

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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In my world, in the preschool through twelfth grade world, I look at the ... the defining characteristic of many schools is the old adage that you have to be a certain age before we can expose you to some sort of academic concept or subject. And all of us anywhere have probably been the recipient of a very pejorative: You're not quite old enough to understand this yet. And while that may have been delivered with good intentions, most of the time, it's just flat-out wrong.

He's the president of Mid-Pacific Institute in Honolulu, and he believes that students should be able to pursue subjects that fuel their interest. Paul Turnbull, 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.

Aloha mai kākou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. In 2013, Paul Turnbull became the president of Mid-Pacific Institute in Mānoa, Honolulu, Hawai'i, one of the largest private schools in the State with an enrollment of over fifteen hundred students from preschool to the twelfth grade. As the head of a school already known for its innovative approaches to education, Dr. Turnbull continues to move the school forward with project-based learning. He embraces the use of cutting edge technology for the students, and he pays close attention to how the changing job market will require very different skillsets, so that teachers can prepare the students. He says family and education are at the center of his life, and this native Canadian combined both when he decided to apply for U.S. citizenship. He enlisted the help of his fifth grade daughter and her class. This took place in 2015, two years after he took the reins at Mid Pacific Institute. The educator became a student again, with grade schoolers learning alongside him in preparations for the citizenship test, which he aced. For Paul Turnbull, the journey to Hawai'i and U.S. citizenship began up north.

I was born and raised in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. So, the eastern side of Canada. And my parents are really interesting individuals, and they worked really hard to sort of move us up, and we moved around the Toronto area for quite some time. And then, ultimately, over a period of years and going to different colleges, I wound up on the West Coast, just outside of Vancouver.

When you say your parents tried very hard to move you up, what does that mean?

Well, Mom and Dad both were high school graduates; they didn't have college degrees. And so, Mom was in banking, Dad was in the telephone company. So, Mom started as a teller, a bank teller, and you don't make a lot of money as a bank teller. And Dad was climbing telephone poles for quite some time. And ultimately, what ended up happening is that they each found that, I think to their own credit, they were more intelligent than perhaps they gave themselves credit for. And because of that, they worked their way up the ladder, each corporate ladder. So, in the telephone industry, telecommunications, and then in banking. And as that happened, we moved from one neighborhood to the next, and it was sort of the Canadian version of the American Dream where, you know, you realize that all kinds of things are possible.

Were they explicit in giving you advice, or did you learn by example?

Both. In my mom's side of the conversation, I ultimately learned that the restrictions and sort of the barriers that are put in front of you, either from a societal level or from an industry level—she was a woman in a man's world in banking, finance. She ultimately ended up becoming the only woman on her floor in the corporate office. So, in Toronto, Bay Street is the equivalent of Wall Street in New York. Only woman on her floor, so that was difficult. And I learned from her that barriers are both real, but they're also what you make of them. And if you disagree with them and you just apply yourself, and you continually show that you can outwork anybody around you, then things will move. So, she moved very large mountains. Yeah; she did not agree with being told that she couldn't do something because of her gender, so she just went ahead and did it.

And what about your dad? You said he rose in the ranks as well.

M-hm. So, the funny thing about Dad is that he's the smartest guy in the room, but he manifests his intelligence into jokes. So, he's a practical joker. And ultimately, he went from climbing telephone poles to managing a crew, and then ending up overseeing and engineering department in the corporate office as well. So, they ended up actually about two blocks away from each other on Bay Street. And you know, when I was in high school, they were both there.

And that was the equivalent of Wall Street in Toronto.

Correct. Yeah. And even as a high-schooler, you know, you're jaded, and you think parents are so lame, when you're in high school. But they would go and have lunch together. And Nathan Phillips Square is the city hall in Toronto. And right in front of Nathan Phillips Square is this very large fountain, but in the wintertime, they freeze it, and it's a skate rink. And they would go skating at lunch. I mean, even as a high-

schooler, I thought that was kinda sweet. So ... yeah; they had the nice ability to come together on multiple levels.

Did you have brothers and sisters?

I'm an only.

So, they poured everything into you?

Yes and no. Mom made sure that I didn't turn out to be representative of the stereotype, that everything is for me. Although my family every so often has to remind me at Christmas that all the presents under the tree are actually for everybody else.

While your parents were both working, you were actually really applying yourself. You did, what, four sports. What sports did you play?

In high school, so I played football, basketball, rugby, track and field. And I was lifeguarding on the side, so every so often for the swim team, they just needed points, so they'd throw me in for like, a fifty-meter freestyle.

So, you loved athleticism.

Yeah. If I was not moving, I was not a pleasant person to be around, so athletics was a very good thing for me, because it just made sure that I was occupied.

How did you do in school?

High school, I could have done much better, mostly because I was, you know, either in a pool, or I was on a field somewhere, or on a basketball court.

Paul Turnbull certainly applied himself in college, earning three degrees, with a fourth, a PhD to come later. He says his mother made sure he was grounded.

My mom reminded me—of course, you know, Mom was always around. My mom reminded me after my third degree that all those letters don't yet spell J-O-B, so it was time to get a job teaching. So, I did that.

And by the way, how did you decide to be a teacher?

You know, honestly, it had everything to do with my teachers in high school. They clearly loved their job, they loved being together. They were inseparable. It was funny; they were like kids themselves. You know, they were always playing together. We were either playing basketball together, or I would see them going out and camping, and

they started an outdoor camping club. So, I learned how to go camping in the snow in high school, and those kinds of things. And it just sort of hit me. I was in physiology class, and Dave Kaye was the teacher. And it just was the most matter-of-fact, I'm gonna be a teacher moment.

Was it a voice you heard, or just this overwhelming thought?

It was just a thought. It was not a voice; it was just, I'm gonna do that.

And then, you stuck to it.

Yeah. Yeah. My family refers to me as Even Steven. You know, if you try too hard to do some things, I think people in life probably have learned for the most part, if you try to force a square peg into a round hole, it doesn't work. But if you just follow your passion, and you allow things to move with fluidity, that it all works out.

Paul Turnbull followed that sudden realization in physiology class into teaching English and physical education, coaching football and girls' basketball in British Columbia, Canada. He found he had a passion for teaching. And at a teacher training conference in New Mexico, Dr. Turnbull would find a different kind of passion: the love of his life. Three children later, he can still get a little mushy, just thinking of meeting the woman he would marry.

I was teaching in Canada in Vancouver. My wife was teaching in Costa Rica at an international school. We both were teaching international baccalaureate English. And so, the IB organization is this amazing worldwide organization, and they're known for rigor and fantastic academics. But one of the requirements is that you have to go to an IB training. So, we were both sent to this conference in July in Montezuma. We had no desire to go individually, of course. And we both went. I was sitting in the Albuquerque airport, looked up. That was it.

Attended the training, didn't say anything. And then, you were at the airport?

So, we were there for a week, and we ended up in the same class, and it was brutal. I mean, I just ... you know, when you fall in love, you fall in love. And, you know.

It was brutal to fall in love?

No; the ability—it's happening right now. I can't speak. It's just funny. When you ... for me ... oh, jeez.

You're thinking back to that time?

Wow; you're still in love, aren't you?

Yeah. I think ... the ability for us to understand that, you know, there was a great distance geographically between the two of us. And in those days, you know, internet and email, and all of those things were not readily available. So, it was an old fashioned letter writing correspondence.

That befits two teachers.

Which does, especially English teacher; right? So, it was just one of those things where ... just like the teaching, when I decided I was gonna be a teacher, it was the most matter of fact, don't have to contemplate this moment. This is just the next step.

But again, there were logistics issues. You were living in different countries.

Yes. So, at the time, Leslie grew up in Santa Barbara, and so, her parents were currently there. And they weren't doing very well with their health, and so, it was the right thing to do. So, we moved to Santa Barbara to be closer to them.

That's a beautiful place to live, too.

Unbelievable. Yeah; absolutely. So, I moved from snowy Toronto to beautiful Vancouver, to even more beautiful and warmer Santa Barbara.

But you did face a little obstacle with jobs; right?

Yeah. So, the difficulty about, you know, immigration is that when you go through the process—and it's a very interesting, very involved and complicated process. Initially, you get two years. And so, it's sort of a trial period, as a probationary landed immigrant or resident alien. I showed up, and I have a social security number, so I was able to apply for a teaching jobs. And unfortunately, I wasn't able to get a job teaching English, which is my first love and my first passion. But an administrative opportunity arose, and I was really lucky to be chosen for that.

But many teachers would not like the idea of moving to administration. They are two different fields; related, but different. Right? Different skills.

M-hm.

So, were you really happy?

You know, I was. So, as a teacher, in my mind, I could have an effect on thirty students in a classroom. But if I were an administrator, and if I had empathy for all the teachers with whom I worked, and I understood some of the barriers that were just, you know,

frankly annoying as a teacher, if as an administrator, I could do something to remove one or more of those barriers, then that meant that I could affect how many students in a school.

Did you ever look back? Did you ever say: I want to go back to my first love, teaching?

Frequently; yes.

Oh, is that right?

Yes.

But you remained an administrator.

I did. It was the path that I was on, and we were together, and we had a family, and you know, sometimes life gives you something that is probably a better course than you think.

Is Santa Barbara where you earned your PhD?

It is; yeah, at the University of California Santa Barbara.

So, you were working and going to school at the same time.

Yes; exactly right. And that's another reason why I am absolutely just head over heels in love with my wife, because man, did she hold down the fort when I was going through my degree. It was a lot of very intense work.

You eventually became the head of a school district, one of the school districts in Santa Barbara County.

M-hm; that's right. Yeah; I was the superintendent of the Santa Ynez Valley Union High School District.

How many schools did that cover?

It only had two schools. That's the interesting thing about California. So, there are a thousand school districts, generally speaking. My particular school district was small by the number of schools and students, but my geographical area was fifteen hundred square miles.

Paul Turnbull married, with three children, and then living in Santa Barbara, California, earned a lot of respect in the role of district superintendent, working with more people

in and outside of the school communities. He did not expect to relocate. But in 2012, he received a call that would take him and his family thousands of miles away, to Hawai'i.

Living in Santa Barbara was a great thing, and I got a call from a search consultant, who asked me to consider Mid-Pacific. And I frankly said: You know what, I have a great life. My wife is working at UC Santa Barbara, and our kids are here, and it's fine.

If it's not broken, don't fix it.

Exactly right. There's no reason to move. So, I said: Thank you, but no, I'm good. And then, I got a call a couple weeks later and said: No, you should really look. So, we looked; but we look as parents first. Our sons were in boarding school, so that was okay. Meaning that if we had moved away to Hawai'i, that they'd be fine. So, when we started looking at Mid-Pacific, we were thinking about our daughter, who would have been in fourth grade, had we made the move. And everything that we looked at was great. I mean, it fit our beliefs and our philosophy as a family, it fit, I think in terms of the academic opportunities and the approach to learning that our daughter would have enjoyed. And then, having satisfied that aspect, we started looking at the community, instead of the administrative spot. The community fit very closely with Santa Barbara. And then, I looked at it as a job. And from there, I didn't see a thing I didn't like.

As the head of Mid-Pacific Institute now, what were some of the things that surprised you that came along? 'Cause you know, you had certain expectations moving locations. Anything that surprised you, something really that you didn't expect?

The community at large, it was just such a welcoming, wonderful ... family-centric, individual ... kind of place. And California sometimes can be that, and sometimes can not be that. And it's a very fast-paced "me" kind of place, depending on where you live. Honolulu didn't strike me as that, and it was a refreshing breath of fresh air. So, that was the first component. As far as the school is concerned, my office is sort of right in the middle of campus, and you can go up to the Kawaiahao Seminary, the old building which is now our center for the arts, and you can go down to the technology centers and you can see the middle school, and then the elementary school. I can have a bad day, and I can go in any direction, be around kids. Easy.

Sometime after you got here, and I know you were received with open arms and things were going very well.

M-hm.

You made another huge decision, which was actually to leave your Canadian citizenship.

So, I'm allowed to have dual citizenship.

Do you have it?

Yes.

Okay; got it.

Yeah. So, the United States no longer asks you to renounce and remove all other citizenships. But you do have to denounce all potentates, which I think is hilarious, 'cause who says potentates.

The idea that I wanted to become a citizen really came out of just the fact that I don't believe that being a member of your community is a spectator sport. I think that we should be active, we should be involved. I had been doing that at the local level in Santa Barbara as a Californian, but I had never been able to vote, the last remaining step on the hierarchy of things to do.

What's it like learning the civics of the United States? 'Cause I believe you had to go through classes.

Yeah. So, ultimately, the civics test is ten questions that they ask, but it's based on a set of a hundred questions possible. And so, the test that you get comes from a guide.

Oh, so you studied up; it wasn't classes.

Correct; yeah. I didn't have to go to classes, per se. But what we ended up doing was working with my daughter's class in fifth grade.

At Mid-Pacific Institute?

At Mid-Pacific; yeah. So, at Mid Pacific, the teachers in fifth grade were great. We have two classes in the fifth grade. I asked them if they'd be willing to help me out. And it was pretty cool. The kids put together like a video study guide for me. Using the questions from the guide itself, and I had multiple choice options. And I remember sitting in the classroom, and all the kids were on the floor, and the big screen on the wall with all these questions. And every time I got a question right, this sort of piped-in applause would happen. It was pretty cute.

And your daughter was the springboard for this?

Yeah. We talked originally, and I said: You know, what do you think? 'Cause she's a dual citizen, so she's the daughter of a Canadian and an American, born on American soil. So, she can go to Canada with a Canadian passport, she can stay in the U.S. with a U.S. passport. So, I said: What do you think; should I be like you? And yeah, she seemed ... like as a fourth-grader then prior to taking the test, I think she had a little bit of this moment of like: That's pretty cool; you know, like I've got something over Dad.

And I can help him become like me.

Totally.

Yeah; exactly right. And it was great. She was able to help, the class did a fantastic job. And then, when I got my citizenship, after passing the tests, which it's always nice to pass a test, we were able to go and go as a class for the ceremony. So, you know, a real lesson in civics for the kids. 'Cause I don't know how many people really get to see a citizenship ceremony.

Paul Turnbull feels he's become a better member of the community because he gained a greater appreciation for the United States and its values through the preparation process for U.S. citizenship. As the president of Mid-Pacific Institute in Honolulu, Paul Turnbull places a heavy emphasis on project-based learning and innovative approaches to education that have the potential for real world applications.

Mid-Pacific Institute has really gotten a lot of great press for technological advancements. But it's not just being able to use tools; it's what you do with them. Can you talk a little bit about what you're doing at Mid-Pacific?

Sure. We really took a look at why we needed to get into different versions of technology, and what they could do as tools. And my predecessor, Joe Rice, with whom you spoke on the show, was really the beginning of all of that. In the late 90s, he opened one technology center, then in the early 2000s we opened the Weinberg Technology Center as well. And thanks to the Hartleys, Mike and Sandy Hartley, the Math and Science Complex that we have at Mid Pacific is host to a center that is really like a scaled-down version of the MIT Media Lab. And in that lab, you have the ability to have engineering and digital storytelling, and design, technological design all together, so that the School of the Arts kids and the engineering-minded kids can work together and find different ways to apply these tools. So, that's the philosophy behind how we approach technology. The tools that we use indirectly are amazing. I mean, they're just so much fun. We were the first school in the State to use a one-to-one iPad program, so all of our students, right down to kindergarten, have the ability to have a mobile tablet. Because we believe that the application of that technology brings the classroom from the inside to the outside. And now, your real world, much like my citizenship, becomes more than an academic exercise, but it's something to be learned and valued, and trusted. We're the only school in the world right now using, I

believe, and I've done as much looking and research as I can to prove it, using 3D laser scanning. So, Lidar scanning for historic preservation. And that means that our high school students and our middle school students are using an engineering grade level of laser scanning to go out and digitally capture and restore artifacts in our local community. So, we have a museum studies course that's a humanities course, and a historic preservation class. They have gone out and scanned, for example, Kaniakapūpū, which is King Kamehameha II's summer retreat, now dilapidated. And when you look at any very old building, there are no as-built drawings, or certainly they don't meet code today. But if you scan them, and the integrity of those scans is down to the millimeter, anything that happens from that point forward, we can actually help to rebuild them exactly as they are. But ultimately, all technology will go by the wayside. It will evolve. And if it's viewed as anything other than a simple tool, then we're getting the message wrong. Problem-solving, the ability to analyze, the ability to use creativity, collaboration, the ability to bring together in groups problem-solving for the real world. So, how can you actually apply all of your learning. So, if you can do all of that with empathy, and you have analytic abilities to approach new learning or new situations with different types of learning, if jobs go away, we're not lining students up so that they can only be, in my mom's case, a bank teller, or only be, in my father's case, a linesman climbing up a telephone pole. They're gonna have access to technology and problem-solving skills that allow them to be fluid as the market changes.

At the time of our conversation in late 2017, Mid-Pacific Institute president Paul Turnbull said it was still the only school in the world, and the only organization in Hawai'i, utilizing 3D laser scanning for historical preservation. Much like Paul Turnbull's inclusion of Mid-Pacific's fifth grade in his citizenship process, it's an example of how education and the real world can come together. Mahalo to this leader in education, Paul Turnbull, a transplant from Canada and the U.S. West Coast, who has embraced Hawai'i, and who has been embraced by Hawai'i. And thank you for joining us for this edition of Long Story Short on PBS Hawai'i. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

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It's important to give back, and it's important to realize that there were a lot of lean times when we were growing up, there were a lot of times where we grew into abundance as well. But in the times of abundance, it was clear that I was responsible to find out whatever percentage of things that I had available to me, and then to give them away. So, it was important to be part of the community.