

# LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



## **TITLE: Community Builders**

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### **Richard Ha**

We always plan five, ten years out. We're always looking for where we need to be in the future. And we already know that this is happening, it's gonna get worse, so we're already moving in that direction.

### **Stacy Sproat-Beck**

I remember asking that question when I was in college. You know; what about a nonprofit? Because I knew it was there, and it was really an amazing opportunity, you know, to be able to grow this entity that is really for the community, and to take care of the land, and to teach people.

### **Kukui Maunakea-Forth**

That's what I love most about what we do, is that we're providing this way for young people at an early age to build equity. You know, and it's not just financial equity, but it's also equity in terms of the relationships that we're creating with other people in our community, and with the land.

**Every entrepreneur seeks professional success. An uncommon few also aim to build a better community. Coming up on Long Story Short, our conversations with four individuals who are among a rare breed of business and community leaders.**

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. On this edition of Long Story Short, community builders. It takes a remarkable type of person to look beyond their own family, business, and circumstances, maybe beyond their own lifetime, and work to make life better for the broader community over the long haul. To illustrate the impact these individuals can have, we revisit four entrepreneurs running distinctive businesses and nonprofits on three different islands. We think it's worth another look at what these innovators have accomplished, putting their vision and values to work, and how they empower people in their communities.**

**First up, Gary and Kukui Maunakea-Forth. Though they come from different places—New Zealand and Nānākuli, this married couple came together through shared concerns about social conditions on the Wai‘anae Coast of O‘ahu. And when it came time to start their enterprise in 2001, making money was far from the top priority. Now the largest organic farm on O‘ahu, the nonprofit MA‘O Organic Farms is providing much more than food. It’s creating a future for young people in West O‘ahu, and educating leaders for the next generation.**

### **Gary Maunakea-Forth**

I think the first place it came down to was the fact that we weren't growing our own food. We definitely worried about the kids in our community. But I think because we saw all this land that was being wrongly used, we just kept asking ourselves: Why aren't we feeding ourselves? And then, we dug a little bit deeper, and one of our friends who's a soil scientist said it turns out that the soil in Lualualei Valley is one of the most unique and nutrient rich soils in the world. And we didn't know that, and kids in our community weren't taught that. The connection to the land had been severed. And we still to this day, those kids that come up to the farm, they've never been up in the valleys. And so, I think that's where it started. And then, you know, definitely as our kids started to get a little bit older and go through the same problems that other kids were going through, our connection to what kids in Wai‘anae, what kids in rural Hawai‘i are going through started to just, you know, really sort of slap us in the face; you know, the idea that a good public education is very difficult to get in Hawai‘i.

We didn't want to just grow food and eat it ourselves. We wanted it to be highly marketable. Because, you know, when we analyzed our community, the state of poverty was multigenerational. And we thought that if we sell our own food for a premium price, that money wouldn't go back to our community. And so, we looked at the kind of social service kinds of things that we had been doing ourselves and that others were doing, and we wanted to add this what at the time was called community-based economic development. But we wanted to add this economic development layer that now has become social enterprise. And so, that's where it started.

### **Kukui Maunakea-Forth**

I wanted it to be this great education program, and I wanted, you know, this element of culture and, you know, this element of vocational skills being taught, and this element of community work being done. And it just didn't happen like that at all. It was whatever, you know, resources and people that were sort of there at the time. And it started off as a ten-month-long experience; you know, farm work experience.

**So, who were you first enrollees?**

**Kukui Maunakea-Forth**

Multi people that we had talked to their parents at Tamura's. Or we saw down at the beach park and said: Hey, you know, we're starting a program; would you guys like to, you know, send your daughter? Oh, yeah; my daughter's graduating, and she doesn't really have plans; sure, we'll sign her up.

Those people that were meant to be there, ended up there. And, you know, all of us, you know, growing up on the Coast, the fact that there's only eleven percent that will go to college; that's a small number. So, what about the other eighty-eight, ninety percent that aren't going to college; where are those guys? And, you know, we thought long and hard about who we wanted to have this opportunity, and to have this experience. And it was really those that were going to become the leaders. So, this eighteen to twenty-four-year-old Wai'anae or Nānākuli graduate that had a desire to do something different, and to connect with not only the culture, but with a future in the community.

**Gary Maunakea-Forth**

Almost every young person that has been in touch with MA'O—and this is pretty much the condition of the Wai'anae Coast, you know, the federal government calls them at-risk. And if you look deep at the statistics, you'll find that Wai'anae has twice the teen pregnancy rate, twice the substance abuse rate. All of these indicators are terrible, twice as bad as anywhere else. And so, most of the kids that come have issues at home, or in their own lives that they've got to deal with. On top of that, you know, we're told in this society that if you go and get a college education, you can get ahead in life, you know, you can get your American Dream. Most of the kids coming out of the public schools in the State of Hawai'i and in Wai'anae are what's termed remedial. And so, they have to be highly motivated.

When we started MA'O, we wanted to start it with an associate degree program. That took us three or four years to gain momentum, because when we went to Leeward Community College initially, they were like: Well, let's do a noncredit program. And so, we started with this ten-month-long program. And now, the various programs we have through MA'O are sort of designed to be like a movement, to have this environment of entrepreneurship, of I want to get ahead, I want to work hard, I want to give to my community.

**Kukui Maunakea-Forth**

Over time, you know, we nurture trust, and respect, and love.

### **Gary Maunakea-Forth**

And when kids first come to the farm, they generally come because we're gonna help them pay for college and give them a stipend. The farming, they could live without some of them.

So, in 2003, I think, was our first real official ten-person youth leadership training of these young people just straight out of college. And one of them went through the whole ten-months, and during that ten months he turned eighteen, and he was all over the place.

He was just growing up. And anyway, he stuck it out, and now, he's still with us, and he's twenty-five years old. And he's now the assistant farm manager. His name is Manny. He represents what we believe is the untapped potential of young men in Waianae. He can run the farm himself. I've seen him talk story with Alan Wong about food, talk story with Ed Kenney about food. At one of the fundraisers, he was talking about the farm to Pierre Omidyar, who's a billionaire. He represents, I believe, what a young farmer in the State of Hawai'i should be. Not just a person who's able to toil in the fields, but he can talk about the vegetables, he can cook the vegetables.

You know, we've tried to take the farming part of it, and make it sexy, and make it interesting. And the best and easiest way to do that is to allow the young people to do, firstly, a bit of everything.

M-hm.

So, they get typecast weeding a lot.

But they also get to do all the other jobs. You know, packing vegetables to go to Town Restaurant, or to go to Whole Foods is one of those things where they start to see the pride in doing it.

### **And the connection.**

And get connection; yeah. And so, if they're at KCC Farmers Market selling vegetables, that's the ultimate job. You know, we're hoping now that the next step for us is that especially some of the young people who really all of a sudden like farming will be farmers, and will either farm larger spaces with us, or go off by themselves.

### **Kukui Maunakea-Forth**

I think that's what I love most about what we do, is that we're providing this way for young people at an early age to build equity. You know, and it's not just financial equity, but it's also equity in terms of the relationships that we're creating with other people in our community, and with the land that feeds them.

**Since 2009 when this interview first aired, MA'O Organic Farms has continued to do well. In 2018, a record twenty-one students graduated from the program with high school and college degrees, including from a new four-year program in sustainable community food systems at UH West O'ahu. While we enjoy the vegetables, MA'O is really growing the leaders of tomorrow.**

**Now, we head over to Kaua'i's North Shore, where Stacy Sproat-Beck is pursuing some similar goals at the Waipā Foundation. The Waipā educational mission includes connecting people to the land, using natural resources responsibly, strengthening family, cultural, and community ties, and preserving a way of life. In 2014, Stacy Sproat-Beck told us why she was a world away from the work her business school professors expected her to pursue.**

**You went to USC, a very fine business school. What was the experience of going to college at USC like? I mean, there are a lot of wealthy scions, you know, sons and daughters of magnates.**

It was kind of a culture shock. You know, not so much being in a city that size, or in a school that size, because you know, I'd lived here for six years in Honolulu, and gone to Kamehameha. And this is a big city, too. But definitely, USC was kind of a culture shock for me, and I didn't fit in that well. And you know, I'd raise my hand and go: What about family business? And they go: Oh, no, no, no; don't talk about that. You know, family business is really hard. And I go: Oh, what about nonprofits? And they go: Nonprofits? You know, maybe we'll bring somebody in to talk about nonprofits, but nonprofits aren't really where the money is. And so, it was kind of a different thing for me. But I still feel like I gained a lot of knowledge and important skills from going there, definitely. It was an amazing education.

**When you came home, I think you were aware of what was going on, but weren't there for a lot of the fireworks. There was a lot of militance about the way land was going on the North Shore, the push for resort development, and the move away from a rural lifestyle.**

On Kaua'i?

**M-hm.**

Yeah. It seems like that was happening. Yeah; that was happening throughout our childhood and youth, and my parents were really active, and my family was really active and fighting development, and wanting to manage it, really, and not just let it get out of hand.

**And in fact, they were fighting Kamehameha Schools, where you'd attended, owner of Waipa.**

Yeah; in the early 80s then, yes, Kamehameha became one of the entities that wanted to develop their landholdings there on the North Shore. They were in development mode, and so, their plans for Waipā and Lumahai were golf courses, resort communities. Back then, it was all about developing the land so they could make money to support the school at Kapālama and the Estate. Eventually, after four years of activism and negotiation, and the default of the potential developer, they were able to obtain a lease from Kamehameha for the sixteen-hundred-acre ahupua'a of Waipā, which is an intact watershed. It's amazing.

I moved home in '92, and I really started helping at Waipā in '94. And it was really just difficult. There were a lot of different challenges and issues.

**And you were doing this as a volunteer?**

Yeah. Well, farming with my husband on the side, helping manage Waipā on a volunteer basis. And then also, I think I was doing promotions for a boat company to actually make money to pay my bills. When Kamehameha went through strategic planning in 2000-2001, they changed their whole viewpoint on land management and revenue-generating lands, versus lands for culture and education. And also, kind of right around that same time, all of these other difficulties that we had just sort of went away.

**What do you do on the sixteen-hundred-acre property?**

My dad guys envisioned that the original founders, it was to be a land base for the practice and perpetuation of Hawaiian culture. And so, that was their vision. And so, we continue to perpetuate that today by doing programs for kids that connect them with the land, and also, you know, we do enrichment programs and leadership, and cultural programs. And they're in the garden and harvesting, and also just swimming in the streams and maybe doing a lot of the things that I did as a kid, that we all did. And I feel like what that does today is, it connects us back to the earth, when a lot of us are just busy living somewhat urban lives. It's helping them to make the connection. So, we do programs for kids. We do resource management. You know, we manage learning sites, and sites that we're restoring. We have a fishpond that we're restoring along the coast, and then we've got lo'i, taro fields, and gardens, and a native plants nursery. And then, up in the valley, we're doing reforestation. And then, sort of teaching and learning through all of that. And even another thing that's really amazing to us is that we've planted a lot of fruit trees lately, orchards of fruit trees, everything from longan and lychee, to mango, and oranges, and avocado, and ulu, star fruit. And really to be able to create abundance, lots of food, because you know, we know the importance

of having lots of food there, both to feed ourselves and you know, to share with community, and then to market too. But also being able to take the kids out. Oh, and mountain apples, too; that's a big one. Being able to take the kids out and let them pick their own snacks off the trees. I mean, we grew up with that, but kids nowadays—

### **They look for a box.**

It blows their mind when they go out and are able to pick mountain apples and eat them. It's just the most amazing experience for them. And for us, I think, that should be so basic, you know.

### **What's the goal for Waipā Foundation now in the ahupua'a?**

So, our vision is a thriving an abundant ahupua'a, and a healthy community that's connected to their resources. And so, it's both ... yeah, exactly that. Just thriving and abundant, with land and resources being healthy, and feeding us in many ways, both physically, spiritually, and then also community that is connected to the place that helps to take care of it, and is nourished by it, and also actively manages and takes care of the land. And I think that's our vision specifically for Waipā, but also, it's a larger vision. You know, Waipā could be just a microcosm of the State or the island, or the world, where everybody is directly connected to the resources that feed them and take care of them.

**Our next guest may not have started out with quite the same intentions as Stacy Sproat-Beck or the Maunakea-Forths. Richard Ha went into the family farming business, and the founded his own farm on the Hāmākua Coast of Hawai'i Island. Along the way, Ha found that his business expertise and entrepreneurial vision prepared him to make progress on challenging issues like sustainability, food security, and renewable energy. Ha always tries to stay ahead of curve, anticipating the next big need. It all started with the can-do attitude he learned from his dad.**

**When you saw your dad farming, and you were playing with tomatoes, did you think: I want to grow up and be a farmer?**

No. Actually, what happened was, I ended up wanting to go into business or into having some kind of organization to be in charge of. And the reason that happened was because Dad used tell stories when I was about ten years old. We had this kitchen table that was like a picnic table, with a bench and everything. And he would tell stories about impossible situations. You know, a business situation, or he had all kinds of different situations. And it would come down to he came up against a stonewall, there was no way to figure it out, and he'd pound the table, and the dishes would all fly. He would say—boom; Not no can; can! I remember that pretty clearly.

**Not no can; can.**

Yeah.

**It's about problem-solving and the will to overcome the problem.**

Yeah. It was just a given that you just don't come up to a problem and look at and say: Oh, that's it. You know, there was always a way around it.

**What were you gonna do with your accounting degree?**

You know, actually, I didn't really know. I just knew that I had an accounting degree, and if anything came up, I was gonna do it. But it just so happened Pop asked me to come back and run his chicken farm. I said: Okay, well, I don't have anything planned; I'll do that. So, I came back, helped him run the poultry farm, and in the course of that, met the supermarket people, learned how marketing and that kinda stuff worked.

**And you learned from the ground, up on that end; right?**

Yeah; yeah. I mean, we raised chickens when we were little, but the business end of it was different, you know. And with an accounting degree, it helped me to analyze stuff. And so, what happened was, we had forty acres, and twenty-five of it was in the chicken farm, so we had some extra land. And so, we needed to find out what could we do with no more money. 'Cause I only had a three hundred dollar credit card. Back then it was hard to get a three hundred dollar credit card. So, we started doing some research, and found out that there was about six million pounds of Chiquita Bananas being imported into Hawai'i. So, I said: Oh, man, if we could get into that, we should be able to do okay. So, we started trading chicken manure for banana keiki, and started two acres.

**At what point did you have your own farm?**

Well, yeah; that was my dad's farm, and we made it into a four-way corporation with my brothers. And then, from there, I went to Kapoho to lease some land over there. And that's when it started, maybe two years after we started the first banana farm. And then, when the sugar plantations started closing down, we were able to move closer in to Hilo, at Kea'au. So, we moved the farm there. At Kea'au, we expanded to three hundred acres, and by then, we became the largest banana farm in the State.

**Are you confident that local people will buy local produce, even if it's more expensive?**

Well, you know, it's really what we need to do to support our local farmers, because to be food-secure, farmers gotta make money. And come the time when we feel like this

is really a serious situation, it'll happen. And everybody's talking about food security. Now, how do we do that? And the answer is, if the farmer can make money, the farmer will farm. So, it doesn't get much more complex than that. So, in an effort to figure out ways to help farmers make money, you know, with the help of the Department of Ag and the legislators, and a bunch of people, we pushed through legislation so that farmers could get cheap loans, low interest, long-term loans for renewable energy projects. And how we look at it is how it affects our workers, our community, and the environment. Every Thursday, our workers can come and just pick up all the different things we grow—bananas and tomatoes, and whatever, you know, as much as they need for their family. And we have profit sharing, although it's been tough the last few years. We have profit sharing, and we want to look, you know, toward whatever we can do to help them with the food side of it. Because it's hard for us to raise our workers' salaries, because we can't raise the price. Everybody's having hard time. So, we have to figure out other ways to help our workers.

**Keaukaha Elementary School, a Hawaiian Homelands community, and a school that was in the academic basement for twenty years; you adopted a class there.**

Yeah. What happened was, I volunteered to be on this thirty meter telescope subcommittee on the Hawaii Island Economic Development Board. And so, when you talk about telescopes, you automatically talk about the culture. Maua Kea, you need to talk about the culture. If you talk about the culture, you end up at Keaukaha. It's a seventy-five-year-old Hawaiian Homes community. And so, that's where I ended up. Yeah; so I went over there, talked to Kumu Lehua about telescopes, and had to learn a lot the culture. I didn't know as much as I do now. I was mostly worried about farming. But you know, the more I got into it, the more I needed to learn. And then, what was ironic was, here I am on the thirty meter telescope subcommittee, and you're standing in Keaukaha, you look at the mountain; there's hundreds of millions of dollars of investment up there. You look back at the school and the community. So, you know, there's nothing here of tangible relationship to that. But whatever the case, we decided this no can; we had to do something.

**What do you see yourself doing in ten years?**

You know, it's hard to say what it'll be, but I'm pretty sure it'll be something that I can't imagine now. Because we always end up doing something that's new and different. Yeah; so I expect that it'll be something new and different, but it'll be something, for sure.

**And it'll be in farming?**

I can't even say that. I don't want to just say one particular thing. But it really has to do with where our society is going, what our circumstance will be.

**Since this interview first aired in 2008, we can now tell you what Richard Ha is doing. In 2016, he closed Hāmākua Springs Country Farms and was awarded one of the first Hawaii licenses to grow and sell medical marijuana with a company called Lau Ola. In the fall of 2018, he left Lau Ola after steering the company through its startup phase. He said he'll continue in the agriculture and energy industries.**

**Richard Ha, Stacy Sproat-Beck, and Gary and Kukui Maunakea-Forth all continue to grow their own enterprises, while building better communities across our state. We thank them for their vision and can-do attitude, and for sharing their stories with us. We hope they've inspired you. Mahalo for watching. For Long Story Short and PBS Hawai'i, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.**

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### **Kukui Maunakea-Forth**

There's no one right way. And we've all sort of figured out this thing that we bring everything to the table, you put it down, if your idea is better than ours, then hey, we're gonna go with your idea. And that's how it even happened with that very first class.

### **Stacy Sproat-Beck**

Things have really just grown like crazy since then, and gone in an amazing direction. I feel like the lessons learned from those really hard times are kind of what maybe grounds me and the organization in sort of humility and remembering that things don't always come easy.

### **Richard Ha**

Pop taught us a lot of lessons, and it had to do with survival. Just do what you gotta do, and plan for the future, and you know, make decisions. You gotta do it, do it now, kinda thing like that.

### **And not no can; can.**

Yeah; absolutely.