

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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Facing fear, I think, is one of the things that I love, because it's an adrenalin rush for me. It makes me realize what I have to conquer, so that it's no longer frightening. And I think in today's society, everything is based on fear. And I really feel for artists today, only because there is no place to fail.

This artist and designer has shut down fear many times in his life, whether it was in walking away from a successful business, or dealing with life-threatening illnesses. Each time, he had no idea what was going to happen next. Amos Kotomori, 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. Amos Sadamu Kotomori of Honolulu and Bali has about him a kind of mystique. He inspires ardent admiration on the part of many of those who work with him or who hire him. That's because he can take an art design and elevate it with touches that nobody else thought of, and which are inexpensive. Or, as one of his colleagues said, he can even make something out of nothing. He designs fashion, jewelry, building interiors, and more. In fact, he designed our Long Story Short set at PBS Hawai'i, as well as this Hawaiian Victorian parlor stage for our Nā Mele TV show, that time featuring Tony Conjugacion. He says the spiritual values that his parents passed on to him while he was growing up have always been at the heart of what drives him to dream and to create.

Being Japanese, we believe that like, our destiny is created with our name. And part of it is that I was named after Amos Cooke.

He actually came here to be a missionary.

Exactly.

And became an educator and a businessman.

Right. His daughter gave me his name. My dad was the first Japanese osteopath in the islands, and Margaret was his patient. She came and said: I would like for him to have my father's name. And so, that's where Amos came from. And Sadamu came from the temple, and it means never-failing, like the daruma that always pops up. But with that, my parents always made it a point. It's not about never-failing; it's about learning from failure, it's about having expectations and sometimes lowering them to learn the lesson. You know. So, that's all part of it. But the most important one, I think, is my last name, which is Kotomori, which is a forest of musical instruments. And I always hear the music in everything. I mean, it makes life so much easier. You know, my dad really believed in service. He loved what he did as well, as an osteopath. It's a nerve and bone specialist. But he was a country doctor, in the sense that it wasn't the money.

I see.

It was about people coming, and they would give us food.

In payment.

In payment. And that was fine. I remember one Thanksgiving, someone gave us a live turkey. It was really mean.

But, you know, what do you do with a live turkey; right? You just kinda go like: Okay. And then, it disappeared, and all of a sudden, it was meat. 'Till today, I can't see buying avocados, bananas, mangos, because they're supposed to be free.

Mm; lychees, too.

Lychee; yes. You know, all of those things, you know. But that's what growing up in Hawai'i is, is that everybody was Auntie, Uncle, Halmeoni, Halabeoji, Popo, Gung Gung. You know, all of those things; it just meant that they were family. And I think that's what is the difference here. And that's why I think when I look at people, I don't look at them as, oh, this is a cohort of work and a peer. You know, I just think we're all working towards moving in one direction.

When he saw you interested in art, was he worried?

Many parents do get worried when they see that art compulsion.

Yeah. You know, art just kind of came by, because my mom was the creative side of it. And you know, she made my shirts, she printed my shirts, she sewed all my clothes for the first two weeks of the school year. So every day, I had something new to wear.

That was unusual.

That was unusual, but I didn't know it. I really didn't know it. So, my love for textiles grew from that. But you know, it's like we are who we are because of all the experiences, you know. And I think part of my DNA comes from that strength of being independent from my dad. And he died when I was in my early twenties. And he left me an obi, which I love. I got a print from his office. But more than that, he left me messages of how to survive, how to really see value in everything around me. So, it wasn't about money. It wasn't about, you know, never failing. It was always about doing more, and maybe serving. My first memory that I have visually, 'cause I'm a visual person, is my dad holding me next to the volcano. And it's like I can still see him there, and always pointing to the sky. And so, I always look to the stars. And the message really is that if you have a dream, if you have something that you really want to do, it's possible. And the song, you know, Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star actually turns into A, B, C. And that is the next message, is that with education, and I was brought up this way, that you can do almost anything you want. But the key is, I think, what my mom always told me; I was born under a lucky star.

Do you believe that?

And I believe that.

Designer Amos Kotomori has enjoyed career successes that have taken him all over the world. He worked in advertising, modeling agencies, and with top fashion designers. Eventually, he designed his own line of men's aloha shirts. He says he was often in the right place at the right time, but his no-fear attitude is what really opened doors for him.

I was working at Parks and Recreation. I was the one who did the summer art programs, working with all the parks and the schools, and you know, doing that. And someone walked in and said: Would you like to apply for a Rockefeller fellowship? And I said: Oh, what's that? It was thirteen states wide, and only ten got it. And I was one of the lucky recipients, and so, I got to go to San Francisco and study, being museum curator in community arts.

All that from Parks and Recreation?

Parks and Recreation. And I was one of the, you know, say top fifteen positions. And I left that because I didn't know what that offered, in terms of the next step. And so, I did. And I met the promoter for Issey Miyake, which is like a dream.

Explain Issey Miyake.

Issey Miyake is a Japanese designer that is internationally known for his fabrics, pleatings. Just an avant-garde designer. And he invited me to Paris to see his show. I was in the Rockefeller Foundation, and I asked for a week off, and they said: Mm, no, you can't go. And I thought: Hm. That was a Friday. I walked in on Monday morning, and I said: I'm leaving the program. And they said: You don't leave Rockefeller. And I said: I am; I have a plane ticket this afternoon, I'm going to Paris. You know, it was the fear that they were trying to instill in me that you don't do this. And the don'ts, don't work with me. I think sometimes you just have to challenge it, and see what's out there.

And you're prepared. What if this thread goes nowhere?

You know, it didn't have any place to go when I went there. And when I got there, I didn't have clothes to wear to the designer shows. I went to Printemps, which is a department store. I bought men's underwear, and I layered it. I took a kimono, I took the sleeves off, I made a scarf. I had a friend who made a jacket for me out of Japanese sex banners. I wore that. I got invited to Issey's show, then to Kenzo's.

How many pairs of underwear was involved?

I wore three different layers of shirts, which was like long-sleeve, three-quarters, and a short-sleeve, and a tank. And it just was that, you know, with jeans. And no one was wearing jeans at that time, I think. It was okay, but not really acceptable to go to a designer show.

But you looked like an avant-garde kind of guy.

Well, it's the best I could do, and I had fun doing it, putting it together. And for whatever reason, from there, I was invited to Dior. And said: I really want to coordinate shows. So, the coordinator actually had me go to the House of Dior, and I watched them put on a show. They put a full-length fur coat on me and said: Now, you walk the ramp, 'cause you have to know how to be a model, you know, know what it feels like. And that was my training.

It sounds accidental, but is it? One, you're willing to go. If somebody invites you to something, you're willing to go. But I mean, it seems like you're getting an awful lot of special treatment.

It sounds like that. But you know what? This is me. I mean, this is my ordinary life, 'cause that's the only life I knew. It's like, doing an agency, there was a need for it. And I wanted to serve that for our people here, the local people, you know, just to be represented in national commercials. But even that, I gave the agency away, and basically, it was one of the hardest things to do. And someone told me: You're giving up the agency because you're afraid of success. And that really hurt. But at the same

time, when I went away, I left and I went to England, and it took me a while before I realized that success sometimes is knowing when to stop. And it's okay, 'cause there's something else to learn.

What tells you it's time to stop?

You know, it's like ... again, from the heart to the gut. And that's it, and following it. What happened when I left the agency was that I ended up in Morocco. A friend built a kasbah there, and he said: Come. And he's been saying come for years. And when I went there, I realized that in third grade, I had done a painting, and I called it Hot Fudge Sundae Mountains. And I can still see it; the valley like this, the cream coming down a lake, and hot fudge sundae mountains. Because I had never seen snow, I didn't know what it was, but I knew what a hot fudge sundae was, and it looked like that, with the whipped cream. Many years later, I give up the agency, I end up in Morocco in Marrakesh. And I look out the window of this car ... I see Hot Fudge Sundae Mountains.

Exactly what you drew in third grade.

Exactly what I saw in third grade. The only reason I remember that painting is because at Royal Elementary, it was sent to the Art Academy as an example of third grade art. But that's the only reason I remembered it. But all of a sudden, bam, the image was there. And I thought: If I hadn't let go of the agency, I wouldn't be here. I'm back on track.

So, that's a dot.

It's a dot; I'm back on track.

You're connecting the dots. What about money, though? I mean, you know, you were running a successful agency.

You know, to this day, I don't know what my balance is. I really don't. I've never put an emotion on money. And the reason for it is because it's a number. I feel like a number needs to be met at the end of the month, to meet all the bills, and somehow, it's there.

Somehow, you were this town kid, who became a—you know, you've rubbed shoulders and had projects with top fashion designers internationally.

M-hm.

And you've been able to choose between successful projects as an artist that pay the bills.

M-hm.

I mean, like you said, there's a reward in creativity.

Yeah.

But often, there's not a reward financially.

Right. I think when you get stuck on a number, you know, it makes it really, really difficult to succeed. Because for me, let's lower my expectations. You know, because I'm getting there, I know I'm getting closer to it. But then, sometimes the dots don't connect, and when they don't connect, it means that I'm drawing the wrong picture. It's really meant to go here. And that's okay. And when I start from there, I can do another one.

It's all about resilience.

I don't know if I am, but I think I believe in good things. I believe that good things happen for its own reasons, and that belief has given me life.

Who is the most interesting top fashion designer you've worked with?

I think it would have to be Dior. I've never met him, but I worked with the people. I don't speak French. But what happens is that art is universal, it's a language of its own. And they wanted me to do their silks, their batiks and silks, and I couldn't stay in Paris anymore, because I got the call from my mom a year after my dad passed away, and she said: You must come home; I need help. You know, family first. I came home. Paris would send me fabric and say: Just do whatever you want, and send it back to us. And I did for a while, and then, you know, it was one of those things where you go like: Wait, I can do this myself. And so, I took the chance, and responsibilities took on another thing here, you know, when you're caring for someone, when you're trying to survive in different ways. Maybe that's why I changed professions, in many ways. But it always led me to where I am.

I see a lot of men wearing your shirts.

Oh, thank you.

They're very distinctive. And I just wonder; what's your thought in creating a shirt, that kind of shirts? What are they like? You know, what's your thought process?

It took me two years to really develop the shirts in terms of finding the fabrics, and doing the designs and the textile process. You know, it's like from silk screening to abstraction, to hand painting, to embroidery; all of those things. But for me, wearing a shirt that I've worked on and designed is wearing a prayer. Because it stems from a story, and when people wear it, hopefully, they feel that prayer. They become happier, or maybe more determined.

You designed the shirt you're wearing now.

Yeah.

Is there a message in the shirt?

Basically, what this is, is it's almost like spirit writing, in many ways because it's calligraphy. I don't really know how to do calligraphy in written form or standard form, but I think there is a message in it which is, stop and connect the dots. You know, sometimes you gotta live long enough to get enough dots to collect, you know, and connect them up and doing this.

Oh, that's why they don't connect sometimes. You gotta live longer.

You gotta live longer. You know, but for me, it's like the shirt is basically to see messages, everywhere. We hear it, we see it. Things don't just happen for no reason.

Honolulu and Bali designer Amos Kotomori has had many successes in his life. But it hasn't been easy. He got past many obstacles along the way.

What was the worst hit you've ever taken?

The unexpected, not knowing was basically when I was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer. Came out of the blue.

You didn't feel bad?

I didn't feel bad, except I was peeing blood. Not a good sign. So, that was my first thing. But that was a good thing, because it made me, obviously, stop and take care of it. But it was Stage 4 cancer of the hip bone, my bladder, and colon. And you know, I didn't know it then, but when I came out, they said: You've got six months. That was eight years ago.

Wow. What a devastating diagnosis.

But you know, it's like, I went to the doctor's, I left Queen's, I made it to Safeway Kapahulu. I got the call: You've got cancer, you're going in on Monday. This was a Thursday. I was going to a camp on Kaula'i to cook for fifty people; it was a music camp. And I thought: I can do that. So, I left on Friday morning, came back Sunday afternoon, cooking for fifty people, and went off to surgery the following morning. But you know, things don't stop because things happen to you. You know. But I think from it, I learned to be a better caregiver, I became a better listener. Because rather than asking, How are you feeling?, when someone's recuperating, I always ask, What can I do to help, is there something you need?

But often, people don't know what they need, or they don't want to say.

Sometimes then, it's basically just sitting there with them and keeping company. And that's okay. You know. But what I also learned is that like, people think that when you go through heart surgery—'cause I had five bypass, working on ten percent.

Ninety percent blockage?

Blockage; yeah. It was pretty amazing.

When was that; was that after your cancer?

After the cancer. My chemo was so intense; I did fifty-four sessions of chemo, twenty-four hours long each of them.

I can't even imagine that. So, you had surgery, and then you went into intensive chemo.

Chemo.

And was the cancer eradicated?

I still go to see my oncologist every three to four months. And I love that, only because they're keeping on top of it. So, you know, every day, every moment, every breath, is certainly a blessing. And so, you appreciate that.

What happened after your heart surgery? I mean, ten percent, you must have been operating on such little ...

I didn't know. And what you don't know doesn't hurt you. That week, I had done ten fashion shows, and it was the longest fashion ramp in America. It ran from Macy's, all the way down to Sears at Ala Moana Shopping Center. We laid a carpet out there,

and you had to walk it ten times with the models. And that just happened days before, and I didn't feel it.

You weren't wheezing?

Nothing.

Wow ...

You know, your body acclimates.

For a while, I guess.

Yeah.

So, then did you have stents put in?

They went in for a stent, and I got up after that, and they said: Mm, so little bit more major. So, what happened is, I said: Okay. You know, so it was gonna be in a couple days. I checked myself out of the hospital, continued doing my meetings and everything.

Your doctor had a few words with you after—

Well, he called me the next day, and he said: Where are you? And I said: I'm in a meeting. He says: You're supposed to be here resting for your operation. I said: Well, if you want me to rest, I need to do these meetings so that I can feel better about, you know, not being available for about a month. And I set it in my mind that even for cancer, thirty days. Because I was taking care of my mom at that point, too, and she had Parkinson's and dementia. And I told her, I said: I'm going for surgery, and I'll be gone for thirty days. And to the day, I was back with her. So, you know, you can. It's a number.

But you know, you do take a moment to think things through, and you had to contemplate that you might not make it through.

You know, it's like, the way I looked at it, when you've only got such short time to organize, and as they say, get things in order—

M-hm.

Which is a nice way of saying: You're gonna die, so you know, make it easier for the people that are left. The way I looked at it; it'll be like Zorba the Greek, where everyone crawls through the windows and claims whatever they want in my house.

And that's fine, 'cause I'm not gonna be around. You know. But it's like, every piece that I have in my home has a memory, and that's what I surround myself with, is those memories. But I don't hang onto them because it's about making new ones every day, creating new ones, and meeting new people, and challenging. You know, there's been moments where not knowing the challenges and facing fear, I think, is one of the things that I love, because it's an adrenalin rush for me. It makes me realize what I have to conquer, so that it's no longer frightening. And I think in today's society, everything is based on fear. And I really feel for artists today, only because there is no place to fail. You know, whereas before, we did it because we needed to do it. It wasn't wanting to do it; as an artist, I needed to do this. I needed to.

And if you failed, then you said there was a place for that?

There was a place for that, because not everything worked.

Well, what was the place? I mean, how did you bounce back from a failure in a very tough occupation to support yourself?

Well, you know, it's like, it comes down to, it can be worse. It's that simple. You know, when things are really bad, and then I go: It really can be worse. And when I stop and think about that, I go: I am blessed.

You said artists don't have room now to fail. But actually, life is materially better. I mean, you know, when you look at what we have, compared to what we had a generation ago.

I agree with you. I mean, I think I'm here because of medical, you know, developments that certainly saved my life many times. I think that like, life is better with the computer, the cell phone, all of these things. But I just think that one of the things that we're missing is the basic element of kindness, being able to listen to each other, being able to care for each other in different ways. I think that really changed my life, but that's the way I was brought up. I start and end every day, you know, with a prayer of my own. And it's basically time for gratitude. And I think about all the things that I'm grateful for, for the day, when I start. And at the end of the day, some things may not go well, and I think about it, but I'm still grateful for it. And it makes me believe that I'm blessed. It confirms that I'm born under that lucky star.

Honolulu's Amos Kotomori now spends much of his time at the serene retreat he built in Bali, Indonesia called Villa Bodhi. Like most of his projects, it started with a dream. And

while he says Hawai'i will always be home to him, it's a place where he finds possibilities in thought. Mahalo to Amos Kotomori for sharing his life stories with us. And mahalo to you, for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

I kinda want to get a sense of how your mind works creatively. 'Cause I know if this table were filled with textiles, or just various objects, I know you could create something from it. What's your artistic process?

You know, if I were to look at this table, I see the stripes, I see that they're organic. But more importantly, I see the light reflected on the surface. And with that, I see a lot of scratches. And, you know, like, it's almost like there's ring marks from a glass, or you know, just simply putting their ring on it and doing this, you know.

I think there's a Hawaiian bracelet mark somewhere.

Bracelet marks, and all of these things. And that's what fascinates me, is the scratches. Because those were made by people; they've left their mark. There's different momentums to it, there's different depth to it, you know. I see that, and I go, like: That's what I want to capture. So, I'm motivated to do something like that.

You also picked this very table for this very program.

You know, this is an example of how a thought can manifest itself. Because in my mind, when I was doing the set many years ago, I thought a triangle table would be perfect for this, because it makes us closer.

M-hm.

We're not sitting further apart. It's, you know, not a rectangle. It was always odd to have a rectangle. And I had it in my mind, went down to C.S. Wo, and there it was.

On sale, yet.

On sale, and affordable on your budget. And you know, so we got that, we got the rest of the set, we got the chairs, everything. And it worked.

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