

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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At a MAMo show, I wanted to make underwear, and I actually started with men's underwear. And that's a touchy subject. I mean, even at that time when we had first started moving into that space, I did get a lot of backlash.

Why is that a touchy subject? I don't get it.

Because it's kind of promiscuous, and it's sexy, and a lot of—

It's too personal.

It's too personal. And not only that; they're like: Oh, you know, it's exposed, and this and that. And I was like: Okay, well, let's look at our kūpuna. I mean, they were topless. You know, the body was celebrated, all these things. A lot of the mindset that comes from ignorance, and the ignorance of being schooled in the traditional concepts of the missionary mindset.

He's a fast-rising star in the international fashion scene, while he remains firmly rooted in Native Hawaiian culture. The phenomenon known as Manaola Yap, next, on Long Story Short.

One-on-one engaging conversations with some of Hawai'i's most intriguing people: Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox.

Top New York fashion houses learned a new name in 2017: Manaola Yap. The name belongs to a young Hawaiian from Kohala, who dazzled with his first runway collection at the prestigious New York Fashion Week. He wowed the audience with bold and modern designs inspired by his knowledge of Native Hawaiian culture. Manaola Yap was born on Hawai'i Island to Edward Yap and Nani Lim Yap, who are both Hawaiian music teachers and entertainers deeply immersed in their cultural heritage. In addition, mother Nani, from the renowned Lim musical 'ohana in Kohala, is a much respected kumu hula. These parents gave their son a powerful and eclectic name, Manaola, which mean life force. It's just part of his name.

First of all, there's your name.

Yes.

And I'm not talking about Manaola.

Okay. So—

How did you get your name? And what is your name?

My full name. Okay; so my full name is Carrington—

Carrington?

Yes; Carrington first.

Where did that come from?

So, Carrington actually came from Dynasty.

The soap opera. So, my mother and her friend loved Dynasty, and they loved Blake Carrington. And at that time, I think all women did at that time. So, when they were in the hospital, they were watching ... or during just that whole time through their pregnancy, they were watching Dynasty, the show. And they and they had a bet that whoever would give birth first would be Blake, and the second would be Carrington. So, her son is Blake, and I'm Carrington.

And has anyone ever called you Carrington, really?

Yeah. It's kind of funny, because I feel like my name changed throughout my lifetime thus far. So, I have people that still call me Carrington from, you know, certain events and circles of my mom's social circles that she has. And then, some call me Manaola, some call me Mana, some call me Bubba. A lot of people call me Bubba.

Why Bubba?

My sister used to call me Bubba when she was small. And a lot of people in our hula hālau, and that's close to the family. In my family too, they call me Bubba. So, it's definitely changed. So, Carrington is my first, Edward is my middle name. Well, one of my middle names; that's from my dad, got that from my dad. So, Carrington Edward, and then Manaolaho'owaiwaikaleikaumakalani. It's a long one.

Now, if Manaola means life force, what does the rest mean?

The whole idea, because the name can be read in many different ways. Manaolaho'owaiwaikaleikaumakalani is heaven's power of life enriching the beloved child. And my aunt, who named me, she's a late kumu hula, her name was Joan Lindsey, she's 'ohana on my mom's dad's side. And when she named me, she named me with the intention that everyone that will look upon Manaola in his lifetime will be looked upon with love, with eyes of kindness and love only.

Do you think names shape you?

Definitely; I'm totally a firm believer in the belief of a name and the energy that a name has once it's borne into the air. Totally.

I know your mom is part of the Lim family, which is legendary. Would you tell us about her family, and then your dad's family?

Yeah.

The Yap family.

My mom's family is the Lim 'ohana. They used to live up on Pu'u Hoi Ranch. My grandfather was the foreman for Parker Ranch; he's one of the original cowboys. They grew up in a very, very country style traditional home. My grandpa on my mom's side was also very Chinese, as well.

And there are members of the family all over the Kohala side, generally performing, generally music.

Yeah; lots of music and dance, too. My cousin Namakana, she's actually a Miss Aloha Hula. She's a really, really beautiful dancer, as well. And aside from our main family, my mom's also graduated a bunch of kumu that have passed on her legacy of dance. And not even just dancing alone; my mom has also shaped them into beautiful women.

And is your father on the creative side, as well?

My dad's super-creative. So, Edward Yap; he's from Honolulu. My dad and his whole family; very, very loving as well.

Your father is Chinese, or Chinese Hawaiian?

Chinese Hawaiian; yeah. So, my dad's Chinese Hawaiian side, he grew up doing a lot of kung fu, martial arts, and all of that, and then, passed that on to me, as well.

From a young age, Manaola Yap gravitated toward performing arts and design. By age thirteen, he already started one of several businesses that would help him express his passion for the arts, and put money in his pocket.

I always also had a fascination in Asian art and artifacts. Actually, all kinds of ancient artifacts from all over the world. I was also known in my community in Waikoloa. Still yet, they still kinda know me, the old-timers; they know me as the boy that did the garage sale. So, I used to have this big garage sale in our garage, and in our whole lot, actually, full of muumuu, old costumes, fabric, kitchenware, old furniture. All kinds of stuff.

And did people negotiate with you?

Oh, all the time.

And did you like that part?

I loved it.

But in the midst of all of this, 'cause I know how collectors work, I would put one artifact. Like, I'd put a bunch of, you know, junky things, tchotchkes and all that, and then in the middle of that, I'd put like a Ming Dynasty sculpture in the middle, and just see. Because you can tell if a collector has an eye. And they'll kinda like pick it right out of the bunch, and they'll just walk by and be like: Oh, my god, like, they probably don't even know what it is. And the first piece I sold was a wooden Kwan Yin statue. And I think I sold it for like, six hundred bucks. Should have been sixteen hundred, at least. Sold it for six hundred bucks. And my dad's like: What are you doing? He's like, You're not gonna sell that here. You know, he was like: I don't think people are gonna buy that kinda stuff. And this guy came out; he was like: How much is that? I'm like: Six hundred bucks. And he pulled out cash, and my dad was like, whoa.

And how old were you at this point?

At that point, I was like thirteen; twelve or thirteen. Yeah. And a lot of people would come in. And at that time, you know, purchases with designers that were coming in were already spending around seven to eight thousand dollars at a time, in my house.

On the Kohala Coast of Hawai'i Island, Manaola Yap's mother, Nani Lim Yap, creates hula shows based on Hawaiian mythology. As a keiki, Manaola would assist in the creative costuming, which would set him on the path to fashion design.

Being in the entertainment business in the Kohala Coast, it was important for us to figure out a way to engage the audience, because they didn't understand much of what we

were doing, or dancing about. So, what Mom started to do, a lot of different people started to do is, create little hula dramas, even in her productions. So, hula dramas where we would explain, you know, the storyline. We'd read a story, tell you what the story is about, and then dance the dance, so that you could make the reference of: Oh, she's pulling something or, Oh, a volcanic explosion happened. Those kinds of things, so that they could see us becoming the dance, and really make that connection and help them be engaged in the story. So, when that happened, that lent for creative costume. It gave us the creative freedom to be able to step outside of the box, and really start to be expressive in our costume. 'Cause we were able to look at mythology and say: Oh, she wore a skirt of flames, or Oh, she wore a skirt made of lightning bolts.

As the person who's gonna come up with this costume, how do you do that? What comes to mind?

That was the most exciting part of my childhood, the fact that every day, like, my mom was putting together a show, she'd be like: Okay, we have to make a headpiece for Namakaokahai. Okay, she's the sister of Pele, she's the sea goddess. Okay, so we'd go to the ocean and we'd find things and be creative.

How fun.

Yeah.

And deep.

And deep; definitely. Or we'd go to the forest and be like, okay, Hi'iaka, she had pau palai, which is a skirt made of palai ferns.

M-hm.

So, we'd go and, you know, gather those kinds of things, or look at, Okay, how can we imitate this fern through this fabric, how can we texture this, how can we, you know, add a train that looks like a lava flow. That whole thing really was a start of me getting into costuming and fashion. And what would happen is, after the show was done, even with our myth show, we had girls that were like: Oh, my god, could I borrow this top to go out after? Like, I'm just gonna put jeans with it. And you know, they would go out, and they'd use it. Or they'd be like: Oh, you know, I have a red carpet event, or I'm going to this fancy dinner, can I wear this outfit? And that whole thing started a conversation with other artists or other friends, dancers that would be like: Oh, you know, I'm going to the Hōkū, can you make me this outfit; this should be at the Hōkū, you know, not just in a show. So, I was like, okay. So, I would create different looks for them, but everything was always done by hand; you know, the concept. I'd draw the

concept, we'd cut the patterns, me and Mom would cut the patterns. And Iwa; Iwalani too, she was a really, really important part of my journey, Iwalani. She has her own line, Iwa Wai. But she also was a very close friend that helped me with my construction in summer.

You had crossed that divide. You had decided, I'm now gonna charge for costuming, for clothes.

Not even yet.

You're doing this for free?

I was still doing that for free, even for the Hōkū. I didn't know how. You know. I think the first person I charged ... even that was really hard for me.

Well, they were your friends, too.

They were my friend, too; right? And the way that we create is, I want to know them first. I want to know what is something that they're missing, or are they a very aggressive person, what can I do in this design to soften that, or help to balance them. That's what our job is.

Well, that sounds a little spiritual, right there.

Yeah; totally. So, that's actually what the brand is based off of, that concept of balance for lifestyle.

And somehow, you worked through your feeling like: I can't charge for this, this is spiritual, this is mana.

Definitely. Because what I was able to do is, I was able to see that this piece created ... one thing for sure, it's definitely a different time. Yeah? So, one thing is the times have changed, and there's that adaptation to time. And also, that the piece itself has been able to change someone, and create more money to create more products, to change more people, and to move our mission forward to help to sustain indigenous culture.

Manaola Yap began creating fashion pieces for the Maoli Arts Movement, or MAMo, a festival that celebrates Native Hawaiian art. In 2014, he decided to make a bold statement at MAMo with his very first clothing line.

When we did the underwear, that was the scary one for me. Because I was like: Mom, I'm gonna make an underwear. My theme was Kumulipo, we did all the first wa, which

is all the animals and the sea creatures. And there was this boy, and he really was an aspiring underwear model, so I was like: Okay, you're perfect, we'll do him. He had a great body and all this. And my mom sewed the underwear. So, we cut the underwear, we printed it, we sewed it. And I just remember, you know, we're in the back, and ... it was a big move for us, you know, to even put him out there. We were just like: Oh, my gosh. First of all, even the whole collection itself was artistically very beautiful. Some things were a little sexy. And you know, we had gone to the rehearsal, we had seen the regular mu'umu'u, the traditional beautiful arts, tattoo, and all these different things. And ... I literally went in the back, and I was like, freaking out. I was like: Mom, they're gonna think we're crazy. I was like: I can't do this, we gotta pull out of this, we can't even present. And she's like: Oh, absolutely not. She's like: We just came all the way over here.

She's a rock, isn't she?

Yeah, yeah. She's like: No, no. She's like: What is your intention? You know, I had listed my intention, this is what I want to do. And then, even with the underwear, I was like: Should we take it out, should we not do it? She's like: What's your intention? I was like: Okay; well, I'm trying to think like a smart Hawaiian here. Okay; a smart Hawaiian businessman, we're looking at underwear. Okay; first of all, Hawaiian underwear is sexy. Right? And that's what drives this marketplace, whether you like it or not. And any marketing advertising is gonna tell you that is the main attraction, human attraction to sales. It's a sexy thing. Two, I've always wanted to see a Hawaiian man underwear model ad, big. We're still working on it.

I also looked at the underwear being something we need every day. You know, that's something we use every day, and it makes you feel good. I love a good pair of underwear; they're always under my basketball shorts and my tank top. But, that is something that we always want to use. So, she's like: Well, if that's your intention ... there's your intention. And we're like, freaking out in the back. Of course, now things have changed, ever since we've opened that gap. But if you look at it before, we're just like: Oh, my god, like ... you know, should we like, do a reveal, or should we like, have him just be like, boom, he's in his underwear. You know, like, what do we do?

What happens is, you feel naked.

Yeah, yeah; exactly.

And you're exposed.

Exactly; we're exposed. So, we're like: No, you know what, do all your traditional protocol, do your oli like you normally do, and then on the end, we'll put him out. So, he had a tie on, he had like a wrap on. And you know, he's just walking out, and

everybody's just like, watching. And all of a sudden, he just drops his wrap. And all the forks and everything, you could just hear go, clank.

Clatter.

And just dead silence, and everybody was just like ... looking at him. And then, I was like: Oh, my god, they're gonna kill us. And it was so funny, because I had a lot of traditionalists that were in the audience, too. We had, you know, a lot of kūpuna, too. But the funny part was, when I was outside, you know, like taking pictures with my gang, so many people too, that were ... I won't mention their names, but very, very influential people in the Hawaiian community, they came up to me and they were like ... Oh, my god, brother, don't tell anybody, but that was awesome. I can't believe you did that; that was the most amazing thing that ever happened.

So, private approval.

Yeah; private approval, you know. And then, later on, you know, I even had some artists too that later on did buy my underwear. And they're like: I have your underwear on right now, they're so cool. But don't tell anybody. You know, that kinda thing.

But I mean, you want to create something that will be useful.

Exactly; useful, for sure, and comfortable and fun. And that's why with that underwear, I feel like you could feel as that whole wrap dropped, that the whole history of Hawaii changed that day.

Manaola Yap learned traditional Hawaiian clothing techniques through his kūpuna, and he picked up modern design through experimentation with his mother's creative hula costuming. He knew early on that college and fashion school were not for him.

My background in design, and everything that I do, comes from hula, from dance. You know, I do not name myself to be a designer that went to school and did all of that. I never really pursued going to fashion school. And it wasn't really necessarily because I know it all, and I knew it all, and all that. It was more so because I also didn't want to tamper with the organic nature of my mind and my creative mind, and how it was nurtured in that space, especially being on the Big Island. I didn't want anything to interfere with it, so that I could keep it as authentic as possible. Because that is something in the industry that ... corporations at large have the hardest time to develop, especially when selling to a consumer or to even make that exchange, you know, in business. So, that was my choice; from a long time, I was already thinking ahead.

Pewa, for me, was created ... it's a very traditional design, and this sample can actually be found, the original sample can actually be found in the Bishop Museum, where a lot of the native artifacts are kept. I chose pewa because for me, it spoke to me on a different level. Pewa are the fishtail repairs that are used in woodwork, in traditional woodwork. And I bent the patterns back and forth because in today's time, we're open to a lot more new ideas.

Just three years after launching his Native Hawaiian inspired clothing label, Manaola Yap was able to establish a retail store called Hula Lehua at Ala Moana Shopping Center. Then came the national spotlight; he received a coveted invitation to showcase his collection at the prestigious New York Fashion Week 2017.

They actually came upon us by reviewing Honolulu Fashion Week, which is a production that's done by Lynne O'Neill and Honolulu Magazine. But they went online, and they watched that whole, you know, Honolulu Fashion Week, and watched all the designs. And then, they had sent us the invitation. So, out of the eight thousand, there's about twenty-four designers that show throughout four countries, which is London, Paris, Milan, and New York. And out of those twenty-four designers, only ten designers get exclusive shows. We were very honored to have been able to show a full collection, which is super-crazy, especially for our first time in New York.

How much time did you have to get ready for this?

We had about three weeks.

Three weeks?

M-hm.

What did you have to do, to get ready?

Everything from ... we textiled everything from scratch, we had to print all the fabrics from scratch, cut and sew. We had to fit, we had to silhouette all the pieces. And I'm a crazy, so we actually had more than the amount of pieces that we put in. We finished at about forty pieces; we did forty looks in that collection. It was actually the largest collection Oxford had ever shown in all four countries. Period. Which was kind of crazy. But that's always how I've been. I just love creating things, so yeah; it was definitely a crazy journey. We also broke some of the rules, because we really, really wanted to share some of the local talent, especially with the models. 'Cause we had been working with these models that have supported us all these few years.

Normally, you would use the models up there.

It's usually only industry models.

Oh; so how did you get the local girls in?

So, when they looked at us, they loved the fact that we're based in indigenous culture, and that we're a cultural label, which is something that they had only really seen a lot in African designers at the time, Indian designers, Chinese, Japanese, those kind of things. But nothing in the context of looking on the Polynesian side, for couture especially. So, when they seen that, they thought that that was super-interesting. But I was like: Okay, if that's the thing, then you have to have some Hawaiians then, because that's the uniqueness of the brand, and that's what makes us who we are; it's the people. We also had some that were native-speaking, which was very, you know, important to us, as well.

And I understand you had a Go Fund Me campaign.

We had a Go Fund Me campaign.

You didn't have a bunch of money lying around to go to New York with all these people.

Oh, no; not at all. Yeah; we did not have the means to go. 'Cause even when we first did it, I was like: There's no way we're gonna go to New York. You know. 'Cause our company is based on organic growth, completely.

Were you behind stage, or next to the runway? Where were you?

Oh; I stood on the side of the runway so that I could watch. It was an intense moment. Even the people in the audience, I think, a lot of them were pretty blown away, because especially how we started the show. We started with protocol. That's usually how we always start. I always start with a hula. And for me, that's creating the ceremony for us as a label for this time as a brand is, I always set hula first. Because like I said, hula is where I come from. That is my world, that is what I know. You know. And that's where my source of inspiration, and everything is borne from that place. So, I use that ceremony and that dance to start um, our runway shows.

Does an individual garment tell a story?

So, it depends. Some pieces have different inspiration. So, some things are basic silhouettes that are, you know, flattering, comfortable, especially to what the market is bearing at the time. I have one top that is very special to me; it's called the Hīhīmanu top. The Hīhīmanu top is inspired by the Hīhīmanu, its namesake, which is the big stingray, manta rays. You know how they have those big wings, and their tail. Then,

some of them, I get really, really intense with. And then, that was the last piece that was on the runway, one of our finale dresses. That piece was dedicated to Liliu, Lili'uokalani, our last reigning monarch. So, creating the mourning garment to mourn the loss of the lāhui, of the Kingdom, in remembrance of Liliu, and in remembrance of the Kingdom, but also to show the forward movement in that garment. So, the garment is actually all black, and it's the only piece that was all black in the whole collection.

Did you get a good crowd for your appearance?

Yes. Our show was actually over sold out. But yeah, I think it was great. And it was really good for us to go up there, especially for Hawai'i.

Anything that we do outside, our heart's always here first. And you know, whether it be New York or London, Paris, wherever we may go next, it's always making sure that we have that sense of pride at home, because that's our home base.

Because of his selection for New York Fashion Week, Manaola Yap gained the opportunity to showcase his work at the other fashion weeks in London, Paris, and Milan. In 2016, Hawaii Business Magazine celebrated Yap as one of its 20 for the Next 20, and Honolulu Magazine named him Islander of the Year in Fashion. It's quick and high ascent for Manaola. At the time of our conversation in Fall of 2017, he was just thirty years old. Mahalo to Kohala native Manaola Yap, now living in 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 nui.

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I used hula as a ... example. I looked at hula, and I looked at ... 'cause I always go back to the dance. Any time I'm stuck, any time I need an answer, I always go back to the dance. And sometimes, I even just dance, myself, because it gives me that clearance and that space for me to think.