

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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Your gender in doing this prison story ...

Yeah.

How did that affect the dynamics?

I will say that the prison setting had more yin-yang, feminine and male energy than I would have expected. So, it wasn't an all alpha male situation. There was a lot of spectrum of gender that presented at the prison setting. So, as much as like, going into it I had thought of like, you know, whatever X, Y, Z bad movie I'd seen about a prison, that wasn't the truth. You know, when you make a movie, you want to show up and own the space, and say: This is how everything has to work. Right? This is my crew, this is my schedule, this is what it has to be.

Because producers are ...

Because producers ...

The synonym is, bossy people.

I'm so bossy. I'm so bossy. And you know, when it came to working in the prison, I call it Daoist filmmaking. You know, you don't have control, and you just give it all up. And you say thank you for whatever you're able to do.

She's a filmmaker who went into an Arizona prison to document the stories of Native Hawaiian men who were incarcerated thousands of miles from home. Ciara Lacy, 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. Ciara Lacy is a Native Hawaiian producer and director of the documentary, Out of State. The film follows two Native Hawaiian men from their confinement in a for-profit Arizona prison to their struggles reintegrating into

society on O'ahu. While still locked up in Arizona, the men began to reconnect with their native culture, even though they were isolated thousands of miles away.

I never knew one ounce of Hawaiian before I even came jail. I learned everything in jail.

[CHANTING]

I always took from people. That's how I knew how to get what I wanted in life.

Why couldn't I have learned my culture while I was outside?

Ciara's path to making this film was also filled with her own personal struggles. She spent her early years growing up in Central O'ahu, where she loved to draw and write stories on her electric typewriter.

I was born early. So, I was born like, six weeks early, and my mom and dad didn't have a name. My mother studied opera at UH, and she was singing an aria at the time, and Ciara was one of the words in the aria. And they needed to give the baby a name, and she pulled that out.

What does it mean?

It means light, or clarity. So, it's like, kinda like chiaroscuro, like light and dark, the painting technique.

Oh, that sounds like you're well-named.

What's your earliest memory? What was your home life like?

I had a great family. You know, my father worked at Pearl Harbor for like, thirty-five, thirty-seven years. And you know, I was lucky; I didn't realize it at the time. My mother was a housewife in the 80s and 90s. And it was the four of us; you know, my mom, my dad, and my sister.

Did you have adversity along the way?

I mean, I was weird. I didn't necessarily fit in, but I was okay with that. When I was very young, I don't know, maybe five or six, my dad went to a garage sale. My parents love garage sales. And he went to a garage sale, and he bought an electric typewriter. And I fell in love with the thing immediately, because I thought it was the coolest thing in the world. And so, I would sit there, and I would just type at it. And I'm sure some of

my teachers from elementary school, like, they must have thought my mom was typing my homework.

Because I would turn in all my homework typed.

In elementary school?

Because I liked to type. And I remember in fourth grade, I wrote a really weird story about like, a drug addict in Vegas. And I'm like ... what fourth-grader does that? And I'm sure my teacher thought this was weird. But it made sense, because that was the kind of thing I would do.

Future filmmaker Ciara Lacy went on to high school at the Kamehameha Schools Kapālama Campus. She applied herself, and became valedictorian of her graduating class. That opened up many possibilities for her future, although she wasn't quite sure what that future was going to be.

When I was little, I knew we didn't have money for me to go to college. Which is not uncommon. Right? I mean, college is super-expensive. So, I needed to make sure I could go. And that was what drove it. So, it's like, I mean, whatever college is, you know, like, I didn't know; I just knew it was something that I needed to do.

And did you know what you wanted to do with this life-changing experience of college once you'd attained it?

No. And I think that was the problem. Like, I knew I needed to get there. And then, when I showed up, I was like: Well, now what?

And when you showed up, you showed up at Yale. You got a very good ...

I was very lucky.

You got good scholarships, and you got a top college.

Yes; I was very lucky.

Did you find it intimidating at all, this idea that everyone at Yale could be the smartest one in your?

Oh, my gosh. Everyone at Yale is super-smart. Are you kidding me? It's like, two hundred percent imposter syndrome. Like, okay, what am I doing here? And it takes a second, and you realize everyone's thinking the same thing. And you know, everyone's coming from vastly different spaces.

And what did you end up majoring in?

I ended up majoring in psychology. And I did crisis counseling in college. And that, I really connected with. But I wasn't sure if that was gonna be my career. And I thought that counseling and the crisis counseling would be good for business. And that was about it. But I didn't think I wanted to go into therapy as my career.

But unlike many people, you didn't stay on the mainland; you came back.

I came back.

And then, how was the job hunting when you came back?

Job hunting was hard. I had a really hard time getting a job. And I wanted to work in production. I like, had a secret love of music videos. I still have a love of music videos. And that's what I wanted to make. But I didn't have a degree in that, because who gets a film degree. It's way too lofty. And that's not a real job. These are things I'm telling myself.

M-hm.

Right?

A year after graduating from Yale University and returning home to Hawai'i, Ciara Lacy decided to pursue her secret passion: to produce music videos. So, she packed up again and left for New York City to enter the world of video production.

And I went back, and I showed up in New York. And I had two thousand dollars in cash, and a credit card. And I sold hotdogs at the Sheep's Meadow in Central Park, and I taught the SATUs for Princeton Review. And I temped, and I interned for free, and I did whatever I could to kinda just figure my way.

So, you're out there selling hotdogs.

And somehow, you get hired in media production.

So, I had no idea where to get started. And at the time, I was like: Okay, I don't have any contacts, I don't know anybody, I'll just go on Craigslist. You know, you can get a couch, and maybe I'll a job.

And so, I was like, putting my resume out there, and sending it off into the ethos. And I sent off for a music video, to work on a music video as a production assistant. And with

no credits, no experience whatever. And I got an email back from this guy; his name is Terry Leonard. And he said: Meet me tomorrow at the McDonald's at Union Square.

And you didn't say: Uh-oh, this guy could be a total crank or serial killer.

I was just like, well, It said the McDonald's at Union Square, so I'm not gonna die. And I said, okay. So, I went and I met him, and we talked. And he said: Okay, show up to work tomorrow; we're working on this music video. And I showed up the very next day, I had no idea what I was doing, and whatever he said, I was like: Okay, I'm down. Like, he sent me to go pick up gear with a five-thousand-dollar deposit. I'd never held that much money before in my life. I had five thousand dollars on me, I'd just shown up in New York City. And I was like: Well, you know what, nobody's gonna rip you off because—

And he trusted you with five dollars.

He trusted me with five thousand dollars. 'Cause he was like: Well, you went to Yale, you're not gonna steal my five thousand dollars. So, I guess that helped. And I was like: Well, nobody's gonna steal it from me, because nobody's gonna look at me thinking I have five thousand dollars. I went and I did that, and then he sent me off to the mayor's office of film and television, and I went in and got the permits for the next day. Did I know how to get a permit for a shoot in New York? Absolutely not. And I think that sort of like, I don't know anything, has been a big part of just like, how I've done my career. Like, I don't have to know everything; I just have to be able to ask somebody else who does, and be okay with—

Yeah; as long as you're learning.

Yes. I ask the question. And I'm not afraid to ask the question.

Ciara Lacy spent about ten years between New York and Los Angeles, working in television production. She climbed the ranks, moving up from an intern to a producer, and she was finally able to work on music videos and rock documentaries for artists, including the members of the Dave Matthews Band and Cindy Lauper. However, in 2011, a medical condition sidelined Ciara.

Yeah; it was a mystery. Like, when I first started getting sick, I thought it was carpal tunnel. I had all this pain in my arms, and in my hands. And it was absolutely frightening.

And then, it turned out to be worse than carpal tunnel.

Yeah. And then, I was like, okay. So then, I was like: Okay, this is carpal tunnel, I'll go get like, acupuncture, and I'm starting to do yoga, and I'm doing all these things. And like, that wasn't actually what it was. And I couldn't lie down, and then I couldn't stand up. So then, I was like, constantly in pain. I was living in New York at the time. I couldn't carry my laundry to go do my laundry at the laundromat down the road. Like, I just couldn't do things. And I was young and super-functional; you can't like, ooh, what are you doing? Like this is not Ciara. Ciara can do stuff. It took a while for them to kind of figured out what was wrong. And I was diagnosed with this neuromuscular disease called thoracic outlet syndrome. And you know, it's probably repetitive stress. It's bilateral; it's probably from all of this that I'd been doing, and I'd been doing a lot of it. And it was the world saying I needed to slow down. I moved back home, and I was thirty-one, and I was told I might have to get a new career. And it really affects your ability to think when you're in a lot of pain. It's just like, super-foggy. And like, you know, I was the kid that used to wake up before the alarm clock. Right? And now, I was just sleeping all the time, because that was the only thing I could figure out, outside of taking the medication to take the pain away. So, it's just like a very different person. And I gained a lot of weight, and you know, it was a pretty dark moment for me. But again, like, when I look back at it now, right, I don't begrudge any of it, because it's helped what got me into the place where I think I really wanted to be. And it got me back home. I never left home thinking I didn't want to come back. I just didn't know how. Right? And you know, I found myself back at my parents' place. And you know, I left very young, and I'd always been independent. And to have to return and not know what I was gonna do about work and money, you know, I didn't want to be a burden. I'd never thought of myself as that before. And so, it was a lot of, like: Okay, what can you do? And just rethinking a lot of things.

But you say this is all gonna turn out for better. I know one thing that happened. That's when you came back here, and you were ill, you met your husband, your future husband.

I did. I met Chris Kwock. And like the night I met Chris, I hadn't gone out in a very long time. And you know, I went out with my very good friend, Kristen. And she'd been kind; she'd taken me out for my birthday the night before, and she was like: Will you come out with me the next night? You know, I wasn't going out, and my first response in my head was no. And I was like: That's not what you should say; you should go. And I went with her, it was the end of the night, and we were about to go home because Kristen's teaching Sunday school the next day. And we bump into this party, and oh, it's my birthday, and I was like: No, it's my birthday. And then, we have the same birthday, and it turns out I meet this guy's friend. And I had lost my grandfather. I had lost him the year before, and he always had these like incredible shiny eyes. And I met Chris, and ... I saw those eyes again. And I'd been so—I'm sorry.

I'd been so sick for so long. And I was just so sad. And ... when I met him, I thought: You could be happy. And I'd forgotten ... I'd forgotten. And like, I don't do good if I'm not happy. You know. It's just sort of how I am. And so, it was so random. In this moment, where like, I shouldn't be here, and I don't want to be at a bar, and I'm super-sick. And like, this guy I'm talking to, this like idea clicked in my head. It's such a small thing. You could be happy. Like ...

And it's nothing he said. It's just who he was.

I was like, this guy with the shiny eyes.

And like, it was something I'd forgotten. And in the haze of everything, my friend turns to me and she goes: We have to go. And I was like: Okay, we'll go. And I'm not thinking straight, and we walk out the door. And I gave my number to his friend, and I said: Tell Chris to call me. And we walked across the street for some reason, and I got a text message. And it said: That's not your real name. And I was like, because whose name is Ciara, I guess. And I wrote back; I'm like: That's my name, and where are you? And I turned my head, and he came running to where we were. And we ended up just hanging out with him, and dropping him off at his house.

And you've said something about him; that he taught you something you actually really didn't know, that there was more to life than work.

Oh, yeah. I didn't know that. My whole identity was like, my performance. Right? My whole identity was, okay, what are the outcomes I provide. Right? Like, how did I do in school, how am I doing at work, you know, those are the things that I knew I had control over. Right? You don't have control over people. I have control over the things that I can do.

Achievement.

Yeah.

M-hm.

Totally. And you know, I never thought of my life as having somebody else in it. I never did. And I think that was just partially just because in was always off doing my own thing, I just never assumed anyone would be there to do that. And you know, and my identity was so wrapped up in my work. And that's why it was so crushing when I got sick, because it was like, if you take away my work, you've taken me away. What's left?

Yeah.

And that's a very sad thing to think. It's a very sad thing to think. And yet, at the time for me, it was true. And you know, as I spent more time with Chris, you know, he would say things that I think most people would be like: That's terrible. He would say things like: You're not that special. And when he says that, it wasn't that I'm not special, it's that your work doesn't prevent you from having the other obligations. The work doesn't come first. Right? The work is part of it.

Ciara Lacy and Dr. Chris Kwock got married two years after they met. As Ciara was still adjusting to life with her medical condition in Honolulu, she found the inspiration to create her first original documentary film. She would pack her bags again, heading this time to a prison in Arizona.

So, I was in physical therapy, and one of my mother's friends who's a physical therapist would throw out all these ideas. Oh, you should do a film about this.

Or you should do a film about that.

I'm sure that happened to you all the time; right?

No, it didn't, actually.

No?

It didn't. And like, at first, it caught me off guard. But in my mind, I was in such a dark space where it's like, I can't do anything. Like, I could barely ride in a car at this point. One day when I was in physical therapy with my aunt, she was like: You know, there are these guys dancing hula in Arizona. And I took pause, because I was like, this doesn't make any sense. You know, dancing hula at a prison in Arizona; why are they in Arizona? And like, how does that feel to you, Ciara, knowing they're dancing hula behind prison. You know, behind prison bars. And I packed it away in the back of my head, and I went off to go wallow in my own sadness. And two weeks later, I was at home ... on a Friday night.

Doing nothing, 'cause was lame and sick, and I Googled what she had said, and I saw a video online. And I cried. Because I was seeing people who, in the moment that I saw, were so far from our community, and were trying to find a point of reconnection, and were coming back from what was probably, you know, without having specific details, really tough stuff, man. I mean, probably some of like, the toughest stuff one could think of to come back from. And yet, they were still trying. And I saw that, and I was like: You have no excuse; you have absolutely no excuse.

You related to them.

Yeah. And in that moment, again, this like crazy click in the head. I was like, maybe we can heal each other. And I didn't know what that really meant. But I tucked it away, and I thought about it. And I saw my cousin Beau.

Beau Bassett.

Beau Bassett.

Your co-producer or part of the producing team.

Yeah; my producer on Out of State. And at the time, he was a public defender. And I mentioned to him this idea, and he was like: You know, this is a big issue for Hawaiians right now. And he's like: We should do this.

Filmmaker Ciara Lacy, along with her cousin Beau Bassett, and her mentor Terry Leonard, set out to produce Out of State. The documentary is Ciara's directorial debut. It chronicles the lives of two Native Hawaiian men leaving the Arizona prison where they'd been serving time, and returning to Oahu to make a fresh start.

You know, the goal was to be as honest about what we were seeing. So, I almost even intentionally didn't look up statistics and facts, because I didn't want my mind, as we were making the film, to be clouded with, oh, this is how things are supposed to go, because this is where the numbers are at.

Mm ...

So, let's just stay true to what actually happens. Right? And as small, and as like, humble as we can appear is more important, because the process was never about us. Right? This film is not about me. This film is not about Beau. This film is about the men who were willing to share their lives, and hopefully, we can do something positive with this.

And they were reconnecting with Hawaiian culture.

M-hm.

In an effort to be whole, and to go back and make a life for themselves.

Yeah. And I mean, you know, that effort, I can get behind. If you're gonna try, like if you're gonna try and nobody else is helping you—this is a very organic program that they have. This is something that the men developed themselves.

There are many interesting themes in your film. And one of them, I think David Kahalewai, one of the prisoners, talked about how it's really hard to forgive yourself. It's hard to start on that journey where you can change. And then, for the others too, how can somebody be ready for change when they have known nothing like what they really want to be.

Yeah. No; and I think, you know, first thing to that is, what a humble and like, vulnerable position for someone to put themselves in. Right? For someone like David to be willing to recognize that, and to share that with other people. You know, we were very fortunate because the men that participated in the film wanted to make sure our community understood what they were trying to do. Right? Wanted them to understand how hard it could be, and wanted to do this film to help each other. Like, maybe if I tell my story, or share my story, maybe if somebody knew how hard it was for me, that's gonna help one of the other brothers who are in prison to figure it out and do better.

You forgive yourself for a lot of stuff that you did. Yeah. I think I had to go to the ends of the Earth and hit bottom to really find out who I was.

I've been locked up fifteen years. I've been waiting all this time; I want to come home. But where is home?

I don't want to go back to jail, 'cause I have too much to lose.

We don't live in isolation. No man is an island. Right? And so, it's about knowing that it's all about interactions. Doing better, for them, is important for them to do the work and put it out there. But it's also gonna be hard, because the other people around them are gonna have to do the work too. And as a Hawaiian, it's like, we talk about hewa; right?

M-hm.

We talk about hewa, what is wrongdoing. And how does hewa work? It doesn't go in one direction. If I do something bad to you, I have to apologize, but I also need your forgiveness, and I also need you to be ready for that. The solution is both of us.

Right.

So, the solution isn't just me coming out, trying to do better. The solution is, I need your forgiveness.

That reminds me of what you said about your own life as a filmmaker, which was, life tends to be incremental, one foot in front of the other.

I just show up, man.

I just show up.

And you keep going, and you hope to be in a forward step.

Yeah. You hope everything you do is a little bit better. Do you always get it right? No. But do you hope to put yourself out there and try? Yes. And for me, it's like, I make a million mistakes every day. Like a lot.

M-hm.

But I know that I'm at least putting myself out there, and I show up. And if I do something wrong, I will apologize, and we'll figure out a way to fix it. And I'm not afraid of that.

In 2017, the documentary Out of State was released, and went on to win several awards on the film festival circuit, including Best Documentary at the Cayman International Film Festival and the San Diego Asian Film Festival. Ciara Lacy's health has improved, but her medical condition still requires management. She continues to produce and direct with a slate of new film and television projects. Mahalo to Ciara Lacy of Honolulu. And thank you for joining us for this edition of Long Story Short on PBS Hawai'i. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

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Yeah; I think for me, the provocation is important. It's like, it's about instigating that ripple. Right? I push the ripple, and then we start asking more questions. It's not necessarily about always finding the solution. Right? Maybe the questions help us get to the solution, but part of it is, we need to start asking more questions.