

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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Jim Leahey is an iconic name in the world of Hawai'i sports broadcasting. For thousands of games, his voice brought University of Hawai'i athletics into our living rooms. And he's one-third of a local sports dynasty; his father was legendary sportscaster Chuck Leahey, and the ball is now in the hands of Jim's son Kanoa. Jim Leahey, next, on Long Story Short.

One-on-one engaging conversations with some of Hawaii's most intriguing people: Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox.

Aloha mai kākou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. James Charles Leahey, sometimes called Kimo, but better known as Jim, retired in June 2018 from a career that spanned more than sixty years in sports broadcasting. He started out teaching school, which he calls his first love. After he changed careers, he became the most recognized sports voice in Hawaii, announcing games and hosting sports talk shows on radio and television for decades. His first radio announcing job came unexpectedly in his teens, when his sportscaster father, Chuck Leahey, fell ill. Chuck Leahey had gotten his start in Hawai'i as a U.S. Navy reporter during World War II.

He was at the attack on Pearl Harbor. He was on the destroyer tender Dobbin, seven hundred yards from the Arizona when it blew up. For one month, his job was to pick up dead bodies and body parts. Okay? And that really affected him. He was also at Midway, he was also at Tarawa, he was at Iwo Jima, but he never talked about them. So, later on, I said: Dad, they're having the anniversary for Pearl Harbor, and all of these people, you know, they wear the hats, survivor. How come you never joined that? He says: Let me tell you something. And he looks ... Let me tell you something. That was the greatest defeat in the history of the United States Navy; it has affected me greatly. I'm not going out wearing a celebratory hat. And so, that's the kind of person he was. I mean, he really loved his children, he really loved his family, but he knew as a chief

petty officer, a journalist chief petty officer in the Navy, which he stayed in after World War II, and he married my mother a month after the attack, he needed something else. So, he went into play-by-play; he went into radio. He refereed basketball games. He did that kind of thing. And because of that, he would have to take us along, because he had these kids. He had to take me along.

How many kids?

Well, he had a total of five. One is deceased now. My brother Robby was blown up in that ammunition firecracker incident.

In Waikele.

In Waikele; yeah.

I'm sorry.

So, the thing was that we sat there, and we absorbed, we absorbed, we absorbed. And we were all sportscasters. I mean, we were all sportscasters. And even when my brother lived in Mililani, had a little pool, we used to play games, and we used to announce the games. And you had to come up there as a new guy with a new bat, and a new way of doing things, and describe what was going on. So, he was able to make a living at it, and he was able to, you know, push it out. And then, he went into Armed Forces Radio in Los Angeles, and we went with him, then we came back. And the first time that I had done it, or I did it, was a boxing tournament in Schofield Barracks at Conroy Bowl. He had pleurisy; he said I can't do it. Pleurisy, liquid in the lungs. And he—This is your pass to get in.

How old were you?

I was fifteen. I was a sophomore at St. Louis. Okay? So, he says: This is your ticket to get in, this is your ticket to get into the arena. This is the equipment; you plug in this, there'll be a radio thing down there, you plug in that, and then you'll hear the engineer, and then you talk to him again. I did it. I went, I got in, I went there. And you know, it sounded fifteen-ish. You know, it was like: There's a hard right to the body, there's a hit to the head, the referee. Oh, he may be down. You know, yeah.

But you were accurate the whole way?

I was pretty accurate. You know, I was pretty accurate. I could tell who won. And uh, then, you know.

Fifteen; you went there on your own without a buddy or—

Nope; just me.

--chaperone, or anything?

Just me.

Wow.

So, that started it off.

But that's live. You sink or swim in live.

Live.

Yeah; no retakes.

No. Yeah; that's right. And people that come up to me and said: You know, I'm gonna do my first game. I said: Well, you have to know the players, you have to study the statistics, you have to know the trends that are going to happen. You have to study the language, you have to read, read, read. And you don't have to read sports all the time; you read other words that you can compare and contrast for the theater of the mind, the people that listen, the people that you're providing the picture for. So, I said: That's what you have to do. And usually, they get right through the opening, the lineups, everything is good. Tipoff; now, all of that is gone. All of that research is gone, and it's your mind and your talent. And I've always believed in three things. One is, always be yourself. Always be yourself. You've been given this talent. Don't imitate anybody else. Two, never tell a lie. Never tell a lie when you're in play-by-play. And three—and you'll get this; never, ever trust broadcast management.

Never trust them.

Never trust myself; no.

Never trust them; yes.

No, no; of course not.

And it's not their fault; it's not their fault. They look at the broadcast, they look at games in a different way. How many people will listen, how many sponsors will we get, how much do we have to pay the announcer, how much do we have to, you know, pay for the rights, and all kinds of stuff. So, theirs is different.

Different parameters.

Yeah; yeah. But don't trust 'em. Don't come buddy-buddy with 'em. No.

Okay; you say that. But when you're asked who are the people who've influenced you most, two of them are from broadcast management: Bob Sevey and Rick Blangiardi.

Absolutely; absolutely. Bob Sevey; let me tell you the story of Bob Sevey. Bob Sevey was my idol, Bob Sevey was my mentor, Bob Sevey was—well, you worked for him too.

And you did trust him, apparently. He was the news director.

Well, he was the news director, but he also had to present the news every day. And he had to say things like: I want three sources on this story before we put it on the air; I'm not gonna go with this, I want three sources. So, he had the best crew in Hawai'i, and you were one of them, that supplied that for him. For me, he says: Don't say U-nited Airlines, it's United Airlines. I said: What's the difference? He goes: You can tell the difference if you're a pro. I go: Well, I gotta be a pro. You know. I was teaching school at Campbell High School in 'Ewa Beach. He came to see me. So, he came in, and he came into my classroom and he sat down, and he said: Can I talk to you? And I go: Sure; how you doing? You know.

So, he looks at me and he says: Joe Moore is leaving for Channel 2 to do the news; we want you to do the sports at six and at ten. And I told him: No. He says: What? What? He says: How much do you make? I say: Seventeen thousand dollars a year teaching school, and I like it. And he says: I'll double it. Now, it's up to thirty-four thousand. And he says: I'll double it. I say: No, I don't want that. I've been in this part-time, and I don't like it, it's kind of a phony business. You know. And he's looking at me kind of funny, he's looking at me kind of funny. And I said: Look, I live in this community, I ride my bicycle to school every day.

Okay; but Channel 9 was the biggest station of its time.

Oh, it was. It was.

But still, were you negotiating at this point?

No, no, no, no. There was no negotiation here. No, no. What I was trying to say is that I liked my job, I liked where I was, and I liked what I was doing as a teacher. He says he'll double it. I say: No, because I like it. He says--and this is what got me, this is what got me: When are you going to think of your own children instead of everybody else's? Uh

... uh ... uh ... and I knew that this offer was not gonna be there, because this is Friday, and he wants me to be there on Monday.

And lots of other people wanted the job.

That's right; that's right. So, he said: And I'll triple it. So, I said: Well, I'll take a sabbatical one year, see how it is. And I never went back.

Jim Leahey's sportscasting career took off as he informed and entertained. And in live sporting events for the University of Hawai'i, he did more than call plays; he was a masterful storyteller. But he was no master of his emotions. He wore his heart on his UH sleeve.

He loses the ball! Rainbows have it! * How sweet it is! How sweet it is!

This is delicious!

Here comes Muhammad. Muhammad step on the plate, he's safe. The Rainbows have defeated UCLA. I don't believe it! I don't believe it!

Jim Leahey made the job look easier than it was. While some of it came naturally to him, he also did a great deal of homework, prepping for a game.

It's a tremendous thing, and what you had to do, and the amount of hours. Oh, I should have brought in my scorebooks, where I had to handwrite all the updated statistics for the next game.

You just immerse yourself in all the information.

And it takes hours, and hours, and hours. And then, you know, you go and do the best you can in describing—

And then, how did you come up with some of the expressions you've used on the air? I imagine you thought about them ahead of time. I mean, when you said at the Brigham Young game that Hawai'i won, you know: This is better than statehood. That was perfect.

You know, that just came. That just came into my mind, because that's how I felt.

Yeah.

That's how I felt.

And the enthusiasm in your voice is just palpable.

Yeah.

Do you consciously build enthusiasm in games, or is that natural?

I think that you ... in order to present the theater of the mind—I keep going back to that, especially in radio. In radio, you have to describe everything. And when you do, people have different ways of looking at it. They have different ways of looking at the stadium, different ways of looking at the grass in the stadium, different ways of where the baseball players are playing defensively. How does the batter look, what kind of bat does he have, what kind of stance does he use, what kind of pitch is going to come his way. All of that have to be conveyed. Now, on television, everyone sees the same picture. But you still have to enhance it. You have to enhance who these people are, what kind of record does the pitcher have.

With a few words, too.

And the words that you use come from reading, reading, reading, reading, reading. And it doesn't have to be sports; it can be anything else. Because then you can compare and contrast. That ball is aloha. Homerun; that ball is aloha. No one in the other forty-nine states is going to say: What? What is that? But the people here do. So, you have to be very concerned with your audience, too. You have to really be concerned with that.

Now, Bob Sevey was probably better known than most governors.

Yes. He was a tremendous guy, and I owe a lot to him. Really.

And yet, it wasn't smooth sailing all the time.

No.

Because he was broadcast management, so you had your tiffs with him. In fact, one time I said--I think we called you Kimo.

Yeah.

Kimo Leahy at the time.

Yeah.

What's Kimo angry about? And he goes: I don't know.

There were a lot of guys in that newsroom that were the same.

Always angry about something. And they reported the news, I think, the best that it could be reported. But for me, working on that particular crew—and then you have Blangiardi coming in, and his idea about taking the events of the University of Hawai'i football team, basketball team, volleyball team, and to televise it to the Hawaiian Islands was amazing. And he had a man who worked very, very hard at it, and that was Stan Sheriff. And Stan Sheriff built already a big arena at Northern Iowa when he was there, before he came as the athletic director at the University of Hawai'i. And he fought with the politicians all the time, because the politicians were saying: We don't need a big arena; the only good team we have is volleyball, we only need four thousand seats. And he says: No, we—

Think big.

Think big. Because we need fifteen thousand, because then we can have regionals, then we can have—you know, it would be national; it would be national. That's what he was looking for. He was so dedicated to what he did, it killed him. Because one night after coming back from the mainland, he went to pick up his baggage and died, right there. And so, that was really a tragedy. But we kept working at it, and Blangiardi kept working at it. And so, Blangiardi, even though he was management, he was my color man. He was my color man in what I consider the greatest game, which was in 1989 when the Bows finally beat Brigham Young after ten years.

Farmer at the forty. Farmer at the forty-five. Farmer at the forty. in front of it. The thirty, the twenty, the fifteen, the ten, the five! Touchdown!

I'm not sure. They say no! And they put it on the three-yard line! No way! No way!

He has it at the fifteen. He will score!

Final seconds will tick away. And so, if you ask yourself: Is this the year? Is this the year? You better believe this is the year!

I remember the time watching that clip. Rick Blangiardi sat at Jim Leahey's side, providing color commentary during many live sports events. Once the broadcast was over, though, Blangiardi's role went back to being the boss at the TV station.

And he fired me twice. And his method of firing, I mean, it was Broadway show. Get out, you'll never work in this town again.

I chase him down the stairs to his car, make sure he leaves. And I go: Boy, I don't want to get fired like that. And yet, I was. One night, he's gonna show the Texas Chainsaw Massacre, and I went ... No, no; you don't want to watch this. I did the sports lead-in to the movie. I said: You don't want to watch this. Tomorrow night, we have a better, it's better for the kids, we have a better movie.

So, you were an employee of the station telling people not to watch the station.

Absolutely.

Right; okay.

That's the first thing he said to me when I came in the next day. And then following that is: You're done, you're finished, you'll never work in this town again. So, I drive home, I drive home and I tell my wife: Toni, I'm sorry, but I got fired today; I got fired by Blangiardi. And she, being the Catholic school girl that she was, said: What did you do now?

Okay? So, I said: Chainsaw Massacre. Ring; the phone rings. It's Blangiardi. Eh, this is Blangiardi. You know.

And he says: We had a good one today; yeah? And I go: Yeah, you fired me. Ah, don't worry about that, come back tomorrow.

But see, he's like nobody else.

Some chances you don't get more than once.

No.

Yeah.

Yeah. But the thing is, I think that now that I've retired, I find it very difficult.

Okay. This is really the nub of it. You've just retired from sportscasting, after more than sixty years. Sportscasting has defined your life; you've loved it. Other people have a love-hate relationship with their job, or they really lost interest a while back. But you have always been all in, all love it. You know, whatever you've had to put up with to do it, you've loved. So, now what?

Ooh; that's a good question, isn't it?

You're supposed to think about it before you retire.

Yeah. I ... I did think about it, but it was like on and off, on and off, on and off. And then, when I had my last tiff with the management of the radio station that carried University of Hawai'i basketball—

Oh, that's right.

I mean, baseball.

You've probably been fired from other places too; right?

Yeah, yeah. I've been fired from other places, too.

So, this one, the manager says: Well, it was only a two-year deal. I said: two-year, I never signed anything. Where is it; show me the paper. So, I'm telling them: Look, I can do it one more year; I know I can do it one more year. And he goes: Well, you know, I don't know, in one or two years, the new guys that's coming in, they actually work here, and... And I go: Well. And he says: Well, call me. I hang up. My wife is across the room, and she's giving me the what-for. I mean, her eyes are like, neeeee. She says: Don't you ever do that again. And I said: What? Beg people for a job. Do you know the kinda people they are, compared to you? What are all these awards? What are all these; you haven't done anything? You're just coming up, just starting? No, you don't even need 'em. Now's the time for you to step away. That's what she tells me; now's the time for you to step away. Now, we have been married fifty-two years. And when her eyes get big, I tend to take that as a signal that I'd better maybe start to think in a different way.

Jim Leahey's home life was in many ways a reflection of his life as a sports fan, enjoying the give-and-take and the back-and-forth opinions, even relishing the disagreement and not wanting to give an inch. He credits his wife Toni and their three children for opening him up to new perspectives, and making him a better person. Those real-life spirited discussions around the kitchen table became the format for Leahey & Leahey, a show he co-hosted with his son Kanoa Leahey for nine years here on PBS Hawai'i.

I would love to have been at your family's dinner table over years, because I know it was vociferous debate many times.

Oh, yeah.

We saw it when you and Kanoa were doing the show here together. You would take positions, and you would advocated mightily. And both of you were so articulate in doing so. And it could get very ...

Yes, it could.

So, I think you're comfortable with conflict.

Yes.

And I think ...

Because in conflict, if you have the right conflict, if you have the kind of conflict where you leave and you don't like the person anymore, you know. But if you leave with respect, you can converse, you know, all the time.

It's true that you don't solve anything unless you work it out.

That's right.

So, what were your dinner table conversations like as a family?

Oh, when we disagreed with each other, it was: How can you possibly be saying that, when you called yourself a human being? You know.

Ooh, that sounds a little personal.

Well, yeah. I mean, but the other ones were: No, no, no, that's not right. Because especially when they got into high school, then they could argue back, then they could really make a case. Then they could say: Yeah, well, you don't know anything; you don't know anything about this. And I didn't like that, because ... they were right; I didn't know anything about that.

But did you admit it?

No; not then.

No, of course not.

But later on; you know, later on, you do. No; the family dinner is something that is very special. The family dinner is something that, what happened during that day, you discuss it. And sometimes, you agree, sometimes you don't agree, sometimes you leave it unsaid, or solutions un—

Is any conversation forbidden, any subject forbidden?

No; absolutely not. And I think my wife watches that pretty good. She goes: Don't say that. You know, that kinda stuff.

And everybody listens to her.

Yes. I mean, she's the one that sets the standard. My wife and I set the standards. Fifty-two years; fifty-two years of the greatest arguments that you will ever hear.

Who wins? Who wins your arguments?

-- vocabulary, I may say.

Oh, I bet.

Yeah.

She's a teacher, and you're a word guy.

I'll tell you what. When we go to sleep, we're solving it. So, when the lights go out, about a half hour after that ... Sorry, I said [INDISTINCT]. And I think that's the best way. You can disagree, but then there's also that it's not permanent. It's not permanent.

And you learn something from every argument? Is that what you think?

You learn most of it; you learn most of it in there. But I wouldn't trade her.

Right now, people are so polarized, and we have a hard time talking to each other about our differences. And you feel really comfortable doing that. It's had some negative effects, but it's really healthy to talk when you don't agree.

Yes.

Right?

Yes. That's the only way that you really make progress. If you're afraid not to state your views, if you're afraid to say that what I believe ... I really don't, I really don't think it'll work. You gotta go in there with some certainty. You gotta go in there and say: Yeah, that's a good point, and I'll give you that, but. And then you challenge, you challenge, you know, whatever they have to say.

Have you ever regretted that you spoke up or disagreed?

Sure. Sure.

Why?

Oh, I think that I ... emotionally, I leapt emotionally before I leapt intellectually. And at the end, I think I hurt the person a little bit too much. Lady. So, I called her up and said: If that's an example of me, I was not up to standard. You know. But you have to have respect for the person. You have to have. You know, what they say to you, you learn from that.

Do you think it made your kids stronger, that you're such a strong personality, and outspoken? And obviously, Toni is very much a part, and probably quieter and more definitive when it's over. But you know, your kids hear a lot from you. Do you think it's made them stronger?

I think it's made me stronger. I think it's made me stronger. Because when I talk to them on the phone or something like that and they have a point, they go boom-boom-boom-boom. You know. Yeah. That's right; that's right. Yeah, yeah, okay. Yeah, okay. Yeah, that's okay. All right. Let me look into that. You know, that kind of made me stronger. At times, you know, I think it's helped them with their problems. Everybody has problems. But I just think, you know, you're Leaheys, and we have a pride, we have a way of doing things, and what you've said has made me stronger. I finally understand where you're coming from; finally understand.

You know what I noticed about you when you were doing a show here? 'Cause I got to observe you. If a guest didn't show, if for some reason a featured guest was not available for the taping, it didn't concern you whatsoever. You and Kanoa knew you could put on a half-hour program.

Sure; yeah.

Adlib it, and it would be a really good show. And it was not necessary, even though it would have been welcome.

It would have been better.

That would be so daunting to almost anybody else.

No; because see, that's who we are. That's who we are. We deal with ideas, we deal with viewpoints. We deal with things that happen. And maybe our viewpoint is a little bit off, a little bit different, but we're going to explain it to you. You know, we're going to show you.

What do you think about Kanoa? When you listen to him call sports, do you hear yourself, and then do you hear things that you wouldn't say?

I hear myself; I hear the same things that I've said in the past. But I also hear something that ... is really good. It's really original. But I can still hold my own. I can still hold my own in basketball, or have good games in baseball. I think I'm a little bit better than he is in baseball. But don't tell anybody.

Jim's son, Kanoa Leahey, has taken his place in the Leahey dynasty as a consummate sportscaster very skilled at handling live coverage, and a sports talk show host. Mahalo to Jim Leahey of East Honolulu 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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A horse walks into a bar. Tell me the joke.

A horse walks into a bar. The bartender looks up and says: Hey, big fella; why the long face?

That's it; that's the joke. She got it.

That was perfect.

That was flawless delivery.

How many years; how many years did it take for you to remember that joke? 'Cause I used to tell it every day for about three months, and you never got it right. The bartender wasn't right, the horse didn't have a long neck.

Twenty-five to thirty years?

It was about that. Yeah, it was about that.