

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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When people meet a professional comedian I think they might expect you to be on all the time. Is that a pressure? You know, do they say: Well, that wasn't funny.

Yeah. You know, I get that a lot.

And you're just being a normal guy at that point.

Yeah. No; I try to separate the two, because I like performing, but I don't like performing twenty-four/seven. You know, I used to get that a lot. Like, you know, they see me in the grocery store, you know. Tell me something funny or, How come you look so mad? Because I'm like you. I have a day job, and I gotta go shop, with my wife.

Augie Tulba, better known as Augie T, has always had a day job, starting from the time he was old enough to sell newspapers. He's a funny guy, but he also has a very serious side to him. Augie T 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. Born Augusto Emery Tulba, the world has come to know him as Augie T, of 'Ewa Beach, O'ahu. He's been voted Hawai'i's Comedian of the Year, he's won two Na Hoku Hanohano Awards, and he's sold out the Blaisdell Arena with his shows. He's also been recognized as one of Hawai'i's Top 100 Influential Filipinos. Growing up in Kalihi Valley Housing, Augie T could have taken a very different path. He credits his hardworking parents and the many mentors he's had throughout his life for opening the right doors for him.

I have five brothers, you know, and it was tough, you know. Dad wasn't the most lovable guy; it was hard for get his attention. You know, Mom was very super, super-caring. But I saw them work; I saw Mom and Dad leave to work every day. And even when they worked, wasn't making enough. You know. So, you know, my brothers and I, we understood the value of hard work. But was tough; was tough growing up. You know, we never have the things most kids had. You know, my mom and dad did a lot to make sure that we were nicely groomed, you know. But was tough.

What do you remember wanting when you were a kid that you couldn't have?

I used to get mad, because I used to see kids' parents abuse the welfare system. So, you know, like, at some point, I would tell my dad: How come all those guys get nice cars, and we get one ugly car? And my dad was like: Never mind; they cheat, they lie, that's why, they lie. You know, lying no get you nowhere, cheating no get you nowhere.

Well, that was a good lesson.

Yeah; it was. But like, at the same time, like, how come they get nice cars, and we no more nice cars. You know, or how come we don't have, like you know, especially like the latest trends, growing up.

When you watch TV and you see all the products being sold to kids; right?

You know, and people laugh at the jokes now, but like, I remember, you know, Christmastime. You know, nothing under the Christmas tree, like, weeks before. And you go to friends' house and get plenty Christmas presents. And you wake up Christmas morning, and there's a lot of presents under the Christmas tree. But then, you look around your house; no more nothing. Because your mom would take stuff, wrap 'em.

Oh ...

So get plenty. But like, you know, after a while, we're like: That's Dads boots. That was Dad's boots, Ma. Like, you know, we wanted G.I. Joes and we would open up our gift, and my brother would have the arm, I would have the leg. I was like: What is this? That's G.I. Joe puzzle. Put 'em together, you guys share. You know, we was so poor, we only could afford one walkie-talkie, Leslie.

We used to share, you know. Ernie?

Yeah, Augie?

So, you know, it's fun now, we look back, and you know, I'm thankful for those years. I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing now if I never went through that period; yeah? And so, you know, it was tough, but like, I'm very thankful for those times. You know, there's a handful of people that I really appreciate what they did for my life. Mrs. Murakami, my eighth grade guidance teacher, who knew that I was talkative, knew that I loved the spotlight. And I was flunking English, and she said: You know, you going flunk English, two things going happen. You know, Augie, two things going happen. Either you going pay attention and listen to what I'm gonna tell you, and you going do it, or

you can get lickin's from your dad. Pick. I said: Uh, I pick yours. So, she said: I want you to enter the speech contest. And I went: Speech contest? Only the nerds enter speech contest. I'm a tough guy from Kam IV Housing; I ain't doing speech contest. But she's like: You know, you love talking, you love telling jokes. You know, and she spent time with me after school, which I thought was like: Wow, who does that? You know, and she helped me with my speech, and I did Rap Reiplinger, Room Service. My eighth grade speech contest. And it was so awesome, because she taught me how to prepare, how to get focused. You know, and I remember coming in that morning—and I share this story with a lot of kids in the middle schools. I come in, curtains close, I walk backstage, and all the nerdy kids looking at me like: What you doing here? And in my mind, I'm going: You like me punch your face now?

But because I prepared, I was focused, you know, and there was a confidence that I never felt before. Because yeah, I like talking, and I used that to get out of situations, but I never knew that using that was going, like, take me to the next level and help me see what I always wanted to become. Because in the fourth grade, I saw Andy Bumatai do comedy at the Maui War Memorial. He was opening for Yvonne Elliman. And I went: Wow, who's this guy? So, I always wanted to be a comic. So, when I did the speech contest, I kinda ...

Was this at Dole Middle School?

Yeah; was at Dole Middle School. You know, when I saw him make three thousand people laugh, I knew that's what I wanted to become. So, doing the speech contest helped pave the way to what I really ultimately wanted to become: a standup comic.

So, kudos to ...

Mrs. Murakami.

--Mrs. Murakami. And what about somebody else?

And at Farrington, Mr. Gary Kau. You know, you have electives, and of course, growing up in public housing, my dad wanted me to do automotive. Couldn't do automotive because I forget which screw goes where, being dyslexic. Just flunk me; just flunk me. Or I never show up. I said: That's okay, I flunk. And then they sent me to ROTC. I have ADHD; I cannot even stand at attention. And then, finally, like, I asked Mr. Kau; he was walking down the hallway. I said: Eh, can I come to your drama class? And he was like: Yeah, love you in drama. And I was like one of two boys.

And what did your dad say? 'Cause you know, who can make money from drama class.

Oh, my gosh. Really? You really like hear what my dad said? I told: Dad, my elective is drama. He looked at me; he goes: You māhū? I go: No, Dad! I was like: No, drama. He's like: Drama? Ah!

Little did he know it would be a career.

Yeah. And you know, my dad and my mom are like my biggest fans. So, you know, if you watch any of my DVDs, they're in the front row. You know, and it's so awesome to do the things that I did, and watching Mom and Dad in the front row.

The stuff they used to scold you for.

Yeah; yeah. So, you know, Gary Kau was a big influence in my life. And you know, my boxing coach, Donald Tsark.

Now, how did you get into boxing?

I always loved fighting. And we had to. I mean, I grew up in public housing. My mom is White, Leslie. My mom has blond hair, blue eyes, Irish, Portuguese, my dad is Filipino, and we lived in Kam IV Housing. So, we got picked on every day. Either people was teasing my parents, or they was teasing us. So, my dad made me and my brothers go outside and box, so that all the neighborhood kids see that that we could defend ourselves; right?

Yeah; 'cause there must have been some much bigger kids living there.

Yeah; yeah.

Yeah.

So, we did good at boxing. I went to the gym, and you know, I loved the whole aspects of boxing. I love boxing; I love the discipline and how it helped me see the world, really. You know. My coach told me: If you train hard, Augie, you going be the first person in your family to go to the mainland. I went: Oh, yeah. And I worked hard, trained hard, I went to Los Angeles, saw Disneyland. And that was it. Another, you know, awakening for Augie. You know, like, ho, if you work hard and you train, you can see the world.

Your world got bigger.

Yeah; yeah. So, you know, I'm very thankful for those people.

Hawai'i comedian Augie T started working long before his comedy career began. He learned at an early age that if he wanted money, he would have to work for it.

I started working very young. You know, I grew up in public housing, so there was a side of me that, you know, knew that I had to get money; I had to have money in my pocket to get stuff, because we never have anything. So, I sold papers, and I worked at Jack In the Box when I was fifteen years old. And I saw: Kapi'olani Medical, part-time, with benefits, seven twenty-five. And I went: That's the same amount of money my dad makes. So, I went, I applied, sixteen years old. And Mrs. Kawamoto at that time, who was the director at Kapi'olani Medical, was like: How old you? I was like: Sixteen. And I was just like: I need this job, I like this job. And we made a deal. I said: If I sick, I call in sick or I'm late once, you can fire me. And she thought: Oh, that's a easy bet. And I ended up being there for sixteen years.

And how did you get there?

I caught the bus.

What gave you the confidence to go as a teenager and apply at Kapi'olani Medical Center?

Well, you know, I boxed all my life, and so, boxing gave me a discipline. Like, I know like, in order to make it in life, you have to work hard, you know, and to achieve your dreams, you gotta be dedicated and focused. And you know, I understood all that from boxing. And then, in high school, you know, I made my girlfriend pregnant. That kinda threw a wrench in the machine, and it forced me to work. But I always knew how to work; I always knew that, you know, you needed to do something to get money. And, you know, I was just driven to just work hard, and provide for my family, even at one young age. So, you know, that helped. For most kids, and I tell 'em, you know: You might not be as lucky as I was. You know, I was just kinda motivated to get on the bus.

But you were paying child support as a teenager?

At sixteen, I became the Golden Gloves champion. I boxed; I was like PAL champion. At sixteen, I entered the Golden Gloves, I won the Golden Gloves. At one time, I was ranked seventh in the U.S. for boxing at junior flyweight. And then, I made that mistake. You know, I don't call it a mistake, because I love my son, but like I did, I made a mistake and made my girlfriend pregnant. And with that, came responsibility. So, my dad was like: Eh, boxing; you have to go work, because I'm not supporting your kid. It was tough working at Jack In the Box, you know, knowing that you have to pay for medical. And I wanted my son to carry my name, so it was important for me to work hard, so that I can be a good example for him growing up. But I wasn't making enough money. So, I applied at Kapi'olani Medical. I got on the bus, and I wanted

one interview that day. I told her my story, and I said: I'm determined, I want to work. And you know, the rest is history. I stayed there for sixteen years. The day I graduated from Farrington High School, I got part-time with benefits. Now, having benefits is like, a lot. You know, they were able to cover my medical expenses, and because I worked at the hospital, the hospital paid for the other half. So, I was able to, you know, take care my son and, you know, provide. So, you know, that for me was big, providing. Because even as a kid growing up in public housing, I never wanted to be part of that vicious circle, and I saw a lot of that happening. And there was a side of me that said: Yeah, Augie, you screwed up, but now you gotta take responsibility, and you gotta work. Yeah? And that's what I did.

So, did you marry after you had the baby?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And then, you know, we divorced later on in life, and you know, that was tough, challenging. You know. You're not expecting that kind stuff to happen, but it does. You know, I worked hard, and I still never stop myself from achieving what I wanted to become ultimately.

Augie T embarked on his dream of becoming a standup comic in 1991, after he won an open mic contest at the old Honolulu Comedy Club. It didn't mean he could leave his day job, but new doors started opening for him.

Two weeks into doing comedy, I bumped into Andy Bumatai at Kapi'olani Medical. You know, the guy that I saw.

Where you worked; right?

Yeah; the guy that I saw in the fourth grade do comedy. So, I'm pulling my machine out of the elevator, and I go: It's Andy Bumatai. And I probably passed him like, four or five times, then he went: You like talk to me? Just talk to me. And then, we ended up talking like, the whole night. Guys come up to him always saying: Oh, I like be one comic, how do I become a comic? But I wanted to be a comic. He was my idol; right? And we spent hours talking.

He told you: You don't have to swear.

Yeah.

You don't have be profane in your act.

M-hm. Yeah; he invited me to do comedy in Waikiki. And I wanted to be the Eddie Murphy of Hawai'i. I wanted to be that guy. I wanted to be different from all the comics. And he said: You not going make money doing that; you gotta work clean.

And that's the best advice someone gave me, because I'm still working. Twenty-five years later, I'm still working. You know, and so, I'm always going to be thankful to Andy. You know, and honestly, soon after that, two weeks later, I bump into Booga Booga.

Okay; now, younger people won't know who Booga Booga is. But fabulous, fabulous comedian troupe.

Yeah. Rap Reiplinger, James Grant Benton, and Ed Ka'ahea. And of course, you know, Rap passed away, but my dad took me to a food product show; Rap was performing. He signed my arm; I never wash my arm for a week. You know, because I loved what he did. And of course, I did Rap Reiplinger at my speech contest in the eighth grade. So, I did comedy. Meet Andy Bumatai; two weeks later, I bump into James Grant Benton and Ed Ka'ahea. I'm like: Oh, my god; can I be your light boy? So, I was the light boy; they took me on the road, and they realized like: Eh, this kid knows all of Rap's lines. So, I became the last unknown member of Booga Booga. Did several, you know, performances with James and Ed, and man, they became my mentors. Later on, you know, Frank Delima, we toured together. And Mel Cabang; Mel Cabang gave me an advice. We were on Kauai, and he was like: You're performing too much; be yourself, be yourself. 'Cause he saw talent, he said: Just be yourself on stage.

Which is not easy to do.

Yeah; because I thought I had to be, you know, really you know, um ...

Amped up.

Yeah. I had to draw these huge pictures. Like: Ah, just be yourself.

I just wonder how many people who intend to be comedians have any idea of how much hard work it is.

Yeah; it's tough. You know, at the end of the day, you can be funny, but if nobody's listening to you talk. You know, and like I said, twenty-six years, this year, and people still coming down to the shows, sitting down, they like hear.

How has your humor changed over those twenty-six years?

Yeah; you can tell. I mean, when I first started, I was like the moke action guy. You know, a little older now, I'm seeing life differently. You know, there's a lot of observance.

You do more social observations.

Yeah. I talk about my kids, I talk about my family. You know, that way, you cannot get in trouble.

You can get in trouble talking about your family.

You can. You can, by your mom. That's it. You know, you shouldn't say that, Augie; so stupid, you. You know, but they love it. You know, I have a overachieving daughter that created B.R.A.V.E. Hawai'i. It's a anti-bullying foundation. My stepdaughter does my bookings. Bo and Taj, you know, they help Dad look good; they do my hair. They both are hairstylists, and I talk about them. They're both, you know, openly gay men. You know, twelve, thirteen years ago, talking about your kids being gay was like, almost like, whoa. But now, I get stories on how people say: Aug, because was so easy for watch you accept who your kids are, made it easy for me. So now, I get guys, construction workers, cops: Augie, I like tell you something. What's that, brah? Eh, my boy māhū too. All right. Yeah!

How was that for you? Did you immediately accept when they told you they were gay?

Yeah. You know, at the end of the day, that's your kids. That's why it's so hard for me to see parents that, you know, like, disown their children. That's your kid, that's your blood, you know. Yeah; I might not agree with everything, but that's my kid at the end of the day.

So, you didn't have to go ask for advice, or agonize about it.

No; I already knew. I always tell people: I knew from the beginning. Leslie, I've become the gay expert. Honestly. People ask me: You know, how you know your kids gay? I go: Watch how they run. I was like: My son was—

That's a stereotype.

Yeah. I know, but he was flapping his wings when he was running. I was like: Why you gotta flap your wings? Do this. So, you know. But it's comedy, and it's healing. You know, and that was my way of dealing with that, you know. And my son tells everybody: You know, my dad, he over-exaggerates. At the end of the day ...

That's comedy.

Yeah. He loves me, and I'm okay with it, calm down. You know, so ...

But it takes a while before people feel secure enough to be able to laugh at something or with something.

Yeah. You know, after my dad got sick, Mom and Dad moved into the home, and you know, every day, I get to pick on my mom. Just watch my YouTube page, Leslie. You'll be like: I cannot believe he said that to his mom. You no like use stereotypes, but my mom is Portagee. My mom is—oh! She says the most funniest things. We were up in Makawao at a silent auction, and my mom was like ...

Trying not bid?

I'm like: Ma, how come you get your hand covering your mouth? This one silent auction. No, you can talk, Ma; you can talk. How come they call 'em one silent auction, if you can talk, Augie? Stupid, yeah, this kind auction. Why don't just start talking auction; why gotta be silent auction?

Comedian Augie T can find humor in almost any situation and make people laugh. But that doesn't mean he thinks everything is funny, or that he hasn't wrestled with his own demons.

You have a life coach.

Yeah.

How did that happen and what does that mean?

Ooh, man. It was a really dark time in my adult life. You know, I was helping a company. I help him build his company, did really well, and then out of nowhere, he just kinda left.

Mm.

Left me. You know, like how I going support my family now? Because I have bad memories of growing up poor, that's like my biggest fear; like, not being able to provide for my family. So, I was talking to somebody, and they referred me to my life coach now. And we talked, and a lot of those fears is because of growing up.

It goes way back, doesn't it?

Yeah. And you know, there's so much good in us, and there's so much bad. And when we learn how to manage all of that, you know, and I think we don't ever stop learning. We should be coachable all the time, you know. So, yeah, I have a life coach, but I have other coaches—my wife.

And you listen.

Yes.

You always have, actually.

I try, with my wife.

So, with the life coach, did you find out anything that was kinda one of those aha moments?

Yeah. Oh; you know, you don't want to ever look back. You know, and I think I learned that you develop a lot of your thinking from age zero eight. And was hard going back, looking at, you know ...

You developed ideas that you still held many years later.

Oh, yeah. And you cannot blame your parents for that. You blame yourself. You know, you drew that pictures.

For example? What do you mean?

Well, you know, my dad loved to drink, like every local dad. You know, City and County worker. And I remember coming home on Friday, and I would see the blue tarp in the back yard. And I went: Oh, no! They going drink, going get loud, going get fighting. You know, and I used to have nightmares. You know. Not so much the drinking, but the arguments after, you know. And I really blocked it out I think because of that, you know. And a lot of the insecurities of like, why I wasn't, you know, cuddled by my dad. You know. So, it's kinda weird how you block that off, but you made this really bad picture of life. You know. Because you know, you saw bad examples, and ... you know.

Did you consciously change that with your sons?

I did. You know, luckily, I have a very understanding wife that goes: Augie ... 'cause was tough. I'm not gonna lie to you, and I talk about that in the act. Because you know, it is. You know, I say in my act: Parents don't go to bed at night; please let my son be a ballerina. You know, and that's funny, but you know, we want the best for our children. And was tough, and you know, yeah, of course, you going block 'em out, because you heard all the negative, you heard the bad things, you know. And it's so weird, because as my dad got older, he became more accepting. 'Cause you know, we had five brothers. If we, you know, ate one certain way; Eh, how come you eating that way? What, you māhū? Everything was like that; really harsh. You know, so of course, you drew pictures of that, and you never like be that. But you saw a lot of that

in you. So, was tough, you know. But you know, like I said, at the end of the day, because my dad never love the way I wanted him to love, of course, you going love your children differently.

And adversity really provides some of the best stories.

Yeah.

They're probably some of the best humor you could have.

Yeah. Yeah; that's why it's getting harder, because you know, my kids successful. They're overachievers.

If you were sitting now in Kalihi Valley Housing with the young Augie ...

M-hm.

If you could talk to your young self, what would you say, and how would you say it?

Get ready for a ride. It's going be an amazing ride. It's gonna take you through ups and downs, but you going be okay.

Comedian Augie T continues to work as hard as he has since he was a multitasking teenager, starting with his radio program every weekday morning before going on to his day job. And on top of that, he has television spots, and weekend performance gigs. Yet, I don't think he'd have it any other way. Mahalo to Augie T Augie Tulba, of 'Ewa Beach, O'ahu, for taking time out of your busy schedule to share your life stories with us. And mahalo to you, for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

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Have you evolved very much as a comedian, do you think?

No, I think I'm still that innocent local guy.

You're not that innocent, but you ...

Well, I play that on stage, only because I do see life like that. When I say innocent, you know, I like the stereotype, I like talking to a lot of my cousins. Really don't take things, you know, serious, they don't see the world the way we see it. They don't watch news,

so when you ask them a question, you know, you always get that local guy. Eh ... You friends with Guy Hagi, you guys do the Cheap Eats. You know. That's the guy I love doing, because you know, I'm so familiar with that guy. And when I play that guy on stage, people love it, because everybody has an uncle like that. So like, I like looking at the world that way. That very innocent local guy, you know, that when you guys did the news—remember doing the news, and you guys interviewed that one local guy, and you know going be funny, because he's like: Yeah, uh ... He don't know how look at the camera. That's the funniest for me, you know. Yeah, it's a stereotype, yes, but it's innocent, and it's fun. You know, so I like playing that role.