

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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People often say to me: When you go to Tibet or Nepal, do you have culture shock? I say: No, the shock is coming back here. And I truly mean that.

Meet a man from Maryland who became a mental health professional and advocate on Maui, and also produced about thirty films, so far. We'll show you how his unlikely journey unfolded, and what he's learned along the way about the search for happiness, 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. I've had the pleasure of interviewing individuals over a period of decades, and I'm still struck by how often the element of chance plays a role in remarkable life stories. The man you're about to meet is no exception. In fact, serendipity is a recurring theme in the story of Dr. Tom Vendetti, of Wailuku, Maui. This psychologist and Emmy-winning filmmaker turned a series of unexpected twists into two intertwined careers that have enabled him to do good in the world, while pursuing his personal quest for happiness. On this edition of Long Story Short, we learn how Tom Vendetti's lifetime of journeys add up to the journey of a lifetime.

You were adventurous. You were hitchhiking far away at age, what, seventeen. You were heading out with your thumb and friends, and going to rock concerts, and spring break and other experiences.

Yeah; I always had this drive to see the world. And surprisingly, my parents were okay with that. But it was nothing for me to hitchhike to New York and see the play Hair, or go to a rock concert in Indiana, or even New Orleans to the Mardi Gras.

Did you start working early?

I started working right out of high school. Primarily, it was during the Vietnam War days, and I was going to be drafted. So, I applied for a conscientious objector status, and I only had a couple weeks before I was going to be shipped off, so the clock was ticking; right? So, anyway, I went in front of this panel, and it was community members, some

clergy, and military, and they just interrogated me, this kid, eighteen years old. You don't love your country? You don't want to fight for your country? And I tried to explain to them that it's not that I wouldn't want to fight for my country. I would; it's just this particular war that I didn't believe in. And within a couple weeks, the letter came, and it said that I was still 1A active, going to be, you know, drafted. My mother said: I can't believe that this is happening. I said: Well, Mom, it's happening. She goes: I think it's a mistake. I said: Come on, Mom, they don't make mistakes like that. She said: Well, I'm gonna call them tomorrow and see. And I was working construction with my father at the time, so we went to work. And then when I came home, she took this sheet and put it out in the front of the house, and must have taken a spray can or something, put one, zero on it, which meant conscientious objector. And I walk in the house and said: Mom, what's going on? And she said: Well, it was a mistake; they made a typographical error.

Wow. That's a huge error.

That's a huge error. And again, I was just elated. And because of that, though, I still had to serve my country for two years. So, I had to find a job in the helping field either, you know, doing community service or something. And that's where I got a job working at Sheppard Pratt Hospital as a psychiatric aide. And at the time, I had no interest in psychology. Which again, it just opened this door up that I've been, you know, doing my whole adult life.

And you ended up getting a PhD.

PhD, and I also got a master's degree in clinical social work from the University of Maryland. After that, I decided to move from Maryland to Flagstaff, Arizona. Back then, there were very few services for the mentally ill, so we created a program for them that got a lot of attention. And a lot of that attention came from a program called Adventure Discovery, where we would take the mentally ill people hiking and on river trips, and things like that.

Why?

Well, again, there was some research coming out at the time that it was very therapeutic. And we actually did some testing to verify it, which started my film career, by the way. We took ten mentally ill people on the San Juan River, and prior to doing that we did some pre and post tests for anxiety and depression. The filming part came where I asked a friend of mine who bought a new camera back then. We did our testing, and made this documentary film, and the research that we did showed that not only the clients benefited, that the depression dropped and anxiety, but also the staff.

That is interesting, because what you're telling me is that by seeking not to fight in Vietnam, it led you to your career and to your vocational passion.

Right; exactly. So, I came back, and I put this film together. And then, I became hooked. So, I was the kid that was very shy in school. You know. I would know answers to questions, and wouldn't raise my hand. And when I realized through film that I could actually communicate, because I had a lot to say, you know, that this was my ticket for achieving that.

At the same time he was building his psychology career and developing his passion for filmmaking, Tom Vendetti yearned to see the world. And that's what first brought him to Hawaii, initially drawn to the Big Island of Hawaii because of his fascination with mountains.

It gets back to my early hitchhiking days. I always wanted to see the world. I had a girlfriend at the time, and we decided that we were going to travel around the world. The first stop was Hawai'i. So, we arrived in Hilo, because of Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa. We ended up spending two years there, because, you know, we needed to make some money. So we started one of the first halfway houses for the mentally ill over there, which is part of the Mental Health Kokua system right now. And then after we got the money, we ended up in New Zealand. And someone at that point said: Where are you going next? I said: Well, I really love mountains. They said: Well, you need to go see Mount Everest. I said: Where is Mount Everest?

You didn't know where Mount Everest was.

No; I was so naïve.

And look at where much of your life has been focused now.

That's right. I had clue. And they said: Well, you have to go to Katmandu, and Nepal. And I said: All right. And it was May. The monsoons came in a little early that year, so people were saying: You shouldn't go up to Mount Everest; you're not going to see anything. You know, there'll be too many clouds, and be socked in. I said: Well, I came all this way; I'm gonna go anyway. On the plane, there was this man sitting in front of me, and he was in English, kinda broken English, pointing out all of the mountains. And I noticed a lot of other people were paying attention to him, like he was somewhat knowledgeable. But I didn't pay much attention to it. And then, when we got off the plane, he and his daughter walked up to me and said: Where are you going? I said: I'm going to Mount Everest. He said: Well, would you mind if walk with you? And I thought he just wanted to practice his English, or something. As I look back at it, I am sure he was, you know, trying to protect me and take care of me. But as we were walking on the trail, people were just going: Namaste! Almost in reverence to this

individual. And then finally, I heard someone say: That's Tenzing Norgay. I went: Tenzing Norgay?

He was a Mount Everest rockstar.

He was. And in that part of the world, he was a hero, you know.

Because he was the Sherpa who went up Everest with Sir Edmund Hillary.

Tenzing Norgay and Hillary were the first two people to summit Mount Everest. So, when I heard that, I said: What are you doing here? He said: Well, I'm on my way to meet Hillary; National Geographic is doing a thirty-year special about us summiting the mountain. Would you like to be my guest? And I said: Of course. For a week, you know, we hung out together. And then, when we were getting up to Kunjun, where Hillary was, first they walked up and embraced; the cameras were going, and so forth. And then, he introduced Peter—that's Hillary's son, was there and then, Deki, Norgay's daughter. And then he said: I want you to meet my friend Tom. And here I am, shaking hands with Hillary, going: What is this all about? Right? And then, from that day on, it just changed my whole life, and I've been going back now for thirty years.

So, you were living on the Big Island, went away to see the world. And then, what? How'd you get back?

Then, I ended up back in Flagstaff. And when I returned, I got a job at the Guidance Center again. My girlfriend and I split up at the time, and my wife Nancy was also getting a divorce from her husband. She was working there, so, it all seemed to kinda click at the same time. And then, we fell in love. And we decided to get married on Maui. When we got back to Flagstaff, we started contemplating the idea of moving to Hawai'i. Before we knew it, we applied for jobs, landed them, and we've been living on Maui now for twenty-six years.

And did you say she's in the same ...

Yeah; she's a clinical social worker. We're very happily married, and it's been a good thing for me.

Among Tom Vendetti's talents is a background in music. This expertise serves him well in filmmaking, helping him to craft just the right mood for each project, as well as build bonds with exceptional composers and musicians.

In high school, I understand, you were not just a jock; you were a band geek, I think is the expression people use. You did both.

Yeah; I played the trumpet from third grade all the way into college, and was on the Baltimore Colt marching band. So, I got to see my heroes Johnny Unitas and Raymond Berry back in those days, which was quite thrilling for me.

And that's another of the things you discovered early in life, that you continued on. Music has just been a continuing theme, and you use it in all of your productions.

Yes.

Original music, too.

And in terms of editing, that's my favorite part; putting the music to the scenery, especially beautiful scenery like, you know, the Himalayas and so forth. And I was so thrilled to have Keola Beamer, you know, work on this latest film. We went to Katmandu, and he had the opportunity to record original music with seven local Nepalese, you know, musicians. And it was just fascinating to watch, and also beautiful to listen to. And it literally brought the film to life, as far as I'm concerned.

I wasn't surprised to find out that they had partnered with you, because when Keola was a guest on this program years ago, he told me that he had become a Buddhist.

Right.

And that his mother, you know, Auntie Nona Beamer, had become a Buddhist, and they both said it was very Hawaiian in its values.

Right. Yeah. Being around Keola Beamer and Moana as friends, again, that's such a treasure, something that I, you know, love both of them dearly.

[MUSIC]

And who's Paul Horn?

Paul Horn is a very famous flautist, flutist. He's known as the father of New Age music. He's a Grammy Award winner and has probably forty-six albums out. And he passed away not too long ago, but he literally said: Tom, if you ever want to use any of my music, it's yours. We became that close over the years.

You traveled with him quite a bit.

Yeah. We traveled to Tibet. I think it was 1992, I asked Paul, because he had played in the Taj Mahal and the Great Pyramids, if he would like to play in the Potala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet. He said: Man, if you can make that happen, we're there. And I said:

Okay. And believe it or not, we pulled it off. And that was my first documentary film, Journey Inside Tibet, that was picked up by PBS Plus.

Which is one of the programming streams on PBS.

Yes.

[MUSIC]

So, I needed to find someone to narrate that; right? And I always really liked Kris Kristofferson. He was a person that I looked up to. And I knew that he lived on Maui. So, I had a VHS tape of what I shot, and the music, but I didn't know Kris' address. But I, again, knew that he was on Maui. Put it all in a package, and I wrote: To Kris Kristofferson, Hana, Hawai'i, without a zip code. 'Cause I was fairly new to Maui at the time. Put it in the mail, and several weeks later, I get this call from this man, Vernon White. He happened to be Kris' manager, and he was calling from L.A. He said: Kris said he'll do it. I thought it was a friend joking, or something.

I said: Do what? You know. He said: He'll narrate your your film. And I said: Really? And I said: Well, how much will it cost? 'Cause Kris Kristofferson. He says: How much money do you have? I said: I don't have anything.

He said: That's what it will cost you.

Oh ...

Yeah. And Kris came over to Kīhei, sat in the recording studio and did that, and was so gracious, and it was humbling for me to be in his presence, that again, it just kept me wanting to make more films, especially after it got on PBS.

I think you're the first filmmaker I've ever met who doesn't raise funds, but who earns the money in another job and pays for it himself.

Right.

That's a lot of money, that's a lot of travel bucks.

It is. But I would be doing it anyway. Traveling, doing it my whole life.

[CHUCKLE]

With psychology, of course, I had to go to college and get degrees, and so forth. But I'm self-taught when it comes to filmmaking. So, put a lot of energy into it, and again, it's just a passion that I love doing, and it's become a voice for me. So, it fills that need, too. The editing part became more like therapy for me. It was extremely therapeutic. Because of the content and the people, you know, that I interviewed and so forth, hearing their words, and then getting to relive it again through the images, you know, that I shot, I never considered it, even to this day, being work. The bottom line with making the film was, like I said, I would get a bunch of friends and we would make it slash, vacation shoot. My wife has been very supportive in that too; Nancy. In fact, she's gone on all of these journeys with me. She loves the outdoors, she loves hiking and trekking, and so forth. So, we invite friends. And hopefully, you know, I have a plan, an idea in mind in terms of what I was trying to tell, in terms of the story. In places like Nepal and Tibet, if you go in with a fixed plan, you're really setting yourself up for disappointment. You need to be open and just kinda let it all unfold. And if you do that, it's amazing; it often turns out better than the original plan.

Is that right?

At least, that's been my experience. Yeah.

So, you don't create at least a Plan B first?

In that part of the world, it's better not to be that attached to anything.

Oh, that's interesting. That sounds very Buddhist of you.

It's very Buddhist. Buddhism and even today's world of psychology just go hand-in-hand. If you get into a lot of what the Dalai Lama says about negative thoughts and, you know, and so forth, that's cognitive behavioral therapy, that's what therapists do.

Training yourself not to have negative thoughts.

Exactly. And reframing things in a positive light, along with the buzzword in psychology now is mindfulness. It's a Buddhist term; right? I could relate to that on both levels. This last trip that we took with the Beamers in Nepal to film Tibetan Illusion Destroyer was about exactly what I'm talking about. They have a festival up there every year called the Mani Rimdu Festival with the purpose of destroying illusions, thoughts, or you know, the way you perceive things, that lead to human suffering.

Tom Vendetti of Maui has seen plenty of that suffering through several decades practicing psychology, as well as fighting to improve Hawai'i's mental health services. And then, came a time when his own mental and physical health was challenged with a diagnosis of prostate cancer.

Basically, when I found out that ninety-nine percent of my prostate had cancer in it, it was like being hit in the head with a two-by-four, a wakeup call.

How old were you?

Fifty-five.

You were fifty-five.

So, I went and had the radioactive seeds, a hundred and twenty-two of them, put in my prostate. And at that time, I got pretty depressed, to be honest with you. I was lying in bed, and I said: I need to go Nepal—I was talking to my wife, even though I felt kinda weak and so forth. But I just said I needed to go to there. When I got up into the mountains, it was that quiet time again, and being able to hike and be into nature that just brought me back to life. In fact, that's when I made *When the Mountain Calls*, on that journey, and reflecting on all of these ... you know, the thirty years of my travels in Nepal. I'll never forget; when I got back from basecamp, I made it all the way there and back. I was in Lukla again at that airport. And I called my wife, and she said: I've never heard you sound so happy.

I felt a true sense of inner peace, true happiness. I contemplated the meaning behind all the wonderful experiences I've had, and of how the mountains kept calling me. They have taught me that life's magic is always right here in front of us.

Well, there, they base it on four pillars. One is an honest, transparent government. Another one is respecting nature. And they basically say if you get up in an environment where all the trees are cut down, and the rivers are polluted, you're not going to be happy. The other one is preserving culture. That's something that they cherish in Bhutan, and they don't want to lose it with Western influence. And the other one is economic stability.

Stability; not growth, but stability.

Yeah. There have been many, many studies saying that above your basic needs being met, happiness improves a little bit above that with income, but beyond that, there's no correlation at all.

Income doesn't bring you more happiness.

Exactly right. And when I went over to the Bhutan initially, I was very skeptical. I thought: Is this for real? But I came back a believer, and I think it could be a model for the world. In different places, like Norway and that part of the world, they've

embraced it. But in terms of Western capitalistic types of societies, we have a long way to go if we want to take that on. But that film won an Emmy too, which was kinda cool, you know.

You came home as an Emmy-winning filmmaker.

Yeah, yeah. That was surreal. You know, when you're sitting in the audience and you're thinking: Well, I didn't have anything really prepared. But when the spotlight hit me, I thought: Oh, my god. I walked up, and there were these two big, giant television screens; right? And I looked up and saw myself up there.

I just kind of focused on one person in front of me and started talking.

Because you're the filmmaker who wants to be on the other side of the camera.

Exactly right. Here's the kid who didn't want to put his hand up in school, you know.

You know, I know that that airport that you went to at Everest is very small. But what are the chances, you know, that you'd get together with the Sherpa who summited Everest with Sir Hillary?

See, that's really an interesting question. I wasn't one of those people that just thought things happened by chance. But I've come to the conclusion, and it took me a long time to get here, that things do happen. Again, it can be on a spiritual level, or it can be on a different plane than this objective level. And that was a real awakening for me. And that's the only way I can explain meeting, you know, Norgay up there, and Hillary. You know, when I walked away from that experience, I was thinking again, you can't explain these things. You know, you just gotta be open to 'em.

What do you make of it? Because you know, we hear stories that appear to be accidents and random chance all the time. But these happenings take people to places they otherwise never would have gone.

Part of what I learned is that, number one, you need to show up. Just simply put yourself in a situation to allow things to happen. And if you do that, they often do. It's something that, you know, you can't necessarily measure. It's got to be probably more on a spiritual level that I'm trying to get in tune with.

Have you found a spiritual path? Are you still deciding?

I'm always going to be on that path. I'd be the first to say that I really don't know what's going on. I'm still working towards that so-called enlightenment or nirvana, or whatever, however, whatever term you want to put it in.

Have you stopped going back there now?

To uh ...

To the Himalayas.

No; in fact, I just got back.

Oh; okay, then.

When I had the opportunity to film His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, a few years back, I asked him what the significance of Mount Kailash was. So, I'm making a film right now that's focusing on three areas—preserving the Tibetan culture in China was the first question, the second one was the significance of Mount Kailash, and the third one was happiness. In fact, I'm almost finished that one.

Well, what does he say about happiness?

Well, he said he has no way in the world to know how to fix happiness on a global level, but on an individual level, it's possible. And it gets back to what we were talking about; calming your mind, again, ridding yourself of negative emotions or thoughts that create negative emotions, and back to that kind of basic Buddhist teachings.

Did you see your Sherpa friend again?

I asked him; I said: Is there any place in the world that you would like to see or to hike or trek? And he said: The Grand Canyon. I said: Well, that's where I'm from; when I get back, I will write to you and we'll hike the Grand Canyon together. And by the time I got back, he had passed away.

Oh ...

Yeah.

Too bad.

Yeah. But I was thinking, you know, here I am, traveling all the way to Nepal to find happiness, and he's saying the Grand Canyon. Is it right in my backyard? You know.

Do you think that both your career—your dual careers, really; do you think those were all about finding happiness? Or defining it?

Well, it certainly ended up that way. Initially, like I said, I had no desire at all in psychology. And I always wanted to see the world, but I really didn't even know about Buddhism or, you know, the teaching of Buddhism or the philosophy behind it. But that's really what has impacted my life in terms of the way I see the world now.

At the time of this conversation in 2019, Tom Vendetti has retired from fulltime psychology practice, and devotes most of his time to filmmaking. He's working on new projects, and we're proud to give some of his films a home here on PBS Hawai'i. Tom Vendetti has learned from prominent people in different parts of the world. He says he's also gained insight from the years with his Maui patients, whom he admires and respects for their strength and intelligence. We want to thank Tom Vendetti of Wailuku, Maui for sharing his search for happiness. Perhaps he's inspired you to focus on what's truly important in your own life, and to show up in life, because that's where chance, serendipity, can take you on an unexpected, life-changing journey. For Long Story Short and PBS Hawai'i, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

I've been asked by Keola to make a film about Auntie Nona Beamer. And it's something that I'm really looking forward to. That'll be my next film. So, I feel honored to make the film. She's had other films made about her, but it's been primarily, you know, talking heads, people talking about her. The goal of this film would be to capture her spirit, and to capture it through her words, through her, you know, hula and chants, and the songs that she's written, and the beauty of the islands.

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