

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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MARION HIGA: At times, it felt almost personal. But I didn't take it that way, because it was my job. And I always go back to the constitutional language; this is what the constitutional drafters expected of this office. And as long as I'm doing that, then any governor can complain as much as they like.

KITTY YANNONE: I've had Democrats publicly won't have anything to do with me. But late at night, when they need some advice, they call me, and they return my calls. I've had media people. I think when you're a little more outspoken and they have a sense you're authentic about it, they return your calls. And you know what? It never stopped me from doing what I do, with the utmost integrity and professionalism.

KIMI WERNER: All I just told myself is: I want diving to always give me that feeling that I had of bringing home those little fish, you know, on that first dive, and knowing in my heart that I was happy and proud of that, and that I felt satisfied with that. And that's the feeling that I wanted. I didn't quite know what type of path that would take me on, or how it would affect my career, but I just knew I wanted that back.

Marion Higa stood up to two governors to stop an auditing practice that she felt was inappropriate. Kitty Yannone defied the local political system by supporting a Republican for governor. And Kimi Werner was at the peak of her powers when she quit national spearfishing competitions. They followed their instincts and their hearts, and they did it their way, 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. Sometimes, it takes an enormous amount of courage to do what you know to be right, when others want you to do otherwise, when it would be much easier to simply to go with the flow. On this episode of Long Story Short, we revisit three women who have previously been guests on this program. Each followed her own path, respectively refusing to give in to political pressure, community disapproval, or turning away from a popular identity that did not reflect her core values.

We begin with Marion Higa. For almost two decades, she was the Hawai'i State Auditor, investigating the use of State resources and exposing inefficiencies. She as unflinching

when agencies criticized her, knowing she had a job to do, and believing she was representing the best interests of the people of Hawai'i. One of the highest visibility audits she performed was on the Superferry. The State government wanted the Superferry to be up and running as soon as possible. But the community was divided in its support for the ferry. The State Auditor was called in to analyze the administration's environmental review.

The environmental groups had challenged the lack of the EIS early enough. I think it wasn't completed by the time they started sailing because you might remember that the first ship was delivered. And I think Superferry was trying to avoid the timetable, and so they had planned to start service to Nawiliwili, again, because they could do that most easily. And people in Kaua'i jumped in the water and kept them from docking, so they never docked. They had to turn around and come back. Now, in the course of all of this, then the State had put up forty-two million dollars' worth of improvements. But because of the way they designed or had to design these improvements, and the sourcing of these materials, it could not be used, because they were not U.S.-sourced. That was the other problem.

What did you hear from the administration about that?

Oh, they objected, of course, to our findings, and had their own responses. But I mean, we could support our findings.

What was your recommendation?

I think our recommendation was ... well, first of all, the EIS; I mean, there was no question that they had to follow the EIS. But I think eventually, we softened the recommendation, because there was the other court case that was still proceeding and was going to the Supreme Court. So, I think we predicted that nothing be hard and fast decided until that case was settled. Eventually, the court came down, one could say, on the side of the environmentalists, and required the EIS.

How did you feel about the stinging rebuke from the administration?

I didn't take it personally. I mean, I expected it, because there was so much at stake. And I understood that even the legislators, some of the legislators who had been avid supporters would be disappointed, at best.

Especially since they had put through a bill that allowed ... it seemed it was written for a particular company, but general language was used, except the timeframe was so short that it looked like it was written specifically for the Superferry.

Yes; it looked like special purpose legislation, which again, is not permitted by State law.

And so, that was people you worked for who were on the other end of criticism.

That's right. And so, you know, they're party to that process. But again, it's like: Well, that's my job, I have to say it the way it is.

Even if it's your job, and you say you're doing it on the straight and narrow, what's it like riding that wave, where basically are taking shots at you as you take that position?

You know, like I said, it's my job. This is what the constitution was intended for us to do, and if we can defend the work. And so, the process seems so laborious, and it's so careful. There's a whole system; it's all electronic now, the working papers are electronic. But there's a citation system involved in our work, so every fact can be traced back to a source document. And so, working for the Auditor's Office is not easy. You have to be very meticulous, and be able to defend your work. But as long as the overall conclusions are supported by this mountain of evidence, it's all defensible.

I always used to think it was so funny when you'd come walking into a legislative hearing room, hearing about an audit of the administration. I mean, how tall are you?

Four-ten; barely four-ten, more like four-nine.

Four-ten; and it was as if a towering figure were coming in, this shadow was entering the room. Did you get that feeling, that's how people were reacting to you?

Sometimes; yes. Uh-huh; uh-huh.

And you wouldn't back down, either.

No, because that's not my job. My job is to support the report, because that stands for our work.

Any memorable exchanges between you and someone else?

A few times. I guess I was at ... Ways and Means once, and I had a minority member ask me ... hunched over the table like this, he says: Ms. Higa ... who do you work for? Who do you work for? Ms. Higa, who do you work for? And I said: The people of Hawaii. No; who do you really work for? The people of Hawai'i. What he was trying to get me to say was, I work for the majority party. And that's not who I worked for. I said: The constitution says I'm the auditor, I'm the State Auditor, I work for the people. So, he gave up.

Kitty Yannone, formerly known as Kitty Lagareta, started her professional journey as a volunteer fundraiser for the Ronald McDonald House. This eventually led to her present career as the CEO of a successful company offering integrated communication services. Kitty Yannone is known for following her instincts. She's bucked public opinion, and risked her business. One of her biggest risks was in ardently supporting a Republican candidate for governor.

I'd met Linda Lingle when she was mayor of Maui through some volunteer work with high school students that we'd gone over there to do, and I didn't know her very well at all. And she called one day and wanted to meet with me. And my husband answered the phone, and he said: The mayor of Maui wants to talk to you. I'm like: Why does she want to talk to me? It was like, a Sunday. I go: What does she want? And he goes: Why don't you talk to her and find out. She asked if she could meet, and she was thinking about running for governor in a couple years. This was maybe a year or two. And so, I went and met with her. I think I spent five hours asking her questions, and I knew nothing about politics. And she said: That's okay, we'll figure it out; it's a big race, I need a communications person, I think you're kind of a smart person. And I'd volunteered on a couple political things, but nobody ever wanted to use that part of me they wanted me to stuff envelopes, which was fine, or do stuff which was happy to do, and it's important stuff. But I was kind of intrigued by having somebody want me to be involved in the strategic side. So, I started helping her in '98, and I immediately got calls from a lot of people around town, friends, parents of kids. You know, if you're gonna do politics at this time, it's really kinda stupid to get involved with the party that has no power. And I said: Yeah, but I like this candidate, and I really want to do this. And I didn't lose any clients; no clients said: I'm gonna quit. They just, I think, were kind of bemused. And Linda came within five thousand votes, and it was a huge learning and a wonderful experience for me, except for the losing part. But we all took it harder than she did. And before we had even let the dust settle, she was saying: We're gonna do this again in 2002. And I remember thinking: Eee, I don't know. But of course, I was onboard for 2002.

Had you suffered business-wise, advocating for her?

You never know what you don't get. I think once people realized she was a serious candidate, I certainly did, you know, I think. And I tend to vote for people, and like people more than parties. I don't really feel connected to parties. I'm sort of a fiscal conservative and a social liberal. And particularly during that time, it was like somebody had branded a big R on my forehead; she's a Republican. And all that they equate with anybody of any political party is interesting. And so, that was a new experience for me.

But you weren't following the playbook of most public relations executives. You were following your mind and, to some extent, your heart.

Yeah. You know, I believe in that, because I think a lot of executives, if they can, they do that. And I just feel even when it's a learning experience, having the experience makes me better overall. And that was a learning experience. And by gosh, in 2002, we pulled it off, and that was interesting. And I thought we were done. That was the other thing, kind of still had naïveté, not having been in politics. It was like: Okay, we're done, I can go back to my life. And I remember Linda called and she said: You know, I think you would be one of the people I want to recommend for Board of Regents. And I remember saying: Oh, why that? I mean, I don't know.

Talk about political.

She had to talk me into it.

What you got into was a mire with the president of the University, Evan Dobbelle.

Yeah.

And a very slippery situation. And your expertise is public relations, but it was very hard to manage it.

Yeah; and it's hard to be in it and manage something. I know that. Therapists will tell you: I can't do therapy in my own family. When you're one of the players in something, and everybody's got their own opinion, you're not the PR managing something then, I think.

And as the chair of the Board of Regents.

Yeah.

I mean, I think there was a perception at some time that you were bungling it.

Yeah; yeah. I actually thought I was. I knew it was bungled, but I also had the perspective of there was a whole bunch of stuff. You know, it was an employee-employer relationship between the Board and Evan. And there are certain laws you have to follow, confidentiality and things. So, we were not in a position to say: Hey, we tried this, we did this. And I think the employee can say whatever they want pretty much, really. And you see that over and over. So, that was a disadvantage, and it was hard. The other part was, you know, you will never know the effort we made to do it carefully. And the sense, I think, that was there was that, I have this contract, no way you're gonna get me out of it, and I'm not going anywhere. And as time went on, I think it became clear the University was suffering, and we had to do something. And in fact, our creditors told us that. And it felt very bungled. It felt like there were lots of

pieces that you couldn't control. It was horrible watching the public perception of it, and knowing there was another story, but you can't be the one to tell it. You're the employer. That was really rugged, I think for all of us. And yet, I found the decision we made to be the right one. I've never regretted that decision. How it unfolded and what it looked like on the outside; yeah, there was a lot of regret about that, but not the decision. And I don't think any of us did.

So, the right outcome.

The right outcome; and it really was. You know, that's the decision. I mean, there were regents who quit because they didn't want to go down. They knew what needed to be done, but they didn't want to be in the middle of all that. And there were some amazing people who stuck around and said: This needs to be done for the good of our university. And I think there is some vindication in what happened at Westfield College. It's pretty much what happened here. That's taken a different more public turn, I think. But came many years later, but it was there, and we did make the right decision. And under David McClain's leadership, we went on to have some finished capital campaign, move a lot of things forward at the University. And I look at it that way and say: Yeah, there was some personal pain, and I could have avoided it, but maybe it wouldn't have been the right people in the room to make the decisions that I think were good ones if all of us had done that. I've never found discomfort to be an inhibiting factor. I used to give a speech after—this was when they were saying: Fear is your friend. I use it as like, rocket fuel. When I feel that, it tells me to turn on all my senses and look at something carefully. But sometimes, it really energizes you. And maybe that's what I get from my mom and dad. 'Cause my mom and dad, in their own way, overcame a lot of stuff in their lives, built a really nice life for them and their family, and still do. And they had certain values, and it didn't include being afraid, or being uncomfortable, being something that pulls you up. Yeah.

I'm sure you had some sleepless nights over the regents matter.

Many; I think I didn't sleep for like a whole year.

And that was okay with you, 'cause you felt like you were doing the right thing?

I felt like we were doing the right thing, and I felt like, you know, sometimes that's what they call—that's what I consider when I see people go through that, and I do with my clients sometimes, who are struggling with hard decisions and want to do the right decisions. And I think I'm grateful I've had that experience a few times in my life, because I think that's what you call political courage. I call it that when I see it in other people. And when you're in it, it doesn't feel like any kind of courage; it feels like a nightmare. But in the end, if something good came out or a group of people were

able to come together to make something happen that was right or needed to happen, or bigger than they could do on their own.

What if it fails?

Yeah; it does. I failed in '98. Do you know how many people wouldn't even talk to me after '98? She's the one who went to the other side, you know. I lived through it. I don't know; I feel like I have to live in this world and do things that I think are important. I can't always defer to, that might hurt my business, or that may not. Then I'd just be kind of a shallow person, I feel. You have gauge with life and with issues, and with people, and the world you live in.

Kimberly Maile Reiko Werner, known as Kimi, is a roving ambassador for the American Clothes Company Patagonia, as well as a trained chef and self-taught artist. She grew up in rural Maui, tagging along on ocean dives with her father as he hunted for fish to feed the family. Unsatisfied with her early career choices, she started thinking that maybe her childhood pastimes could still be part of her life. She learned to spearfish, became an accomplished free diver, and a national spearfishing champion. Yet, despite the success and recognition she was gaining through her awards, she realized that spearfishing competition wasn't the right thing for her, either.

You know, my first tournament, that first national championships, that was really special. And coming back home to Hawai'i was just the best feeling in the world, because Hawaii is just the most supportive, loyal, wonderful hometown, I think, that anyone could ever ask for, in my opinion. And the way that people supported me was something that I just was so grateful for. But I think after that, it was never quite the same, because I almost just felt like I just always had a title to defend. I did continue to win in competing, but it was just never as fulfilling to me. And I noticed that even when I would go diving, you know, on my own just for food, all I was thinking about was competition, and you know, I started to think of fish as points, rather than even as food. And once I realized that, I didn't like it. I just realized it's changing me. You know, it's changing this thing that's so sacred to me. It's something that my parents, you know, taught me these values through this. And it's not about these values anymore; it's really about trophies and winning, and recognition. And this was the thing that really made my life fulfilling again. Am I really gonna do this to it? Am I gonna take it to a level where it's all about, you know, chasing titles? Like, I didn't like that. And so, just for those own personal reasons of how I found it affecting me, I did walk away from competition.

I saw you do a TEDx talk, and you said that even though you knew it was the right thing to do, it didn't mean that other people weren't very disappointed in you, and that you felt really bad about it, too.

Oh, definitely. I mean, it was one of the toughest things I've done, because it was right in the peak of what could have been my career. You know, I had sponsors now, and you know, people that believed in me, people that looked up to me. And all of a sudden, I was just gonna walk away from it. And it let down a lot of people, and definitely disappointed people. And for myself too, I mean, I did feel a sense of, you know, confusion, because I felt so lost. I didn't really know who I was without that. It had become so the tunnel vision of my life, and pretty much, you know, everything that was confident-building seemed to come from that department. It was the first time where, you know, my art started to sell more, because my name was out there more. And it just seemed like it was something that was causing so much personal gain that for me to turn and walk away from it, I definitely felt like a loser. You know, I felt like a waste of talent, and I felt like I didn't quite know if I would like ... you know. I didn't know the effects it was gonna have. I didn't know how much it would bum people out, or if I would just never be really supported again, really.

What happened, then?

It took me a while, actually. It was probably a year where a lot of times I would go out diving, and all of a sudden, it wasn't the same happy place it used to be. You know, when I say I'm totally present in the moment, and those voices in my head go quiet, it wasn't happening; these voices were just telling me that I was a loser, and I was failure, and you know, what are you doing, like why are you quitting. And it was still, you know, looking at the fish as points, and so then, I'd have to get out of the water with no fish. And then, I really would beat myself up. Like, I'm not even good at this anymore, I can't even dive 'cause my mind's all messed up. And I got pretty depressed. But through that, you know, I just kinda took some breaks from diving and whatnot. And then this one day, couple friends of mine like said: You need to get back in the water. Like, let's go. And so, we all went out on our kayaks, and again, my brain was just still fighting itself, and I just felt like I wasn't diving the way I dive; I didn't have it anymore. And so, I'm like: Let's just pack it up and go, guys. I know what you're trying to do, and I know you're trying to bring me back, but it's just not fun for me anymore, and there's nothing worse than the feeling of actually being out here and it not being fun anymore, so I just want to go home. And they said: Okay, let's go. But then, I said: You know what, let me just take one last drop. And I put my spear gun on my kayak, didn't even take it down with me, and I just took a dive. And I had my two buddies, you know, spotting me from the surface, so it was safe. But I just took a dive, and just told them to watch me, you know, took a dive. And I got down to the bottom, and I just laid in the sand. I just crossed my arms and I put my face in the sand. And I laid there, and I let every single critic come through my head, every single voice, every single thing that I had beat myself up about, like, I just let it come. And I listened to every single put-down, worry, concern, fear. And they all came, one after another, and I just waited, and I just still waited, held my breath. Okay, what else you got; give it to me. You know, I just waited, and waited, and waited until there was nothing left. And when

there was nothing left, there was not one more voice that could say anything, you know, hadn't already heard. Like, it just went quiet. And as soon as it went quiet, I opened my eyes and I'm on the bottom of the ocean, and I was just back. I think the competition, and just more than that even, just the expectations that I was putting on myself. And I think that can happen a lot with anybody who tries to turn their passion into a career; it can get quite confusing. I think a lot of times, we go into jobs because we're so passionate about our craft, and then before we know it, you know, we're not really enjoying it anymore, and we're going through the motions because we're trying to hit these certain marks of society, whether it's financial success, or I need that house, or I need that car, and before you know it, your own beautiful passion that kinda becomes this vehicle for living unauthentically, and doing things based on expectations that were never really yours to begin with, maybe. Because before, to me, it was never truly about like, oh, that moment when you spear your fish. But it was the feeling that I felt when I would take a drop, and just the serenity that would come over me, and just this feeling of welcome home. And when everything just turned quiet, and I was still there holding my breath, and I looked up and I just saw my two friends, and I saw the sun just sparkling through the ocean surface, and I just looked at the beautiful ocean and hear the noise, you know, the sounds of the ocean, and that was it. I was like, that's the feeling; that's the feeling that satisfies me. And soon as I came up, I didn't even have to say anything; they knew. They knew exactly what had happened, they knew exactly. And I smiled at them, and they were just like: You're back. And I'm like: I'm back. And that was that. And after that, then I just started diving for food again, and just realizing like that's something sacred to me, and I'm going to protect it with everything that I have. I'm gonna do everything I can to keep this pure. Even if it means no success comes from this, this is mine.

Kimi Werner, Kitty Yannone, and Marion Higa followed their instincts and listened to their own voices to do it their way. Mahalo to these three women of Hawai'i for sharing their stories with us. And mahalo to you, for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

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I still get approached by people, total strangers. You know, I mean, it's always complimentary. I know it's a curiosity. I mean, I go into restaurants, and I know people recognize me. You can tell when you're recognized.

And so, do they say: What did you really think?

Sometimes, people will say that. But most of the time, people will come up and thank me for the work that we did. So, I'd like to think that there were some good effects, for some folks, anyway.

Things that I have done that were much harder learning experiences than I anticipated. Ronald McDonald House was that way at times, and certainly Board of Regents, and getting involved politically. There are things in my company I don't have a business background, and I've had to learn through trial and error, experience. I wish I'd known more, but I came out the other side knowing it now, and I don't regret much of anything. I think, you know, I've had sad things and hard things, and it's life. And you know, as long as I keep getting up and experiencing it, I'm kinda happy.

I think by following that passion and really making the commitment to be true to my love for it, surprisingly, it did bring success, and just in so much more of a meaningful way. Because now, it wasn't just any sponsors that I was working with; it was sponsors and companies like Patagonia who truly hold the same values as me, who aren't just, you know, trying to sell an image or, do what's trendy, but really, really believe in trying to make this world better, trying to give back to these beautiful natural elements of our world.