good person to study, because he understood his role, he fulfilled it to the best of his ability and he did it a disciplined fashion. I look to him because because of that.

You've spent a lot of time considering leadership, haven't you? Who are some of the other leaders you admire?

Well, my father. My father was—leaders have to connect what they say to what they do, and what they do to what they say. My father did that all the time. Leaders have to be caring. My father did that all the time. You have others out there like a Walter Dods, for example. He's forever influential in my life.

Because?

Because he exudes. People talk about aloha, for example. Walter is a kind man, right? He understands that success comes through working through people and never forgetting that. Always trying to uplift those around you, and you yourself become very successful. Recognizing the good in people, recognizing that you have to bring discipline to the situation. And I've often said, in Hawaiian language there's a word, *haahaa, haahaa ko kulana*. You look at Walter; he's that. Very, very humble man, very much a servant, as you can see, in our community, but even with individuals. He's touched so many different people's lives in giving direction. I know when I was flipping through the piece that you did on him, one thing that stuck with me all the way through, and it just reinforced what he used to tell us all the time, and like I say, connecting what you say to what you do. Walter would talk about two career paths.

M-hm.

Right? You want to be successful, we've got our careers. My banking career, for example. But if I really want to be successful in the banking career, I've gotta take care of the community, and I've gotta be as passionate about the community as I am about well, my specific vocation, for example. And you know, as a youngster coming through the bank, you think, Okay, he's pushing me out here, I'm doing all these different things, and not realizing at that time that he was preparing me for what I had to do today. So you go out there, you work in the community, you're thrust into a leadership position, you're the treasurer, you're doing all these different things, right? But you're out there, but

you have those two career paths, and you're constantly making sure that you don't chase your vocation to the detriment of your community.

You know, I notice when you talk about leadership, you tend to say humility, humble, haahaa. Oftentimes, when you read descriptions of leadership, it says bold, assertive, decisive.

I think it's possible to be bold, assertive, decisive, and still be humble. You don't have to be someone that speaks in a loud tone, or a bold tone to be bold. You can be yourself, you can be strong. Like I say, people watch your actions. Right; you can show intensity by not necessarily saying a single word, but just through your actions and your commitment, and your resolve to getting things done in a way that's very sensitive to the entity or individual that you're trying to assist.

When you have studied on your own leadership, do you talk about vision, and do you think about what your vision is?

Yeah, I think about what my vision is. But a lot of that is influenced by others. When you sit back and you look at just a real broad perspective, and you look at someone like Martin Luther King, when he was giving his speech, at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, I have a dream; everybody has dreams. Right? But he laid it out, point by point, what he expected to see, and getting people to buy into that dream. For me, if you ask me whether or not I have vision and dreams, I'd like to see our community be much stronger. I'd like to be able to go into our housing communities as we do in a much larger fashion, and continue to build on those things that have occurred. We've been very fortunate to have our private school system here willing to go into some of these housing projects and provide scholarships. But my whole aim is to go ahead and work with the homeless on the beach, and really bring opportunity to them to get them to dream.

Corbett Kalama was raised with a strong belief in the values of inclusiveness, stewardship and education. His mother Elizabeth Correa Kalama was a *kumu hula*. Father Charles Alan Kalama was a plumber, draftsman, musician, and boat builder. He even made musical instruments and fishing equipment. The family didn't have much money but Corbett Kalama says he had a rich childhood.

What was it like growing up in Kailua? This would be in the middle 50s?

M-hm. It was fun. Kailua was just, if I could describe it, it was a huge playground, and I had many mothers and fathers. And it was a time of real broad community, growing up. As a community, we learned to respect our elders, in more ways than one. If we were out of line in any way, shape, or form, we'd go home and get disciplined by our parents, then we'd have to go back up the street and apologize again to Mrs. Esposito or Mr. Grandberg, or Mr. Silva, or Mrs. Kim, and that type of thing. But that was just the way we were raised. And even when we'd go fishing and different things like that, we'd fish as a

group. And all the elders, it wasn't unusual for them to sit down and give us guidance on what to look at in the ocean. So they were constantly teaching us. But we learned at an early age to share. So we'd lay nets, for example, off Kailua Beach right near the boat ramp, catch fish—they'd teach us how to do that, and take the fish out of the net and make sure that everybody in the neighborhood shared in that part of it. So it was very giving, comfortable, environment. It was a challenge growing up in the types of houses that we were. There were different types of camps. We had a very small home, nine hundred square foot house.

Nine hundred square feet, and how many—children?

Eleven children.

And two parents.

My dad was just very creative. So while everybody would go around the neighborhood bragging about having a double-deck bed, we had triple-deck beds. My father welded it together, and we'd sleep two children to each bunk, and every so often, one of the younger siblings would sleep in the middle between the other two. And then we had a box spring and a mattress. And then the youngest would sleep in the living room with my dad and mom on the bed. We had a small, little saimin type uh, you have Japanese saimin stands, those little tables. That was our kitchen table.

How many bedrooms is this?

One. One bedroom.

Nine hundred-square feet.

Nine hundred square feet.

One bathroom?

One bathroom.

Oh, that must have been rough.

Oh, it was rough, but you work it out. Yeah, you work it out, and it was an interesting perspective reflecting with my older brother, Charles, about how he viewed his life when he was growing up. Because when he grew up, he was the first one, so he lived at the time when we only had two, three children. So it was an interesting perspective. It wasn't until, it got to me as number seven, already; and then there were four more after me. And it's interesting when we reminisce as a group, as a family, the different perspectives we had at different stages in our life. But it a very very rich time.

Do you remember how many times it was that you got new clothes, and not hand-me-downs?

I can count it on one hand, as a child. Not because my parents were not trying. We had so many children, so the hand-me-downs were a usual thing for us. But nonetheless, we took care of each other all the way through.

How did you take care of each other?

We made sure that—one important responsibility was, the oldest sibling was responsible for the younger ones. That's automatic. The other thing was to make sure we took care of our clothes. Right, because we knew that our

siblings would have to use the clothes, especially those of us who were going to St. Anthony's grade school; they were uniforms. So we were very careful. Where kids would be scraping their knees and tearing the pants, for example, we couldn't afford to do that. Right? We had to do that.

Because you were thinking of the next kid.

Thinking of the next kid. We'd help my mom wash clothes. We had an old washing machine, the old scrub type thing, and wring it out, put the clothes into a big pan with starch. Starch it, and then we'd do the ironing and different things. But we did whatever we could do. We never had as a child, a lot of apples and those types of things, so in retrospect, it was probably very healthy for us, because we'd go into the mountains, we'd pick guavas and mangoes, and mountain apple, and lychee, and just everything there, and mangoes in the tree. And you learned to pick enough. We'd sell mangoes, we'd do different things. There was a golf course nearby, when we moved over to Kailua, Mid Pac Golf Course, that wasn't unusual. I'd love tournament days. I'd sit out there in my tin canoe, and a foursome would come by, at least two would be in the water. Dive in with scoop net and my goggles, and either try and sell it back to them, or else I'd sell it up at the country club. Just trying to make ends meet and to help my parents, take care of all of us that way.

Was that something your parents told you, you should be doing?

No, no; we just realized when love runs deep and different things. We shared everything that we had. My father shared all of the knowledge that he had, we spent a lot of time in the ocean. We lived a lot off the ocean. I don't necessarily go out of my way to eat lobster or those types of things anymore, because it was right there in our front yard. But we learned the right way to pick lobster and not to damage the whole. We were very, very protective of sustainability as they talk about it today. But we learned that way, so we all had to pull our load.

What was the fishing out Kailua way like then, compared to now?

Unbelievable. Unbelievable. Kailua Reef used to be like an aquarium. You had every type of fish that you could think of. There was white coral; you could go just a little further outside that, deep enough to where you'd see a lot of black coral that was there. There were lobster holes everywhere in Kailua. You could walk right from the sand into the water, and find a lobster hole, octopus holes. It wasn't unusual for us to take that small island off Kailua Beach is called Popoia Island, they refer to it as Flat Island. But we'd go out there, and we'd go surfing. It wasn't unusual where we'd just take a bottle of water, some matches, and we'd hide an old refrigerator grill, and then we'd *jan ken po* at about lunchtime to see who was gonna go in the water to pick slipper lobster. We'd go out there, and it was two apiece. One person would have to dive in the water and pick it, and that's how we'd live. We'd go out there and do that. So we had a park that was there. We were windsurfing before there was windsurfing.

Did you see other people taking too much? Was there some kind of a neighborhood—

As a child, no, you never saw that. You always had—the neighborhood was very, very protective of each other. So even when you went fishing, you had to go and you went to visit with other families to make sure that they had enough food too. So it wasn't unusual. But see, with that responsibility, they also had the responsibility of the discipline aspect of it. So no, it wasn't unusual, it wasn't unusual for the neighborhood kids to just sleep on the beach as a group. It wasn't unusual to be sleeping at someone's house, and know that everybody was okay.

When you have something, you always share.

You share it. You share it. And it worked out, and kids talk about that. Now they're all adults or grandparents, they talk about coming to our house when we were youngsters. And my dad, at a very young age, even though we lived in that small house, it wasn't unusual for him to go around and pick up the homeless in those days—that were in Kailua, and bring them home to our house.

I think that's so true that so often, it's the people who have less who give more.

Do you find that?

I still see that. And I think it's just finding the opportunity for those that do have to help connect them to the group. 'Cause a lot of the work that I do in the community now, it's not for a lack of desire on the part of individuals that are a little better off than others, but it's trying to make that connection.

Can we go back to your dad a bit? 'Cause you mentioned him as your first role model as a leader. Tell me about him. I've heard from your old-time neighbors in Kailua, he was a character.

My dad was a character. My father he developed a three-prong spear out of aluminum when no one had it. And my father is just very, very creative. But the other side of it too is, he spoke a number of different languages; he could pick up really fast. He had great relationships. In our neighborhood, we had a Filipino community, for example, the Lambitoc family was there, and a lot of Filipino workers that would come in, and we got to really know them. We learned the culture, and that type of thing. My father would include everyone all the time. We'd go through, but he was just able to take things and look at issues, and look at challenges, and resolve them quickly.

What kinds of things did he build? You said he was—

Well, he built boats. He could build houses. He was a draftsman, so a lot of the big buildings in town, he was there. Lot of the plumbing that went on up on Waialae Iki Ridge and all of those places, my dad's company did that. He just...motorboats. It wasn't unusual for my dad to...well, musical instruments, he made banjos, guitars, ukulele, electric things. I mean, he was just amazing. But he could do that, and have it just be perfect. Harmonicas, bass harmonicas. And we had that around, it was just everywhere in our homes.

Did you have musicians come to your house too?

Yeah, we had a whole bunch of musicians. As we had talked earlier, it wasn't unusual in those days, the bars would close at eleven o'clock. Sundays, they stopped selling alcohol at three. Well, not to say alcohol is good or bad. I'm

commenting on that, but it was just that I got to meet a lot of people. But when my dad would come home from the bar, he'd bring the entire bar home. The bar owners, the patrons, the musicians, and everyone, and there was some protocol involved. We'd all be asleep, and my mother's name was Lani. So he'd be standing out in front of the house, and he'd yell, Mama Lani, get the kids up. So we'd all have to get up. And you know, formal greeting, you always welcome people into your house, so we'd have to go out there, and we'd sing for these folks. And of course, they didn't want my dad to have us sing, but then you didn't cross my father, so everybody would listen to us sing. They'd sing. We'd sing to them, they'd all come into our house. This would be a Friday. Friday night, the instruments would be set up in the living room, and then they'd just play. So you had Charles K.L. Davis, Tony B, Gabby Pahinui, that type of folks that would be in there. And we'd just sit there and listen and watch them play. 'Cause you know, in those days, you never asked too many questions. You just listened, and then you remember the sound. When they'd all pass out eventually, we'd grab the instruments and start playing. And that's how we all learned how to play music. But we got exposed to a whole number of things. And then my mother was a *kumu hula*. Her teacher was Auntie Lokalia Montgomery. Her *pahu* drum was made by Daddy Bray. And the other students in her class were Auntie Maiki Aiu was my mom's cousin, Sally Woods Naluai, and they were all trained, and they all *uniki*'d at the age of thirteen. Right, but the story there is, my dad—my mom in order to spite my dad, went ahead and sold her—pawned her *pahu* drum. And on her *pahu* drum, her name's there, Kekaulanikaeakawaha is on it. So lo and behold, this lady named Auntie Pilahi Paki is walking past the pawn shop. And Auntie Pilahi is relating this story to me. And she says that the drum was calling out to her. So I'm in my little back yard in Kailua Beach, I'm raking up the panax hedges. And I see this lady, who I've never met before, was Auntie Pilahi Paki holding my mother's *pahu* drum.

Was she considered a cultural expert at that time?

Didn't even know who the lady was. This was my first experience with Auntie Pilahi. I looked at her, and I said, Auntie, how come you have my mom's *pahu* drum? I didn't know my mom had pawned it. And then Auntie Pilahi started chanting to my mother. So I ran in the house and I said, Mom, there's this lady out there, she has your *pahu* drum. So that's how I got to meet Auntie Pilahi. And I was about six, six or seven years old. And that's why our relationship started. But that was just part of the music part of it. Then from that, I got to meet Uncle Eddie Kamae.

Okay; well, let me ask you about Auntie lolani Luahine.

Very special, very unique, very spiritual. It's my experience with her was going up to Mauna Ala with my mother, who was a *kumu hula*, and I went up there grudgingly 'cause my mom would have us in the days when I was growing up in Kailua, not too many men were dancing anywhere. So my brothers and I would often have to go ahead and perform for my mother in the Waikiki Shell and then

pai umauma. All that stuff. And then every so often, my mom would want to go up and visit Auntie Io in the 60s, and she was up at Mauna 'Ala. And we'd go there, and it was always an interesting time for me. Auntie Io had a way about her that demanded respect immediately. And you were a bit scared, in a real respectful way, because she had these eyes that could basically burn holes through you. And then her hair was this way, and what she used to do was let her hair out, and her and my mom would dance on the lawn there. I would [DRUMS TABLE] for them, and they would uh, Kaulilua was—she would—and so I remember vividly—she would teach me how to take the *ti* leaf and fold it, so that I could *pai* my [KNOCKS TABLE] *puniu* my drum for them.

Is it true that when she danced, something seemed to come from within her? She almost became another person.

She was larger than life. Auntie Io—I get chicken skin, my whole body is alive now, 'cause I can just see her, and she was just a very, very unique, very powerful.

Why do you think that was?

She just had—she had *mana*. She had the spirit in her.

And she was—connected to the spirits, as the—curator of Mauna Ala.

She was connected. People went to her for guidance. She was a beautiful dancer. And as a child growing up, it was people doing *kahiko* was very special. You never used to see that. It was interesting to watch the transition when the whole Merrie Monarch and everything, and then everybody started doing it. Because even as my mother was going through and training her *haumana*, very few were taught—

Your mother's generation, was the generation that generally was looking more Western than going back to roots.

Yeah. See, my mother was raised around that, so my mother was a chanter. My mother was a chanter that would actually—Auntie Maiki, her *haumana* would come to my mom, and my mom would provide them guidance.

But were they going against the mainstream grain at that point? Everybody else was looking elsewhere.

They were somewhat, to a certain extent. But if you get back to who we are as a people, as Hawaiians, it's to be inclusive. The Hawaiians, when they talk about *aloha*, and reaching out to everyone, that's what it was. You know, so they went far beyond, and you find a lot of our folklore and a lot of our stories about Hawaii in all parts of the world. You can go to Japan, it's a big part. There are *olis* out there that talk about the volcanoes in Japan, and why they're so tied. There are a lot of things that have gone on in Hawaiian history that have gone on and 'til today, you have that challenge between the *kumu* that want to leave it, and the others that want to continue to grow. And it's been growing.

Kamehameha Schools trustee Corbett Kalama graduated from Kailua High School with honors. Also from Western Oregon University and the Pacific Coast

banking school at the University of Washington. He's taught high school and college courses. His love of learning started at a young age. It was something that came naturally to him.

I just blazed through school. There wasn't anything that I couldn't do in my mind's eye. I was an honor student, and it just goes back to high school. I remember walking into an assembly one day as a sophomore at Kailua High School, and I saw a guy walking and had one of these yellow braids, right. And I said, What is that? And he said, That's the Honor Society. I said, I'm gonna get one of those. Right? Well, there are no—so I went and I figured out what I had to do. And one way to get in, I went and took a trigonometry class. But I was the only Hawaiian in the class. And I decided, Okay, I'm gonna get the top score in the class. So that's what I did. I got straight A's and I aced all my tests, and all that stuff. And it became a challenge. The things were pretty easy for me. And then when I went to college, the same thing. I challenged a bunch of courses, so I had enough credits to graduate within three years. So life was easy.

Tell me about meeting your wife. You met her—legs first?

Yeah. My wife it's really interesting. I came back. I was a freshman in college, I came back to Kailua Canoe Club, and I've always been very successful in canoe paddling since I was a youngster. Did a lot of big races, and those types of things. So I got out there, and in Waikiki we have a 4th of July regatta, the Walter J. MacFarland Regatta put on by the Outrigger Canoe Club. I'm an experienced steersman, so I get to go out there and steer the canoes. Not everybody does. Well, my wife was paddling in the seventeen and under women's crew, and I as the steersman. Well, as we were coming in, the boat sunk. We filled up with water and swamped. So part of the steer's responsibility is to make sure that you've got your passengers okay. So I went underwater and I was counting legs. You know, five sets of legs, and I saw these long legs. I go, Ho, who is that? Came up, and it was Sandy. So she didn't know this; I decided right then, that's who I'm gonna marry, was that. She was seventeen years old, and I was eighteen. And then we struck up a relationship over time, and then I'd go back to school in Oregon, and she was here. And she's a very, very hard, hard worker, very patient, very patient. She's a kindergarten schoolteacher in Kailua, loves kids, kids love her. She's done a tremendous job.

So could you really make a lifelong commitment based on underwater legs?

Yeah, uh—no. But it was a start. Starts from the toes.

Is there anything else you want to talk about that I haven't asked you about?

The idea of *aloha*. Being kind to people all the time, recognizing the importance of working together as a group, seeing the good in all people, recognizing that we have to be good servants, and recognizing that through patience and perseverance, you're gonna emerge successful, but you cannot do that by yourself. One thing that I learned as a child growing up is you need to understand your history and where you come from. And so it's not

uncommon for me to go ahead and share my genealogy when I meet with Hawaiian groups, especially, because that's who I'm representing, that's who I come from, that's who I am.

Corbett Kalama connects to the past, lives in the present and helps shape the future with his commitment to children and the community. He draws from the Hawaiian values he learned, growing up in that tiny home with a large family and an open door to those less fortunate. Mahalo to Corbett Kalama...and to you...for joining me on Long Story Short. I'm Leslie Wilcox with PBS Hawaii. A hui hou kakou.

Video clip with production credits:

So I decided, without telling my mom, that I'm gonna go to Kailua High School. So what happened was, I turned out for the football team, and the Kailua coaches didn't know. And I turned out for the junior varsity football team, and I made it all the way through the cut, and it came time to register me, they realized that I wasn't going to Kailua yet. So I went to my mom, and I asked her, I went to her house and I said, Do you mind dropping me off at school? So we were driving up through Kailua town. And I said, No, you have to take a left here. [chuckle] She said, Where you going? I said, Kailua High School. And she said, When are you going to Kailua High School? I said, This year. When? You didn't tell me about this. I said, Don't worry, Mom, don't worry; I'll be okay. That's how I got to go to Kailua High School.