

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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I didn't realize that just rowing in a competitive race is extremely painful.

It's extremely painful; it hurts from the moment you start. But it especially hurts; the end of every crew race comes down to a sprint at the end, where you're rowing all-out. Whether it's a two-thousand-meter race or a four-mile race, at the end, you're going all-out. You're using every muscle in your body, from the muscles in your fingertips to your biggest muscles in your back and legs. And they are all screaming at you. With every pull of the oar, they're telling you not to take another pull of the oar; and yet, you have to.

He's learned about life struggles and overcoming hardships by sharing little-known true stories in his books. This best-selling author 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. Daniel James Brown, visiting Hawai'i from his home in Redmond, Washington, is a New York Times best-selling author of the book "The Boys In the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Olympics". This American rowing crew was made up of mostly working-class students from the University of Washington who had beaten Ivy League teams to reach Germany and triumph over a favored Nazi team in Berlin. Brown was inspired to retell this nearly forgotten story when he was introduced to an elderly, ailing, and immensely likeable Joe Rantz, once a powerful member of that 1936 Olympic Team.

I love the book, because it works on so many levels. There's are so many inspiring things about it. And you know, as I first read it, I thought: Is this for real?

Yeah.

Because you know, you don't see this kind of valor often.

Yeah. As I say, the story inspired me when Joe Rantz first told it to me. And Joe was in the last few weeks of his life at that time. But when he first told me the story, I was

inspired by it. It was one of those stories that just got better, and more inspiring, as I learned about the other guys who had rowed with Joe.

You also brought to that story of The Boys In the Boat, Hitler's regime.

Yeah.

And how the Olympics of 1936 were really a propaganda game to show what a great, peaceful, civilized government Germany had.

Yeah. The Nazi party very deliberately, when they decided to host the Olympics in 1936, they saw it from the very beginning as a propaganda opportunity. And so, they turned Berlin into almost a movie set. They literally got down on hands and knees and scrubbed the streets. They rounded up homeless people in Berlin and shipped them off to what turned into Dachau, the concentration camp.

Because behind all of that, Hitler wanted to exterminate Jews, and he didn't believe in Blacks at all. And when I think about it, he was there watching all of these tournaments and meets.

Yeah.

He saw Jesse Owens win four Gold Medals. A Black guy beating his German team.

Right; right.

And then, what happened to the boys in the boat?

So, the boy in the boat were, you know, kind of another slap in the face to Hitler.

And these were rural kids, generally. Right?

Yeah.

Representing the U.S.

These were not elite athletes. These were kids that had grown up on, you know, mill towns and fishing camps in the Northwest. They were not elite athletes by any means. The day of the rowing events in 1936, Hitler and Goebbels, and Goring, all the top Nazis were there watching the events. They were on the balcony of a boathouse they had built for the occasion. And Germany promptly won Gold Medals in the first five rowing of the day. So, by the time these Americans rowed out to the starting line for the start of the—the big prestige event is the eight-oared event at the end. By the time these

Americans from Washington State rowed out to the starting line, the crowd is just roaring: Deutschland, Deutschland, Deutschland. Hitler and the other Nazis are up on the balcony watching. And I mean, that's the context in which the race starts. And they're racing against the German and the Italian crews, two Fascist powers, which were assigned Lanes 1 and 2, the most sheltered lanes from the wind. So, when the race starts, it's not at all even odds, and it very much looks as if Germany and Italy will again win a Gold Medal. Of course, that's not what happens.

And what did happen?

How did it play out?

So, because the Americans were assigned to Lane 6 out in the windiest part of course, they had a terrible first half of the race. Halfway through the race, a thousand meters down the race course, Bobby Moch, the coxswain, was the small person in the back with a megaphone. He's the only person looking forward; everybody else is rowing with their backs to the finish line. But Bobby Moch, the American coxswain, is looking down the race course. Germany and Italy on Lanes 1 and 2 are many lengths ahead, and just sailing down towards what appear to be Gold and Silver Medal finishes. And waves are breaking over his bow, because he's in the windiest part of the course; so he's in a terrible state. Don Hume, the stroke oar, the guy that sets the rhythm for the whole boat, is sick and not responding. About eight hundred meters left to go, Don Hume suddenly snaps up, gets his focus back. The boat starts falling into sync, what they call swing in rowing, and the boat just accelerates, almost as if it had been lifted up out of the water. And they come back, and they catch the German and Italian boats in the last twenty-five meters or so of the course. And as they go across the line, they're just jogging back and forth for first place, second place, third place. And the American boat finishes sixth-tenths of a second ahead of the Italian boat, which is a second ahead of the German boat. So, it's an extraordinary comeback.

In fact, did they even know who won as they passed the finish line?

No; for a long time, nobody knew who had won. And when the announcement finally came, it was in German, so the guys in the American boat are just looking around. They didn't know that they had won; they weren't at all sure what was happening.

I'm glad to know there was officiating that was fair, because otherwise, I could see going another way.

There actually was a photo-finish. But the fact that the Germans and the Italians were assigned Lanes 1 and 2, which were sheltered the whole length was very odd and suspicious in the first place.

But Hitler was watching this race.

Hitler was watching the race.

Any word from him?

They just disappeared from that balcony.

And what happened to those nine men?

Nine young men. They all went on to happy, prosperous middleclass lives. Most of them lived into their nineties.

Author Daniel James Brown says that not only was he inspired to write “The Boys In the Boat” when he heard the story of crewmember Joe Rantz, he also felt an immediate personal connection to Rantz.

I'm a huge admirer of that generation of Americans from all walks of life. And when you think about what they had to confront as a generation, first the devastation of the Depression, and then immediately on the heels of that, the trauma of World War II, which I think most of us still have a hard time really understanding, there was a period of ten, twelve years there where the world was upside down, and lives were being torn apart.

M-hm.

And that generation found a way to get through it, and they emerged on the other side, called The Greatest Generation for a reason, I think. I think that those experiences tempered them and taught them a kind of toughness, but also a kind of humility that served them very well. When I first met Joe Rantz, the principle character I follow in the book, he was in the last couple months of his life. Joe was this incredibly humble, gentle-speaking, polite gentleman who had been through the Depression. And when he started talking about his personal experiences growing up, I immediately thought about my dad's experiences. My dad had lost his father in 1929, right at the beginning of the Depression, when my dad was just fourteen at the time. And so, my dad's mom had been left to raise him and his brother and sister with real no means of doing that. I think she took in laundry and things to get through the Depression. So, when I met Joe, I thought immediately of my dad. They were the same kind of man at the end of day. And in some ways, I think they were sort of typical and emblematic of that generation who were tempered by the Depression, and learned these virtues of humility, coupled with toughness and civility. So, in some ways, I wrote the book for my dad, without ever mentioning him in the book.

Daniel James Brown's father and mother struggled through The Great Depression of the 1930s. Their experiences during those lean, difficult times helped them shape better lives for themselves and for their children.

I had a really nice family. I grew up in the Bay Area. My father worked in the flower business in San Francisco. And so, actually from a very early age, he would take me around to florists in the Bay Area as he called on his customers, to visit them. He was a very gentle, very kind man. He was very much a product of The Depression. He was humble, he was civil, and he was a great role model.

Was he frugal, because he came from The Depression?

He was very frugal.

He would go around the house, turning off the lights. You know, we would walk out of a room, leave the lights on, and he'd go and switch the lights off when we walked out of the room. But you know, he was just an extraordinarily kind man; everybody loved him. My mom was a stay-at-home mom, homemaker; sweet as can be, just a lovely person. It's interesting; she had had to drop out of college because of The Depression, at UCLA. And later, when I was going to UC Berkeley, my mom was about fifty at that time, she decided she wanted to finish her college degree. So, she went to Berkeley at the same time I was going to Berkeley. In fact, I used to see her walking. Sometimes we'd meet for lunch. And that was in the middle of all the turmoil at Berkeley, and I remember seeing her once talk her way past a line of National Guardsmen as one of these riots was going on, on the Berkeley campus and tear gas was flying. So, you know, she finally did get her college degree.

"The Boys In the Boat" author, Daniel James Brown, faced his own set of challenges growing up.

I'm actually a high school dropout. I suffered a lot from anxiety as an adolescent, and I was bullied a lot as an adolescent. So, I would get panic attacks, and I got to the point where I just absolutely dreaded going to school.

I was small, not very well-developed. Didn't you know, develop as quickly as some of the other guys, so I was small.

They called you names?

They called me Cupcake. To this day, that word sends a chill down my spine. So typical, you know, adolescent bullying. But it got to the point between the bullying and I just was predisposed to ... you know, those days, people had anxiety disorders. They

didn't even have names for them or medications, or anything. So, I was sick to my stomach every morning before I had to go to school.

Did it arise from the bullying, or did it preexist?

I think I preexisted, to some extent, but the bullying made it much worse.

Did the school do anything about it?

Not really; no. You know, this was in the 50s and early 60s, and no, you're just—

You're supposed to suck it up.

You suck it up, you're on your own, kid. And it got to the point, finally, I was in my junior year in high school, in the middle of a biology lab one day. And I don't know; something just clicked in me, and I said: I'm gonna deal with this in an unconventional way. I got up, and I walked out of the school. I walked across the street, got in my car and drove home, and told my mom and dad that I wasn't going back, that I wasn't ever going back. And that, of course, caused them a lot of distress. My mom cried, my dad was sort of very silent for a while. But as I say, they were very kind and understanding people. And my mom, bless her heart, set out to come up with a plan by which I could move forward. And so, she arranged with the school; I could get my high school degree by completing a series of correspondence courses. The deal was, I had to go to the university library in Berkeley and spend eight hours a day working on these correspondence courses until I had completed all the work. So, I did that. I'd drive in to Berkeley every day and walk across the campus, and go into the Dole Memorial Library, big beautiful graduate library there.

Heavy stuff for high school.

High school.

For a non-high school student.

Yes; absolutely. And you know, I felt like a college student. And I would do my correspondence courses in a few hours, and then that left me usually several hours every afternoon to just browse the library. And that's really, I think, where I became a bookish person. And so, I would just go pull books out of the stacks and sit and read them, whatever interested me. And I think it took me about a year of doing that, and then I got the high school degree, and I enrolled in my local community college, Diablo Valley College. And I had a wonderful English teacher, freshman English teacher there. And he sort of took me under his arm. And now, I couldn't wait to get to school every day. I mean, I just loved my community college.

You're in school with adults now.

I'm in school with adults, I'm there because I want to be, and some of my teachers were great. So, I really thrived there in the community college. I'm a huge fan of community colleges. I think they're wonderful institutions. And then, I transferred to Berkeley for two years, and then, I went to graduate school at UCLA for a couple of years. Got a master's degree in English, and then wound up teaching college English.

And did you think that would be your career? I'm a college teacher.

Yeah; yeah.

English.

So, as I say, I had so loved my community college experience, I really wanted to be a community college English instructor. But there was essentially no job market for that; there were way too many of us. And I finally did find one in Prescott, Arizona. But at that point, I was about to get married to the woman who's now my wife, and she did not want to go live in Prescott, Arizona. So, I had to turn that down. And so, I never did get that fulltime community college job that I wanted.

Then, what did you do?

So, I married Sharon, and she was also teaching English at San Jose State. And we were going to have a baby, and we wanted to buy some kind of a house. We'd been living in apartments. And San Jose at that point was turning into Silicon Valley, and housing was just not affordable for two people teaching, you know, college English. So, I saw an ad in the San Jose Mercury, a little one-line ad for something called Microsoft, which I had never heard of.

Really? Oh, the beginning days of Microsoft.

It was Microsoft. They wanted editors. So, I sent them a resume, and they flew me up to Seattle. And actually, one of the first things they did is, they put me in a car with a Realtor, and they drove me all over the Redmond, Washington area, showing me houses. Which were about half what they were in California, and just barely manageable for us on what would be my salary. So, I took the job at Microsoft, and I was there for the next twelve years or so.

What did you edit?

We edited users' manuals and help systems. And in the early days, we edited these, you know, paper users' manuals, which were pretty deadly stuff.

Were you one of the first people to describe how to use Microsoft products?

Yeah; actually, Microsoft Windows. The first product I worked on at Microsoft was Windows, before it was a thing in the world.

Was it hard to explain?

It was. It took a lot of back and forth between us and the engineers. 'Cause the engineers wanted very engineer-y sounding instructions. And we knew that most people, if this was gonna be a mass product, were not in fact engineers. So, a lot of it was just translating things into understandable—

That sounds like a challenging job.

It was, and it was fun. The people I was working with were all very, very smart. I've never worked anyplace that I was surrounded by so many smart people as at Microsoft. And that was exhilarating.

Daniel James Brown wrote and edited manuals and the first interactive tutorials for software giant Microsoft for a dozen years. And then, he decided it was time for a change, and turned his focus toward a different kind of writing.

You know, at the end of the twelve years, as I say, it was fun, and exciting, and exhilarating, but I'd had enough of it. I was still remembering how excited I was by all those English classes I'd had. And I don't think I had ever really sat down and thought I want to be a writer. But, I got to the point where I wanted to do something new. So, I quit Microsoft, and I decided I'm gonna take a little time to figure out what I'm gonna do next. And that first winter, a dark rainy winter in Seattle, I discovered that sitting around not knowing what you want to do gets boring pretty fast. So, I started writing. And I wrote what turned into my first book over the course of the next year, not really expecting that it would even get published, let alone turn into a career. But that is in fact what happened, to my great surprise.

That seems like a luxury of time, where you could devote time to something, and not earn a living.

Yeah; yeah. I mean, it was the result of having worked at Microsoft. You know, the company did very well. But I couldn't have done nothing forever. But I had a window there, where I could sit back, as a lot of people were doing at that point. Most of the

people who started at Microsoft when I did were starting to leave the company to go figure out what they wanted to do.

Was it a burnout situation? You'd been working really long hours.

I'm not sure burnout is exactly the term. Well, yeah, that actually probably is the correct term. Long hours in a industry that was growing and exciting, but not something I had ever intended to devote my life to.

Well, what did you decide to write about? I mean, think about that; if you could write about anything you wanted, that's a tall bill.

Yeah; it is.

What do you choose?

So, what happened was, that Christmas, my brother and his family were staying with us at our house in uh, Washington. And we started talking about this forest fire in the 1890s. We had grown up; my mom had talked about this forest fire in Minnesota in which her grandfather had died, and her father had escaped on a burning train. And that was about all I knew about it. But when we moved my mom from California up to Washington, I found a box of stuff that she had kept. And my brother and I dove into that over Christmas, and I started pulling out letters and diaries, and news clippings, and old photographs about this forest fire in Hinckley, Minnesota in 1894. And it turned out to be this spectacular event. It was actually two fires that converged on this little town, trapped most of the people in the town. They tried to evacuate the town with a couple of trains that were there. One of the trains caught fire as it was backing out of town. That's the one my great-grandmother and my grandfather were on. And there all these heroic things that people did, trying to save people that day. And I thought, well, nobody knows this, and that's a pretty interesting story. So, I just sat down and started. I went to Minnesota, spent several days in the archives at the Minnesota Historical Society there, and started researching it, and came back to Washington and just started writing. And that turned into a book. I didn't have a publisher, I didn't have an agent, I didn't have any idea how you got a book published, but I just started sending it out to agents. And it took months, and I got a big stack of rejection letters, but eventually, an agent agreed to take it on. And she sold it for a very small amount of money to a quite small publisher. But it was published.

And it was your entry.

It was my entry. And it did well. What happened was, actually, Barnes and Noble, the bookstore chain, they have a thing called Discover Great New Writers, where every three months they pick a dozen writers that are unknown, and they put their books out

in the front of the store on a special rack called Discover Great New Writers. They chose my book for one of those. And that got some sales going. And then, HarperCollins, big New York publishers, saw that, and they bought the paperback rights to it. And then, it really took off and started doing well. And so, then I had a contract to write another book.

Would this be narrative nonfiction, or historical? What would you call it?

I call it narrative nonfiction. I mean, narrative is a story, and nonfiction is a true story. So, people call it all kinds of things. Some people call it dramatic nonfiction, some people call it creative nonfiction. But I don't like that one. I don't like the term creative nonfiction because it implies you're making stuff up.

So many people want to write books, and want to write. And this is a time when, you know, people want to read books less because of the length.

Yes.

What's that like as a writer? How do you navigate that? I mean, if that's your passion, I mean, do you have enough of an audience?

Oh, yeah. I mean, you know, I think the way you navigate that is by telling the story as well as you can, crafting the story as well as you can so that it engages the reader from the first page. And people will read a book if when they open it, they get to the end of the first page, they want to read the second page. As long as you keep doing that through four hundred pages, you're good.

How old were you when you started writing a book?

I was probably fifty. I mean, that's another thing I tell young writers all the time is: Don't wait 'til you're fifty. 'Cause I really wish I had time for, you know, five more books. That's not gonna happen. So, on the one hand, I tell young writers, you know: Get going. On the other hand, I'm not sure that when I was twenty-five I would have been able to write any of these books.

Daniel James Brown's debut book of narrative nonfiction in 2006 was titled "Under a Flaming Sky: The Great Hinckley Firestorm of 1894". It was followed by "The Indifferent Stars Above: The Harrowing Saga of a Donner Party". "The Boys In the Boat" was published in 2013. It remained on the New York Times Best Seller List for two and a half years, and inspired a PBS American Experience documentary, "The Boys of '36". The TV program is available for viewing in PBS Hawai'i's Passport web portal. Brown continues to look to the past to find stories that will enlighten readers in the present. At the time of

this conversation in the fall of 2018, he was in Hawai'i, research the forced relocation and incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II.

Mahalo to author Daniel James Brown of Redmond, Washington, for sharing his personal story. 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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What do you think the future is for online-only books?

You know, as an author, I don't really care, in one sense, how people read the story. I think we probably sell more e book copies of "Boys In the Boat" than paperback copies. I'm not sure, but we sell a lot of e book copies of that book. And I'm absolutely fine with that. I actually read mostly on an iPad or a Kindle myself.