LONGstorySHORT with LESLIE WILCOX

PBS Hawaii

GUEST: JIM BURNS: A LOCAL BOY
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I'm told that your law clerks, when you were looking for a new one, of course, you checked all aspects of their background, but it was really important to you to find out where they went to high school.

Yeah; I started with that. You know, that gives me a picture of, you know, where they lived and who they are. And then, from there, I'd ask them other questions. But, yes. I think that's true of all the people who lived—local boys, back in the old days. You know, Where you went high school? And if they said Kamehameha; okay, you got a picture of them. They said St. Louis, they said Punahou, they said Iolani, they said Farrington, Kaimuki, you'd get sort of a picture or flavor.

So, what did it say about you, that you went to St. Louis?

Well … that during school, I had to wear a tie.

[CHUCKLE]

You know, that it was a little stricter operation than other places, little more controlled. That it was all boys, so you don't know anything about girls.

Jim Burns has always called himself just a local boy. This, despite the lofty trappings of his career, rising to Chief Judge of the State Intermediate Court of Appeals. And he's the son of one of the most consequential political leaders in Hawaii's modern history, Governor John Burns. Jim Burns, next on Long Story Short.

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

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. James Stanton Seishiro Burns, better known as Jim Burns, retired Chief Judge of the Hawaii Intermediate Court of Appeals, was born in Honolulu in 1937 to a father who was a police officer and a mother who was partially paralyzed by polio two years before Jim was conceived. It wasn't until much later that Jim's father, the late Governor John A. Burns, became a politician and the driving force that brought Democratic Party to power, changing Hawaii's political landscape forever. It was apparent in Jim's young life that there was something exception about his parents.

When people talk about when they were born, it's you know, just a fact. I was born on this date. But your story of birth is huge. I mean, I've never heard such a dramatic birth story as yours. I'd love to hear it from you.

Well, I don't remember it.

[CHUCKLE]

I only know what they told me. Interesting story. My mother had two children, and then while she was pregnant with the third during the seventh month, she got polio. Then called infantile paralysis. And so, the baby was born, my brother, but he didn't live long. And so, she was paralyzed at that time, from the neck, down, and real bad. Now, this was 1935. But subsequently in 1936, she became pregnant with me., while she was paralyzed. And you know, I don't know how much of the upper body then was paralyzed, but definitely from the lower body, she was paralyzed. And so, all the doctors told her to abort. And they said they wouldn't treat her if she refused. And she said, No, I'm not going to abort. And so really, nobody wanted to treat her.

So, was she personally at risk? Is that why they wanted her to abort?

Yes; both of us were at risk. Yes. And she said, No, I won't. Fortunately, my father knew a guy, a Japanese body expert, I think you'd call him. He was a jujitsu, judo master, and so, my father found him. And of course, the doctors didn't want him to touch my mother, said he would kill her, you know, with what he was going to do. But no, my father went with him, and he took care of my mother during the pregnancy; all during the pregnancy. You know, she said, dunked her into bathwater. What was it … seaweed water and et cetera. Massaged her, stretched her. My mother said, It almost killed me, but every time I would scream, he'd say, Go ahead, scream some more.

Now, she was paralyzed. It's indicating that she's feeling pain, but would she feel pain?

Oh, yes.

Oh, she did feel pain?

Oh, gosh; yes. Yes. She just couldn't move her body. But she could feel pain. Yes.

I see.

I never talked to my father about it, but I did talk to her about it. You know, why would you get pregnant while you were paralyzed? And she said, I wanted to show that I could continue to be a wife, you know, that I could be together with him. And being good Catholics, it happened.

And you were born perfect?

I was born healthy, almost eight pounds, full-term pregnancy. And delivered by a friend who didn't deliver babies, because there was no doctor to deliver me. He was a doctor, but he was not a doctor who specialized in that particular business.

So, I notice that you have a Japanese middle name.

Yes, I do.

Is that because of the man who helped your mom deliver?

Yes. His name was Henry Seishiro Okazaki. Quite famous in the community. And after I was born, you know, my father talked to him, I guess, about, Hey, what can I do for you? I've gotta pay you whatever. And the man said, You call him Seishiro. And that's all my father ever called me.

Jim Burns' brother and sister were only a few years older than him, but by the time Jim came along, the family had gone through many changes. Jim's father had become a police officer, and he had moved his family from Kalihi to the Windward side, Kailua, where Jim grew up.

So, you were the favored child, right, because you were the youngest, who'd come through so miraculously.

Well, that's what my sister says. I'm not sure it's true, but I guess I had a better life than she did, or my older brother did.

Was your father, who was known as very strict and sometimes punitive—

Yes.

You had it easier than the older kids?

Well, I don't know how they had it, but I know that I had some whacks; some pretty good ones. So, he was very strict with me, also. But I think because I'm younger, he mellowed over the course of time. So, I think they caught it more than me, before he mellowed.

You know, when your father was governor, people said—and this was sometimes quoted in the papers—his nickname could be The Great Stone Face; he was very impassive and stern.

Yes.

What was he like as a father?

Same. Exactly. Yes; very. Not too many jokes.

They both sound like very strong people. I mean, did you feel like you had room to breathe around them?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Well, you know, depending on what part of my life you're talking about, I didn't see him that often. I saw my mother much more than him, and my mother was much easier to deal with than he was.

And even your mother went away for a while for treatment; right?

When I was two years old, she went to the mainland for treatment, and she was there until Christmas of '42. Actually should not have come back; she came back sooner than she should have. But she was so homesick.

Wow. And your dad was often gone as well.

Yes. So, I didn't see her. You know, I wasn't conscious of her when I was two years old, and I didn't see her until I was four and a half.

Wow.

Or actually, let's see. Christmas—I'm sorry; five and a half.

Five and a half.

Five and a half years old.

Do you remember seeing her at five and a half?

Well, I know that she came home. And we had been writing to her while she was gone. You know. I mean, I'm sure my penmanship was not so good in those days.

[CHUCKLE]

But I would write notes to her.

Who took care of you?

Well, that's a good question. I recall a lady from down the street, a good family friend, who used to take care of all of us. My father's mother lived next door. But, lots of kids she took care of, and I remember her. And then, when we got older, I know my father got some gals from the detention home, the girls' home, and they came and babysat. So, it was just whoever. And then, it was wartime.

Tell me about Pearl Harbor.

Okay. Well, let's go back a ways. My father's a policeman, and prior to the war, he's in charge of espionage. He's the chief of espionage in the police department. And I

think the United States knew that it was going to get into a war with Japan. It had to, to get into the war in Europe. And so, I think about '39, the chief asked my father to put together him and four guys, to go check with the Japanese community and find any signs of disloyalty. So, my father gathered together four other guys from the police department, three of whom were Japanese, and one was Hawaiian.

Did your dad get to pick?

Yes; he got to pick. So, he picked the four. And … interesting story. I always tell this story, and it's true. Five people … remember Hawaii Five-O?

[CHUCKLE]

That's where the five comes from. You know, that investigative unit. But anyway, so the five went out and checked all over the place, and came back and said, No, no signs of disloyalty whatsoever within the community.

We were at church Sunday morning, December 7th, 7:00 a.m. Church was finished, and we were just gonna start going to home. And we saw this … blast, explosions at what was then the Kaneohe Naval Air Station, which is now the Kaneohe Marine Station. And we could see planes and bombs, and et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And you know, I'm young, I'm only four and a half years old, and all I know is that there's a ruckus going on. But he knew what was going on. So, he rushed home, ran into the house, picked up the phone, called, and all I heard him was say, Oh, four-letter word. And out the door he went, and I didn't see him for a long time. We didn't see him for a long time.

Long time, meaning how long?

You know, I recall two, three weeks. But he was gone. And now, we were at home, we didn't have my mother. You know, just had whoever was looking after us, and thinking that we're going to be invaded. And then martial law came, and et cetera. We lived under that. And right next door, there was a military camp that they set up in the ironwood pine trees, which was interesting. So, part of my growing up was working with the soldiers, being with the soldiers. They were nice to us.

So, very unconventional entry to the world, and very unconventional upbringing.

M-hm; yeah. I would say so.

How do you think it affected you?

Well, it made me very independent; that's for sure. You know, I didn't have a lot of social contact, other than my brother, sister, and whoever else was around. So, I learned how to do my own thing.

I know you went to St. Louis. I think it was called college at the time.

St. Louis College.

And you lived in Kailua.

Yes.

So, Pali Road was there.

But it was the Old Pali Road.

So, it wasn't that hairpin …

It was the Old Pali Road.

With the hairpin turn?

Yes.

How did you get to school?

That way. In the mornings, somebody took us. Either my father, or somebody. Lots of kids went to St. Louis, Sacred Hearts in those days from Kailua. So, somebody, whoever it was, took us to St. Louis.

How'd you get home?

Well, when I was younger, you know, somebody would pick us up; my father or somebody he got to pick us up. But as I got older, the bus went to Nuuanu, dropped us off. Those days, the buses had electrical lines, wires.

That's right. They were trolleys.

Yes; trolleys.

More like trolleys.

So, Nuuanu was as far as they got.

And then, how did you get home from there?

Hitchhike.

Did you always find somebody to take you?

Yes. Yes.

Who was it usually? What kind of person?

You know, all kinds of people; neighbors, friends, or just people. You know, Kailua was a small town, country town, and everybody kind of knew each other, friendly with each other. Different kinds of people. But there was one man; an interesting story. A guy named Charley Asada, and he drove the kerosene truck. And people say, Kerosene truck?

Yeah.

Well, in those days, the farmers between the Pali and Kailua, talking along the Koolaus, lots of Japanese farmers. And they didn't have electricity, so their source of power was kerosene.

Oh …

And so, he would drive his kerosene truck, and he'd go fill up the tanks for all of these people. You know, different places, different days. And so, I went with him. And people say, Why did you do that? And I say, Well, number one, he was fun to be with; he was very educational, entertaining, et cetera. But number two, while he was filling up the tanks, guess what we were doing? We were eating. I mean, those people had good food.

[CHUCKLE]

And so, by the time I got home, I was full.

There was a time when your father left the police force to become a fulltime politician. And your mom started running a liquor store.

Well, yeah. Initially, he ran it. So, he bought a liquor store, and he was running it in Kailua. But then, he got so involved in politics. Now, we're talking about '46, '47. And then, he ran in'48. And so then, my mother started running it. And we lived five blocks away, so we're talking a lady in a wheelchair going to the liquor store. And sometimes somebody took her, sometimes she wheeled herself, and sometimes I pushed her.

And she basically took charge of the purchases and the ordering, and …

She was there all day. You know, I don't know how she did it, but she did. And when I could, I went and helped. As I got older, I did more and more help. But, you know, we had shelves, and she couldn't reach. So, the customer would just reach and take whatever they wanted, and … you know, then they would make their purchase.

I thought that was an interesting choice of a type of business, because hadn't your father previously had a problem with alcohol, and he'd stopped? But then, he bought a liquor store.

Well, his father was an alcoholic, and then deserted the family. And so, he was a very angry man. I think my father grew up very, very angry and bothered. So, he was incorrigible when he was young. And in fact, so much so their mother couldn't handle him, sent him off to Fort Leavenworth to live with an uncle. And when he came back, he bounced around and finally became a policeman. But while he was a policeman initially, in the 30s, he got into an accident and had liquor on his breath. Now, nobody said he was drunk, but he had liquor on his breath, and apparently, policemen weren't supposed to do that. So, he was sanctioned for it. And I guess his mother sat him down, and eventually, he promised, Okay, I'm not gonna drink anymore.

And he did; he quit cold turkey at some point.

I never saw the man drink.

Amazing.

No.

And could handle the liquor store, no problem.

Yes. But he drank coffee [CHUCKLE] constantly. But, yes. And then, as I say, my mother ran the store, and they ran 'til the early 50s. And then, Piggly Wiggly came to Kailua, and ran us out of business.

The old Piggly Wiggly. It was during Jim Burns' high school years that his father, John Burns, started becoming politically active. It would be many years before John Burns would win an election, but through his organizing activities, the elder Burns was laying the groundwork for what would become major social change in Hawaii.

When you were a kid, here you are with a Japanese middle name. You're going to St. Louis. And I bet you there weren't many Caucasian boys at St. Louis.

Well, Caucasian; if you include Portuguese, there were plenty.

[CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE] Yes. So, I don't think they knew whether I was Portagee or Haole. I was just one of the local boys. I spoke Pidgin, and I associated with everybody.

Yeah; that's true. If I hear you, and you're talking with your St. Louis buddies, I would never know what race you are.

Yes; yes. So, yeah. No; we just mixed, and nobody ever said, Eh, you one Haole. The only difficulty I had was, my father was a loser as a politician.

In the beginning.

He lost from '46 to '56; ten years. I went to college before he won an election. So, it was all during my grade school and high school, he was a loser. And I used to catch heck for that.

Why did people mind that your dad was losing political battles?

Well, because he'd run for office, and he'd lose. And they would say, What the hell is your father doing, running for office? You know, losing. And in fact, even worse, they used to call him names. And I went home one time and I said, Daddy, what's a Communist? And he said, Why are you asking me that kind of question? I said, Well, that's what my classmates say you are. And he never really answered the question. I had to go find out by myself.

So, all those years, his political aspirations and the ability he had in bringing people together, that was not a plus for you?

I wasn't involved. No. All I knew is, he was involved with running for office or organizing the Democratic Party. And I think he was on the other side of most of the kids that I was hanging around with, and you know, they were all on the other side of the track. And so, he was sort of an outsider and everybody's wondering, What's he doing? Why is he over there? You know.

What do you mean, other side of the track?

Well, the Republicans were totally in charge. So, anybody who wasn't Republican was on the other side of the track.

And it's true; at that time, the leaders in Hawaii tended to be Republican and Caucasian. But your dad was Caucasian, but from Kalihi, and the son of a single mom who eked out an existence, and like you said, he was an angry young man who, I guess, knew something about street gangs growing up.

Well, yes. Number one, he grew up in Hawaii. Grew up in Kalihi; he was very much a local boy. Again, he went to St. Louis. So, I don't think you would call him a Haole. Same as me.

Would he consider that fighting words?

Probably. Yes.

So, your dad really had a way different profile than any of the others. He was on the Democratic side.

Yes.

And he was from an impoverished background.

From the streets. Yes; yes.

I know he wasn't a man to sit you down for father-son talks. But did you get the sense of his passion for equal opportunity for everybody in a place that marginalized many ethnicities?

Oh, yes. I mean, I'd sit and listen when he had conversations with other people, and you know, I could get the sense of what he was talking about. And so, I didn't have any difficulty understanding what was happening. I didn't know that the Haole was in charge of everything, you know, but I did know that we couldn't be members of Oahu Country Club. You know, there were certain things that I knew that they had, but we didn't have. And I knew the difference between Punahou and St. Louis.

What is the difference?

Well, in those days, it was more the Haoles than St. Louis, which was more of the local people. I knew that difference.

So, you grew up with that sense of the local people are getting a bad shake, bad rap.

I don't think I really realized it, other than through my father. You know. Why is this man so committed to doing what he's doing? Why isn't he out there working for the family, kind of thing. Other than that, I don't think I thought about it.

And you knew it wasn't getting him any traction while you were growing up, because he wasn't winning elections.

Right; right. So, you know, I didn't think about too much, but still, you're wondering, Hm, why is he doing what he's doing?

When your friends at school or anybody would criticize your dad or say things about him, did you feel proprietary and defensive, or how did that make you feel?

Just made me wonder. That's all. I didn't think they were fighting words. At St. Louis, every word was a fighting word, if you took it that way, you know, if you were insulted. Everybody talks stink about everybody, so I sort of got used to it, and I got to be pretty good at it myself. I think during the course of his growing up, and especially as a policeman, he got to realize what kind of society Hawaii was. And he got to realize that this bunch of White folks were totally in charge of this place, and nobody else had an opportunity or chance to do anything. He was at the police department one time, and this businessman, one of the Big Five people in control, picked up the phone and said, Governor, come to my office. And my father said, That's kind of backwards. You know; Governor, come to my office? Isn't the governor supposed to say, You come to—you know. But that's the way it was; who was in charge, who was in control. And you know, and I guess he could see the prejudice against the local people; Filipinos, Japanese, Chinese, Koreans. And he just eventually said, No, no, I'm gonna do something to change this. And he totally committed himself. So, he quit the police

department. Which was sad, because he loved the police department. I say this to people; all his life, he was truly a cop. In his heart, he was a policeman. He loved it. And that's part of the problem with his family. You know, policemen—it's very tough on the family, because they go to work and they get to see what's going on, then they come home and say, I don't want you to be like that. You know, so they're very strict on you.

And did you ever talk to your mom about your father's political aspirations, and what was he doing?

Well, no, but I knew she was getting frustrated.

Because she was working at the liquor store, while he was organizing?

She knew that he was doing what he wanted to do, and she knew he was doing the right thing. So, I think she supported him in that way. But on the other hand, I'm sure she said, Hm, I wish I had a little more family life.

And so did you, no doubt?

Yeah; sort of. But, you know, I saw my father more, I think, than others. I used to caddy for him, and you know, I spent time with him in the car, listening to him, or time when he was running the liquor store. So, you know, I associated with him.

And your mom looked at his time away from the family as something that he just had to do, and she accepted it?

Yes. That was the kind of person she was. You know, same way she handled her paralysis; it was, That's the deck of cards that they dealt me, and that's what I'm gonna deal with. You know, and I'm not gonna agonize over it or worry about it.

And your dad was busy trying to change the world.

Yes. That, he was doing, and my mother put up with it.

Jim Burns was in college on the mainland by the time his father was finally elected to office as Hawaii's Delegate to Congress in 1956. During his term, Hawaii became a State, and John Burns came home to run for Governor. He lost his first two tries, but finally won in 1962, well after Jim had finished college and law school. Mahalo to Jim Burns for sharing his childhood memories with us and what it was like to grow up with a father who sacrificed so much, including time with his family, for his social and political ideals for Hawaii. And mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.

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You noted that that's you here.

Yes.

Cut off from view.

Yes.

And then, there's another picture where you're also cut off, and you're wheeling your mom, and in a very important occasion.

That's my day off from basic training to go attend the inauguration. And I'm in my uniform, and I'm behind her, and pushing her. And nobody had a clue who I was. They just thought I was a soldier pushing Mrs. Burns. The local paper said: Unidentified Soldier. They didn't know that I was related to them.