

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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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. We had lunch maybe about a month ago. And she reminded me, because I had started the process to go into the police department. And she said: Do you remember what you told me? And this was not when I was living with her, but after I had moved out, but you know obviously, we stayed friends. She said: You remember what you told me? And I said: No. And she says: I'll never forget that I asked you, How long are you gonna stay in the police department? 'Cause she knew it wasn't anything I really wanted to do. And I said: Ah, I think I'm gonna stay until I make chief. And I said: I really said that? And she said: I will never forget that; and when you made chief, it was just like I was like, holy cow, that really happened.

Thirty-two years later.

Yup; thirty-two years later. Exactly.

When Susan Ballard joined the police force in 1985, there were few women cops, let alone in high positions. She didn't necessarily plan to make a career of being a police officer, but she persevered, and overcame barriers. Honolulu 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 grew up in the South, raised to be a proper Southern lady. She moved to Honolulu in the early 80s with no particular plans, other than to look for work at McDonald's as a manager, a job she'd done before, until she figured out what to do next. Ballard became friends with police officers at the Central YMCA, and they persuaded her to apply at the Police Department. Now, there weren't many women cops at the time, and there were many male officers who felt that women were not up for the job and could put them in harm's way.

I guess I've always been a rebel, too. I mean, you know, even growing up, I was kind of a tomboy, you know, just because you sorta had to, to take care of yourself because of the situation. But when I went into recruit school, we had like about four women. We started out with like four women in our class, which was a large amount at the time.

And unfortunately, I think we only ended up—I'm sorry, started with five, and we graduated with three that continued on, actually all the way through retirement. Two of 'em retired already; I'm the only one left. But you really did have to prove yourself. I mean, when you went to defensive tactics, it was like, you know, they would try their best to try and, you know, get you to quit, you know, to give up. You know, I always tell the story that, you know, there was a bunch of men in the class who formed the I Hate Women Club. You know, because they didn't think that women should be in the police department. Well, I didn't care. I would jump in the truck with them and say: Well, sorry, I'm going with you regardless. You know, and I think after you kinda push yourself on 'em enough, and they see that you can, you know, take care of yourself and you weren't gonna back down, then you know, things became easier. Is it right? Well, no, it wasn't, but you know, that's the way it was going through recruit school.

But you didn't take offense?

No; I really didn't. You know, it didn't really faze me. Maybe because I was just kind of oblivious, or maybe I was in my own world somewhere, but I didn't pay that much attention to it. I'll never forget when I first went out on the road, the first case that I went to, you know, the guy who was supposed to be covering me off—and it was a domestic. So, I went in and I said: Are you coming in? And he's standing outside the door of this, and he says: No. And I was like: Okay.

No backup.

Yeah; yeah. So, I went in, and you know, resolved the situation and stuff. And then after that, he was okay. But I had to prove that, you know, you could. And you know, couple of the other stories, you know, that I tell is that when I was down in Waikīkī, we had a hostage situation, so we had to call out SSD. At that time, it was the SWAT team. And it was my beat, so it was like, whoo, I was all excited because, you know, I was gonna, you know, be there, you know, and you have this case. And so, the SWAT team came, and the SWAT major was there. And my lieutenant, you know, bless his heart, Wally Akeo, he was like the best lieutenant ever. But you know ... he came, and I says: Okay. I said: You know, I'm gonna go ask, you know, what is it that I can do, because it's my beat, I want to make sure that I do what I can. So, I went up to the major of the SWAT team and I said: Excuse me, sir. I said: What is it that you want me to do? He said: Be a good girl and go get us some coffee. Well, me being the person I am, I was ready to rip—I didn't care what his rank was, I was ready to rip into him. God bless my lieutenant; he grabs me by the shirt and just pulls me out.

And he tells me: Calm down; go over there, just calm down. But did you hear what he said to me? And he says: Just take it easy. But you know, those are the types of things, you know, that we had to deal with. Even at the main station ... I don't know, way back when, our director said that women had to wear brassieres. It was required. And

so, during our lineups, our lieutenants would come behind us like this, the women, and check like this to see if we had a brassiere on. Yeah.

Wow!

Yeah.

It sounds like the Middle Ages.

Exactly. Well, I mean, uh, even the weight room. The weight room was behind the men's locker room. And so, for us to go workout in the weight room, we had to walk through the men's locker room. And so, we were only allowed to go down one side of the locker room, and as we approached the door, we had to yell: Woman coming through, woman coming through! Well, I mean, let's face it; all that's gonna do is egg 'em on. So, you can imagine. Man, we got flashed, I mean, anything that you can imagine. They always told us: You don't look, you keep your eyes straight ahead. It didn't make any difference what they did. It was: You look straight ahead. But, yeah. So, it was an interesting time.

And there was a time when an interview board asked you what rank you thought you thought you would want to be, and you said captain.

I did.

And they said?

They laughed. They said: Oh, there'll never be a woman captain. Okay, well ... good. Okay; whatever. You needed to ask me something, I answered. I didn't even know what a captain was at the time, actually. So, you know, I figured, hey, that sounds high. I'll just shoot for captain.

Along the way, I'm sure you made friends and got advice, too. What kinds of advice helped you along the way as a, at the time, rare woman, and still a rare woman in the police department?

You know, I go back that, you know, I was very lucky as I came through, because I had a lot of really good supervisors. And obviously, they were all men, because at the time, there weren't that many women supervisors. But Bill Clark was my major at the training division when I had become sergeant. And you know, I guess one of the things I always remember about him is that he would just tell us, he says: You guys do whatever it is that you need to do; you go create programs, do whatever. And that's kind of what I got from—you know, take risks and stuff. You know, try it. If it doesn't work, it's okay. Then I

had Steven Watarai, Chief Watarai at the time. And everybody was just in fear of him. I mean, it was like when they told me I was gonna go and work for him, I was like: Oh, no. I said: I'm in trouble now. But you know what? He sat me down and he says: You know what? He says: I trust you, until you show me that you can't trust you anymore. And you know what? And he always ... he would support you, he would, you know, go to bat for you. You know, and he was true to this word. And as long as you didn't do anything that caused him not to trust you, he was behind you one hundred percent. So, I mean, like I say, I was very lucky. And like Wally Akeo, when I was in Waikīkī when I first went down there, you know, because there were very few women, but he always encouraged me to like, take the sergeant's test. He would encourage me to go out and do things that, you know, I wouldn't normally do. And you know, he would basically tell me: You can do whatever it is that you want to do. And you know, and that was back, you know, in '88, you know, back when it was unheard of. So, like I said, I've always really been lucky for the most part, always working with some good supervisors who were very supportive.

And then, you dismissed the flack, pretty much. You just decided that you weren't gonna deal with that.

Yeah. Yeah. You know, I gave this talk to my managers. And one of the things that I said is, you know, I learn a lot from my dogs. And one of 'em is, if you can't play with it, you can't eat it, pee on it and walk away.

And sometimes, you know what? If something doesn't serve you, if it's not working for you, you know what, you just gotta walk away from it. You can't pay it any mind. It's like it's not worth you spending time to worry about. And I think that's kind of been, you know, my philosophy all along. 'Cause you can find yourself getting caught up in things and going: Oh, well, this person's out to get me, and this person. But you know what, then you're letting them control your life. You have to control your own life. You can't let people make you upset because they control you. You've gotta control the way that you feel. And it's a constant reminder. I mean, even to this day. But you know, I mean, that's one of the things. If you find yourself getting caught up in stuff, you know, it's like: Okay, stop. You need to control your own destiny. Don't let other people control what you think, or what you say.

And don't spend one more moment on it; right?

Exactly; exactly.

Former Police Chief Louis Kealoha was running the Police Department when Susan Ballard turned in her retirement papers. Morale in the Department was low, as the police force watched and waited for the Chief to be indicted in a Federal corruption case. A series of events during this time turned Susan Ballard in a new direction.

You'd been through years and years of police being unhappy with chiefs.

Kinda interesting. When I was commander of District 4 out in Kāneohe and Kailua, I had said that, you know, when I hit, I think it was like twenty-eight years, I was gonna retire. So, I was at twenty-seven, and Chief Kealoha and Deputy Chief McCauley were in power. And they really started ... and for whatever reason, you know, I don't know what it is, and obviously when you have power like that, you have people who are gonna kowtow to you and do whatever it is that they want, so that they can get ahead. And you know, and I saw that. And so, one person did that, and they made allegations, you know. Oh, well, you know, she's not being a team player, or whatever. And it's like without even asking me why I was doing what I was doing, it was like: Okay, well, you're out of there. You know, you're going down to Central Receiving Desk, which was, you know, like the place where you buried people. It was the bad place to work, you know. We only send people down there who were you know, not doing well, and all this other stuff. So that's what happened. And instead of retiring, I said: You know what? I'm gonna stay around, and I'm just gonna be a needle in their side. So, I thanked them for transferring me out of District 4, because if they hadn't, if they'd let me stay there one more year, I would have been gone. But they didn't. Once again, as I said, everything happens for a reason. So, I went down to the desk. And I was quite unhappy when I went to the desk. It was like, you know, I'm not gonna do anything. You know, it's like, you know what, the heck with these people. But then, after about a week or two, you know, I started meeting the people who were working down there and says: You know what, these people don't deserve it. And so, you know what? I made up my mind at that point in time; I says: We are going to make Central Receiving Desk the best place to work in the Department. We are gonna take care of our little corner of the world. We didn't care what was happening on the outside. They can do whatever it is that they were doing, but we were gonna take care of Central Receiving. And that's exactly what we did. And I got a team together, the sergeants, the lieutenants, you know, the officers who were down there. Awesome group of people. I mean, all of a sudden, it went from a place where half of 'em would transfer out. Every time that there was a transfer, the people were putting their names in to come and join us down at Central Receiving Desk. So, I decided, you know what, it was great. And I knew that they would never transfer me, because they weren't gonna put me anywhere. So, it was like, great; just leave me down here. I was having a great time, you know, I had a great group of people to work with. And so, lo and behold, you know, all this started happening. Well, we kinda knew what was going on, I think, long before, you know, the public. And so, you know, when it came out, and then he finally retired ... because the indictment was taking so long, I thought, you know what— I mean, 'cause it was like, two years, three years, or whatever that it took. And I thought: You know what, I'm just gonna retire. I said: You know what, I've got thirty-two years in the department, um, you know, I'm not gonna, apply for the position. But what had happened was that officers, not just the people who were working down at the

desk, but the officers would coming in, and they would ask me: Are you putting in for Chief? And I said: No, I think I'm just gonna retire. So, it was actually the officers, they said: Please, we're asking you, please put in to become Chief. And I said: All right. And I did. And so, I put in. But honestly, I never thought that this would happen, because of what was going on, you know, with the Chief, that obviously the public, the commission, everybody thought, you know, we're gonna go on the outside, we're gonna pick somebody who's not in the department, 'cause everybody in the department is corrupt.

But it helped you to be sidelined.

It was.

You were on the outs.

Everything happens for a reason. It was great. I mean, otherwise, you know what, I probably would have, you know, never been selected because, you know, I would have been tainted, you know, with that administration.

On October 25, 2017, the Honolulu Police Commission announced its appointment of Major Susan Ballard to become Honolulu's eleventh Police Chief, and first woman at the top of the Department.

When you're the police chief, you run on O'ahu. I don't know if it's still true, but it was once the eleventh largest city in America, the whole island. But essentially, you're running a mini city.

Right.

What's that like every day? When do you start, what do you do?

Well, I mean, I do all my workout in the morning. Because I know that once my day starts, I'll lose control.

Are you a gym person, or do you do that at home?

Actually, I've got my weight room at home, and then I do my yoga at, you know, a couple of different yoga studios in town. And then, you know, I'll jog on my treadmill like three days a week, or whatever. And then, kinda like do a boot camp type workout. But it's all within my house. I really don't belong to a formal gym, other than the yoga studios. Because I'm an early morning person, I mean like, really early.

Early; how early?

Like, I wake up like, midnight. I mean, because I have a hard time sleeping.

When do you go to sleep?

That's why the nighttime events are so hard sometimes, because I usually try and get to bed by about seven-thirty. And so, yeah, my sleep ... I mean, I had insomnia for quite a while, so now that if I can get four or five hours sleep, I'm like: Yes!

And then, you wake up around midnight?

Yeah. And so, I usually do my workout, and stretching and then, you know, getting ready, and then go do my workout and stuff. And that usually takes me 'til maybe about two o'clock in the morning, two-thirty. And then, that's when I walk my dogs.

Wow ...

So, everybody in Kailua knows, here's the crazy chief, she's walking around.

It's funny, because the newspaper people delivering newspapers, they stop by and say good morning. You know. And then after that, when I come home, then I usually have time to take like about an hour nap. And then, I get up and then I go do yoga or whatever usually around five, five-thirty, six o'clock.

You've had a full day by the time you get to work.

I do. And that's why tell people; I said: You know, your five o'clock in the afternoon is my like, midnight. Okay?

Right, right.

Yeah. So, yeah. And then, I usually get to work, and then you know, try and you know, clear up the email. But like I said, a lot of times, I just have um, events and, you know, those types of things. And then, we have what we call chief's reviews, so I, you know, go out to the different districts and the divisions and, you know, talk to the officers. And we do a little different. Before, it was very formal. Now, I like, you know, the officers just to sit down, and I want 'em to ask questions. And they can ask questions about anything. And I told 'em; I said: If I can answer 'em, I'm gonna answer 'em. If I can't, I'm gonna find the answer and get back to you. And they know, I'm not gonna take offense to anything that you ask. And I think the officers, you know, are realizing that. If I'm lucky enough to have a block of time free, I've been trying actually go out and jump in a car with one of the officers, and then, you know, go patrolling with 'em. Because you know, you learn a lot from 'em, sitting in the car with them, you know,

talking. I was down in Chinatown couple days ago, you know, and I was talking to some of the homeless when we were getting 'em to move off the sidewalk. So, you know, I try and do that, you know, because at the same time, you know, the officers want to know that you're there for them as well. So, I mean, it's not just the community like I said before, but you know, it's for the officers as well.

It's true; you have a lot of constituents.

You know, one thing that people get upset about more than anything else is like parking, and being stopped. You know, and and they're all: Oh, you know, you're just giving us a parking tag, or you're just giving us a citation because you need the money.

Yeah; you should chase real crime.

Right; exactly. You know. And we tell 'em, we says: Okay, well, first let me clear up a misconception. HPD doesn't get any of the money from the citations. It all goes to the State; nothing comes to us. But you know, we tell 'em. You know, I mean, one of our biggest complaints—like I had one gentleman at one of the talks, and he was very outspoken, that he felt that it was highway robbery that we were stopping people, you know, for different types of traffic violations, and that we should be out there solving the real crimes. And I told him, I said: Do you know what the number one complaint is from the communities, from almost every single community, besides the homeless—we'll just leave that out for now. But it's parking problems, and speeding, and other types of traffic, you know, violations. I said: So, we're out there doing what the community is asking us to do. And you know, I mean, it's just like DUIs. You know, you stop someone who's drunk, and they go: Why you stopping me, I didn't kill anybody. Not yet.

That guy's drunker than me.

Yeah.

Do you feel like people are really watching closely?

They do. You know, and I think more so initially. Like for example, you know, before, if I went out to dinner or, you know, or I'd meet my friends over at Whole Foods in Kailua, and we'd have, you know, a couple of beers or whatever. I mean, I ride my bike everywhere, I don't drive my car. But now, as Chief, I you know, choose not to ever drink in public or have a drink, because people don't know, they don't know that I'm not driving. You know, they see me and they think: Oh, well, here she is, having a beer, and you're talking about drinking and driving. So you know, I'm very careful about that type of thing. Um, so that, you know, on the weekends, after I come back from a hot yoga class, I like to have a beer. So, you know, I'll have that at home. But, yeah. So, I mean, that's something that you know, I force on myself not because, you know,

anybody else had said: Oh, well, you can't do this, or that anybody ever made a comment. I guess I'm probably my worst enemy.

In the more recent past, police chiefs haven't served all that long. It hasn't been a long tenure for them, maybe seven years, five years. Before, there were long-serving police chiefs.

Right.

What do you think you'll do?

You know, I'm older than most. So, you know, like I tell people; I said: You know, we're just taking it one year at a time. You know, I don't know, in five years, you know. And a lot of it is the tenure is shorter because there are just so many issues. It's not like before, where it was a more, hate to say, simpler time. But it was. But now, I mean, I would not want to be an officer out on the road now. There is so much stuff that they have to deal with and do that, you know, we didn't have to do coming up.

Yeah; I was just thinking about men in the police department over the years, and you know, there is a certain amount of stoicism and, you know, a face that doesn't show emotion, and sunglasses, and not talking too much.

Yes.

Did you ever feel like, hey, that's kind of a model, strength; quiet strength model.

It is, and it's still. And I mean, even you go up to the chief level. Because, I mean, you know, all the other chiefs have been pretty stoic, and you know, the model that you're talking about. And I think that might have been a big difference, big change for people, you know, the officers who are in the department, 'cause now all of a sudden, you've got somebody who is, for lack of a better term, I'm very loquacious.

And you know, we laugh and we joke. I mean, before, if you went up on the fourth floor, which is where the assistant chiefs and our offices are, you could hear a pin drop. I mean, it was dead silence. I mean, you know, it was like you went into this—it's almost quiet as a cemetery. Now, you go up there, and people laughing and joking, and you know. I mean, it's a big change. And even the officers, it's like all of a sudden now, they seem to have permission to smile. It's okay to smile, it's okay to laugh, it's okay to be happy. You don't have to always put up that face. Unfortunately, we're still trying to, you know, like with the public, you don't have to be that robot, that perfect person. I said: You know, you can come out of your shell. Because, I mean, most of 'em are very personable people, you know, once you get to know 'em. But it seems like, you

know, all these years, that is you know, the way that officers are portrayed. So, we're trying to break that mold, you know, and trying to move out of that realm.

Well, you heard what the Mayor's representative—I think the Mayor was out of town, but it was Roy Amemiya saying, you know, that you've been chosen, and your job is to restore trust in the police. And it is true that there've been a number of scandals and incidents such as domestic violence, and an unwillingness to address that. And how do you plan to restore that trust?

You know, it's kinda interesting that when I first became Chief, it was during Christmas season, parade season. And so, I was, you know, walking in some of the parades, and you know, people were, you know, yelling and cheering, and stuff. And I was just walking down. It's like, wow, they're really excited about their parades. And one of my deputy chiefs turned to me and said: Chief ... you know, I think they're cheering, they're yelling because you're going by. And I'm going: What? And so, I started going over and shaking people's hands and stuff, and you know, and basically saying: Thank you. And it was just so humbling that everything that this department has gone through, you know, in the last several years, that the community—and this was everywhere, was willing to forgive and forget. I mean, maybe not totally forget, because it's always gonna be back there. It wasn't just the community's trust that was broken; our department internally, the officers' trust was completely obliterated. I mean, to the point where you had retirees that were embarrassed to say that they retired from the Honolulu Police Department, and that they would not say anything. But you know what? It's nice to hear now that, you know, they're proud of saying that they are, you know, retired from the Honolulu Police Department, 'cause they see that we are trying to change. And just like I tell people when we go outside, I said: It's not gonna happen overnight. And I'm not gonna tell you that our officers aren't gonna do anything wrong, because they absolutely will; it's no different from your children. They're gonna make bad decisions, and they're gonna make bad choices, but we are going to address it. I tell people even now, the people who get promoted; I said: You know, the higher you go, the more humble you need to be. Why do you need to flaunt your power? I mean, yeah, you've got it, it's there. But why? I mean, if you have to do that, then obviously, you're doing something wrong. I said: You know, you should be the most humble person in the world, the higher up that you go. Because you know, that way people feel comfortable around you, and you can get a lot more things done.

At the time of our conversation, Honolulu Police Chief Susan Ballard was eight months into her five-year term as Police Chief, and one month shy of her thirty-third year in the Department. Mahalo to Honolulu Police Chief Susan Ballard of Kailua, O'ahu for sharing your stories with us. And mahalo to you, for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

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You know, I always tell people; I said: You know, as long as you do the right thing, for the right reason, in the right way, then I feel fine. I mean, you're never gonna get everybody to agree. There's always gonna be somebody who disagrees with you. And that's just the world that we live in. But as long as you don't do anything, you know, mean or retaliatory, but you do it for the betterment of the community, the betterment for the officers, then how can you go wrong. You know. And if I'm wrong, I'll be the first to admit, okay, well, we messed up. Or if a law is passed and says: Oh, well, you can't do this anymore. Okay, well, you know, you've given me my direction, you know, and we'll have to move in that direction. But as long as long as you do it with a good heart, and you're doing it for the right reason, you know, I can go home and I can sleep at night.