

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: Suzanne Case

LSS 1118 (26:16)

FIRST AIR DATE: 5/15/2018

Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park is my favorite national park. We used to hide in the lava tube and scare the tourists. And at age four saw the Kīlauea Iki eruption, which was two thousand feet in the air. And you know, I had that experience of hot lava and cold air on my back, and we were all lined up on a wall at the edge of the crater. So, I mean, that kind of thing is just a powerful experience.

She grew up experiencing some of the natural wonders of Hawai'i. And now, her job is protecting them for future generations. Suzanne Case, 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. There's a tremendous amount of legal and other office work that goes into protecting and preserving the lands and waters of Hawai'i. But Hilo born Suzanne Case, who heads the State Department of Land and Natural Resources, is not only handy with paper trails, she's handy on mountain trails too. In fact, she needs nature in her life. Case is a familiar name in Hawai'i. Suzanne's brother is former U.S. Congress member Ed Case, and her cousin is entrepreneur Steve Case, who cofounded America Online or AOL. Suzanne Case has spent most of her career looking out for natural resources, first as legal counsel, and later as Hawai'i executive director of the Nature Conservancy. In 2015, Governor David Ige appointed her to lead the department charged with managing the State of Hawai'i's natural resources. Her deep connection to nature took root while she was growing up in rural Hilo, on Hawai'i Island. Her father, James Case, took a job at the Hilo office of the Carlsmith and Ball law firm in 1951.

So, I was born in Hilo, and grew up in Keaukaha until I was about ten.

Okay; I have to stop you there, because everyone I've met in Keaukaha is a Native Hawaiian homesteader.

Yeah; yeah.

Your family lived there.

So, there is the Native Hawaiian homestead, and a longer neighborhood going down to the end of the road. We were in that neighborhood; we were down towards the end of the road. We went to third and fourth grade at Keaukaha Elementary. So, it was a whole mixture there. But it is a very diverse community, and very outdoorsy. The road goes right along the water. We lived right across the street from the water. And so, you know, every day, we were in the water.

It's two steps into the water, practically.

Totally; yeah, yeah, yeah. You cross the yard, go down the wall, cross the road, and you know, walk down, and you're there. And so, we were there every day, either in the water, or scrambling along the shoreline. You know, it's all lava rock there, a lot of underground caverns and stuff. We had ponds on our property, there were ponds in the neighbor's property. We were right across the street from the Richardson's, we'd call it, Fishpond, which was and is a beautiful fishpond. You could scramble along the wall, there's a mākāhā there. And it's now a community center, which is perfect for it.

And why did your family pick that area? Because you have a choice of where to live in Hilo.

Yeah. I think my parents just wanted a place. We had a lot of kids in my family.

How many kids?

Six kids growing up. And so, were just outdoors all the time. And I think they just wanted us to be outdoors. When we were little, my dad would come home from work for lunchtime and have a bite, and take us for a swim. And then, come home after work, and we'd go for a swim. And you know, so you learned to swim. We swam underwater on his shoulders, you know, just right out in front of the house. And so, that part was really neat.

Well, your father sounds like he was such an engaged father. And your mom.

Very much. They both were very engaged. Yeah. So, my mom actually finished her college when we were in Hilo, when she had, you know, young kids. And then later, her master's when she had more young kids. But you know, she was at home all the time, and cooking and sewing. She made our clothes.

She had a set of twins among all the kids.

Yeah; yes. They came a little bit later, so I grew up really with three brothers, and then later on, a brother and a sister. So, lots of outdoor energy from that group.

Did your parents or your brothers make allowances because you were you a girl?

Not at all. No; no. And I was pretty much of a tomboy growing up.

You weren't gonna let them take the lead.

Right. I mean, there were a couple of things that, you know, I thought it was unfair that they got to do, that I didn't.

For example?

I don't know. I mean, part of it was just I had older brothers. But on the flip side, my dad used to take me out to lunch, starting in preschool, on the last day of school, because you know, there were so many boys, he wanted to do something special. And so, that was a tradition that continued all through high school, and he does it with his grandchildren now. And my brothers were very jealous of that.

Which of your siblings were you closest to?

Probably Ed. Over our whole life, you know, he was really my oldest brother growing up, so I always looked up to him. And you know, we're still quite close.

Your elementary school was destroyed by a tsunami.

Yes; yeah.

The old Waiākea Kai.

Waiākea Kai Elementary School; right. It wiped out a whole community. And I was there from kindergarten through second grade, and then we went to Keaukaha Elementary School.

How much of an impression did that make on you?

Very bit impression. Waiākea Kai was predominantly Japanese, mixed community, and Keaukaha was predominantly Hawaiian community. So, it was a big part of kinda my grounding in Hawaiian language and music, and culture, and in fourth grade, played in the Merrie Monarch Festival. So, I learned ukulele then, and you know, kala'au sticks that my friend's grandfather made. And you know, so all my friends were Hawaiian, and they got to go to Kamehameha Schools, and I didn't really understand why I couldn't go there. But it gave me a real love of Hawaiian language and music, and culture that I think, you know, lasted with me.

You've had a couple of aha moments. I remember you speaking of one when you were a kid, spearfishing, which changed your behavior.

Yeah.

Tell us about that time. That was probably in Keaukaha.

It was actually in Honomalino Bay in South Kona. We used to go there for vacations. A very remote place, very off the grid. And we spent a week or two at a time, every single year, when I was growing up. And a very, very special place. I knew it underwater better than above water.

Where is it?

Honomalino; it's south of Miloli'i, South Kona.

Oh, that's very south.

It's very south. You know, no roads to it, kind of thing. So, my dad made our Hawaiian sling spear guns out of, you know, bamboo and surgical tubing, and electrician's tape. And so, you know, we always had the right size spear for our height. And so, you know, we learned how to fish, but we had to, of course, clean and eat our fish. And so, I finally, at age eleven or so, caught my first weke is what I caught. And then after that, after you got good enough, you had to go for the real eating fish. And so, for me, that was uhu. But they were much faster, and I never could spear one. And so, one day, I just got so tired and so frustrated that I just turned, and I speared a butterfly fish, just because I wanted some success. And the spear ripped through the fish, and the fish swam away with this gash it in. And I went: Oh, that was not pono. And so, I quit spearfishing. I knew that I couldn't do it if I was gonna not do it the right way. So, I quit spearfishing. I actually saved up my money, and I bought an underwater camera housing for an Instamatic.

Oh, you shot them in another way.

I turned into an underwater photographer at age twelve. And so, it was just a powerful moment for me of realizing you have to do the right thing.

Suzanne Case faced a culture shock at age nine. Her family packed up and left the country life in Hawai'i Island that they loved, and moved to the City of Honolulu, O'ahu.

When I was almost ten, my dad's firm asked him to move to Honolulu, to build up the Honolulu office. And so, we were just between—just finished fourth grade, and so, none

of us wanted to move. First, we thought we were just gonna go for a little while, and so we thought that was fine. But when we found out that we were moving for permanent, we just said: N-O, we are not gonna go. All of us kids, we just: We are not going.

And then, of course, we had to. But it was rough; it was very rough. I always felt like country bumpkin goes to the big city. And you know, it was a rough transition. I went from public school to private school; that was part of the transition.

So, from Keaukaha Elementary to Punahou.

To Punahou; yes, exactly. They were just two worlds. And you know, Punahou is a great school, but it took me a good maybe four years to really kind of find my place there.

You repeated sixth grade.

I did. That was probably the thing that was most influential in my getting settled at Punahou and turning out more successful.

It was for social reasons?

It was for social reasons. And I was struggling a little bit academically. I think I was borderline when we moved from Honolulu, and normally maybe they keep you back. And so, they said: Well, you know, let's go with it. But after two years, my teachers and my parents recommended I do that. And you know, that was a hard social adjustment, but really, really good one.

I would think it's hard, because you know your classmates go on without you.

Yeah. Yeah; yeah. Yeah, and you know, and it's awkward. Right? But it was good for me. I had my first success in school. We were up at Camp Timberline, and had to do a study project, and a study plot. I happened to have a spider in my plot, and so, I ended up really studying that spider for a week and, you know, got an A-plus on my science paper. And I'm like: Oh, that feels good. You know. Feels good to understand what it takes to, like, really apply yourself, to be really good at something. And that was neat. So, you know, that kinda thing helps your transition.

You got so comfortable at Punahou, where you had once felt uncomfortable, that you became the first female student body president.

I did; I did. And it was kind of one of those step-up things; right? So, you know, I remember thinking about it for a while. I had been on a student council, small advisory council, and I remember just feeling like, again, I should do this, I should step up and,

you know, do this kind of service. So, I did, and I ran, and I was elected. And so, I was the first female student body president at Punahou.

Did you remain an outdoorsy person in Honolulu?

Yeah; totally. So, we moved to Tantalus, and so that's an outdoorsy place.

So, that's the country in town.

That's the country in town. It's a very, you know, special place to live in terms of, you know, it's very close to town, but it's in the forest. So, again, we were just like—the neighbors were much more spread out, so a little more lonely place to have that period of your life. But you know, we had kids about a mile up the road, and so, we would, you know, find paths through the forest. And we had this system of neighbors picking up kids after school at the steps at the bottom of the hill. And nobody does that anymore. but we were essentially hitchhiking, except with people that we knew. And so, very, very independent. You know, you could come home whenever you want. And we had a great mudslide right near our house, so you know, we'd go out especially when it was pouring rain. That would be the best, and just get covered in mud. And you know, that was some dangerous stuff there, but you know, you were lucky that you don't get in too much trouble.

In addition to enjoying forests on Mount Tantalus above Honolulu, Suzanne Case continued to be fascinated by the reefs and ocean, with the help of two popular television shows of the time.

I just dreamed about being a scuba diver, and used to watch the Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau and Sea Hunt, Lloyd Bridges' Sea Hunt in black and white. We didn't have television until we moved to Honolulu, and then it was very, very restricted. So, I always wanted to learn to scuba dive, and you could get certified when you're fourteen. So, soon as I was fourteen, my dad and I signed up for a course, and we both took it. And I was actually much more comfortable underwater than he was. But we got certified, and then I started diving, and then I found people to go diving with as well. And then, I saved up my babysitting money to buy a set of scuba gear—so tank, regulator, pack, vest. And I used to go diving a lot, mostly on Oahu off of Waikiki, off of Hawai'i Kai, off of Hanauma Bay, Cockroach Gulch, and also Sharks Cove, Makua. So, you know, I loved kinda the meditation of being underwater, and just blowing bubbles, and being still and—

Bringing your camera.

I did.

With the underwater housing.

I did; I did.

After graduating from Punahou School, Suzanne Case followed in the footsteps of her father and others in the Case 'ohana, including her older brother, former Congressman Ed Case, by entering the world of law.

In our family, half of us went into law. I would say on my cousins' side, they were more on the business side. But I think all of us had, you know, a sense of like, kind of social responsibility. You know, a sense that we needed to contribute somehow to Hawai'i, to society and stuff, and so, it just expressed itself in different ways. You know, Ed's very much of a public servant in politics, and you know, Steve obviously is a really fine businessman. And you know, all just trying to do something good for the world.

Was that said to you explicitly by your parents? This is what you've got to do, this is what we believe in.

They had a strong sense that we had to contribute to society, I guess is the way we were kind of brought up. I mean, I can't point to a specific thing they said, but that was kind of a theme going on. You know, you need to do something good for society with your life.

You chose to go to law school. Was it a real choice? Did you feel, you know, expected to?

By the time I went to law school, it was a real choice, because I didn't think I was gonna go for a long time. And honestly, I didn't really understand what my dad did. He did business legal transactions. So, I was around it all the time; I just didn't really understand what a lawyer did. And I didn't really understand it until I went to law school. But I think by the time I went to law school, I realized that I needed to do something that was intellectually engaging. And so, it turned out to be a really good path for me. And I ended up practicing law for eighteen years, mostly real estate transactions, mostly in conservation. I worked at the Nature Conservancy for twenty-eight years.

A nonprofit; and in charge of conservation of lands.

It's a conservation organization globally. And so, I worked there as a lawyer from 1987 to 2001. I worked all over the western United States. I worked in Hawai'i, I worked in the Asia Pacific region, places like Indonesian and Papua New Guinea, and China, and Pohnpei.

Were you negotiating tracts of land?

So, in the US, we were, very much. We were basically doing conservation transactions. So, real estate transactions to put important pieces of land into permanent protection. And so, that was just another switch. I practiced real estate law in a law firm in San Francisco for four years after I graduated from law school. And that was just straight real estate transactions; one pension fund buys an office building from another pension fund, so I saw it as kind of morally neutral work. Whereas when I made the switch to the Nature Conservancy, you know, I felt good about everything I was doing. But it was still real estate transactions, it was still problem-solving in terms of like, what are all the things you need to do to get to this point on closing day. You know, always referred to it as closing instinct. You need to get here by this date, so what are all the things you need to do. But that was for conservation. And then, in the middle of that in 2001, I was in Hawai'i, still as lawyer, and was asked to be the acting director, 'cause the previous state director was leaving. And I said: Uh-uh. I said: There's plenty of people that could do a much better job than me, I'm perfectly happy being a lawyer. And so, the regional director who had asked me just, you know, continued to talk to me about it, and then something just switched in my head, and I said: Yeah, I'd like to do that. And it was a real switch. It was a switch from implementing to like, figuring out where we need to go, what's the path to get there.

Also, you began working with donors, too.

Very much; yeah.

Fundraising big deals.

Yeah; yeah. And that's obviously a big challenge for people to do and very much of a change from, you know, just doing the legal work. But you know, my only kind of path in it was just to realize that, you know, what you're doing is, you're telling people this great work that needs to be done. And there are people who want to do this great work, so you're, you know, offering them a path to implementing their own dreams as well. So, you know, once you realize that you're talking that language with a person about what they care about too, then it works.

Suzanne Case led the Hawai'i program of the Nature Conservancy for fourteen years before being nominated by Governor Ige in 2015 to head the State Department of Land and Natural Resources. Case said she had not envisioned herself in that position, but after legislative approval, she stepped up to a new set of challenges.

You were chosen after lawmakers didn't like a previous selection by the governor, who was Carlton Ching. But when you came onto the scene, many people were saying: She's perfect for this job. You live the job.

Yeah.

And in a sense, I can see exactly what they mean, because you are somebody who loves the outdoors.

Yes.

You live it.

Yeah.

And you want to protect it. So, that's who you've always been.

Yeah. I've always been very outdoorsy, very deep love of Hawai'i, deep love of places, and this problem-solving; you know, the how you do it, and the why you do it.

Right.

In combination.

And you had legal skills, to boot.

Yeah. And so, that's been really helpful to me. So, all of that, you know, DLNR has a broader mandate. In the Nature Conservancy, we were very focused on protecting our forests and reefs. And that is true also in DLNR, but there's also state parks and historic preservation, and enforcement, and conservation regulation, and small boating, and you know, a whole slew of things. You have to come up with a decision a lot of times, and the decision is gonna affect somebody positively and somebody negatively. So, how do you make sure that at least they all feel like they've been heard. And then, you know, that you're doing something that really has a good public policy base in it.

But you know that it'll never be win-win for everyone. Somebody will always be unhappy with your decision.

That's a very hard thing about it; it's a very hard thing. Yeah; yeah. But overall, our mission is to protect Hawai'i's public trust, natural and cultural resources. So, that's just the underlying driver. And that helps a lot, because a lot of times, there is a greater good and, you know, it may hurt somebody who would like a bigger piece of that greater good, but you're trying to come up with something that's fair.

Do you sleep at night saying: Oh, no, you know, I'm working really hard in this area, but over here there's coral bleaching going on.

All the time.

And what's gonna go on.

All the time; yeah, yeah. And it's even much more specific. It's like: Oh, gosh, I need to get back to this person, or there's an issue here. Something is bothering me here, so we haven't worked this one out yet. And so, yeah, there's a lot of processing, you know.

Always feeling like you're not doing enough, and in fact, you're doing a lot.

Yeah; yeah. But again, you know, you have to find that balance, too; right? So, you know, I'm fortunate I live on Tantalus again, and around my family all the time, and I'm in the forest all the time. So, I have that kind of, you know, ability to kinda step back and, you know, take a deep breath, and go: Okay, what's important to do next. And that's been very special for me.

Does it ever take away from your feeling of enjoyment in these places that you have the obligation to protect them, and there's a lot to do? I mean, does that tarnish some of it for you?

Not at all. It drives it. And a lot of the projects, you know, are also very much driven by the communities that we work in. And so, they have that intimacy too, sometimes for many, many generations. And so, it's a motivator. You understand how important it is, and so it's very inspiring.

What's next after this? I mean, this could go on for a while or not, but what's after this?

You know, I think the point is, you just have to be open to, you know, whatever life brings. And once you make that leap to leave a whole career behind, and do this public service, you just have to hang with whatever the future brings. So, I'm definitely in this general field for the long haul, and will just continue to try to do my best for Hawai'i and the planet.

Suzanne Case says that outdoor activities are still her favorite pastime, and they help her to understand her conservation work from inside, out. All of her career, she's jumped into her work on site visits, such as on numerous trips to Palmyra Atoll, a thousand miles south of Hawai'i, for the Nature Conservancy. She likes to get a firsthand look at what needs to be protected. Mahalo nui to Suzanne Case of Honolulu. And thank you for joining us for this edition of Long Story Short on PBS Hawai'i. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

For audio and written transcripts of all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit PBSHawaii.org. To download free podcasts of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, go to the Apple iTunes Store or visit PBSHawaii.org.

Palmyra is a place to me, you know, it's both good and bad that more people can't get there. But it's the kind of place where, if you can see a place like that, it totally resets your baseline. You understand what our world is supposed to look like underwater, and you know, what we've lost in Hawai'i just from overuse. But to me, it's a great inspiration for what we can make it look like again, if we take care of it.