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**I always used to think it was so funny when you'd come walking into a legislative hearing room, hearing about an administration audit, an audit of the administration. I mean, how tall are you?**

Four-ten; barely four-ten, more like four-nine.

**Four-ten; and it was as if a towering figure were coming in, this shadow was entering the room. Did you get that feeling?**

Oh, yes.

**That's how people were reacting to you?**

Sometimes; yes. Uh-huh; uh-huh.

**And you wouldn't back down, either.**

No, because that's not my job; my job is support the report, because that stands for our work.

**Marion Higa's job was to hold government agencies accountable. As Hawaii's State Auditor, she was comfortable speaking truth to power, and became a household name. Marion Higa, 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. Marion Higa is a woman who was both revered and feared. For two decades, she was Hawaii's State Auditor, and often called Hawaii's most trusted official. It's a role Higa never imagined, as a girl growing up in McCully on Oahu.**

I'm from Honolulu. I was born, in fact, not too far from here, at Kapiolani Hospital. But my parents lived on King Street, right across where Times Supermarket is now. That was the first Times Supermarket.

**What was the neighborhood like then?**

It was McCully. It was mostly Japanese, maybe lower middleclass, very stable neighborhood, very safe neighborhood. You know, we just ran around; no concerns. We lived there because my grandfather, my paternal grandfather had started—my grandparents on both sides were immigrants. But they were not arranged marriages, in the sense that they were not picture brides. So, they were already married in Japan on both sides; came here already married. And my grandfather on my father's side went to Kauai. In fact, I have the contract that he signed in 1900, I think it was, under which he was to be paid fifteen dollars in gold coin.

**Over how much time?**

Per month. But the plantation would retain, I think, one or one and a half dollars in case he wanted to return to Japan. And my grandmother would be paid ten dollars a month in gold coin.

**And what did they do?**

They worked on that plantation, the sugar plantation, but eventually were able to get off the plantation, and my grandfather started his own rice farm in Hanalei Valley.

**Oh ...**

So, that's where my dad was from. But eventually, they gave that all up, because as the children grew up and moved away, my grandfather gave up the farm and moved to Honolulu, where all the children eventually settled. So, then he started a delicatessen, and during World War II, was able to keep it going by buying fish early in the morning, as I understand it. So, we lived above the store.

**After Marion Higa's father graduated from college, he married a young woman he'd met just once in Honolulu, who had moved back to Japan. Higa's grandfather arranged the marriage.**

I asked my mother once why she decided to accept a proposal of marriage to this man she had met only once. And she said, Well, there were three reasons.

**[CHUCKLE]**

One, he had a college degree, which was rather rare for that time, and that promised maybe a better life.

**M-hm.**

He didn't drink. And her father had been an alcoholic, and had died young. So, she wasn't gonna have anything to do with a guy who drank. And the third thing was, she wanted to marry an American, because American men don't beat their wives. So, somehow, in going back to Japan, I guess he had seen that, for whatever reason. So, she decided that he was probably gonna be a good guy to marry.

**Well, let me ask; why didn't his parents seek a girl already living in the islands?**

I don't know why. My father was on the shy side, so I guess my grandfather felt that his chances were better with somebody who had spent some time in Japan. I don't know; I never asked my grandfather, either. But he didn't speak English, and so, it was hard to communicate with him. He lived with us until I was eighteen. So, she decides to accept. After both she and my dad passed away, my brother and I were clearing her apartment. She was living in assisted living, after selling the house that she could no longer live in because it was two stories. And so, I was clearing her apartment, and I found this old beat-up paper sack. And there were papers in there. They were love letters from my dad to my mother when she was in Japan, trying to make sure that she would actually show up. [CHUCKLE]

**That's a treasure.**

It was so uncharacteristic of Dad, you know. And so, I call up my brother, I call up my sister who lives in Seattle. Hey, guess what I found? [CHUCKLE] Of course, that's now been put away. [CHUCKLE]

**What was family life like for you in McCully?**

Well, it was ... you know, there were high expectations. I was the oldest of the three. There actually had been a sister, older, who passed away soon after birth. And so, there was always this expectation that the eldest child, no matter the gender—and my parents were very, very insistent that gender should not play a role.

**That was kind of untraditional, wasn't it?**

That was somewhat untraditional.

**Usually, it's the oldest boy, not the oldest child.**

Yes. But see, there's five years between me and my brother. So, there's me, my sister, and my brother; we're each two and a half years apart. So, by the time my brother came along, I was already five years old. But, it was made clear that, number one, education was to be valued, and there were high expectations for behavior, for achievement in school, and there was no question that we would be going to college. Because my dad went to college.

**And that wasn't true in general. That was not an expectation for girls in general at that time; was it?**

Probably not; probably not. But I also had the good fortune of having very good teachers from kindergarten, on up. And my parents were very involved with the school, so there was always this emphasis and an expectation that one makes the most of one's talents.

**And Marion Higa did; she shined in the gifted classes at McKinley High School. Then, Higa went on to the University of Hawaii, where she honed a skill that would serve her well in the future.**

There was an extracurricular debate team. So, some of us were also in that. And Senator Sam Slom always tells people that he's known me longer than anybody else at the Capitol. Which is true, because he was also a debater, and we were on the same debate team at UH.

[CHUCKLE]

**And how did he do?**

Oh, he did fine.

## **Did you debate against him?**

I'm sure I did. You know, we always had practice debates with the faculty advisor. And there would be a national debate topic, and all of the competitive debates would revolve around that. And you know, you always pick ... the structure was where you start out picking the negative or the positive for the argument. And so, you had to be prepared to argue both sides, and you had to be prepared to answer the other side's position.

## **What did you like about that?**

Well, I like back and forth, and the preparation for it, and figuring out what the counterarguments might be.

**Marion Higa graduated from the UH, and received a master's in education in Illinois. Shortly after Higa got married, she lived in Germany, where she became a substitute teacher. When Higa moved back to the islands, she applied at two very different jobs.**

I thought, Well, before I go back to the classroom when we come back to Hawaii, I would like to work on institutional research of some kind. So, a friend of mine was with the university's institutional research office, so I got in touch with her and said, Do you have any jobs? She says, No, but if you want to do research, I think the Auditor's Office might have some positions. She had seen an article in the paper about the office. So, I applied, and they were engaged in the first major audit of DOE. Had nobody on staff with an education background, so apparently, the education jargon was escaping the staff. 'Cause most of them were CPAs at the time. And so, they were considering me. But I had applied with DOE, anyway. And I get a call from a principal in Honolulu District, offering me a position teaching Latin and English. Because I'd had high school and a little bit of Latin in college. And so, I said, Oh, I'm considering this other position. And apparently, Latin

teachers were hard to find. So, he begged me. He says, Oh, please, take this job. You know, Honolulu District, at that time, there was a glut of teachers. You know, other people are trying to get into Honolulu District, and you know, this is ideal for you, et cetera, et cetera. Then, I checked back with the Auditor's Office, and they did offer me a position. So, I called him back and said, Mm, I think I'll try this other job for two years, and in two years, I'll take my chances that maybe you'll still have an opening of some kind for me in the district. And he says, No, no, come, come over to my school. I said, Nah, I think I'll stick to my guns. And I never left. [CHUCKLE]

**It might have been good for you not to have had experience in the local DOE, in terms of you kind of brought a bit of an outsider, even though you were educated in education partly here.**

Probably; probably. You know, I didn't have a whole lot of classroom teaching experience, 'cause I was just subbing in different grades.

**But you knew the lingo.**

I knew the lingo. And as luck would have it, after we released that DOE report, then the two education chairs, the House and the Senate education chairs, asked for my help to review the documents that they were getting. Because at the same time, the State was converting to a different budgeting system. So, DOE was the guinea pig, and had to submit budget documents in the old format and the new format.

**Sounds like a bear. [CHUCKLE]**

It was. [CHUCKLE] So, the Department felt picked upon, but it couldn't be helped. And so, it took several years of effort to merge them, and then merge the other departments. And so, I worked with the two education chairs. So, that gave me good exposure to legislative

proceedings. I was lucky. You know, I was just in the right place at the right time, many times over.

**What about when the audit was not going to be of the DOE; how did you do there?**

Well, you know, virtually all audits are management audits. When you start looking at the problem that's brought to you, and when you do program or performance audits, you have to get to the cause of the problem. You can't make a good recommendation until you identify the cause of the problem. And so, much of the time, when you start peeling the onion to see what caused this problem, where should the problem be traced to, it's not necessarily staff incompetence or recalcitrance. It's very often at the management levels; and higher and higher you go, and then very often it's at the governing level. So, it's at your board, your board of trustees, your board of regents; your boards, whoever is setting the policy, which trickles down to the operational level. So, we tried not to get mired in the operational level, because you couldn't very often find the cause of the problem at that level.

**You could probably find a lot going wrong, but not why.**

Yes; not the why. And if you don't get to the why, you can't help them solve the problem.

**Twenty years after Marion Higa was hired as a staff member at the State Auditor's Office, the top job opened up, and she got it. Higa was now the State Auditor, with a full understanding of whom she was working for.**

I guess I was at ... Ways and Means once, and I had a minority member ask me; hunched over the table like this, he says, Ms. Higa ... who do you work for? Who do you work for? Ms. Higa, who do you work for? And I said, The people of Hawaii. No; who do you really work for?

The people of Hawaii. [CHUCKLE] What he was trying to get me to say was, I work for the majority party. And that's not who I worked for. I said, The constitution says I'm the auditor, I'm the State Auditor, I work for the people. [CHUCKLE] So, he gave up. [CHUCKLE] So, it's a delicate balance, because you have to maintain your independence and go where the facts lead you. And somebody may take a different conclusion with the same set of facts, but you have to be able to defend your conclusion, and you have to be able to defend your recommendation. And that takes a personal appearance before committees.

**And you did some excellent summaries, too, in which you didn't use CPA speak or any kind of professional jargon. It was very straightforward as far as expressing what you meant.**

We worked hard at that, and maybe it's because of my English background. And you know, I had been in newswriting, and of some of those kinds of things. And so, we tried to pitch our language at sixth, to seventh, to eighth grade, and possibly high school, but not at a college level. Because we were hoping that people would read our reports. [CHUCKLE]

**And when you faced the legislators, or whoever you were speaking to, you were always addressing people with power.**

Yes.

**And people who would might have reason to feel, you know, personally slighted by or tarnished by what you were saying.**

Oh, that happened a lot. [CHUCKLE]

**And you laugh about it.**

[CHUCKLE] Especially on the part of administrators, or the Administrative Branch or Executive Branch.

**You were hired by the Legislature, so the people whom you were analyzing and auditing were appointees or elected officials involving the governor. How was your relationship with the governors?**

It was different with different governors.

**Starting with who would be the first one?**

Governor Waihee was there when I was first appointed, then Governor Cayetano, Governor Lingle, and Governor Abercrombie. Of the four, actually, Governor Abercrombie was the most supportive. And it wasn't communicated to me directly, but through the other directors, that he had instructions that they were to adopt our recommendations, and that they were to take our reports seriously.

**Well, he'd seen you at work when he was a member of the Legislature for many years.**

M-hm; yes.

**Who was the worst?**

I better not say. [CHUCKLE]

**Marion Higa will admit her relationship with Republican Governor Linda Lingle was perhaps the most tenuous.**

**This was Linda Lingle, who had actually held you up as a model. You know, your reports had cast light into dark places, showing misfeasance and malfeasance, and lack of integrity in the State**

**administration, which was Democratic. And so she was this Republican saying, Yes, gotcha.**

Yes.

**And thank you, Marion Higa, for pointing that out. So, how did your relationship go, once she became governor?**

Well, my friends at first were accusing me being in the Republican pockets. [CHUCKLE] Because they said, Oh, you and the governor are going side-by-side. [CHUCKLE] So, you know, I thought, Okay, we shouldn't have any problems with this bill. So, I had it introduced, and bang, I get an angry call from the administration saying, What are you doing here? And you know, I said, Hey, I'm trying again. Governor Cayetano vetoed a complex bill, an allegedly complex, so we simplified the bill. It's our own language now, and it's very simple. And the administration testified against the bill, and all guns were blazing. And it was a fight through the entire session.

**What does that feel like? I mean, you know, you'd been navigating these currents of power and resistance, and resentment, and a very happy public when you called out things that they thought were legit. But now, the governor is taking you on in a way, really, that the previous governors did not. I mean, they showed pique; they weren't always happy with you, clearly.**

[CHUCKLE] Yes, they weren't; they were not as happy.

**Not at all. But you were entering much choppy waters now.**

Well, at times, it felt almost personal. But I didn't take it that way, because it was my job. And I always go back to the constitutional language; this is what the constitutional drafters expected of this office,

and as long as I'm doing that, then any governor can complain as much as they like.

**Not only did Marion Higa challenge governors in her twenty years as State Auditor, she also took on major State departments and projects, including the controversial SuperFerry. What Higa and her staff uncovered often made headlines.**

The one that I get the most personal satisfaction with is a relatively one small one that we did. And that was the DOE storeroom. They had a storeroom out in Waipahu, a leased space. And over the years, we had heard complaints from teachers about, Oh, we have to order all of our supplies before the end of the school year for next school year, and we can't always get what we want, and we have to buy off their list, and their list is antiquated; we'd rather buy from the neighborhood stores or Costco, or wherever. Because the requirement was, you had to buy things prepackaged sizes they came in. So, if you needed two tablets, you had to order twelve, 'cause they were packed in twelve. And because you had to place your order so early, especially if you're on the neighbor islands, these boxes would be barged from Waipahu to the neighbor island, delivered by truck off the barge, taken to the school, deposited at the school. And it was like, Okay, here; here, guys, go bust up the boxes yourselves and distribute to the classrooms on your own pedal power. And so, we said, this made no sense anymore. So, I sent my staff as part of their fieldwork over there, and they come back and they said, There's paper there for these copying machines that are no longer in use. It was those Thermo-fax papers, those slippery papers that had been not in use for a long time.

**And there was inventory that was spoiled, or again, outdated.**

Outdated. Unusable inventory, wasted space, side aisles. And in order to see what the industry was doing, my staffer was able to get to, I think, Hopaco's warehouse. You know, narrow aisles; quick-quick-quick, just

go through it quickly, you can pull your stuff out. So, we said, Shut it down. And the person who was superintendent at the beginning when we issued the draft report said, I disagree.

**Yeah; I remember that. There was pushback. Like, No, this works for us, it's central.**

Yes; it's centralized, it's worked for us years. Oh, and there were scissors, little scissors, pointed scissors, for second-graders. The pointy scissors; not the round-tip ones. And so, I said, The recommendation is, they have to shut it down. Well, you know, we have a lease; what are we going to do with the lease? We've got all this inventory. They didn't even have a very good inventory system in the first place. But what are we going to do with this inventory? So, we said, Shut it down. Well, fortunately for the teachers, superintendents changed, so by the time we issued the report and crafted the legislation for it, it was Superintendent Hamamoto. And she had been a teacher herself, had come up from the schools; she knew what we were talking about.

**She said, Oh, yeah. [CHUCKLE]**

She said, Oh, yeah. [CHUCKLE]

**Even if it's your job, and you say you're doing it on the straight and narrow, what's it like riding that wave, where basically, people are taking shots at you as you take that position?**

You know, like I said, it's my job. This is what the constitution was intended for us to do, and if we can defend the work. So, the process seems so laborious, and it's so careful. There's a whole system; it's all electronic now, the working papers are electronic. But there's a citation system involved in our work, so every fact can be traced back to a source document. And so, [CHUCKLE] working for the Auditor's Office is not easy. You have to be very meticulous, and be able to

defend your work. But as long as the overall conclusions are supported by this mountain of evidence, it's all defensible. I use this sometimes in speeches to groups. I'd say, Well, my job is like the kid who said to the emperor, The emperor has no clothes. So, my job is to say, the emperor has no clothes. [CHUCKLE] The emperor won't like it. [CHUCKLE]

**Well, did you ever make mistakes?**

We probably did. You know, in some cases, maybe we came across with recommendations that might have been a little too sweeping. I mean, I got feedback that said, Well, you know, how do you expect us to make these policy changes so quickly? And you know, This has been something we've had to live with for a long time; we know that's the problem. You know, you should go talk to the governor. [CHUCKLE]

**I'm just wondering; you still make your home in Hawaii, although you travel a lot. Does that mean you feel good about the way the government has worked? 'Cause you've seen the dirty laundry; you've seen all those subpoenaed documents that most people have never seen. What do you think?**

You know, it's almost sometimes remarkable that it functions as well as it does, depending on the agency you're looking at. But; but it's still better than any place else.

**Any place else?**

Yes.

**Let me ask you; when you look back at your service at the State Auditor's Office in Hawaii, how would you characterize what kind of a difference you made in the State?**

I think a much greater awareness of accountability. And it's not just those who work for government. The public out there has to insist that government be accountable for its money, and for its performance, and that decisions have to be made with some idea of what you're deciding for. And I think the term accountability became much more stylish and in vogue, partly as a result of the work that we did.

### **Do you miss it?**

I don't miss the work, so much as I miss the people that I worked with. Both the staff, as well as other, people at the Legislature. I just once in a while pop in with baked goods or something, [CHUCKLE] just to say hello. [CHUCKLE]

**Marion Higa made the office of Hawaii State Auditor a symbol of government accountability. Higa, a widow for many years, retired in 2012, after forty years total in the State Auditor's Office, to spend more time with her two children and two grandchildren. And she loves to sew and travel. Still on Higa's bucket list, to visit all fifty states. At the time of our conversation in late 2014, she only had four more to go. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.**

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### **So, do you sew your own clothes?**

Yes.

### **All of your own clothes?**

Pretty much.

**Did you sew what you're wearing?**

Yes.

**So, when you were running the Auditor's Office, I can imagine you didn't have a lot of time. Were you actually sewing your own clothes then, as well?**

M-hm; m-hm.

**You'd have go to speak at the Legislature, and you'd run up a design?**

[CHUCKLE] Not quite that fast. [CHUCKLE]

[END]