

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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Do you miss the connection when you knock somebody out? Do you miss that?

No, I don't miss it. I just miss being in the ring and, you know, raising the hand that you win, you know. You know when your hand go up. I miss all of that.

And the crowd goes wild.

Oh, yeah. You know, it all pays off; yeah? Because hard work.

For you, what is it to be a tough guy?

Humble, quiet; but yet inside, you know what you can do. That's the most important. I don't need to prove to anybody what I used to be, or what I was before, and stuff, you know.

He was once one of the top professional boxers in the world, in the junior lightweight class. Today, he teaches what he's learned in and out of the boxing ring to at-risk youth in public housing. Ralph Aviles, 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 kākou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Ralph Aviles of 'Ewa Beach, O'ahu is a former professional boxer who reached the rating of Number 3 in the world in the junior lightweight division during the mid-1980s. However, he received only modest press coverage. As a boxer, Aviles overcame obstacles and learned how to deal with adversity. But his challenges in the ring paled in comparison to the struggles he faced as a child growing up on the West side of O'ahu.

First that I can recall was living in Nānākuli when I was very, very young, at the age of probably two or three; Nānākuli. I was born down Mākaha side. Then we moved to ... Māili, and then we moved to Mākaha.

And what was your family like?

My family was like ... we was pretty much close at the time, because we had very, very hard time. My mom wasn't working.

What about your dad?

We never had a dad at that time. Yeah.

Never met your dad at that time?

No.

So, just your mom. Your mom wasn't working, but she was having babies?

Yes. We was on low income at the time; yeah?

Did your mom tell you why you didn't see your dad?

No; she didn't explain. My mom was a lot more to herself. We had to live more on our own. You know, survive on our own.

She kept to herself.

Yeah; she kept more to herself.

So, how many of you lived together at the same time with your mom?

About seven of us.

What do you recall?

I recall we didn't have a table to sit on to eat. So, we would sit on the floor and eat. Yeah, we would go out and play. And you know, we never have so much toys, but then, we would make our own toys one way or another. Play under the house, and you know, just entertain our own self. You know. We had a ... hard time.

Living conditions for Ralph Aviles and his family improved when Able Aran entered his life and became his stepdad. Aran was the first father figure in Ralph's life, and began to coach him in boxing when he was five years old. The large family would eventually move to an even more rural place, the sleepy village of Pahoa on Hawai'i Island.

My stepdad, he started to move in with us in Nānākuli. And then, he moved us out of Nānākuli, into Māili, in a regular home. Whereas, Nānākuli was a low income place; yeah?

And then, when did you go to Pahoa?

After living in Mākaha for a few years.

What was Pāhoa like?

Very, very slow. You know, everything just went stop. When we got there, everything was like, okay ...

You know. It's like, in the beginning, when we first moved there, for a few years, you know, we never like there. We never like it. We didn't enjoy being there. You know, everything was just different; was just ... nothing was surrounded, everything was just spread apart.

But you had each other, still.

Yes.

And then, your stepdad took an interest in the boys' boxing.

Yes. He created a boxing club up in Pāhoa. Then we used to come down, fight for the Golden Gloves, and you know, amateur boxing. And we used to compete a lot, 'cause we had our own club.

So, was it always disciplined fighting like boxing, or did you guys get in trouble too?

No, not very much, we was in. We was always disciplined, you know. We was never in trouble; yeah?

That's pretty good.

Yes. I mean, you know, now you brought that up, you know, I'm like, wow, you know, yeah, I never realized that. But you know, I guess because of the Police Athletic League, they was always, you know, emphasizing to all the clubs and the districts, you know, Stay out of trouble; yeah? That's what it was. That's what it was helping; yeah?

And they were helping you use your energy up in a disciplined way.

Yes; yes. They was really backing us up back then, the Police Athletic League. They used to supply us with all the equipment.

You probably had to learn a lot of ... there's a lot of mental attitude; right? I mean, you know, it's not just the physical, it's really about how to control your psyche as you fight.

Yes. People think when you get hit, you get mad; yeah? No; it's not like that in the ring. Yeah. I'm talking about boxing; I'm not talking about you know, MMA, UFC. I'm talking about boxing. You know, boxing, you have to stay in control, you know.

It's very strategic.

Yes; you have to be always thinking. Yeah? And you cannot get mad, 'cause once you lose your temper, you know, the guy is gonna take care of you. He's gonna do a good job on you. Because you're not focused.

They say that some of the best boxers are those who come from very tough circumstances, and they have kind of a nothing-to-lose attitude. Like, I want to get out, and this is gonna get me out. Would you say that's motivated you?

Well, what really motivated me was my stepdad. You know, he would always push me. Even when I was trying to play another sport in school, high school basketball, you know, football ... when came time for events, big events in boxing, he would pull me out. And I would get very, very upset about it, but then, you know, today, that's the right thing he did for me, you know, I think.

Under the strict guidance of Abel Aran, his stepfather and coach, Ralph Aviles became a professional boxer at age eighteen.

When I turned eighteen, my first fight was in Japan. I fought the world champ kickboxer.

Kickboxer?

Yes. But he became a professional boxer. But he was a world champ kickboxer. And we fought eight rounds.

And? You won?

Yes; I won. Was in Japan.

That was your very first professional bout?

Yes. And then, from there on, it just took off. You know, I was main event here, ten rounds.

Who did you fight?

Many different fighters from the Philippines, Mexico. They would always bring down a fighter; yeah?

And where did you fight? What was the venue? Was it at Blaisdell?

Blaisdell. Was HIC at the time, yeah?

HIC; right.

Yes.

Good crowd?

Three thousand, four thousand. You know. Five thousand; it all depends, yeah? It varies.

Any names we would know of the folks you fought?

No; they was all from, you know, different states, different countries. Yeah. Mexico, Philippines.

Your mom was involved too; right?

Yes.

What did she do?

She was the manager.

The momager?

She was my manager for a few years when I turned professional.

How many other women were involved at the time?

She was the first in Hawai'i. And still the first, I believe.

And how did she manage you? What were her skills as a manager?

Well, she would do a lot of cooking for me, and wherever I would go, she would be next to me, you know. She like, was a mentor to me; yeah? We was close; me and my

mom was very close. Yeah; no matter what. You know, whatever she did, I would never look at her in the wrong way. I was always—you know. I had a lot of respect for her. 'Til this day.

So, all of your brothers wanted to do more with boxing? I mean, you went professional. Did they, too?

No; I was the only one that went professional.

Okay now; why is that?

Because my brothers ... couple of them went to the military, you know. They went their own separate ways; yeah? The sport is very, very challenging; yeah? It's very hard work. Not everybody can really maintain it, you know, for so many years; yeah?

Yeah.

It's hard.

Yeah; you get beat up too, sometimes. Right?

Yes.

It's not a one-way street.

Yes, yes; you do. You know, I gotta admit that; yes, yes. You know.

What were you known for?

I would love to throw a left hook to the body; yeah? Yeah. And movements; defense. Yeah; that was very important to me. If you don't have defense, then you know, it's hard to ... move up in the game; yeah? I'm not one that ... even though the hand is raised, I'm not one that likes the win if you're all cut up. So, you know, that's why I advertise a lot about defense. Yeah.

What did you learn from other fighters? You know, everybody has their style and their stance, and their approach. What did you learn from others that came up against you?

There's a little respect for each other. When you're in a ring, and you hit each other, you have a little respect, you know.

That you could get to each other.

Yes; for each other. And you can kinda sense it, you know.

What was the hardest time you had in the ring?

My hardest time was ... wasn't in the ring; was in the locker room.

What happened?

My real dad approached me.

Your real dad?

Yes.

Whom you'd never met before.

Yes. And ... it was really devastating because ... I was just getting ready for the fight. Was intermission, and I was putting on my robe, putting on my gloves. And my manager said, Ralph, I have a surprise for you.

Your manager said that?

Yes.

Oh ...

Not my mom manager, but my other manager, who was Larry Ichinose. He said, Ralph, I have a surprise for you. And then, I looked by the door.

You knew what he looked like?

Yes; I kinda knew what he looked like, you know. Then when he stand by the door, I was like ... I was in shock, because I wasn't sure of myself. Should I go and hug him, or should I just stand here and stay here? Because my stepdad was standing right me. Should I show emotions? I never know what to do.

Yeah.

I was just confused. And I was getting ready to fight in fifteen minutes. Putting on my gloves, everything, you know.

Kinda wondering about Mr. Ichinose's timing.

Yes; yes.

So, what did your father say?

He didn't say anything.

And you didn't say anything?

I didn't say much. I just said, Oh, hi. And Larry Ichinose, you know, just all of a sudden said, You know what, Ralph, I was putting up posters Downtown, and he came and approached me and said, That's my son. And Larry Ichinose said, What, that's your son? So, Larry Ichinose asked him what was my mom's name. And he mentioned all that to him, so he knew that this guy wasn't joking. He knew that this guy was for real. That's why he brought him to the fight, for the first time.

Did you have a conversation with him?

No, I did not.

So, he never said much, you never said much.

No.

And then, he just walked away?

I just gave him kinda like a hug. You know, not real big hug, but just a hug, and you know, it was time to get into the ring. But my mind was already just going. I lost my determination.

And you lost the fight?

I lost the fight.

Ralph Aviles says for years, he did not know that following that surprise appearance, his birth father suffered a beating by people protective of the newly-successful young boxer, and was warned to stay away. Ralph never saw his birth father again. In 1992, ten years after their brief meeting, Ralph found out more about Esperanzo Aviles, the father he never knew.

He was homeless. You know, he was alcoholic, homeless, pushing wagons. Living down Chinatown. I never know, until the coroner's office called me.

And how did they know you were his son?

They found some paper clippings of my fights in his wagon.

He carried clippings of you ... in his life.

Yes.

So, that sounds like love.

They found him in ... found him in the ocean; Chinatown.

Mm.

Drowned.

Yeah; hard to get past things like that, right? I mean, it's just something you never ... could have known about, and you just have to accept. Couldn't know the man, and ... he died ... probably wanting to get to know you.

M-hm.

Although Ralph Aviles never knew his biological father, he had several positive adult male influences besides his stepdad.

Remember any names of people who helped you out?

James Takushi.

James Takushi, the State labor negotiator?

Yes. Yes.

He was a boxing fan?

Very much. Yes. His son is also a boxing fan too, and the son is my age, too. So, you know, me and him, we get along real fine. We're good friends, we've been friends for years, and years, and years. You know, back when I first started professional.

How did he help you?

He got me a job when I came down, when I was on the Big Island, then I moved here, back here. Moved back over here, he got me a job, part-time job so that way, I can work when I'm not fighting, and when I'm fighting, I can take off easily. I had no

problem, you know. So, he did a lot for me, and you know, he was always checking up on me, and you know, make sure that I'm on track, that I'm not banging the guardrails; right? Once you start banging the guardrails, you know that you're not on track, so you know you gotta re-track yourself again; yeah? And I had Ted Kimura. He was the owner of Island Termite at that time. Island Termite was a big termite company at that time. He was also helping the younger generation, the younger kids. He was doing a lot of donations, too. Yeah. And he helped me out a lot, too. You know, not financial, but mostly, you know, physically and just talking. And letting me know the rights and wrongs.

Of the game, or of the sport?

Of the sport, and what's out there; yeah?

Or what not to get involved in.

Yes; yes. Yeah.

You were way up there in the world of boxing in your class. Right?

Yes. Yes; I was number three in the world. Rated number three in the world.

How long did it take you to become number three in the world?

Just about eight years.

In what division?

Junior lightweight. So, hundred thirty pounds. Yeah. Of course, now, I'm not hundred thirty pounds.

Who did you fight to get there?

Well, actually, I fought couple fighters that fought for the title, but they also lost the title. I mean, not the title, but that match; you know. So, I fought couple of them. One was from the Philippines, and one was from Mexico. And then, I beat them, so that's how I moved up in ranking; yeah? And you know, back then, the WBC was very strict too, so you know, you really had to perform and earn your position.

So, from eighteen to age twenty-six; that's how long you fought professionally?

Yes. I had thirty-three fights, professional. Twenty-eight wins and five losses, with eighteen knockouts. I retired in 1986.

And why did you retire?

My good friends offered me a good job.

Which was?

Driving the City bus. And to this day, I'm still driving the City bus, after thirty-one years.

So, how did they make their case for the City bus versus number three in the world boxing?

Because Sad Sam Ichinose wasn't around to promote fights anymore. You know, I was just fighting here in Hawaii, and not moving up in rankings and stuff. I was looking for a title fight, but I never did have a title fight.

You have to be offered the opportunity; right?

Yes, yes. Well, you know, you had to become number one before you get a title fight; yeah?

Yeah. So, you could see it wasn't going to a good place.

Yes.

It wasn't going in the right direction.

Yeah, yeah. And you know, I was getting up in age, too. Well, you know, twenty-six years old, then I figure, you know. And I said, You know what, if I have a job, I might as well just take this, and just ... 'nough already.

So, after you finished boxing and you started bus driving, did you start a family?

Yes. Start a family, and you know, I got two kids right now, a boy and a girl. They're twenty-five and twenty-three.

Since retiring from professional boxing in 1986, Ralph Aviles has lived a quiet life as a City bus driver and family man. Aviles volunteers with Matt Levi, a private investigator and journalist, to help him work with at-risk youth. Matt founded the nonprofit Lawakua Kajukenbo Club that operates at public housing complexes.

We work out. I teach them, you know, striking, self-defense, and how to keep your hands up. It's just basically boxing, you know. And you know, they enjoy it. I hold the

mitts for them, you know, I teach them combinations. They love it. They like that, you know. They can let out their anger, let out their frustrations.

Okay; one, two, three.

Good. Then come back again, with your left hand. One, two.

Three.

Back with your left hand.

One.

One, two.

Some people would say, Oh, my god, these kids are at risk, and you're teaching them how to hit people. Why is it a good thing to teach them boxing?

We never bring up hitting people; yeah? We don't bring that up. And you know, these kids as they're going, they're not thinking to themselves that they are hitting people, and going out there and hitting people. Because we're teaching them self-respect, you know.

So, they think of it in terms of self-defense and self-respect.

Yes.

They can protect themselves.

Yeah.

They can be strong.

M-hm. And they get confidence, no matter where they go, you know.

Okay; because he's throwing... throwing, and all you did is blocking, blocking, blocking, which is good. But what we need to do now is move side-to-side, too; yeah?

Getting him tired by just moving back and forth, and all over the place. Okay? So, use your hands; let your hands do all the work. Okay? ...right there.

What's a situation where this would help them?

This will help them. At least they can ... instead of get into one major fight, instead of getting into trouble, they can try to avoid it. And why I say try to avoid it is because they know self-defense. You know. So, they can easily block and say, You know what, I don't want to fight. You know, I told them that, you know, we need to grow and have some self-esteem, and some confidence before you can get out there and share whatever you want to share with others. Because if you don't have confidence, you know, you tend to get off track and do the wrong things.

Do you see yourself in them?

I never thought about that, you know, if I see myself in them. But I always thought, even when I was young, that you know ... I think respect was always first on my list.

How to get respect?

Yes. So, you know, I always carried that around; yeah? You gotta have respect for yourself before you can show respect; yeah?

So, how wonderful; it's good for the young people you're training, and it's good for you.

Yes. No, it is. That's why it's good now that I'm doing this, because it's like a wakeup call; yeah? Even my wife said, you know, It's good that you're doing this, you need to do this, you know.

Retired professional boxer Ralph Aviles says he was emotionally isolating himself, turning inward. It's brought new light into his life to connect with young people, and pass along lessons he's learned the hard way. He feels he's benefiting just as much as those he helps. As of this conversation in June of 2017, you'll still find Aviles humbling driving his City bus through the neighborhoods of Central O'ahu. That's another definition of being a tough guy; doing what it takes to support oneself and care for family day-after-day, year-after-year. As he said, thirty-one years so far. Mahalo to Ralph Aviles of 'Ewa Beach 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, a hui hou.

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