

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: Susan Ballard: Finding Strength in Childhood

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It was a very interesting upbringing with my mom. She was really into the manners, and the whole Emily Post. And believe me, it stuck with me. When you were at the table, if you ever tried to, like, reach across the table, your hand would get smacked, you know.

You always made sure you passed things around the table. You had to have conversation. And you know, when you think back, to this day, I really think that that's one of the things that's missing from so many families. That, you know, if you really sit down and have a meal with your entire family, and you force the kids to talk about their life or what happened, you know, during school or whatever, you know, I think, one, social skills. You know, instead of always looking at the computer. And two, I think that, you know, we would have a lot less problems than we would have today if we still had family dinners.

The young life of future Honolulu Police Chief Susan Ballard was a mixture of practicing good manners, while learning to stand up for herself. Sometimes, the two did not mix, but the result was that she grew up with strength of character, and people skills that helped her to become Honolulu's top police officer. Police Chief Susan Ballard, 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. Susan Marshall Ballard became Honolulu's first female Chief of Police in 2017, and hers was not a meteoric rise. Barriers take time to overcome. She had already served thirty-two years on the force. Ballard was born and raised in the South, with Southern manners required at home. But the kids at school were not genteel in their teasing. She says they made fun of her for being tall and wide, with buck teeth. Her parents' divorce forced her to grow up quickly, and as a young woman, she says she experienced domestic violence by a boyfriend.

I was born in Norfolk, Virginia. But unfortunately, I was only there for about maybe five years before we moved away. And we moved to Jacksonville, North Carolina, and that's where I started school. And then, I was only there for about a year, and then, we moved to Fayetteville, North Carolina. And no, my family was not in the military. But my

father was into the manufactured homes, so we always seemed to end up in large military cities. So I went there. I finished elementary school and junior high school, and high school in Fayetteville.

So, was he a salesman in mobile homes?

Yes, he was. And then, he eventually became president of the company, and doing the manufactured homes. So, I lived in uh, mobile homes. I was the typical Southern type girl. You know, we started out in a single wide, and yeah, got to play out in the yard barefoot.

You know, run around in the South. You know. And then we moved to double-wides, and then I think it was probably about junior high school, we had our first house. We bought our first house in Fayetteville.

And your mother?

My mom was a homemaker up until my mother and father got a divorce. And so, she took care of the house, and took care of us. And then, she went back to work as a secretary at an insurance agency. Speaking of my mom, she used to always tell us when we were growing up that it's not your kuleana. And this was from the South. And so, you know, we knew that it meant responsibility. And this is like, North Carolina, and this is like, way back. And so, when I came over here and I found out kuleana, and I was like ... they said: Oh, that's a Hawaiian word. I says: No, it's from the South. And then, because, I mean, my mom—so I have no idea how she ended up getting that.

That's so interesting.

Yeah; yeah, yeah. Yeah. 'Cause she used to always tell us: Don't pay any attention, it's not your kuleana, just let it go.

Did you have any idea how that came about?

I have no idea. And she was not really—well, I would ask her things, like: What about this? And ah, she never really—you know, she was—

So, old—

I couldn't get information from her.

Old school.

Yes.

They don't like to talk.

Yes.

Right?

Very much so.

Would you consider it a middleclass, non-dysfunctional childhood?

Yeah. Growing up, I would say that very much so is what, you know, would describe. It was just like a normal upbringing. You know, did school, did after school types of things. And you know, one of the things when I was growing up is, I was ... uh, quite large. I was fat. I guess obese is more what the medical community was calling. So, it was a interesting upbringing, because you know, when you're in school, you know, you found out the kids were actually pretty mean when you're overweight. And my nickname was uh, Tub, Tub of Lard. So, all the way, even through high school until I left Fayetteville, even though I had lost weight in high school, I was still called Tubs. Yeah.

How did you deal with that?

You know, I guess I was able to uh, carry my weight. I did a lot of activities. I was really good at football; they always wanted me to play the line in the neighborhood.

Were you tall as a child, too?

I was. I've always been taller than everybody else. And so, I got to be the line in our neighborhood football team because, you know, I was so big, I could just knock people over. I know, I know. It sounds bad, but you know, I mean, you just kinda dealt with it. But I mean, it was a name, you know, but we were still able to get along and, you know, do different things. But it definitely does make a mark on you, you know.

And did it change your social life, do you think? I mean, do you wish you'd had a different social life?

Yeah, I think so. You know, my mom was the typical Southern belle. You know, we were raised with Emily Post. So, you know, everything was manners and, you know, had the right way of sitting at the table. We had to have dinner every night; Mom, Dad, you know, the kids. My father traveled, so he was only at home on the weekends, most of the time. But we were always required to have dinner, you know, as a family. And then, she wanted us to go to learn to cotillion and go to the dance, and all like that. So, like I said, I was large, so nobody wanted to take me to cotillion. So, I'll never forget

that my mom had to talk to the teacher, and had to ask one of the guys to please ask me to cotillion. And that's kinda something that sort of always stuck with me. You know.

Was he good guy?

He was; he was. He was very nice. I mean, back in the South, doesn't make any difference, 'cause if you didn't say, yes ma'am, yes sir, and treat people nice, you'd always get a whack one way or the other.

And you would actually do what your parents said, it sounds like. Which often doesn't happen nowadays.

Oh, yes. And don't ever bring a note home from the teacher. Because if you got a note from the teacher, it didn't make any difference; you were wrong. The teacher was always right, so you shook in your boots if you had to bring a note home from your teacher.

And these things stay with you, as far as what seems right to you?

Yes; it really does. And I think a lot of it is just, you know, how you treat people, you know, and just being able to talk to people, you know, and have a decent conversation. You know, 'cause you were brought up to always appreciate, you know, everything that you have, and not take it for granted, 'cause it can be gone the next day. Which is what happened, like, when my parents got divorced. It was like, we lived comfortably, and then when they got divorced, all of a sudden you had nothing. So, you know, when you look back, you appreciate everything that you had, you know, when you were growing up.

Obviously, not everything was polite. I mean, you were teased at school, and for a long time. How do you think that affected you, now that that weight is certainly not a problem? I mean, how do you look at that experience, and how did it affect you?

Well, I think a lot of it, as far as affecting, you know, when I look at people, if they're large, it's like, you know, I can kinda empathize with them. And then, you know, a lot of times, you see people who are exercising who are large, and you know, human nature: Oh, look, that person's fat, or whatever. And I'm looking at 'em going: At least they're doing something. You know, they're out exercising, they're out walking around. So, you know, you give people more slack. I mean, there's no such thing as, you know, this whole perfect body thing, you know. And especially for women; you know, we're brought up that you're supposed to, you know, look just so, and you've gotta be skinny. 'Cause my sister was completely opposite. She's probably about six inches shorter than me, she never had a problem with her weight. The other thing I had, I had buck teeth, I

had to wear braces. But you know, she was always like ... I don't want to say perfect, but she never had to worry about, you know, her looks or anything. And she used to have guys always coming over to the house. Where for me, it wasn't until I lost weight that I actually really was able to, you know, really start dating. And so, you do know that, you know, the whole body image, you know, is an issue. And it does stay with you. So that to this day, I mean, I make sure that I exercise and I eat right, because you know, I do know that even—is it right? No. But you know, I mean, if you see kind of an overweight man, you know, it's like: Okay, well, you know, it's okay. But if you see an overweight woman, then it's like: Oh, look, she's not taking care of herself. So, you know, especially in the position I'm in, you know, I always try and make sure that, you know, I exercise and eat right. And I think that just always goes back to the childhood, that I never want to get to the point where I was overweight again, because I know how hard it was too, to lose weight and to keep it off.

Well, how did you do it, and when did you do it? You graduated still overweight?

No. I lost it when I was in high school. So, actually, I did it relatively quickly. It was about four or five months. It was like, from the end of my—I believe it was my sophomore year of high school, towards the end.

Was there something that made you do it? I mean, was that some inspiration caused by an event?

There really wasn't. I think I just had gotten to the point where I was just tired of being made fun of, and it's like, you know, it's time. I needed to lose weight, and you know, so I put my mind to it, and I did. And of course, when you're younger, it's a lot easier to lose weight than when you're older.

And you did it by a combination of dieting and exercise?

Diet and exercise; yeah. Yeah. And from that point on, I have always exercised. I mean, I was able to play on the softball team in high school, play on the basketball team in high school, because you know, I lost the weight and I was able to, you know, function in those type of sports.

No more linebacker stuff?

No more lineback. I still played football, but you know, they let me be receiver now.

And so, then all of a sudden, guys came calling?

Well, I mean, yeah, more. But I'm kind of selective too, so—

You know, we'd go out on dates and, you know, if I really didn't like 'em. But I had a serious boyfriend in high school, and you know, we almost got married. And then, I'm the one that's kinda like: Um, this isn't really what I want. And so, I usually get into long-term relationships, but I'm usually the one that—because I value my independence, and I think that came from when my mom and dad got divorced. Because I saw my mom, who hadn't worked, and all of a sudden, she had to get a job, and that you know, we basically lived from, you know, paycheck-to-paycheck, and you know, where was the next meal gonna come from. And so, I said to myself: I'm never gonna be like that, I refuse. So, from that point on, I mean, I think I started working when I was like, fourteen years old. And actually, at that point, I really started saving for retirement. Because I said: When I get older, I want to make sure. I said: I can suffer when I'm young, but when I get older, I want to live like a queen. And I said: I never want to be dependent on somebody, where I need them to the point where I can't live my life. And so, I think that's really, you know, caused me to take a look at a lot of things. And I think that's why probably I've never gotten married, is because I like my independence, and I don't like to really answer to anybody, you know, when I get home. Other than my dogs.

What was life like when your dad left, and your mom was in reduced circumstances?

I mean, it was difficult. I mean, one, because they didn't get along. You know, it was kind of an ugly divorce, and we had to leave our house and move into a two-bedroom apartment. So you know, very small. And my sister at the time, she and I didn't get along at all, she didn't get along with my mom. So, it was just really—

Lots of conflict all around.

Yeah. It was just conflict everywhere. And then, so my sister ended up leaving, moving away, and so it was just, you know, me and Mom. And you know, I mean, the fact that, like I said, you know, where was the next meal coming from. And then, she had to go out, you know, and get a job. And you know, all of the luxuries that I was used to no longer had. And so, that's why I went out and you know, got a job, and I figured I'd just, you know, take care of myself.

How old were you when you got the job?

The first job I had, I believe I was fourteen, close to fifteen years old.

So, this was all around the time that you lost the weight, as well.

Yeah; yeah.

All of it happened around the same time?

Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Really kind of a pivotal period in your life.

Yeah. It really was. Yeah. And then, decided: Okay, well, I'll go to college. But there was no money for college, either. So, my grandmother, when she was alive, every Christmas, I'll never forget, my sister and I both, we would get savings bonds from her. We'd get hundred-dollar savings bonds from her. And you know, when you're kids, it's like: Why are you giving us savings bonds; we want toys, we want material things. Right? But it was like she'd give us a savings bond every single year for Christmas and for our birthday. And so, it had gone into the bank, and so because of that, I was able to pay for the first year of college. And then, you know, while I was there, I was able to get, you know, a couple of jobs and was able to, you know, uh, earn enough money to pay for tuition and a place to live.

After graduating with her bachelor's degree, Susan Ballard went on to graduate school in Tennessee, where she stayed and worked after receiving her master's degree in athletic training, now called sports medicine. She says she and her boyfriend decided to leave Tennessee and travel west. They got all the way to Hawai'i. And it was here, she says, that her boyfriend smacked her. It was a turning point in her life.

When I left Tennessee, a friend went with me and we had stopped in California. And you know, obviously, looking back, you know, even when I was dating him in Tennessee, there were instances where he was very controlling, and you know, did things that he shouldn't have. But you know, you're young, and it's like, you know, you get into that: I'm sorry, but you know, you kinda made me mad, and—

And I'll never do it again.

Right; never do it again. That whole type of thing. And so, you know, it didn't happen like over, and over, and over again. It was just occasionally. And so, you know, you kind of put it out of your mind. So, when we came over to California, and decided that you know, we weren't gonna stay in California, and so we continued over here to Hawaii.

Now, why did you come to Hawai'i?

Well, one, because there was no way I was driving back across the United States again. 'Cause we drove from Tennessee to California, to Los Angeles. And I just was not gonna drive back. And plane ticket is eighty-nine dollars one way. So, jumped on a plane, came over, you know.

What were you thinking you would do?

Well, I figured if nothing else, I could go to McDonald's and work as a manager at McDonald's. Because, you know, it was something that I had been doing working, so it was just kind of a stopgap and, you know, I figured I could get a job. And that's what I ended doing when I first came here.

And is what did he do? What was his plan?

He really just kinda lived day-to-day. And so, he got a job, you know, at one of the restaurants and stuff here. And then, we ended up getting an apartment, and then things just sort of kinda snowballed at that point. I mean, he ... you know, I caught him a couple times with other people. He would come home drunk, you know, kinda force himself on me. And then one time, when it got to the point where he hit me one time, I said: That's it. I said: You ever hit me again, I'll kill you. Because I knew at that point in time, I'm either gonna stay here, or I'm gonna get out. And obviously, it was hard, because I'm in a place where I really didn't know anybody.

And cost of living was high.

Well, you know, I guess back then, I didn't really notice it that much. I mean, things weren't that expensive. And I guess, you know, I was doing okay, and I had money saved. And money really never came into the equation as long as we were together, because we could split the rent, you know, and whatever that way. But then, when I made that decision that I was gonna leave, it was like one of those, oh moments, and you're like: Okay, now what. So, I thought: You know what, if anything else, I'll just get on a plane and I'll just, you know, fly back to North Carolina. But you know, I had met some really nice people from Central YMCA, and they were officers, a lot of them were officers. Funny thing about Central YMCA; you you had cops, and you had crumbs. You know, so it was a really interesting combination. But the officers, I met this one guy, and I used to play racquetball a lot. And so, I kinda told him what was going on. And so, he came and he stood by. He did what you call the standby, while I packed everything up to move out. Now, I'm standing there in the hallway and I'm thinking: Okay, so where do I go now? So, he called a friend of his, who talked to another friend, and then I swear it was no more than maybe an hour later and he says: Okay, come with me, I've got a place for you to stay. And so, this lady, her name's Marsha, and she lives in Seattle now. But she had a studio apartment out in Makiki. She actually allowed me to come to her studio and live on her floor, not even knowing me from Adam. I mean, I could have been a serial killer, for all she knew. But you know, this lady, a nice Japanese lady, she let me come, she let me sleep on her floor. For four months, I was there, until another studio came open in the same building. It was a little walkup in Makiki. And you know, I mean, she taught me so much. She taught me about taking

your shoes off, going in. You know. The guys at the Central Y took me to the Korean bar for the first time, which was really an experience.

You know.

I mean, she was an awesome cook, too. So, you know, I mean, I got to—

Local foods.

All the local foods. I mean, you know, if it wasn't for the folks at the Y, and then for Marsha, I'm sure that there was no way I would have stayed over here.

And what happened to the boyfriend?

You know, I don't know. I saw him one time, in town. But I don't know if he went back to the mainland, or if he's even still over here.

So, you had to make a decision that enough is enough.

Yeah; enough is enough. And you know, at that point, I said: You know, nobody's gonna ever touch me again. You hit me, and literally, you'll be dead. Because you know, there's no way that I would allow that to ever happen. And you know, sometimes, you know, you just have to stand up for yourself. And thank God that I learned to be independent, so the fear of going out on my own was not something that I was worried about. You know, because, you know, especially if you're young. You know, if you're young, it's like you don't worry about a lot of things, that you know, if they happen when you're older that, you know, you can, you can just go forward and make it happen. Yeah.

When you came here, what did you think of the mix of races?

It was really a culture shock, because you know, you had all these people who didn't look like you. And so, you look around, and it's like: Ooh, okay. And then, you know, people would explain to me about all the customs and everything else. And I was like: Wow, okay.

It's a lot to take in.

It was; it's a lot to take in. And then obviously, you know, sometimes, you know, the discrimination against being Caucasian, Haole, whatever when I first got here. And I think I took the bus for the first and got lost. I ended up going around the island to get to Ala Moana Shopping Center 'cause I didn't know what I was doing. I remember I was on the bus one time, and this guy looks at me and says: Eh, you F-ing Haole, get in

the back of the bus. And me, I'm just oblivious. I'm like: Oh, who are you talking to? I had no idea. And it was the first time. Because being from the South, I mean, basically you have Black and you have White. I mean, it's pretty much that's it. You come over here, and you know, all of a sudden you're in a minority. And it was something that I never really experienced before, you know, any type of racism, and it was sort of an eye-opening experience. In the first six months, I was almost ready to pack up and leave. But it was like all of a sudden at six months, you know, I looked around, and I was like ... well, once again, people are just who they are. And it's not like, you know, well, what is her nationality? I don't know. I mean, you know, Asian. Are they Japanese, Chinese? I don't know; they're just people. What difference does it make? You know. And so, it was, it was really a learning experience, and I absolutely love it because I love all the culture, the different cultures and stuff. But you know, once again, you had to learn because you didn't want to offend anybody.

Let's see; you're eight months into your five-year term as police chief.

Right.

You've gone through a lot of things. Is there a common thread? I mean, how do you decide? 'Cause you've always been in positions where you might be a one-of.

Yeah.

How do you know who you are?

You know, I've always tried to be myself. I never tried to be someone I'm not.

You didn't try to emulate anyone?

No; not really. I mean, you know, as I was growing up, there really was nobody that I really wanted to emulate. So, I sort of developed who I was along the way. A good example is like, you know, on the weekends, I just wear my hamajang shorts and tee-shirts. And people go: Oh, you're the chief, you should dress up. I'm going: No, that's not who I am. You know, and it's the same thing about, you know, wearing makeup and things like that. You know, 'cause when I first became chief, they put all this makeup on me and made me take this picture. And I saw it, and I said: No, take that down; I look like a hoochie-koochie mama.

You know. But I just try to be true to who I am. You know, I don't want to be someone that I'm not. Sometimes, I say things that you know, afterwards, they're going: We can't believe you said that. But I mean, you know, that's how I am. You know, I try and be cognizant, and make sure that, you know, I don't say anything inappropriate, you know, considering my position now. But sometimes, it just comes out. And honestly, you

know what the best compliment I've gotten throughout my career with the police department, and even up to being chief, is people tell me: You have not changed one bit from the time that you became a police officer. And that is probably one of the biggest compliments that they could have ever given me.

You're at what, thirty-three years and counting in police work.

Yep; August 22nd, I'll make thirty-three years. Yeah.

We continue our conversation with Susan Ballard about her path to becoming Honolulu Police chief in the next Long Story Short. Mahalo to Susan Ballard of Kailua, O'ahu for sharing your story 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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I know you always have loved pets.

Yes.

Is it since you were a little girl?

It was. I've always had either a dog or a cat, you know, in the family and stuff. So, I've always been a consummate animal lover. So, currently, I have three dogs. I have Mango, who's an English Setter; he's the youngest. And then, Kai; he's a Golden Retriever. And then, Kona, who's the oldest, and she's a Border Collie/Spaniel mix. And she's the boss of all three of 'em. And then, of course, I can't forget Koa Kitty, who's my cat who has no eyes. He was born without any eyes.

How did you come to be his owner?

His mom.

Mom.

Yes; his cat mom. Well, believe it or not, I actually happened to be on Craigslist, which you should never go on Craigslist.

Never, ever, ever, when it comes to animals, 'cause there's just a million of 'em out there that need to get adopted. I emailed, and so, this wonderful couple emailed

back, and so we arranged to meet out in Waipahu. Well, that's all you need, of course. Yeah. Okay; I got me a sucker, you know. So, I went down there, and I met them, and that's how I ended up getting Koa Kitty.

And it worked out with the dogs?

It's worked out well, and the cat walks around. He's learned how to go in and out the doggy doors. I mean, the cat is absolutely amazing. He's been a wonderful addition to our family.