

**GUEST: ARIYAPHON SOUTHIPHONG (ANDY SOUTH): A LIFE REDESIGNED**

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I'm hoping that me living my life in a public manner gives the opportunity for discussion and opens up the floor for people to realize that being transgender isn't being a freak of nature.

**Honolulu fashion designer Ariyaphon Southiphong, formerly the man known as Andy South, 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; I'm Leslie Wilcox. Honolulu fashion designer Andy South first gained national recognition in Season 8 of Lifetime Television's reality competition show, Project Runway. In 2012, Andy announced that he was now a she, a transgendered female. Her mother renamed her Ariyaphon Southiphong, or Ari for short. Her clothing line continues to operate under the Andy South name. As of our conversation in 2013, Ari has not yet undergone gender reassignment surgery. Ari has been on hormone replacement therapy, biweekly injections of testosterone blockers and estrogen, which she plans to take for the rest of her life. When Ari, who had already built the Andy South brand, first told her mother about wanting to start hormone therapy, her mother had her concerns, based on a previous transition attempt.***

Her first question was like, Why would you want to do this? Because she had gone through my first transition, which was right before Project Runway, and I stopped right before.

**Were you not sure you wanted to?**

I wasn't sure.

**Ah ...**

Yeah. I wasn't sure about my first transition, because it was so quick. My body took to the hormones so quickly, the changes were coming on too fast. And I felt like I had made the decision based on pressure, or encouragement from people who didn't really know me as well as I, thought that that person or that influence should be coming from. And so, I took a step back and I actually had a lot of resentment toward being transgender. I didn't go out anymore, I had stopped talking to a lot of people. Because had to deal with my own internal

conflict of, What did you just do to your body? A lot of things caused me to hate myself.

**That's what you were feeling like right before you went on the TV show?**

Yeah.

**'Cause you were still centered.**

Yeah. That's what I was feeling right before going on the TV show. But that first transition and then off of it, I took it as, well, it was probably a lesson learned. And then, when it came up again, this was after I came back from Project Runway, and a lot of great things were happening, again that same feeling of something is missing. I had already gotten a glimpse of who Ari was. Who I was as a female.

**Did it come to you as a visual? 'Cause you're a visual person.**

M-hm; it did.

**You saw yourself as a woman?**

Yeah, I started to see her more often. I saw myself as a woman much more often, because I had that first glimpse of my first, few months on transition. In the beginning, I used to always talk about the Andy South woman, and she was always on the show. A lot of people will recall and they all became fans of that warrior woman that I was designing for. I guess what I realized was that the imaginary person I was designing for was me.

**I see.**

So, that imaginary Andy South woman who was a warrior. Because I felt like I had to fight for whatever it is that I wanted to do. And especially at that stage, it was such a breaking moment of my career that I think a lot of the reason why my designs came out as very hard and very defensive was because I felt like I was constantly fighting. I was constantly competing to remain in the game. And then when I came home after that initial collection -- I mean, the back story to my collections are always very extensive. Because it's about the woman and what she's going through. And after that first collection, at the end of my first fashion show actually, the last model came out with this huge costume that was ripped away. It was about a girl going through the seasons, transitioning through winter, and then at the end breaking into the first glimmer of spring with the ice melting away and her hard exterior melting away. The next collection was extremely feminine. But I think that they made sense with the Andy South brand completely, because even though it looked like light and dark, the story was like a next chapter to this girl, where a lot of it was silk hand-dyed ombre, beautiful colors, like the water. Because I imagined this girl now coming out of this melted snow, out of this debris, like everything was frozen over and that she was coming out of this muddy, murky water, renewed and was finding a new femininity in herself. And that was in the same collection that I decided to make my transition.

**This time, Ariyaphon Southiphong was confident about transitioning to a female body. But that didn't make the journey an easy one.**

**Do you spend any time saying, Why me?**

Many times. Yeah; many times. I constantly ask, Why was I born this way? And after college, I actually transitioned from Buddhist, 'cause I grew up Buddhist with my parents, and I became a Christian. But I understand a lot of the Buddhist teachings that my mom taught us. I constantly pray, and I constantly have conversations with God on a regular basis. And then, when I was dealing with the reality of my transition, and quite often the struggles. And a lot of people see me now, and they see me received very well in the general public. There's a lot of things that I deal with internally that aren't so ... glamorous, they're not positive, a lot of things that I question about myself.

**Self doubts, you mean?**

Self doubts; yeah. All the time. Because society is always telling you one thing, even though in your gut that you need to do the other. And especially in the beginning, I constantly prayed about, Is this right? That was my main prayer.

**Did you have a mentor or counselor?**

I mean, I did talk to my doctor about it, who diagnosed me with gender dysphoria, which allowed me to start my transition.

**So, you have to say you're mentally ill in order to begin something that you say is going to heal you.**

Yeah. Because in the medical world, that's the way it's treated. You treat gender dysphoria by allowing yourself to live in the form, and attain that physical being that you identify with for your mental sake. Which when you think about it, it's so ... [SIGH] ... it's almost pitiful, when you think about it, of someone having to succumb to admitting to that, and admitting to them suffering from mental illness in order to be happy. Because I don't think it's a mental illness. I think that it's just the life that I was born into. This is life. And my main conflict with God in the beginning was, like the main question was, Is this right?

**Did you say, God, you know, You know I'm not your son, I'm your daughter?**

Right. Yeah; exactly. I used to always ask, actually; I don't ask anymore, because I know that for whatever the circumstances and whatever He has in front of me and before me, this is the path that He's determined for me, and the journey that He's already laid out, because He knows that I can handle it.

**There are a lot of segments of the Christian church, and there are some elements which would say, Come on, that's not right.**

Of course.

**I know you've heard it, and what do you do say?**

I think that everyone's walk with God is different. And especially with being a Christian, there are so many different variations, I would say. Some being a little bit more by the Bible, being closer to Catholicism. But for me, religion has always been kind of not a big question, but I've always been one to ask questions. And the reason why I think I'm such a strong Christian is because I found Christianity and I found God on my own. I wasn't brought up forced to go to church. I wasn't brought up forced to do anything religious. But I knew He

was calling me. A lot of thing that happened in my childhood and my life, just aside from me being transgender, have already told me that He has been calling me back to Him, to know Him, to live my life in a way that will affect the world in a really great way. In the beginning, I used to always ask, like, Well, am I really supposed to live this life? My fear was that I was doing something wrong. My fear was that I was being selfish and acting upon my own want to be a woman. Going back to people telling me it's a choice. People telling me that this is a decision you make, you're not born this way. But for me to live as a straight male does not make sense. For me, it doesn't make sense.

**And for you to live as a gay male doesn't make sense.**

It doesn't. It doesn't anymore. Because I mean, the first thing people ask with the hormone replacement therapy is, Well, how do you change, how do your thoughts change? And for me, I just make more sense internally. My thoughts make sense, things seem more balanced.

**With balanced thoughts and a decidedly female perspective, Ari Southiphong says she has a greater understanding of how to design clothes for women.**

My idea of designing for women has changed, because now I'm wearing the clothing. Of course, my body is different from, your genetic female body that you have to fit, but the same things apply as far as you know, wanting to cover certain things, or wanting to wear a bra, which in college, I never really cared about. Well, the girl can go bra-less, I don't care. Being a man designing for a woman, I didn't have that innate sense of fashion being completely functional. You know, I always wanted, the really fashion-forward pieces, and I always designed for the very fashion-forward woman.

**This should expand your market, shouldn't it?**

M-hm; exactly. I mean, as the business grows, in our first two collections, I learned a lot about our clientele, real women who bought our clothing. And I think it's very common for students and for young designers to design for a very petite frame, for a very thin model. But the majority of my clients and my customers are older women who are not, size zero to a four. And so my design sensibility has changed according to, one, my personal transition and now being so connected with the brand, that I am the brand, but also, on the business side, designing to maintain my customer and give my customers what they want.

**Would you do men's clothes?**

I have started. And that's something I started to do before my transition for myself to wear. But I recently started to do some menswear pieces, and starting with the basics. Because I think with the women's wear, I've gotten a very good grasp on the fit and the styles that I love to design and my customers love, but with the menswear, I guess I'm more focused on the fit. So, I'm doing a lot of basics, a lot of basic button-downs, cargo shorts, just to get the fit right.

Because for a brand, that's the most important thing, is that the product fits the customer.

**I always look at, say, Vogue, and there's some hideous looking dress on the runway, and they say, Metallics are in. And you think, Who would ever wear that? So then, your job is to convert that into something people would want to wear, using the theme or the color, or the something.**

Exactly. The magazines will list the trends. So that's why I always say the magazines really the ones who run the show. Because whatever they say, whatever magazines say are the trends are what the consumer will look for.

**And then, you adapt that sense of a trend. Because you know, so many things aren't wearable.**

Right. Well, 'cause fashion is a creative industry. You run the gamut from being commercial, commercially and retail-conscious of running a company, and making sales, and making things affordable. And then, there's the extreme creative side of it, with haute couture, and handmade garments that are much more like art pieces.

**Where do you see yourself?**

When I first started, I saw myself doing a lot more couture, because I love the creativity of it. And I still do. And I would love to do couture gowns all day, every day, and I would love to go to France and study under a real couture house. But the reality is, to run a business, that's not gonna be possible. I have to form a brand that's much more wearable. And actually, I prefer to design things and manufacture them, and create them for people who love them and actually wear them. There's nothing more exciting than seeing one of your pieces in the street.

**So, is your ideal customer somebody like you, or is it somebody else?**

I think my ideal customer is someone who's like me in the sense that they're risk takers, that they know who they are. And that's what I base the Andy South brand off of. 'Cause my logo is --

**Authenticity.**

Authenticity; exactly.

**And that's your life struggle.**

Being who you are.

**Ari Southiphong, the former Andy South, is self-assured about who she is. But she's also well aware of the challenges that transgender dating presents, especially someone who's in the public eye.**

**If the future is a husband and a family, how does that get accomplished?**

Finding the right person. It's gonna take a really, really amazing man to be that person, to know himself well enough to know that falling in love with me, or being attracted to me isn't being attracted to a man. And I've met some really great couples with some of my sisters who are who are now sex-changed. They're post-op. But a lot of times, the ones that have a really strong relationship

are the ones that first started dating not knowing that she was born a man, and they built a relationship just exactly like a straight couple. And then later down the line, she has to tell them, because she can't hold the secret in. When they meet the family, then it gets complicated, so it has to come out.

**Yeah; but I would think that that would put you at risk for a blown-up relationship, or even violence.**

Exactly.

**Because you didn't tell.**

Yeah; exactly. So, you never know how someone's gonna react. And not that it's a matter of deceit and trying to trick someone into thinking you're a genetic female, and tricking them into fall in love with you. I see it more as because of the society we live in, to have it at the forefront complicates a lot of things with people. And letting it come out over time, I think allows the person to get to know the person for the real reasons. Get to know their character. And whether they fall in love, they fall in love with that person's personality, their strengths, their humor their beauty from within, before they completely shut the door on the fact that this person is transgender, even post-op sex change.

**So, a lot of it is context.**

A lot of it is context. And the reason why girls are working the streets, and they're becoming creatures of the night is what I would say --

**Which really puts them in position for violence.**

Yeah. The girls who have to work the streets at night, they put themselves in a lot of danger.

**Now, why do they have to work the streets at night?**

Employment opportunities for transgender individuals, especially mid-transition or very early on when they're still very androgynous, they're very difficult to find, and it's very difficult with the current laws. One thing that I hear from many young girls is when they get a job, if they show them their ID card with their gender on it, then they're required to use the male restroom, or the gender marker that's on, say, their driver's license.

**I see.**

Because they've basically told them, I'm male. But for someone who's living their life as a woman, that's difficult. And that's like kicking them when they're down making them go into use the male restroom, for people to see that they are male. You know, that they are transgender. No matter how passable they may be on the outside with their features, the fact that it's lingering, that's the risk we take for living this life. And a lot of transgender deaths and murders go unaccounted or unspoken about, uninvestigated. They get swept under the rug, because it's ... sad to say that it's just not a priority. Being transgender heightens that risk of someone trying to pick a fight with you, especially men who see you as a man and see you as a freak. So, the danger level of living a public life as transgender, it's very high especially if you're in the wrong place. But thankfully, I'm in Hawaii.

**Have you ruled in or ruled out surgery?**

I haven't ruled out surgery at all. And ideally, if I could get everything done and be perfectly healthy, and live a full, great life, long ...

**Surgery is a risk, I guess. I mean surgery is a risk, and that's a big one.**

Surgery is a huge risk, and I know that my life purpose is more than just making the complete transition to being completely physically female. Because like I said, gender is internal before it is physical. When I first transitioned, it was very young of me to think that I wanted to do everything as soon as possible. I wanted to do everything quickly, so I can get on with my life and I can live my life. But as I transition, I learned to really, really love myself for the first time. And even before that, loving myself as gay male and accepting myself, it's not the same when you finally accept yourself for who you are. And whether or not the surgery and the final—you know, 'cause that's like a final step to achieving the closest possible likeness of living as a genetic woman, right now, it's not that important to me, because what's important is my career.

**Ari Southiphong, formerly Andy South, is also passionate about advocating for the transgendered community. Her openness about her transition comes from a strong desire to educate.**

**So, the T in LGBT stands for, what?**

Transgender.

**So, not transsexual, it's transgender.**

Transgender and transsexual are pretty much the same.

**But I've read, speaking of looking things up. I read that you don't have to have hormonal treatment or surgery to identify as transgender.**

You don't. You don't have to have any procedures done, you don't have to be on hormones to identify yourself as transgender. Like I said, gender is internal before it is physical.

**And you know, there all these categories where you could get stuck on side streets, instead of seeing the big street picture. Like, transvestite.**

Yeah.

**Where does that fit in?**

Transvestite is a gay male -- or not even, it doesn't have to be a gay male. It could be a straight male, as well, that cross-dresses.

**So, people have to learn what transgender is, because we have all these labels. We use names we don't even know what we're talking about.**

Exactly. That's what I always encourage people to learn. Not only for the sake of me being able to share with them, but also for them to be knowledgeable, and for them to not look a fool either. That's probably really embarrassing when you're talking to somebody who does know what they're talking about, and you're using terms in the wrong context and in the wrong form. And it's disrespectful as well.

**I think there are very few people having conversations like this. You know, you're open, you're explaining something to me that I don't know very much**

**about. What would you say to people who really don't have a clue about what being transgender means, and they'd like to know, and they don't know how to talk to people about it?**

You can research. A lot of what I did before my transition was actually research online, mainly because I needed to find out for myself, kind of unclouded by the opinion of the person sharing with me what being transgender is. But then also talking to people who are. Talk to them, because chances are, you might even know somebody who is, and you may just not know. Like, talk to them regularly now.

**But how do you bring it up? I mean, what if they're not?**

Well, I mean, don't just go and ask any random person, like, Oh, so are you transgender? You've gotta be really sensitive about it.

**Good way to start a conversation.**

Yeah. You've got to be sensitive about the form that you speak about it. But I think if you know somebody who is, I think asking about it is much more of a welcome thing than people might think.

**Than tiptoeing around it.**

Than tiptoeing; yeah. It's much easier. I have a much greater sense of relief when people ask me about it, because I like that people are interested in knowing what it is that I'm going through. And the fact that they're open to learning, that's the first step to educating more people, and it's the first step to transgender individuals becoming more a part of society. I mean, we're steps behind the gay community, because there are a lot of things that don't protect us, because a lot of our issues aren't brought up and aren't dealt with. They're just not discussed enough to determine things and laws to be in place that are appropriate for us, but also appropriate for the rest of the community as well.

**But on the other hand, I think people are reticent, because it's so personal. And yet, it's central to you.**

Right. And I think in my case, I'm very open about it, because I realize that my life is in the public eye, that I can't disappear and come back as a woman and expect to have the same life. So, that's kind of the cross I bear. Alongside of the business purpose that I serve and the career that I'm building and the opportunities it offers, I'm hoping that me living my life in a public manner gives the opportunity for discussion and opens up the floor for people to realize that being transgender isn't being a freak of nature. And I really want people to realize that, yeah, I am transgender, and I run a business. Because you don't see that often. This life can seem difficult, being transgender, and it is. This isn't a life that I would wish on anyone, because it's not easy.

**Because that's front and center, everybody reacts to that first; right?**

Exactly; exactly.

**And even among very well-meaning people, and I think so many people are well-meaning, you hear all the pronoun confusion.**

Yeah.

**He, she, he she.**



And my mom does that too. She still sometimes slips and calls me, he. But I understand that she raised me as a son for twenty-five years, and so for me to expect her and my family and friends to automatically change overnight, that's selfish on my part. Me allowing myself to live my life is not selfish. It's the right thing for me.

**With confidence, Ari Southiphong is looking ahead, and her Andy South business is the priority. Her high end clothing brand is seeing growth. She's forging ahead in the challenging fashion industry, while navigating new dimensions in her personal life. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.**

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit [PBSHawaii.org](http://PBSHawaii.org).

It's much greater than just tolerating. You tolerate your crappy neighbor, you tolerate your husband's snoring. But to really be accepted in a community, I think, is just such an uplifting feeling that probably I'm most thankful for, is for the support that I've been getting from fans and from community members who have thanked me for taking a stand, and for honestly just being me.