

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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We've had a couple of deaths recently. One lady was in the park, you know, someone that we knew, a homeless person that died. And ... sometimes when those things happen, in some ways, it just kinda galvanizes my desire to make things different. And sometimes, people might mistake, you know, my passion for some of that as anger.

Connie Mitchell has spent her life serving those in need, especially those who often need the most help. Connie Mitchell, executive director of The Institute for Human Services, next, on Long Story Short.

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

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Connie Mitchell runs Hawai'i's oldest and largest nonprofit agency dedicated to the problem of homelessness. But for all of her efforts—and she generally gets high marks for her work from a range of community stakeholders, Hawai'i has one of the highest homeless rates in the nation. She's known for her positive attitude, in fact, a fiercely positive attitude despite challenges, and she's known for seeing the homeless population as people, as individuals. Born Constance Kau Yee Fong to immigrant parents from China, Connie Mitchell grew up in the same town neighborhood where The Institute for Human Services is based, and where she leads the agency in serving the homeless and affected communities.

I grew up on Vineyard Street. And the duplex that I actually lived in isn't there anymore. They actually used it as a prop and bombed in Tora! Tora! Tora! Yeah. But anyway, I grew up there, went to school at Kauluwela Elementary School right around the corner there. And I didn't think I would end up being so close, you know, to where I grew up, but I am now.

Does it feel familiar?

It does. You know, in some ways, it does and yet, the neighborhood has changed, you know, a little bit. But of course, when I was a child there, there was a really different context, you know, and I might not have noticed, you know, the things. But I 'm sure there weren't as many homeless people back then as there are now.

Well, what was your life like as a child?

Well, I grew up, you know, with an older sister and two younger brothers. And my mom dad are actually immigrants from China.

What part?

Guangdong. And they came separately, actually. My dad came as a teenager, and then afterward, you know, brought my mom over.

How did he know your mom?

You know, I asked her that question the other day, and she said, Oh, you know ... I think he knew a relative of hers, you know, her mom's aunt or something. And so, they kinda got together. I always say it was a semi-arranged marriage, 'cause I think there was, you know, an attraction there. But she didn't know what she was coming to when she was gonna come to Hawaii; right?

And they stayed together?

They did.

Four kids.

Four kids. And so, we ended up moving when I was in the fourth grade, I think, or seventh grade, up to Liliha. So, it still wasn't that far from where I am now, either. But that's where she lives, still. And we grew up, you know, pretty Spartan lives, but you know, I learned a lot about living simply, but never feeling like I was poor or anything. You know, because we always had what we needed, had our imaginations, had really good friends to play with, you know, and really just enjoyed it. So, I think, you know, I learned a lot from my mom and dad, but didn't really fully appreciate, I think, the experience of being an immigrant until I was much older.

What did your parents do for a living?

So, my dad had a restaurant in Kapālama.

Called?

Called Nam Kok Chop Suey. I don't know if you remember it. But it was, you know, a small Chinese restaurant, and my mom helped him in the restaurant. I even worked there, you know, in summers when I was in high school to wait on tables. And it's right where the Central Pacific Bank building is, you know, on Dillingham now. You know, it

was really the times that I worked was when I saw my mom and dad, because they were working all the time. And I think that's real typical a lot of times, you know, of people who have family businesses. And ... I think it was great, because I could still connect with my Chinese culture, but you know, they weren't really there so that I explored a lot of other things and really learned a lot from friends, you know, because my parents weren't around that much. You know, my dad would bring dinner home, and then he would be back at the restaurant afterwards.

And you saw this as a positive thing; that you had your parents, but you also had your friends.

Yeah. You know, and I didn't know the difference. I didn't know how other people were growing, but that's how I grew up, and I'm just really thankful for it. I think my parents really were ... I know they loved us and cared about us, and really wanted to make sure we were safe and were provided for. But you know, when I would watch TV, and you would see those TV shows about families, and I'm thinking: Well, that's just not how our family is.

Did you have an extended network of family at all?

We did, and it's because my dad and my mom would sponsor other relatives to come over. And my uncle on my dad's side actually worked for him as a cook, also. You know, so we did have family that came. My grandmother came when I was in the seventh grade, I think, and she was a part of our family for a short while, and then she ended up leaving and finding a place of her own. But it was really sometimes challenging, 'cause you know, like being bicultural, I went to Chinese school like, from first grade to ninth grade. So, for nine years, I went to—

Did you learn to speak Cantonese?

Yes; uh-huh. And you know, my parents spoke it at home. But you know, it was a way to really hang onto my ethnic culture, you know. But I think all the while it was being shaped, I also had, you know, a lot of influence from the fact that my parents, being really open, said, Why don't you go to church? You know, and they actually encouraged me to go. And I went to a church on Judd Street for many years. And, you know, that helped shaped my own faith.

Was it the same faith church that they believed in?

No. You know, they weren't Christian. And I think there was a woman that went into the neighborhood and was just, you know, looking for children that might want to go to church. And so, I started going to Sunday School, and then ended up really just learning so much about God's love, you know. And that was like, a little foreign in

some ways, you know, from the culture that I was coming from. But I'm thankful for that, and I think that my faith has actually inspired a lot of the choices that I've made, you know, throughout my life and work, particularly.

And your parents never said one thing to you about, Don't go there, that's not what our Chinese family has always done?

Right, right. Yeah. So, I kind of like, you know, was embracing the Christian faith, and then at the same time, you know, my parents practiced their own cultural practices and faith. So, ... I think it's in some ways typical, you know, of people who grow up in Hawaii. You know, you're exposed to a different way of thinking. And I'm thankful for the way that Hawaii is, you know, that we are able to ... no matter how we think or how we believe, that we're able to get along most of the time.

Did you feel that Honolulu was friendly to immigrants?

Yes; and I really felt like ... I didn't feel like I stood out or anything like that. You know, a lot of us maybe came from the same kind of background, and I think as a child, you just know. If you're playing with other people, you're playing with them, you're getting along with them, and you don't think about those other things. But that kind of childhood, growing up in a diverse community very much shapes how you feel when you grow up.

As a child, did you see college in your future?

I did, 'cause my parents really valued education.

And had they had a college graduate in the family yet?

No.

So, who was the first?

Well, my older sister was. You know, she graduated from the University of Hawai'i, and then, I did also. She left right after college, you know, and went to San Francisco. And my brother who's a couple years younger than me, he did also. And they're both there now. You know, he's an architect in San Francisco, and my sister was teaching in the Berkeley school district for many years, and just recently retired.

And what did you go to college to study?

Oh, I became a nurse, and later on went back to get my master's in psychiatric and mental health nursing. And you know, at first, I wanted to be a pediatric nurse, but I

couldn't deal with the pain of seeing the children, you know, suffering so much. And I thought: Okay, I don't know if I want to really do this. You know, but ... I think I really ... have always seemed to gravitate toward serving underserved people. Like, when I was in San Francisco, my first nursing job was at San Francisco General Hospital. And it was a county hospital, so you had people who were prisoners, and people who were on Medicaid, and you know, people who just didn't have that much. But it was an excellent medical center, and I learned a lot when I was there.

Where do you think that comes from, wanting to serve the underserved?

I don't know. I'm always for the underdog, number one. You know, but I also feel like ... maybe because I've been given so much, and I feel so blessed ... that ... for one, I think everyone ... it's a basic need, a basic right, you know, to have healthcare. And I really want to make sure that people are afforded that opportunity.

So, you're in San Francisco getting your master's of science in nursing. And how did you get back here? And I don't think it was a direct path to IHS.

No, it wasn't. So, actually, I graduated here at the University in nursing, and then I went to San Francisco. I came back, and I worked actually for a doctor and managed his office. You know, an internist. Internal medicine practice, and then kind of saw that a lot of people who were coming in, they seemed to have a lot of mental health issues also, lot of anxiety and stress that were causing a lot of, you know, their illnesses. So, I did a stint, you know, just really after that, going to work on a demonstration project that really addressed the connection between mind and body. You know, so we were actually trying to demonstrate that if you're provided mental health services, behavioral health services, you could actually reduce the amount of medical utilization, you know, of a person. You know, this holistic medicine, you know.

It was just common sense to you.

Yeah; really. And you know, I think along the way, I've also done a little bit in financial planning. I think I spent about seven or eight years serving as a pastoral associate at a church. And you know, all of these experiences just kinda come together in my work at IHS, you know, because I think it's given me skills and perspectives, you know, that are very ... maybe different, you know, from somebody else who might be coming from just strictly a social work perspective.

You also saw acute mentally ill patients in residence at Hawai'i State Hospital in Kaneohe.

Yeah. And so, after I graduated with my master's in psych mental health nursing, my first clinical position was as a clinical nurse specialist there. And I worked with people

who were dually diagnosed with cognitive impairment, as well as mental illness, so they might have been developmentally disabled also. So, it was just really a wonderful learning experience there. We were under a Department of Justice consent decree and was really needing to upgrade, you know, the quality of the care that was there.

It had to be sad to see that, you know, the place wasn't taken care of as it should have been.

Oh, yeah. I mean, I think when I first started there, it was really ...

And it was dangerous for employees too; right?

It was. You know, and at one point when I was there even, you know, I had to take out a TRO on someone, because I thought, Okay, I don't know if this person's gonna kind of retaliate or anything. But we also had like a car fire that was set, and it was, you know, very much a retaliatory thing from one of the patients, we believe. And the hospital was evolving at that time. I mean, it was facing the fact that it was a forensic hospital. Almost everybody that was coming in the hospital was coming in from a court order, you know, after that. But I think we really need to maintain a sense of the fact that these were also patients. And I think learning to triage and understand, okay, some people have some criminal tendencies that make them dangerous in a different way, and some people have more mental illness and are impaired by their mental illness. That needs to be acknowledged and recognized, because sometimes, if you just say, Okay, well, they're all mentally ill, and so we need to just, you know, always take the tack that they're not responsible for their actions, then some people who are responsible for their actions don't really get the consequences that they really need.

After spending most of her career in the field of nursing and healthcare, including fourteen years at the Hawai'i State Hospital in Kaneohe, which included a tenure as the director of nursing, Connie Mitchell leaped into tackling homelessness in Hawai'i.

Well, a friend of mine knew that they were looking for an executive director. And you know, I had never worked nonprofit before.

You had a stake in the State retirement system.

Yes; uh-huh. When I was looking for what next, you know, for myself, I really wasn't sure where it was gonna be. And that's why I really think it was almost divine providence that, you know, this really came about. Because I heard about it through a friend of mine, and I applied. But I had applied a while ago, and I thought, Oh, well, I guess they found somebody. So, you know, I didn't think twice. And then, I got a call back, and I went for a second interview, and then was offered the position, you know, shortly after that. And I thought, Well, okay, do I take a break? You know, 'cause I was just moving

out of, you know, my place and had just left the hospital. And I thought, No, I think this is really what I need to do. And even when I was being interviewed, they asked me, Well, how long are you gonna stay? And I said, Well, I don't know, and all I can tell you is that when you give me a chance to do something, I will give it my all. And I said, You may not like me, you know, so we'll how it goes. And I think that it's been a really good match for me in terms of the work.

What is your goal? Is it eliminating homelessness?

I think as a group, you know, our Partners In Care consortium of homeless service providers and people who are concerned about homelessness, what we're trying to do is develop a system where we no longer have unsheltered homeless, and anyone who becomes homeless will quickly get into housing. You know, so it's not about just managing homeless, like let's just put 'em in the shelter and leave them in the shelter. We have long left that model behind at IHS. You know, we have been trying to house people as much as possible, you know, and as quickly as possible. And as the system has changed and as funding has become available, we've been able to do more and more of that. I think there's very few people who just absolutely don't want help.

So, I mean, it seems like there are people who, if you offer them a job, they say, Can't you just give me money? I mean, I've met a couple of those.

Yeah. You know, I think the people on the street, you know, people who are unsheltered, there's a really big mix. But remember, the people on the streets unsheltered are a small population compared to everyone who experiences homelessness. Once you hit the streets, you know, a lot of people stay there for quite a while. And what we're trying to do is like, try to bring them in so that they don't stay there. 'Cause once you become homeless for a long time, it's harder to get people off the street, because they realize, Oh, I can do this, this is fine. You know, and they don't realize that their lives are changing, their health could be threatened, and when they do get sick, they're gonna get more sick. You know, 'cause we see infections that are just ridiculous, you know.

Somehow, they get accustomed and prefer it?

I think they lose hope. That's what it is. You know, and they just don't think that it's possible. And you know, if you're using drugs, you probably can't get a job. If you can't get a job, you certainly can't get a place. And if you can't get a place, then that's why you're out there on the street; right?

Hawai'i has a great compassion, doesn't want to see people on the streets, doesn't want to see people suffering. And on the other hand, you know, there's, Hey, are we

using our money well? Because aren't these people just being moved, moved, moved, moved? Is anything really happening?

M-hm.

What do you say to that?

I think that there are a lot of people that are coming off the street, and you know, they are being tired of the movement, you know, of the enforcements that are going on. But I think what I envision is being able to try to convince people that they can be a part of the community again. You know, they don't feel a part of the community; that's why they're out there. You know, they don't have a place to go, and we have to, as a community, figure out how to do that. I believe that if every one of those people who is capable of working could work if they weren't using drugs, or you know, their mental health was stabilized.

Those are big ifs.

Yeah; but we could do it. I believe that it can be done, if we have the will to provide the services, you know, and to walk alongside some of these people so that they can believe also. Because I don't think they believe it right now; they don't think that there is a way out. And I've seen it happen, that when they start to believe and they actually take a chance on us, they're able to get out of that situation.

The day-to-day challenges of running a large nonprofit organization and navigating the highly politicized issue of homelessness can take its toll on anyone. Connie Mitchell continues to maintain her positivity through her faith, and through the inspiration of the late Father Claude DuTiel, who is beloved for founding The Institute for Human Services through his Peanut Butter Ministry of handing out sandwiches on Downtown streets.

You know, Father DuTiel has always been sort of the person that I think of, you know, in terms of his values and his approach to people.

Who started IHS.

Yes.

Or the forerunner of IHS.

Right. You know, he did start IHS, and he himself was someone that suffered from both mental illness and alcoholism. And ... he just had that kind of heart, you know, that really wanted to give back to the community. And I think that, you know, it's a person like that who galvanized the community to want to do something that is my inspiration

in a lot of ways. And on the other hand, you know, I feel like the heart part comes from that. I think my husband Mark is someone that has really taught me a lot about systems, and how to be willing, you know, to kind of ... change things, so that things can be better. And my husband is just awesome; you know, he really understands, because he was in the mental health field as well. I shouldn't say was; he still is.

Okay; now, how did he come into your life?

Well, we met at a conference. And then later on, you know, he was doing some consultation, and when he ended up coming over to Hawaii, he was the CEO at Kahi Mohala, you know, for a number of years. And then he retired again, and then he ended up not retiring and going back to work for the State at the Department of Public Safety. So, you know, he's very well versed in systems issues, you know, with mental health, with developmental disabilities, with health in general. And so, we had a lot in common, you know, and really, I look to him for a lot of wisdom sometimes, you know, about how to proceed. But he also has a lot of experience that he is able to share with me that I've learned a lot from, I think. So, emotionally, intellectually, you know, I'm really grateful for a lot of the friends that I have had. You know, a good friend of mine, her brother had committed suicide, and this was when I was in college in nursing school. And I just thought, Wow, you know. I mean, that impacted me. And then, I had another friend who committed suicide later on who was in my Bible study group. And mental health seemed to be a theme in my life.

As of this conversation in June of 2017, Connie Mitchell has grown The Institute for Human Services from its original two shelters in Iwilei to eight facilities, including locations in Sand Island and Kalihi Valley. A believer in servant leadership, Mitchell remains passionate about the job, overseeing one hundred and fifty employees.

So, one of your staffers, Kimo Carvalho, says he really likes working with you because of course, you're serious, but you're also silly. What does that mean?

Oh ... I can be ... pretty silly in terms of, you know, when we get together and we do like little office parties and stuff like that. You know, I will sometimes surprise people, you know, when I would dress up at Halloween, or something like that. But, you know, it's like I'm just like anybody else, and I've always felt like being a leader doesn't mean you put yourself above. You know, it really means that you're willing to do whatever anybody else is doing, and you're working alongside them, you know.

So, servant leadership?

Yeah. It's gotta be about that. You know, I think it's really trying to bring out the best in other people, you know, and really helping them to really blossom and find their voice, and find their strengths.

You have so many. How do you spend your time?

Well, um ...

And you've got to talk to lawmakers.

Absolutely.

You got to talk to funders, you've got to talk to homeless people, and supervisors, and community leaders, and business owners.

So, there's no ... usual day at IHS. Everything is urgent. And you know, you're right; you know, we really look at the community as a major stakeholder. You know, we serve not only the people who are homeless, but we serve our community. You know, and as a part of that community, we have people who are policymakers, we have people who are funders, people who are just the public. You know, we really want to help people understand better what homelessness is about in Hawaii, and we want them to understand how we all can help them better.

I think it's so wonderful that after—is it eleven years on the job now?

Yeah.

Eleven years on the job, you're very positive, you continue to work at a very high performance rate. What keeps you going?

That's a good question. I think it's really seeing people turn their lives around when we are able to help them. And it happens quite often, I have to tell you. So, I think just, you know, being able to ... do some new things, find some new solutions, partner with new people who have similar passion and, you know, just really want to make a difference; that's really exciting to me, to see so many people like that.

Connie Mitchell, executive director of The Institute for Human Services, is a hard worker and a respected leader, and Hawai'i still has a high homeless population per capita. She says we're making headway in slowing down the rate at which homelessness grows. And she says that if different parts of our government would just agree to work together at important junctures, such as when inmates are released from prison, we could do better. Mahalo to Connie Mitchell of Honolulu for sharing your story with us. And thank you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, hui hou.

[END]