

# LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



**TITLE: Fred Hemmings**

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**Have you ever had a spill, where you thought you were gonna die?**

Yes; yeah.

**Held underwater?**

Yes; it's the worst way to die.

**Do you know which way is up when you're down there?**

No, because for a minute, you're in sheer terror, thinking you're gonna die. And one of the things you tell yourself on a big wave wipeout is, you don't take your death breath. There's a point where your body says you gotta take a breath, and it takes a breath, and you swallow water and you die. So, it is an absolutely terrifying feeling. Yeah. But you only feel it if you live.

**Fred Hemmings has had many death-defying experiences that he lived to tell about. Waterman, entrepreneur, lawmaker; he's done it all. And not for love of money; mostly for the sheer enjoyment of doing it. Fred Hemmings, 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. Ask anyone who Fred Hemmings is, and you'll get a wide range of answers: legendary surfer, channel winning canoe paddler and steersman, professional surfing contest producer, marathon runner, national television sports commentator, State Representative and State Senator, and back in the day, a Punahou School football player on a renowned championship team. Retired now, Fred Hemmings has been all of these things during his lifetime. Yet, for all of his endeavors and accomplishments, there's one description that he is most proud of: local boy. It speaks not only to his family roots, but to his pride in his island home. The third of six children, he grew up in Honolulu in the 1950s and 60s in a landscape that is unrecognizable today.**

I count as one of my greatest fortunes, besides my family, being born and raised in Hawai'i. My roots are very deep in Hawai'i. My mother's side of the family, which is Portuguese, got here in 1881 from Funchal, Madeira, Portugal of a Portuguese island. And my dad got here in 1925 from New York City, as a young boy. We were a home of modest means. We weren't by any means wealthy. And you know, we lived rather frugally. It was an interesting time. Lived in Kaimukī; born and raised in Kaimukī. Kaimukī boy.

**You also lived in Kāhala, though.**

I lived in Kāhala uh, when it was pig farms, and farms.

**And it was all muddy, it had dirt roads.**

Oh, there were basically three paved roads: Aukai, Kāhala Avenue, and Kealaolu that goes along the edge of the golf course. I lived on the next road up from Aukai; it was called Farmers Road, and it was a dirt road.

**And there was a reason it was called Farmers Road.**

Exactly.

**People don't realize that now, perhaps.**

Yes; yes. Between Farmers Road and Kaimukī, there was no houses, because there was no subdivision. And it was three-acre farm lots. Bishop Estate, which owned it all, had three-acre farm lots. And my grandfather, Arthur Freitas, a gentleman of Portuguese ancestry, and a great bon vivant, what a character he was. He raised horses. So, we had three horses, and we lived on a three and a half acre farm lot along with mostly Japanese farmers who were growing lettuce, cabbage, and other things in Kāhala. But Farmers Road was a farmers' road. I went to Star of the Sea, a Catholic school, you know, my early years, a kindergartner. I went to Star of the Sea when it was still across from the old Keokara Store. There was no Kāhala. Keokara was on the corner of what now would be Kilauea and Wai'alae Avenue. And across the street was the old Hung Wai Gee that then turned into Star of the Sea School. And so, it was the old Hung Wai Gee. Classic; you know, the wood buildings and all of that. So, that's where I started school.

**Your mother was Portuguese.**

Yes.

**Your dad, English-Irish.**

Right.

**What was your family culture like?**

You know, there's really something funny. As rough and tough as my father was, hard-drinking, you know, a real rugged guy, the facts are that Portuguese women, they're even tougher. But she was real quiet, you know, but ultimately, my mother would rule the day. And she instilled in us a lot of the values that I think have been an asset in my life. Most especially, I think values that come from what I call the holy trinity of humankind. You know, we're physical beings, and we nourish that through exercise and good health and eating habits. We're intellectual beings; we nourish it through education. But most importantly, I think is, we're spiritual beings, and who we are, the goodness of who we are is our spiritual being. And my mother, in her own way, being a Catholic and being the way she was, she nourished honest, hardworking, spiritual values that I think endure throughout the betterment of humankind. So, she was something special.

**What were you like as a kid? You said your dad was rough and ready; were you?**

We all had nicknames; my dad named us. My sister was Big C; my brother Mark was Butchie. My nickname was Bully Beef.

**Because?**

I was a bully beef kinda kid. You know, I was a rough, tough, rolling around, rough 'em up kid.

**Does that mean you were a bully?**

No; it just meant rough.

**Bully.**

Yeah, yeah.

**I know what you mean.**

Bully, bully, bully boy, you know.

**Yeah.**

Bully boy kind guy.

**So, you're always ready to wrestle, or whatever it was.**

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. And being a hard-headed young boy of Portuguese ancestry, if anybody would give me any grief, you know, I wouldn't back away. I got in my fair share of fights when I was kid.

**When you say your fair share, what does that mean? In connection with Portuguese ancestry?**

Well, you know how kids are. No, kids argue about all kinds of different thing. And you know, like if I got off the bus in Kaimukī from Punahou, I was all of a sudden a Haole getting off the bus from Punahou. You know. When I was at Punahou, I was Fred Hemmings the Portagee. But when I got off the Punahou bus in Kaimukī, because I was getting off a Punahou bus, I was a Haole. So, guys would make remarks. Eh, Haole; eh, Haole. You're too young to remember this, but they'd say: Eh, you like beef?

**Oh, I remember that.**

You remember that? You like beef? Eh, punk, you like beef? And I'd say, yeah.

**And it was because of your ethnicity?**

Because they perceived me as a Punahou Haole. It was stereotyping of the worst sorts. You know.

**And on the Punahou side, they said what?**

I was a Portagee; Fred Hemmings the Portagee.

**And what did that connote in those days?**

I wasn't one of them. You know, I'm a kid, and I'd say: Well, I'm really not one of these guys, I'm not a wealthy Caucasian; I'm a Portagee at Punahou. You know. And I was on financial aid, and I worked in the cafeteria. One of my claims to fame is, my Aunt Min Marciel introduced the malasadas to the Punahou carnival.

**There you go. So, did that do the trick? Did you feel like one of the bunch?**

Nah ... I've always taken pride in my Portuguese heritage.

**And you distinguished yourself at Punahou as an athlete.**

M-hm.

**In those days, football was everything.**

Oh, gosh.

**And you surfed as a recreational fun thing.**

I grew up in a surfing family. My dad and Lex Brodie surfed together in Waikīkī as young boys. They both went to Roosevelt together. And so, my playground when I was kid wasn't on a baseball field or anything; it was the surf at Waikīkī, where I learned to surf. And one of the greatest blessings in my life is growing up in the shadow of Duke Kahanamoku and the other beach boys. But my father wanted me to be a football player. 'Cause he played football at Roosevelt, I was gonna play football. So, I got involved in Pop Warner Football, and I did pretty well at it.

**What position did you play?**

Funny story; let me tell you. I found out in my senior year at Punahou when I played with Charlie Wedemeyer, the ILH championship was a real big deal back then.

**Absolutely.**

'Cause that was the only game in town. I found out I was pretty fast and could run well. 'Cause I was linebacker and, you know, all these little, scrawny little running backs would come out of the backfield, and I'd nail 'em like a heat-seeking missile. I should have been a running back, but I had polio. Four of the children that were alive in the early 50s, we all had polio. And so, my father decided in his mind that I was a plug, that I couldn't run fast 'cause the polio was lumbar polio, and my legs were quite weak for a while. I had to do a lot of things at Shriners Hospital to rehab my legs. Didn't cripple me, but it made me not be able to run fast. So, my father said: You've gotta play on the line. So, I ended up playing on offensive center in middle line, which is kinda fun. Not as fun as running with the ball and making a touchdown, you know, 'cause linemen, they don't get any credit. We just block and get our butts kicked. But it was great.

**When did you get polio?**

1952.

**So, you were just a little kid.**

Yeah. It was just weak legs for a while, and I eventually rebounded out of it. And within two or three years, you know, I was running and jumping around like any normal kid.

**But your dad had a sense that you could use your legs, but not fast.**

Exactly. In his mind, I was a plug. And he'd call me that, too.

**Oh; what did that do? Did that make you feel bad, or did it make you want to ...**

Oh, I believed him. Yeah. That's one thing parents should really learn is, be careful of what you say to your kids. 'Cause they're more than likely gonna believe you. And so, always plant seeds of confidence and goodness with your kids.

**So now, you realize that you could run fast, and knock people down.**

Yeah; by the time I was a senior at Punahou playing with Charlie Wedemeyer, I was playing on the line now. We used to play both ways; offensive line, and then defense. I was a linebacker, and I could run down the little backs, and you know, like I said, nail 'em. And I said: Eh, I'm not that slow, I could have been a running back.

**And that was a great team you were on.**

Oh, it was unbelievable. I'll never forget, Leslie, what a thrill. November, Turkey Day of 1964, we took a bus with a police escort to the old Honolulu Stadium. We warmed up on our field, not in the stadium, and they were all wondering where's the Punahou team. And we took a bus. We ran off the bus through the portal, and right onto the field to play the game. And I was one of the captains. And we beat Kamehameha. We were tied; we'd gone through the whole season, Kamehameha had lost a game, we'd lost a game. So, Turkey Day was for the championship. And there were twenty-five thousand plus people in the old Termitte Palace, which was the stadium. There were folding chairs along the edge of the field so they could maximize the crowd. And we ran onto the field, and at the end of the game, we won twenty to six. We beat Kamehameha for the championship. Which back then was a real big deal; ILH champions.

**Fred Hemmings grew up surfing in Waikiki. He competed in amateur surfing events around the globe, winning many of them. This was during the 1960s, when the surfing craze was taking over the nation, and Hemmings saw an economic opportunity.**

I didn't go to college. I went to college for one year at UH, and then I quit to start professional surfing and start the business of professional surfing. I went surfing, basically. But I'm telling all my grandkids, and as I told my children: You've gotta go to college if you want to be successful. But as fate would have it, not going to college

was, in a curious way a blessing for me, because I didn't have an occupation. I could go where my nose took me in life. I surfed with the greatest surfers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the 60s. Joey Cabell, Paul Strauch, and then a guy who was the first Pipeline which history has forgotten, a guy named Butch Van Artsdalen, and myself were the Duke's surf team.

**You also mentioned that Duke Kahanamoku was perhaps one of the greatest citizens of Hawaii you've ever met.**

When I was a little boy, back then, lot of local guys would call the younger boy: Eh, boy. You'd never say the name. He wouldn't say Fred; Eh, boy. But then, I got to be a member when I got to be a fairly good surfer; I got put on the Duke's surf team, and I traveled with Duke. I think I can honestly say the most beloved citizen of Hawai'i, the person we loved the most because of the content of his spirit, not his accomplishments, was Duke. A handsome Hawaiian, a man who knew no malice or negative.

**So, you were an amateur surfer. Surfing in competitions, you did well in competitions.**

Yeah; I did pretty good. I never surfed professionally. I started professional surfing. Surfing had grown under the leadership of a guy named Eduardo Arena of Peru, and he developed a world surfing championship. They held the first one in Peru in '65, and then they held one in San Diego, and finally went to Puerto Rico when I competed in it and did pretty good. It's their fiftieth anniversary this year. I read a poem, probably the only thing I ever remember, poetry in school; it was by A.E. Housman. It said: Smart lad, to slip betimes away, From fields where glory does not stay, And early though the laurel grows, It withers quicker than the rose. It was about an athlete who died young, and they were carrying him through the town. And laurel would never wither, because he got buried as a champion. And what that said to me was that, leave the field when you're a champion. You know, don't become a has-been. And I didn't want to become a has-been, but I also saw the economic opportunity of starting professional surfing. I got hired by the Smirnoff to put on their meet, which originally was California, and then it moved here. And the following year, in 1971, I started the Pipeline Masters, which believe it or not, is in its forty-eighth year. Gosh; I think I was eight years old when I started it.

**And you're not involved in it anymore?**

No; I sold my proprietary—same thing with my life. In 1988, I was really proud Leslie. I had surfing events on all three television networks. This was before there was cable television.

**While Fred Hemmings was busy with his amateur and professional surfing careers, there was another sport that was close to his heart. He was a champion outrigger canoe steersman.**

I learned to steer a canoe in an old koa boat called the Ka Moi. It's now hanging in the bar of the Outrigger.

**That's the other thing; you were a member of the Outrigger Canoe Club, even though, as you say, you're a family of modest means.**

Right.

**How did that happen?**

That happened very modestly. You know, we couldn't charge in the snack bar or anything, but we were all members 'cause my dad wanted us to paddle and surf, and he wanted us to be members of the Outrigger. And we were. And you know, the Outrigger is like Punahou; people can sometimes stereotype the Outrigger. But I'm so proud of the Outrigger. It has really contributed significantly to watersports in Hawai'i. Outrigger paddlers and surfers have been amongst the world's best. It's won more Moloka'i to Oahu canoe races than any other club.

**So, it was your hangout when you were in school?**

Paddled every summer. You know, we had regattas. Back when I started paddling, there were no fiberglass canoes, there was only koa canoes.

**And they were heavy.**

Oh, yeah.

**What about the paddles?**

The paddles were wood and very heavy. Yeah. But things have changed, progress. But to the credit of canoe paddling, they've done an excellent job of preserving the integrity of the sport.

**And you're a steersman. So, that's a very key position on the boat. All of them are key positions, but you call the shots on the boat. What does a steersman do? Maybe you could explain all the things.**

You're very intuitive that way. I used to steer, and I was very much the boss of the boat. The steersman thinks about the course, the steersman thinks about working the ocean,



working the wind, how to avoid currents. And there's a thousand things a good steersman should learn about. When you're in the Molokai race, is the tide coming in? If it is, you run a little more inshore, because it runs faster near the shore. The tide's going out, you stay away 'cause it's pulling Makapu'u from Moloka'i. So, there's all these little subtleties to being a good steersman, that the steersman should worry about. Of course, in the regatta season when they race around flags, it's a little different.

**Your family seems to have a steersman gene. Don't you have generations of steersmen in your family?**

Four.

**Four?**

My grandson Trevor, who's sixteen now, just won the state varsity paddling championship, steering at Punahou. So, he's a fourth generation canoe paddler steersman. Which is something; fourth generation. My dad, my son. My son's won a couple Moloka'is. He's real good.

**I saw a photo of you surfing this huge wave in a canoe.**

Yeah.

**Where was that?**

A place called Castles. Ancient times, it was called Kalehuawehe. Those swells come from New Zealand. They come actually five thousand miles; it takes them ten days to get here. And by the time they get here, if it's a really huge swell, it can get up to fifteen feet out at Castles. It's where Duke got his legendary ride in 1917, from out at Castles.

**Have you ever had a spill, where you thought you were gonna die?**

Yes; yeah.

**Held underwater?**

Yes; it's the worst way to die.

**Do you know which way is up when you're down there?**

No, because for a minute, you're in sheer terror, thinking you're gonna die. And one of the things you tell yourself on a big wave wipeout is, you don't take your death breath.

There's a point where your body says you gotta take a breath, and it takes a breath, and you swallow water and you die. So, it is an absolutely terrifying feeling. Yeah. But you only feel it if you live. So, I can remember a couple times. Yeah.

**And how did you break out of it? How did you get free?**

You finally break the surface and you take a breath. And you know, you live.

**You were able to endure until you can get out, get up.**

Well, once you get your air back in your lungs, you know, the next wave comes. What happens when you wipe out is, the water in the surf line is usually moving. 'Cause once a wave breaks, it becomes moving. You get pushed in. That's where rip currents come from. So, you get pushed in enough where you're not in the lineup for the next wave, usually. So, the next wave hits, you know, it's soda water. You just dive under it. You know. And when you wipe out on a big wave ... this was before you could get towed in; you had to paddle in. So, you're taking a lot of your energy; it's like running, and then, you jump in a washing machine. And usually, when you wipe out, you get—pah! You know, you smack the water. So, you put all those combination things; you don't get held under much longer than twenty seconds, but that's plenty enough to drown. 'Cause you don't have any air. And you know, when you suck in a breath of air, that air goes to the muscles that are working. And so, you can try to release quick. But fortunately, you know, most of us made it successfully. There are some that haven't, though.

**When you've had a close call like that, how long does it take you to go back into the water, in big water?**

As long as it takes to get your board, and go back out.

**Fred Hemmings continued to take ocean risks that could have ended in disaster, and he took some hits on land, too. It wasn't until he had a particularly harrowing tree-cutting accident that he started thinking differently.**

I've had my share of accidents. I cut my toe off; three of my toes off with a lawnmower. The worst one was actually pretty serious, and this happened late in 2015. I was sawing down a tree along the side of the road, and it fell down and it kicked back, and it hit me in the chest and broke eight of my ribs, punctured my lung, and crushed my shoulder.

**Were you alone?**

By myself; yeah. I'll never forget this. So, I flew through the air. You know how they say when you die, you relive your life. I said to myself: Oh, S, I killed myself. Then I blacked out, and then, I finally came to, and I couldn't move the side of my body. It was a real funny feeling. And I reached into my pocket and grabbed cell phone, and I called some people, and they called the ambulance. But then, when I went to the hospital, they OD'd me on opioids, and my heart stopped, and they had to jolt me back. So, I'm very cautious now when I do yardwork.

**But you still do yardwork?**

Little bit.

**Did your life change because of life-threatening incidents like that? Have you changed your life any?**

I've had a lot of life-threatening incidences. But this one did change me. All the rest, like almost dying in the surf, and you know, having all these other perilous situations I've been in; you know, I've done a lot of things that are kind of on the edge. But that did change my life.

**How so?**

I was scared.

**Of?**

Death.

**Mm. And so, you're careful?**

Yeah. You're scared of losing not your life; you're scared of losing your grandkids, and your family, and you know, things you love.

**Yeah.**

So, it's a strange feeling.

**Mortality.**

Yes; mortality. Exactly. I used to, with reckless abandon, take the canoe out to Castles to ride big waves in a canoe. I'm a little gun shy now; I'm not gonna take a chance that's gonna kill me. You know, when you're younger, you know, that's part of the DNA of humankind. There are some guys that got that alpha gene, that they're gonna risk

their life, and that's what progressed humanity, is the guys that leave the safety of the status quo and venture. You know, it's a star trek gene, I call it. It's the genetics of star trek, to go where no one's gone before. That's what advances humanity.

**Are you saying you had that before, but now, you're reining that in?**

I had it in spades. I mean, I had it triple-time. And now, well, I'm also seventy-two years old, so I don't have to go. I'm done there. You know, I've done my star trek going places where no one's gone before; big waves, politics, surfing, paddling. You know, I've pretty much done everything I've wanted to do.

**What's your goal now?**

What's my goal?

**Yep.**

My goal is to enjoy my family and loved ones with the remaining years I have, and to rekindle friendships with friends around the world and nourish, you know, relationships. I'm not a very materialistic guy. I drive a Honda; you know, I'm not a high-end guy. I don't need to go to fancy restaurants.

**You don't hire a yardman. Or maybe you do now.**

No, I don't.

**You don't?**

I still do a little bit of my own yardwork. You know, the family compound, we have some guys that come in and help out. But I'm a good supavisah.

I can 'em where to go.

**So, you've never regretted that you didn't go for riches, you went for experience?**

Exactly. That's a good thing. I pay my bills, but I'm not a rich man. I have a beautiful family, and I pay my bills, and I'm able to put food on the table, and that's rich enough for me. And what's really nice now for me is, I'm at the age where I can travel to other places and have friends. I love going to Peru, and I have a lot of friends around the world that I can occasionally visit, and they visit here. So, it's a rich life without a lot of money.

**Besides being a legendary waterman, Fred Hemmings is probably best remembered as a rare Republican State Senator in Hawai'i. And he brought the first surf shop to Ala Moana Center. In 2017, he wrote a book, *Local Boy*, a memoir. Mahalo to Fred Hemmings of Lanikai, Windward O'ahu, for sharing your stories 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 would run at night. I wouldn't go to bed; I'd meet a buddy at nine-thirty, ten o'clock at night, and run in the mountains. And so, I wrote about it in the book; it's under Running. It says: One of the most beautiful moments ever was when Kent and I were running the Maunawili Trail to Waimanalo on a cool, full moon night. About halfway to Waimanalo, we rounded the Ko'olau Ridge that was high promontory. It was very still and eerie, and quiet. The luminescent moon was bright, casting a blue hue over the Windward Coast. It was ethereal. We stopped running, and pulled plastic ponchos from our butt packs and lied next to the trail, and basked in the soft light of the eerie night. Surely, God was on the high altar on the Ko'olau Ridge. He touched us. So, that's a message, I think, that I learned, that you know, money can't buy that, those moments. You know, we have such great gifts, if we take the time to appreciate 'em. You don't have to be a rich fat cat, or you don't have to have a fancy car. You don't need to go to, you know, wherever to be happy. You take it in your own spirit, what you appreciate in life.