

# LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



**TITLE: Mahealani Wendt**

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When I went to Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation, I'm not sure that the most effective thing I could do there was as an attorney. I worked as a volunteer, I worked as a grants writer. I knew nothing about writing grants. You know, a lot of times, you're fueled just by passion, and you have so much ... I don't know how else to put it. You know, you just feel so, so intensely about something, and it drives you, and you do everything you have to do to make it happen. And that's how I became a grants writer.

**Her success as a volunteer grant writer led to a thirty-two-year career fighting for Native Hawaiian rights. Mahealani Wendt of Maui, 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. Mahealani Wendt is the retired executive director of the Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation, a community activist, accomplished writer, and poet. She's the eldest of seven children, grew up on Kaua'i and O'ahu, and now lives on farmland on Maui in Wailua Nui along Hāna Highway. She knew from the time she was nine years old, living in the rundown tenements of Downtown Honolulu, that she wanted to help others. She was deeply affected by the poverty of Native Hawaiian people she saw around her, and despite being poor herself, she says she was raised in a loving, nurturing environment, and never went hungry. In childhood, she developed a love of writing and reading.**

My father is Spanish; he's second generation. My grandparents emigrated from Spain in 1906. They were plantation workers, the first sugar plantation in Hawai'i, Kōloa Sugar. And so, they settled on Kaua'i. And eventually, he met my mother, who's from Hilo; she's Hawaiian. And we grew up on Kaua'i there. It was very beautiful, very country. We had horses, cows, pigs, chickens, raised every kind of, you know, fruit tree, we had a garden. We were cray fishing, climbing trees; all this stuff we did, it was beautiful. My parents separated. You know, we were pretty innocent; we never understood what happened. We just knew that one day, my mother decided that we were going to move, and she brought us to Honolulu. It was a really different lifestyle. You know, it was kind of an idyllic life, country life, and we moved to the heart of Honolulu, to the tenements. And I still remember our address; it was 1278 Fort Street.

**Fort Street.**

Yeah; Fort Street, and there were twenty-seven steps going up to the second floor where we lived.

**This was an old, beat-up building.**

Yeah; it was the heart of the slums, the tenements in Honolulu. This was in the 50s, mid-50s, and these tenement buildings, the closest thing that would kind of resemble it would be the buildings in Chinatown. Those are far more well-maintained than the ones we lived in. The buildings we lived, I'm now understanding, they were at least fifty years old. They were wooden, they were termite-eaten. They were firetraps, basically, you know, not fit for people to live in, but we lived there. My mother, when she left, you know, didn't have really the means to support all of us, and so ... that's where we lived. Some slept on the bed, some slept on the floor. We had, I think, three showers, cold water.

**On that floor?**

In the building.

**In the whole building?**

Everybody shared.

**And how many people were in the building?**

There were fifty-two rooms. There were three areas where we could do our cooking. There were kerosene stoves.

**Was it dangerous? I mean, I know from a fire standpoint, it was dangerous. What about from a human standpoint in a rough part of town.**

It was a rough part of town. From my standpoint, I never saw any danger, I never experienced any danger. It was a new world; I thought it was really kind of cool and exciting. New kids to play with, new people to meet, new aunties and uncles. All Hawaiians in that building. You know, in the same way they do now, the aunties take care. So, we felt very protected and free, and I never felt any danger. If you were entering from the sidewalk, you know, there were these narrow steps that went to the second floor. And the pool hall was downstairs, next to a Chinese restaurant, next to a grocery store, next to, you know, all these different kinds of—

**So, it felt like a neighborhood to you.**

It did; totally.

**No creepy people hanging around.**

I never remembered any creepy people.

You know. And I mean, when I think back on it, I think: Wow, it would be like, you would think there would be creepy people, but in my child's eyes, I never saw creepy people. To me, they were really nice; nice people.

**And you felt adults were looking out for you, too.**

Yes, we did; we felt very protected.

**I wonder how your mom felt with seven kids to take care of.**

We owned our own home on Kaua'i. My grandparents homesteaded twenty-five acres there, and you know, the lands are still there. So, you know, what caused her to feel so compelled to move, we never understood. I never even understood it as an adult. But there we were. It must have been very stressful; we were really poor. I sold newspapers. I thought that was really cool, 'cause I could have spending money, you know, and stuff. I was selling newspapers. My corner was Fort and Kukui, and I sold the Honolulu Advertiser. I sold forty papers, made a dollar. And then, that was my lunch money. I made most of my money from tips, 'cause I was so young. You know, I was like, nine years old, standing on the corner with newspapers. Oh, poor thing, you know. So, they'd give me a dollar. Wow, that's a lot of money. That's what I would make for the whole, you know, selling forty papers. So ... I thought it was great.

**M-hm.**

Again, the perspective. You know, as a child, I was innocent. I saw all of it as a great excitement. It was just a different thing, you know. I mean, one thing, for example, when we lived in Kaua'i, the store was really far. You know. When we moved to Honolulu, the store was downstairs.

It was amazing. I was just like, enthralled, you know. When I lived on Kaua'i, we'd go to the movies once, you know, every six months or something. When we went to Honolulu, we lived next to the theater. You know. So, that's how I saw it from a child's sort of sense of wonder. It wasn't until I was, you know, older, maybe intermediate school, I sort of kinda understood that we were really poor. And then, as I got older, I realized that, you know, the auntie that, you know, was so sick, and da-da-da, this is why. And then, I realized that, you know, so-and-so, that you know, we really thought was really a

cool guy, he's in jail because he did this. You know, so I had a sense of perspective, but it was afterwards.

**After the fact.**

Yes.

**Did you ever connect with your father again?**

Yes. We saw him as we could afford to. I think he would send money and, you know, we'd go. But it wasn't very often. And he came to visit us once. You know, he was not a Honolulu man; he was a hunter, a fisherman. He would come back from the mountains with, you know, these burlap bags full of 'o'opu to feed our family. You know, very subsistence lifestyle. When he worked, he worked as a heavy equipment operator, kind of a laborer. I loved my dad. Both of my parents read to us. My father would put us on his lap and read. You know, those experiences. I came to really love literature and reading from both parents. My parents were very good parents, in spite of the separation. And my mother was very strict; she taught us very fundamental values, and we were expected to, you know, adhere to them. And if we did not, the punishment was swift and sure. All of the kids turned out good. I went to Royal School.

**Royal School.**

Yeah.

**Okay; elementary. And then?**

I went to Royal Elementary, and then I went to Central Intermediate.

**And then?**

And then, I went to Kamehameha in my sophomore year. I liked public school. Public school was awesome; I learned a lot. You know, again, the common theme of, you know, this love of literature, that was more than reinforced in the public school. In fact, at Kalaheo Elementary, where I went to, you know, from first to third grade, my second grade teacher, Mrs. Robello, encouraged me when I wrote a little poem for my mother. You know how teachers do. It's so important. She took my little poem, she put it on the wall. You know how teachers, you can encourage by telling everybody, you know. And when her students would make a little picture, she'd put that on the wall. So, she had ways of encouraging and making you feel: Ho, this is something I can do.

**How long were you in the tenements?**

Well, we lived in Honolulu for three years. There was a terrible fire in the tenement next door.

**Another wooden building?**

It was a wooden building; it was right next to ours on the next block, and it burned down. And four people died in that fire. One of the ones who passed was a three-year-old who was my brother's playmate. And so, it really affected everybody, the family. It really had an impact on me. And it was just ... I don't know; I'll never forget it. We stood out there and watched this whole thing happen.

**And watched it burn down.**

Yes. We lived there until my mother could find someplace else she could afford. So, we moved close to Queen's Hospital; same sort of building, but not as big. We lived there for another, like, three or four years, and then we moved, and we actually moved to a much nicer place. Things were getting better; you know, Mom could find work, and so, we moved to a much better place.

**How formative was the experience of living in places like that, those two different buildings and the fire that took your acquaintances and friends?**

I know that it has everything to do with my community advocacy work, especially on behalf of Hawaiians. The people who made a difference in our lives when we were growing up were the social workers who reached out to us. They were so kind. They were so kind to my mother. And I grew up feeling that I wanted to be a social worker. I changed my mind when I realized I didn't have the fortitude. I saw what they had to deal with. And I'm a little bit emotional; I have a really hard time focusing, you know, when I see that. I got older, I guess I gained a perspective. As a child, I didn't really understand what that environment was all about.

**Yeah; you thought they were nice people.**

I thought everybody was nice.

**But they were carrying all this pain, I suppose—**

Yes.

**--that they saw.**

M-hm. And as I got much older, and we learned our history and, you know, the displacement, I started focusing on Hawaiians. It happened kind of gradually. I was,

you know, someone who was intent on a social work profession, but I also had competing things that I was really interested in. The literature thing was always an interest.

**After graduating from Kamehameha Schools, Mahealani Wendt went to work for big corporations, first on the continent, and then back home in Hawai'i. She was good at what she did, but her heart was not in the corporate world.**

Right out of high school, I lived in Texas. And while I was in Texas, I worked for a very large insurance company, a national insurance company, and I learned a lot about corporate business. And so, I worked there for five years, I worked my way up. Then I came home to Hawai'i. I worked for a local corporation called Crown Corporation. They had a bunch of industrial loan banks, they had securities firm, they had insurance. You know, I mean, some of the companies are still around; a lot of them are no longer. But you know, they were real estate developers; all of that. I was into that. And I was like an admin assistant to vice president. So, I did that. And then, I went to college.

**That was good preparation.**

Yeah, it was good preparation. But interestingly, I started doing the community activism, you know, the demonstrations and stuff when I was still working for this corporation. And my boss, who was a vice president, said: Just don't let me see you arrested, or on TV. You know, something like that. I said: I'll be fine.

You know, so I always like, had these two like, sort of identities there. I would be this corporate thing at work, and then, you know, uh, the rest of the time, I'd be ... and then, I decided I needed to go to school, because I needed skills to do the thing I wanted, which is [SIGH] effectuate social reform. Working for business was really a survival thing for me. I had good skills, I had good typing, accounting; those sort of things. I had skills that I could market very readily in the business environment, so that's where I went. But that's not where my heart was.

**So, you're taking political science now at the UH.**

M-hm. I'm taking political science, and I have an opportunity to do an internship with Legal Aid Society, along with thirty other interns, students at UH Mānoa, political science majors. And we're placed at the Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i at a time when, you know, we were coming into a growth of social programs, social economic programs in our community. So, there was this quantum leap in legal services available to the community through Legal Aid.

**Because there was more funding.**

There was more funding.

**More value placed on that.**

Yes. I chose to go with the so-called land unit at the time. And in the course of my internship, I was assigned to work with community organizations in the Hawaiian community. And that sort of was a catalyst for my future work. I attended law school, I left law school. I was very active in the community. I mean, actually coming into this kind of work, the genesis of it was community activism. So, the early so-called land struggles—Kalama Valley, Kokua Kalama, He'eia Kea, Waiāhole-Waikāne, Niumalu-Nāwiliwili on Kaua'i, Mokauea Island—all of those struggles, I was there. I was there. I was not there as a leader; I was there as someone who felt compelled to be there. I really related to what the people were suffering, and I felt I had to be there. It's a combination of that activism and my experience at the Legal Aid Society leading me to Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation. You know, it's kinda like all boiled into the picture.

**Why did you leave law school after college?**

Well, I had children. At that time, I was a single parent. That was part of it; it was the economics of it. You know, when I went to Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation, I'm not sure that the most effective thing I could do there was as an attorney. I found my niche was really talking to the staff about community; how community felt, you know, what was important. Because sometimes the rigor of legal linear thinking separates you from community. And I think you need both. So, I think it would have been fine to go through law school, but at that point in my life, I felt I would be more useful in bringing that perspective to the firm. And I think that it worked really well.

**And you worked your way up to heading the office; you ran the office.**

Yeah. So, the first position was an interim attorney who agreed to come over from private practice to sort of get us started. The second was Melody MacKenzie. Then after, I think, a year or two, the first gentleman moved on back to private practice after kinda mentoring us. I became the third staff person. And Melody MacKinzie was my boss for, I don't know, maybe six, seven years. And she taught me so much. I just owe her a great debt of gratitude. She's the kindest, the most brilliant mentor a person could have. I mean, I just love her; I love her to this day. She was the executive director, but I guess she was kind of, you know, having to do a lot of this admin stuff. And it just seemed more efficient to have me do the administrative part, you know, deal with personnel hiring, firing, that sort of thing. 'Cause I had a background in it. Melody has those skills, but she's also brilliant; a brilliant jurist, a brilliant scholar. You know, I mean, talking story as a staff, and it just seemed like, you know, a more sensible way to go. And so, I guess in name, you know, I became the head of the organization,

and then she could focus on cases and clients, you know, and I could just deal with the other stuff.

**You did that for a long time.**

M-hm. Well, I retired after thirty-two years. So, yes, I did it a long time. It was fun. I loved it.

**What kinds of cases did your firm handle?**

Well, our cases were all Native rights cases. So, you know, they're kind of characterized as the things that we require in order to be Hawaiian. Hawaiians were being affected with respect to land tenure, their ability to hold onto their lands, ability to hold onto their natural resources, have access to it, ability to engage in traditional and customary practices that they require to be Hawaiian. If their access to the ocean is cut off, then they can't go fish, they cannot gather limu; these kinds of things. The ability to exercise practices relating to their traditional religion, things that would impede it, ability to access their trusts, the Hawaiian Homelands trusts or the public lands trusts. All of those things became our areas of focus. We had genealogists on staff, we had title people on staff. We had Hawaiian translators on staff, because we're dealing a lot with archival documents, many of which are only in Hawaiian. So, we had people on staff who specialized in translating legal documents. So, the shop is a specialty shop, you know, asserting the rights of native people. And we did well. There were many cases that we did, that I'm very proud of.

**That was a very ... just vibrant time, and also, it was a time of people coming into age and being very proud, and also running into a lot of walls, too.**

Yes; yes. And I think with knowledge comes power. You know, and the more we're able to understand our history—and of course, language is a window into culture, the more we understand our language the more we understand better who we are. Part of that is having, you know, connection to land, connection to water, connection to ocean, continuing to keep traditional practice vibrant and alive. All of those things are important. And you know, ultimately, it's about values. And as many other peoples, including indigenous peoples, those values are really important, not only for us here as a people in Hawaii, and not only for all of Hawai'i, but even globally. You know, you join with other peoples. There are certain values that are universally exalted as being life-affirming and necessary in order for, you know, humankind to thrive. We can make a contribution, and it's really, really important that we be allowed to be a people.

Why do we do this? We do this because we love Hawai'i.

A&B doesn't own the water, the taro farmers do not own the water. Our people own the water. Ke Akua owns the water.

Ae!

Ae!

Ke Akua owns the water.

Ae!

For all of us.

So, let our people live, and let the 'aina live, forever. Stand up so that we can make that happen.

**Mahealani Wendt met her husband, Ed Wendt, through her work in native water rights. He's a taro farmer with kuleana land. Where they live in Wailua Nui, in Maui's Hana District, is beautiful, but as always, farming kalo is hard work. Besides her passion for justice, Mahealani Wendt has always had a love for poetry and writing. Even as head of the Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation, she found time to write, and has received numerous literary awards, both nationally and internationally. We're going to close now with a reading from one of her poems that reflects back on her childhood. Mahalo to Mahealani Wendt of Wailua Nui, Maui, for sharing her life story 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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At statehood, we trundled kerosene tankards over rutted Honolulu sidewalks, past beer halls, pool halls, taxi dancehalls, past honky-tonk dives, juke joints, and shoeshine stands, to rooming house kitchens where we lit our communal fires and kept vigil for the one day our nation would be restored. The torches burned bright as we stood watch. Our children, listless on tenement floors, their coverings prickling with insect filth, and the grit of ambient sounds, incessant scuttlings and winged scurryings inside squalid floors and walls, we sensed a slow collapse under the terrific weight of a people whose gods kept watch with them there. The minions of forest, river, and ocean gods, companions in these root places whispering their encouragements as generations of children turn to hear, like flowers brightening to sun.