

GUEST: TIN MYAING THEIN: FORTHRIGHT AND STRONG

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Burmese native and champion of Hawaii minority small business owners, Dr. Tin Myaing Thein; 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, and welcome to Long Story Short. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Born and raised in Burma, or Myanmar, Dr. Tin Myaing Thein's amazing journey has led her to Hawaii's Pacific Gateway Center, where as its executive director, she has empowered thousands of immigrants, refugees, and low income residents on their path to self sufficiency. Back in her student days at Burma's Rangoon University, Myaing was a vocal critic of the repressive regime that had toppled the nation's democratic government in 1962. The following year, at the strong urging of her mother, Tin Myaing Thein left her own country to study at the East West Center in Honolulu. Because of the dictatorial policies of the new regime in Burma, Myaing would not return for the next twenty-six years. Her childhood friend and fellow Girls Scout, Aung San Suu Kyi, stayed in the country and would become a political prisoner for years, later to emerge as a Nobel Peace Prize winner and Burmese Opposition leader. When Myaing left Burma, she took with her two powerful legacies of her mother and her grandmother; perseverance and resourcefulness.

The influence of my mother is tremendous, because she is a self-starter, and she and my grandmother, both of them fought for other women who didn't have the same privilege. And the famous story that we have about my grandmother was, in that little town where we grew up, my brothers were walking home with her, and they came across a couple around the corner where the husband was abusing his wife. And my grandmother didn't know them at all. And in Burma, the culture is that you respect elders. So, that was the only thing she had as a

shield, right? And she went up to him and she said, You stop this, this moment, don't you dare lay a hand on her, or I will come and get you. And my two brothers were trembling, because if he turned on her, they had to protect her, and they were too young to. But, the man obeyed her and apologized and said, I'm so sorry, and they went home together. It seemed like they made up. But my grandmother had guts. And we got a lot of that from her. Burmese women are, in their own right, very forthright and strong. And in the five duties of a wife and five duties of a man, the women are supposed to handle the finances in the house. I know in America, it's different. The man likes to handle the finances. But over there, the woman does. And she has to make sure that the children are well fed and educated, and the relatives are also cared for. But she holds the purse strings. So, it's quite an honor. We came out of a time when we had major problems with the Colonial powers. The British were our masters, so to speak, for a hundred years. When they had the Nationalistic Movement to fight the British, which we couldn't conquer militarily, we fought them culturally. We never gave up our dress, our language. Even though we can't speak Burmese in schools, we were speaking at home. We were to have English names in school, so we had our own Burmese names at home and we had different name at school. The British symbolized the West and the Caucasian race. To marry a Caucasian was ... somehow betraying them.

You weren't keeping the bloodline strong.

Yes; exactly.

What was the thought process on that? I mean, love isn't really logical, for one thing. [CHUCKLE]

Love isn't logical. He was a very handsome man. [CHUCKLE] And he had the traits that my mother would approve of. And he also was one of the most organized men I know, and he could do work that would be the same work that ten people could do. And when I first met him, I thought, Oh, my god, we will never, ever, in the Southeast Asian cultures, ever catch up with the West, because if they work like that, and can produce like that, we will never catch up. But then, I found out he's very rare. There are lots of other people who are not organized like him. And my parents accepted him, but I think to this day, people still feel the pain of me marrying a foreigner. They call it a foreigner.

How long were you at the East West Center?

I was there for three years.

And then, what?

Then, my husband was in Thailand at that time, he was doing his master's thesis. And I went back, and we realized that if I went home -- at that time the country was closed, I couldn't get out again, and he wouldn't be able to get in. So, we decided that we would get married, and we went back. We did get married, and we came back, to a school that accepted both of us. So, I could get my master's, and he could get his PhD. And that was in Pittsburgh. And we arrived in Pittsburgh in the middle of the night, and then in the morning we thought, Oh,

let's see it. And it was a horrible looking place. It was not like Hawaii at all. I had imagined all the places in the United States to be like Hawaii, as beautiful, right? And there was soot all over, and we lived in housing. And of course, at that time, I was still wearing my native dress, my sarong and slippers, and it was so cold. The good part of it was that because it was such a horrible atmosphere, we both studied real hard, took extra courses, and got out of there [CHUCKLE], and we went to New York.

For your PhD?

For my PhD, and he was working at Columbia University also.

How did you decide what you would get your PhD in? Did you have a plan at that point?

Well, what happened in Hawaii was that when I came to the East West Center, although it was a US government scholarship, the Burmese government, the new military government had come in '62, and I was the last group to leave the country. They had decided that I'll go for a master's in microbiology instead of psychology, which was my major.

Were you good at science, by any chance?

No, not at all. And I don't know why they felt that I could do it. And when I got here, analytical chem was the worst part. And so, East West Center was very kind, and they allowed me to get a bachelor's. That's why I have two bachelor's. And then, when we went to Pittsburgh, we were trying to not waste our years for the microbiology course, as well as get back to my people-oriented school. So in Pittsburgh, I went to the graduate school of public health and tried to keep the people in my line of work. And then, when I went to Columbia, there was a very special program in graduate studies where you had to have a master's in public health or science, and you had to have a master's in a social science. And the other social science I chose was medical anthropology. And it was wonderful, because then I got my two master's. And the teacher there was a wonderful woman named Margaret Mead. And I was so thrilled to be in her class. Oh, she was ... feisty woman. And she had us take chances. For our group project, we studied the Hell's Angels. We had no idea what we were getting into. [CHUCKLE] And she did call us in and said, Okay, end your project now, because I don't think I want you any more in danger. But she just pushed us to the limits. It was really, really neat. So, we did, in the second semester, focus on another group, the Harikrishnas. [CHUCKLE]

That's a change in scope.

Yeah. We got the difference in how the groups went about what they did in their mission, and how they got to being what they were.

Do you remember any real concise takeaway from Dr. Mead's classes?

Well, it's just that there are different groups, and there's a lot of things that they do for different reasons, but you have to look at it from their perspective. And then, you begin to understand.

A former British colony, Burma lived with an authoritarian military rule for almost five decades. Tin Myaing Thein's childhood friend, Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, is at the center of a political reform movement. This conversation took place in 2012, some months before Aung San Suu Kyi visited Hawaii, and the two saw each other in person again.

Along the way, you also knew Aung San Suu Kyi from your home country.

Yes. She was in New York at the same time. She was working for the UN. But Aung San Suu Kyi and I know each other on a social basis. We went to the same school, although I was older than her, and she was in my Girls Scout troop. We had fun. Of course, we had a camping trip which was nothing more than in her compound. It's like camping out in your yard. [CHUCKLE] That's what we did. And it was a lot of fun.

What was fun about it?

Well, actually, ghost stories, and then getting scared that somebody would come. Actually, we were very, very safe in that little hut that we were in. We learned songs the Girls Scout songs, and so forth. And we would be yelling at the top of our lungs. [CHUCKLE] She must have been five, I must have been nine. Right, something like that. And then, she went away and we met again in New York. At one point, she thought that she could stay in our guest bedroom. But we were on the West Side, and the UN was on the East Side, so it didn't work out. We hung out and talked, and whatnot. And then, of course, we went away from Columbia to Trinidad in Tobago to do some studies there in family planning. And then, she went on to England.

Do you have a close connection, would you say?

Yeah, we did. I haven't seen her for a long, long time. Yeah.

What's she like?

She knew the path. She had decided what her destiny was going to be, and it had to be intertwined with Burma. There was no doubt about it. And she had her chart all planned out. And she wanted to do whatever she could to help the country move forward.

Did you ever imagine she would spend all those years under house arrest and, you know, isolated and kept away?

Yeah. That was a long, long time. But I've been following her speeches, and she said that during the years there, she did a lot of meditation, she read a lot of books. She was able to think, and follow through the radio what was happening in the world. And she said she had more time to do that, than if she was outside.

Do you think you'd still have that kinship, if you were to see her today?

I think so. Yeah. Those are bonds of childhood that you never actually sever.

What do you think the future of Burma is? You've seen so much from the time you were moving around, escaping the Japanese invaders, to the military Junta taking over. What now?

I think that watching what's happening, there is tremendous amount of room for optimism. The country has a very farsighted president who released Aung San Suu Kyi, released a lot of political prisoners, demolished the censorship board so that all the newspapers can print whatever they want to do. And the man who was head of the censorship board does not have a job anymore. That's good news for many of us, and I'm sure he is happy too, to be retired. The US also have dropped the sanctions of importing goods from Burma to the US. So, with that I think there's going to be tremendous growth.

Which means it's far past time for us to know how to pronounce the new name of Burma, which is ...

Myanmar.

Myanmar.

Yes. Myanmar, has become politicized, and people will say, Oh, it's what the new government put in. But it's always been spelled with the M alphabet in the Burmese language. And what people don't bring to the discussions is that the Burmese alphabet has certain letters that have more than one sound. The Fa letter has two sounds; an S and a T-H sound. The letter Ma, which is the M sound, has both M and Ba. So, you write it with M, but you pronounce it with a B. So, I'm sure when the British were there, it wasn't that they were stupid, they heard B, so they called it Burma instead of Myanmar.

Oh, it's always been the same name, essentially.

It's the same name.

Oh, I didn't know that.

But Myanmar, if you say it in Burmese, it's Burma. So, if you said Burma, I'm sure the British heard it as Burma. And that's why they called it Burma. But then now, it's twisted into, one group saying, No, it's the regime calling it Myanmar, and another saying, No, we don't want what the regime does, and so forth, and so on. But actually, it's all linguistics.

Do you think you can tell something about someone from the country, based on how they pronounce the name of the country?

I can tell their age. [CHUCKLE] Yeah.

After years spent earning two bachelor's degrees, two master's degrees, and a doctorate in medical sociology, Dr. Tin Myaing Thein worked to improve the status of women, and was honored nationally for her work. Along the way, she and husband Jack Reynolds raised two children. Dr. Thein has spent the greater part of her career serving as executive director of the Pacific Gateway Center, a Chinatown-based nonprofit in Honolulu that offers health and social services programs, giving a jumpstart towards self sufficiency for low income residents, immigrants, and refugees.

This particular job, where it was almost like case management, was doing what I was doing naturally anyway, helping people. And it's not just with businesses,

but also social services, helping them with new skills, English skills, occupational skills, and so forth. I have the most wonderful board, in the whole, wide world, I think. Because they totally go along with my wildcat ideas, scatterbrain ideas, if you want to call it. But the Kitchen Incubator was conceived through many community discussions with our clients. The refugee women said, We'll never get off welfare -- this was a long time ago. And we don't have enough English, and we don't have the education to get a good job. But we can cook; and we've tried, but we haven't been able to do anything, because we have to have a certified kitchen. And they tried to work with Pizza Hut and cook during the hours that Pizza Hut wasn't using. They tried to use bars, because the bars are shut down during the day or in the morning. And it didn't work because of the insurance. And I just tucked that idea in the back of my mind, and when we went to the mainland, I found out that there was such a thing as kitchen incubators. And so, I did more further research on it. And I'll tell you, Leslie, people come to you because everything is the right timing. I was looking for funds, but I didn't know where to look. And along came this wonderful woman named Gail Fujita from EDA, the Department of Commerce.

Economic Development Agency --

Administration.

Something like that? Okay.

Economic Development Administration; yeah. And she said, I heard that you've been talking about this kitchen incubator, we want to fund you. And I almost fell off my chair. And she helped me look for other funders, because it wasn't enough what she could give us. And she looked for other partners that we could partner with, and just walked me through the whole process. And we had so much support. Central Pacific Bank was also key, and so was the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation. And we were able to build it. That money today would be triple if we build it today.

How much did it cost then?

Five million.

And when was that?

2000. So, we have been very, very lucky with all the support that everybody's given us, to help people start their own food-related businesses.

Well, what kinds of foods are they cooking in the kitchen incubator?

Oh, tremendous. There is a lady who's making children's lunches for private schools. There's a Korean man who's cooking Micronesian food, and he's selling it at a Micronesian store. There is a couple who have moved out, and that's what it's all about. They should start their businesses and then move out at a certain point in time. They made these wonderful cakes that won awards, and they've now moved out to Kailua. There's Auntie Nani, who is making cookies. And then, there's another lady who makes Hawaii's Best Brittle. Oh, it's out of this world. And her name is Mary, and she's trying to supplement her social security income and get some extra income for her needs.

And do they all block time in the kitchens?

Yes, they do. So, they can come in the morning, or afternoon, or evening; anytime that they want.

Oh, you must feel so wonderful, knowing that you had a hand in getting that going.

Well, I like food. [CHUCKLE] And people at my organization, we like food. And so, I always tell the story that when we were outlining our values with a workshop leader, we came up with the usual, integrity, spirit of *aloha*, so forth, teamwork. And the staff came up with food as one of the values. For refugees, it's the only way they can go home. For immigrants, that's the way they go home. For different immigrants of different cultures, we share food, we like each other's food, and that's how we can relate to each other. The kitchen incubator is a very important project, because I think many of them have learned that we have to move away from total dependency on government funding, and there's such a movement as social enterprise. We have projects that will bring in some extra revenue, which we then use into the programs. That's how we've been able to fund our program.

And do you know how many businesses have been created as a result of the incubator?

Oh, yeah; at least four to five hundred, over the years.

And you do more than the incubators, as well.

Yes.

You mentioned social issues.

Yes. We help immigrants who want to get their citizenship. We help fill out their forms, we help tutoring them for their citizenship classes.

Don't you have an English as a Second Language Class too?

Yes, we do.

I sat in, years ago, on one of your classes. I never knew how they did that, how the teacher couldn't know any of the languages, but would still be able to --

Be able to teach.

-- teach English.

Yeah.

It's amazing.

Yes; it is something like an immersion, but on the other way. So, it's been very, very rewarding to have English classes. We did have Punahou Schools come and volunteer to help the children and their families with English language practice. Among our refugees, we also help the human traffic victims and their families. And we help to get them settled, get them jobs, and get their kids into school, and so forth. We have a project called The Hawaii Language Bank, and we provide on-the-spot translation, as well as translation.

How has your program changed over the years? You have anything new happening?

We are converting a gas-powered car into an electric car. One of our staff donated his car, and we have got a kit, and it's now ready, to have the car on the streets. Our rationale was to help our clients who are not well-to-do, because they can't afford a thirty-two-thousand-dollar car from Nissan. But with a kit that's like three or four thousand, and then the labor that's given, maybe couple more thousand, maybe with five, max six thousand, they can get an electric-powered car.

And they could help convert other people's cars.

Right; exactly. So, we would have teams learning how to do that, more and more people will learn how to do it. Another project that we have is the farms. We were able to get farmland. We leased farmland from Hawaii Ag Foundation, and many of our human traffic victims who are farmers are able to farm on the land. Because they were having trouble getting leases, and so, we stepped in. It's almost like an agricultural incubator. Each of them got five acres, and we've worked with CTA from University of Hawaii College of Tropical Ag and Human Resources, and they said that with the new technology of agriculture, you can live very well on five acres. So we used the five-acre model, and everybody got five acres.

And these are truck farms; they just pull up and cultivate it every day.

Right; right.

They don't live on the property.

Oh, no; they don't. But we've had our first harvest, and now they're on to their second harvest.

What are they growing?

They're growing cucumbers, tomatoes, ... peppers, eggplant, sweet peas.

There you are, back to food again.

Yes; yeah. [CHUCKLE] And along with that, we have pop-ups, where we're helping chefs who want to start their own restaurants. So, they get to use our Lemongrass Café in Chinatown. They cook there, and then people will sign up to come to their pop-up, and they will test out their recipes to see if they can get a following.

So, it's restaurant for a night kind of thing?

Yes; restaurant for a night.

Dr. Tin Myaing Thein's commitment and passion for her work have been recognized by many organizations. Honors include the East West Center Distinguished Alumni Award, and the Hookele Award for Nonprofit Leadership. Married for forty-six years at the time of this taping in 2012, she and her husband Jack, who's now retired from his management consultancy, are the proud grandparents of two. They're also close to their extended family that includes Myaing's sister, cousins, nieces, nephews both here in Hawaii and in Burma. Thank you, Dr. Tin Myaing Thein, for sharing your long story short. And thank you

for watching and supporting PBS Hawaii. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou, until next time. Aloha.

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

What's the budget of the Pacific Gateway Center?

It's about two million.

You make a lot happen with two million dollars, don't you?

Yeah; we have to, because my staff, they are very dedicated, and they're very motivated, and they know that ours is not a nine-to-five job. When there's a problem with an immigrant who has a domestic violence issue, you just can't say, Oh, it's five o'clock, time for me to go home.

Right; see me in the morning at nine.

Yeah, right; take two aspirins. And so, we have to go and extract the wife or anything that needs to help save somebody else. There are issues when somebody's life is at stake or their welfare is at stake, and we have to continue on.