

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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Having gotten leprosy and having struggled against the Board of Health, and the autocratic, dictatorial nature of fear and stigma, and having Patient Number 3306, I mean, just short of stamping it on your arm, you know, changed her, changed everybody who was caught up in that fear.

Patient Number 3306 was his cousin, and Lorenzo DeStefano wrote a play about her life. Meet this Hawai'i-born photographer, filmmaker, film editor, and writer who explores the hidden lives of those who are often overlooked in society, 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. Growing up in Hawai'i, he was Larry Stevens. Now, he is Lorenzo DeStefano, having gone back to the Italian origins of his family name. Today, DeStefano lives in Ventura, California, but during the early years of Hawai'i's statehood, he was an island kid living in the O'ahu neighborhoods of Kāne'ohe, Wai'alae, Kaimuki, and Waikīkī. Lorenzo DeStefano tells his stories through different types of media. He produced and directed a documentary film titled "Hearing Is Believing", about Rachel Flowers, a blind musician and composer. And more recently, he wrote and directed a stage play called "Shipment Day", the true story of his cousin, Olivia Robello Breitha, who developed leprosy at age eighteen and was exiled to Kalaupapa, Moloka'i.

[scene from "Shipment Day"]

That's when he began taking scrapings from around that spot on my arm. He went deeper into the flesh than I ever thought he would. I tried really hard not to scream, and I didn't. I almost passed out.

LORENZO DESTEFANO

Jason, everything sounds good?

[OFF STAGE]

Sounds great.

LORENZO DESTEFANO

Yeah, that line with Lauren was okay; we got it?

[OFF STAGE]

Yeah.

My dad came from Brooklyn. I think he came to Hawai'i in the late 40s. He worked at KGU as a radio announcer. I don't know if he spun music, or talked. I know when he did go to KGMB. Was it Channel 9, I think that was, a CBS affiliate. He had a show uh, called Larry Stevens' Matinee, and he played movies, screen movies of his choice, I guess. They had a library of movies. And then, between the breaks, he'd be sitting there with a cup of coffee, and he ran this thing called the Trading Post, which was sort of an early QVC type thing.

Really?

Where they sold things. And he'd say, like, you know: Mrs. Wong in Kāne'ohe has a bunkbed she wants to sell for five dollars; if you're interested, call 5671.

That's interesting. I've heard that since on the radio.

Yeah; I don't know if he invented it, or it was something that he was assigned to. But he got to be known. But here was this guy smoking a cigarette and drinking coffee, and he'd say: Well, now back to the movie. And then he played Charlie Chaplin's song, "Limelight"

And he started off as a DeStefano, changed to Stevens. So, you were born a Stevens.

Yeah.

You changed your name back.

Yeah. Well, he was Severio DeStefano. You know, this was the 40s, when we were at war with Italy, and you know, there was a lot of bias about immigrants anyway. Jews, Italians, Germans; you know, a lot of people changed their name. And he changed his name to Stevens, Lawrence Stevens. So, I was born Lawrence Peter Stevens. I just changed it back a long time ago to Lorenzo DeStefano. I didn't change my name, I just went back to what it was before, you know, before he had changed it. And he approved of that. You know, he says: Yeah, times are different now. And I understood why he did it.

And your mother from Kalāheo, Kaua'i was a Silva.

Yeah.

And she turned out to be kind of a business dynamo.

Well, she's the eldest of three. They were orphaned when my mom was nine, when her parents died. What I think that instilled in my mom, being the oldest of three, she was gonna make something of herself. She wasn't gonna be tagged as this orphan, this second-class citizen, you know. So then, she got secretarial skills, and really made something of herself. And I think when most women were maybe just homemakers and happy with that, she was that, plus she worked for Bishop Realty in the early 60s and throughout the 60s as one of the top brokers with Vi Dolman and people like this who were around at those times. Really dynamic women, who were sort of in the business world. Looking back, I feel honored and privileged to have been brought up here. You know, lots of diversity, growing up without fear of the other people that looked differently or acted differently than you, multiculturalism. I think, like anyone who was around then, life was slower and simpler. The 50s was sort of maybe a fantasy period of tranquility. You know, then I started to grow up. Some of my first jobs were, I was a busboy at Rudy's Italian Restaurant on Kuhio Avenue, and I sold koa wood bowls on Lewers Street.

On the sidewalk?

Yeah; yeah. And then, I worked at a candy store making candy. You know, I had two or three jobs.

Where was that?

On one of those side streets. Then I went to Punahou for a year, until they suggested that maybe I'd do better elsewhere.

What was the reason for that?

Well, I was not applying myself, you know. They were pretty strict, as they are still.

So, you were disappointed, or did you want to leave?

I wasn't as disappointed as they were. You know. I think they were disappointed, but you know, my folks never really pushed me. They just wanted me to be myself. I guess they were kind of ahead of the times. They weren't really autocratic about—you know. 'Cause they both made made themselves, reinvented themselves from where they came from.

Lorenzo DeStefano finished his formal education at Kalani High School in East Honolulu. Deciding against a college degree, he says he felt comfortable teaching himself, as he did during his teen years when he taught himself photography, namely street photography, capturing candid chance images of strangers.

I think my folks bought me Time Life books on photography. It was like about eight or ten books, which were great books, you know. I think I wasn't the only one to get turned on to photography by those books and the great photographers in there. Black-and-white, color, nude; all the stuff that was fascinating, you know. And then, I saved my money from bus-boying and all that stuff. And a friend of the family went to Japan and brought back a Nikon for me and some lenses. And I just started shooting, you know. It was really a sense of discovery for me. And so, I got into these places. I actually went into Leahi Hospital and shot a behavioral unit for kids. You know, emotionally disturbed kids.

I remember that unit. There were also patients with tuberculosis there in your time, too.

Yeah. But again, I had full access, you know. Now, you know, you have to fill out forms, even if you could get in.

As a teenager on your own, no parent accompanying you or other friends, you just went on your own, and got in?

Yeah. I got in my car, and went and did it. And then, you know, like I remember shooting a Young Republicans rally at Kapi'olani Park, and you know, seeing the different kinds of people. It was, I guess, the Nixon days, and people with the flag. And I thought they were rather curious people, you know. I think the important thing is, as a photographer or writer, whatever, you have your own politics and your own values, you know, what you believe in, that either agrees with who's in power, or doesn't agree with who's in power. But when it comes down to your work, you should be pretty much nonjudgmental, you know, about it. 'Cause that lessens the power, I think, of what you're doing. Your job is not judge so much as a photographer, as to show, you know, whether it's a play, or a novel, or whatever. It's to observe, translate, express, but not take sides.

Lorenzo DeStefano's curiosity with still images progressed into a hunger to learn all he could about motion pictures and film editing. He said that as a teenager, he saw the musical movie "Cabaret" more than a dozen times at the former Cinerama Theater in Honolulu.

The fourteen times I went to see Cabaret, I did that for a reason. Because Cabaret was a brilliant film. I'm not such a big fan of musicals, but there were great songs in there by Kander and Ebb, you know, the songwriting team. But the way the film was put

together was stunning to me. You know, it was editing as impressionistic. It wasn't just shot over shoulders and, you know, sort of the standard TV type of editing, or even movies, mediocre kind of exposition. It was very creative. But I was convinced by that film I wanted to learn that craft, and I couldn't do that here, you know. There was no film school here at the time. And so, I went to the mainland and eventually found myself in L.A. And I found ways to get into the game, you know. I basically lied about the experience that I'd had, and I got a job as an assistant editor at National Geographic. We used to do their editing down there. And the first day in the cutting room, I got the job. It was like three hundred a week; it was like pretty good at the time. People now are not making three hundred a week, you know. Hundreds of thousands of feet of sixteen-millimeter film shows up from Africa of elephants. Just elephants, you know. And I'm going: What am I supposed to do with this? And the other assistant, who I still know—she's in New York, says: You don't know much, do you? I said: No, not really.

So, I did a couple of those National Geographic specials, you know, and I learned quickly, you know. But I was always looking to get in the union—this was a nonunion job, so I could work on features, you know, movies. So, it took me a couple of years. You know, basically, what I did was, I had about ten editors whose names I had collected over a year or two whose movies I liked, you know. But I didn't know how to contact them. This was not internet days, you know, where you can just find people pretty easily. So, I called the Editors Guild, the union, and another group called American Cinema Editors, where these people belonged, and I basically posed as an assistant to a producer, a known producer. And I'd read the trades, you know, Variety and the Hollywood Reporter, and find out what movies were almost in preparation to go into production. And so, I'd call up and I'd say: I'm—and make up a name, you know. I'm revealing all this stuff now.

Intrepid; intrepid job-hunting.

I'd say: I'm assisting this producer, a real producer. And they'd say: Oh, say hi to him. I said: Okay, I will. I didn't know the guy. But I said: You know, we're looking for editors for this picture, and there was a real movie that's in the trades. I said: I need phone numbers and addresses for these guys. You know. And they gave 'em to me. So then, I'd write letters to these people. And I'd say: You know, I'm willing to do anything, sweep up, whatever. And I wrote to about ten people, and it was amazing, about eight of them got back to me, either phoned or wrote a note. Six or so of them took me to lunch. Ended up working for four of them over the years. Two of them were Oscar-winning editors, you know. Richard Halsey, who won an Oscar for "Rocky", was a big influence on me. I worked for him for four years. Bill Reynolds, who won four or five Oscars for "Sound of Music", and bunch of films was another one. You know, these are guys who had done it all, you know.

How long did it take to get to where you wanted to be, which was actually editing?

About five years. Yeah. First movie I edited by myself was "Girls Just Want to Have Fun", with Helen Hunt and Sarah Jessica Parker. And then, I cut about ten or twelve movies after that. And then, I got on a TV series at Warner Brothers called "Life Goes On", which was a show with Patti Lupone.

That must have been really long hours. Were you doing a weekly show?

Yeah. It was a network series on ABC. It was on film, shot for eight days. You know, it was a drama, family drama. It was about a family with a young Down Syndrome child. It was kind of a cutting edge, breakthrough series in a lot of ways.

I think you've compared film editing to writing.

Sure. I learned that later, you know, that the final drafts of a script in the case of film is in the editing room. You know. Where the script is now thrown away, and now it's the film that was shot from the script, and then it's free, you know, open season on how you're gonna turn this into a film using all the techniques available. Not just editing, but sound and music, and other things.

When you were editing fulltime, did you say: I have found exactly where I want to be, and this is where I'm gonna stay, this is me.

Yeah, I did have that feeling. I think I chose well, in terms of my personality, you know. A lot of editors make great directors, you know. David Lean was a film editor, "Lawrence of Arabia". Hal Ashby won an Oscar for "In the Heat of the Night" as an editor, went on to direct "Harold and Maude", and "Being There".

Did you have that aspiration to be a director?

I did; yeah. But I was, you know, daunted by it, you know. Editors don't often make good directors, 'cause it's an insular kind of personality. Directors tend to be more outgoing and jump right into the fray, you know. And editors tend to—not to stereotype, but tend to want a more private controlled atmosphere. And the set is not a controlled atmosphere; it's basically chaos, you know. And so, it took me a while to embrace the chaos, you know.

What did you direct?

Well, I did my own things, and then I did documentaries starting in the 80s. Music films; I'm sort of a failed musician, you know. So, I worked that out by making films about

musicians. I've done three of them so far. And then, I directed on "Life Goes On". That's when I got into the Directors Guild and worked actually in a studio situation.

I would think egos would come even more into play when you're directing on a set.

Well, in that case, it was good, because people knew me. The actors all knew me, and the crew knew me from being a producer and a supervising film editor. And so, I was a friend, you know, I was part of the team already. So, that was helpful. But yeah, that was a step, you know, of confidence-building.

In Los Angeles, Lorenzo DeStefano worked his way up the ranks as a film editor, later becoming a producer and a director. He would eventually branch out on his own as a documentary filmmaker and writer. During one fateful visit to Hawai'i in the late 1980s, DeStefano learned of a family secret: a relative who had been exiled long ago when leprosy was a much-feared and little-understood disease. DeStefano set out to meet his forgotten cousin, Olivia Robello Breitha.

Well, first of all, I should say she's one of the most amazing people I ever got to meet, you know. And the fact that she's family was even more of a revelation.

What was the connection to her? How were you related?

My mom and her mom, their mothers were sisters.

I see.

So, they were first cousins. Yeah; yeah. Portuguese girls from Kalāheo.

How did you meet her?

Finally, my mom told me about this cousin of ours who had leprosy, who was in Kalaupapa. And I went over there to meet her. And I hiked down the trail, and she wasn't home. I didn't check first; I just figured she was there. She was in Honolulu. So, I missed her the first time. But then, I met her Christmas of '89, and we spent, you know, seventeen years 'til she died in 2006, being very close, you know. Especially after my mom died in '96, ten years between then and Olivia's death, Olivia who'd never had kids, you know, who loved children. I wasn't a kid anymore, but anyway, we bonded. You know, I like to call her the Rosa Parks of leprosy. You know, she's a simple woman, like Rosa Parks was. Rosa Parks was a maid, you know, who took the bus back and forth to White people's houses to work, and who wasn't gonna change her seat. Came a day when she says: I'm not doing this. And then, we know what happened from there. She and others kicked off a whole movement, you know. Olivia said: I'm

not my disease, you know, I'm not my condition; call me by my name, Olivia. And I really respected that.

So, did you remain on the mainland and go back and forth to see Olivia?

Yeah; m-hm. I did, and she came there. She went to the UN in '97 with Bernard Punikaia and Catherine Puohala, and a lot of other patients that were being acknowledged. It was World Leprosy Day or Month, the World Health Organization. And so, they got to meet Kofi Annan, the secretary general of the UN, and get medals. And I still have her medal at my house. And she got together in New York City, the only time she'd been. And so she traveled, you know. Like a lot of patients from decades of isolation, when they were able to travel, they just got out of Dodge and went all over the world—Belgium, and you know. So, not everybody wrote a book, but she did. And so, I think she made the best of the disease, I think. She took the disease and said: You're not gonna beat me down, I'm gonna beat you, and I'm gonna become what I'm gonna become, despite you, you know. And she did. And you know, she made some enemies along the way.

She was feisty.

Yeah; she was not about to be pushed around, you know. When she died in 2006, you know, I was in mourning for her, and I didn't come to Hawai'i for seven years after that. My mom was gone, my dad, her. There was really kinda no reason. I'm gonna come here and get a tan? You know. What am I coming here for? And I came back in October of '13 to put her gravestone. I had a gravestone made in California with a picture of her and John, her husband, and it says: Together Forever on it. It's a nice little stone with the dates that they were married, and when they were born and died. And took that over to Kalaupapa in October of '13. And that was the first time I'd been back in seven years. And it sort of reminded me of what Hawai'i meant to me, you know.

At what point during the seventeen years you really got to know Olivia did you decide: I want to do a play on this?

I didn't. Never.

Not at all during the seventeen years?

No, because it was happening, you know. She would say; she says: Don't ever make a movie about my life. I said: Fine. You're not so special, I'd say. She'd say: Wait a second; what are you talking about?

Lorenzo DeStefano says that his cousin Olivia Robella Breitha taught him the value of fighting oppression, and to never lose sight of your quest for dignity. DeStefano decided to tell the early part of Olivia's life story and her encounters with the stigma of leprosy through a one-act play he wrote and directed called "Shipment Day", which was staged at Mānoa Valley Theatre in Honolulu, in late 2018.

She described to you what her life was like before she contracted the disease. And your play shows that, what it was like.

M-hm.

She was an eighteen-year-old, expecting to be married soon, and still living with her parents.

Yeah; yeah.

And very Portuguese household.

M-hm. Yeah. Well, that's in her book, as well as stories that she told me and stuff. But it's very much in her book in the early chapters.

What was the hardest thing about writing your Olivia play?

It really wasn't difficult. You know. It wrote ...

It wrote itself?

I won't say wrote itself. I mean, it was a one-act play, twenty minutes, and we did it at PlayBuilders of Hawai'i, which is a local play development program run by Terri Madden. It's a terrific program that they have here. And we won Best Play, and Ku'ulei Shafee won Best Actress, and William Hao won Best Actor for this little twenty-minute thing we did. And that's what got Mānoa Valley Theatre interested in the full version. And so, they asked me to write a full version.

[scene from "Shipment Day"]

It was in that moment that I became a stranger, leaving a home and people that I loved.

Inclusion is important. And yet, people's fears, you have to deal with them in a creative way. And that's what's great about cinema and theater, you know, is that you get people in the dark, and you kind of own them for a little while. It's a privilege, you know, to have people, especially when they bought a ticket, you know. And you need to honor that, the fact that they did choose to leave the house, when they really don't

need to leave the house anymore. They can switch on anything they want. So, to take that privilege of having them show up, and trying to maybe transform them a little bit, or ... I don't want to use the word educate so much, 'cause that implies they're not educated. But to show them, expose them to something that they maybe weren't expecting, you know; so that a controversial character, even someone who's completely divergent from their belief system. You know, if you're a Democrat, and you take a Republican type character and make them human, that's good.

Is there one paramount lesson or piece of wisdom you take away after having known Olivia for so long?

You know, basically, it's like, don't give up to the tormentors, you know, in your life. You know, not everybody's in an extreme situation like that, you know, where you're really incarcerated. Self-belief, you know, pride. Not that kind of pride that's boastful pride or anything like that, but inner strength, you know. Yeah; she was strong, super-strong person. Yeah. That, I guess I take away, you know. I guess I was drawn into those worlds, hidden worlds, which I think looking back—I don't look back a lot, I try to look forward. But looking back, I guess there's a kind of continuity there, you know, of discovery, finding out what's unseen or what's overlooked, you know. And I think there's a commonality there throughout everything I've done. Which basically comes down to being a curious person, you know.

Lorenzo DeStefano is having his play “Shipment Day” translated into both Spanish and Portuguese with the hope of sharing Olivia’s story with foreign audiences. And as curious as ever, he continues to discover hidden stories to bring both the big screen and the stage. Mahalo to Lorenzo DeStefano, former islander, who makes his home in Ventura, California. 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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Everybody loves stories. We've got to find some commonality here. You know, as people get torn apart by political differences, and ideological differences, those maybe never can be healed. You know, maybe we're in a place where it's getting wider, and wider for people being able to really find any place to relate. And I do firmly believe, and I'm certainly not alone in this, that the arts is one place, if you can get people in.