

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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I was in the third grade, and Mrs. Zimmerman, our teacher, gave us the assignment of doing a book report. As I began to read, I stumbled on a word, and one of the girls in the class led the group in laughing at me, and I remember deciding this is not a safe activity.

It took twenty years after that incident for her to feel comfortable standing in front of an audience again, and she made a career of helping people get over their fear of public speaking. Meet this presentation coach 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 māi kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. It's one of the biggest fears of many Americans: public speaking. For more than thirty years, Pamela Gaye Chambers of Honolulu has been coaching Hawai'i residents, from children to CEO's, in how to develop presentation skills. Not just public speaking, proper etiquette, dressing for success, preparing for a job interview, and learning to work more effectively in a workplace environment are only some of the many skills she teaches. Her career began with wanting to help people with speaking disorders. She avoided work that involved public speaking until she took a job that she wasn't aware required it.

You grew up in west Los Angeles.

Well, my father was a professor at UCLA. He taught the classics: Greek and Roman history. And my mother was a stay at home mom, which I so appreciated. Some of my friends would go home to an empty house. My mother was always there finishing up a painting or something. And so we were...we had a humble beginning. I mean, I-I teach dining etiquette now, mainly because I had to learn what fork to use 'cause we only had one fork. Well, we each had our own, but we didn't have two forks.

And you went to public schools in LA?

Yes.

Where you had your third-grade experience -

Yes.

- That, that scarred you until you recovered from that?

Yes, yes. Emerson Elementary School. And Mrs. Zimmerman, our teacher, gave us the assignment of doing a book report, and I was an avid reader, so I instantly knew I'm gonna do Charlotte's Web, and I was excited and I wrote it all out, and I couldn't wait to get up there and read my book report. And as I began to read, I stumbled on a word and one of the girls in the class, her name was Wendy, was a leader of the group, and she led the group in laughing at me for my mistake, and I became flustered and my glasses slid down my nose and my face got hot and I just choked. And Mrs. Zimmerman said, "Go on!" That was her way of supporting me, and I remember deciding this is not a safe activity: being in front of the room with all eyes on me, being vulnerable, being laughed at. This is something I will avoid. So, for the next two decades, I avoided being in front of the room.

How did you get out of presentations for the next twenty years?

Oh, by being very cunning. If, if there was a school play, I would be absent the day that they were aud-you know, assigning the, "You be the rock, and you be the lead." And, and I would volunteer to do extra credit work behind the scenes so that I wouldn't have to be in front. I got very good –

Did anyone notice that - what, what you were doing?

I don't think so. No one called me on it; no one said, "Hey you – "

You majored in something called Communication Disorders?

Right. I was going to be a speech pathologist. That was my plan, to help people who stutter or who have a lisp, or who nasal and they want to change that, or they're too breathy.

And that comes from what? Because you liked helping people, and you were looking for –

It came from taking a class in linguistics that fascinated me. It was a class that told you, taught us how to write not phonetically, but in the symbols and – well symbols that allow us to know how to pronounce a word when we look it up in the dictionary. So, the word 'length' has a symbol for the 'ng' sound, and I was really good at that. I could listen to the teacher say a word, and I could write it in that language –

Diagram it.

Yes. Yes, and then I thought, "Well, so where do I get more of this?" And someone said in the communications department. So, I joined that department.

And found out there was something called Communication Disorders to major in.

Yes, yes. And I was able to work with a child who stuttered. I was able to work with an aphasic woman, a woman who had – very elderly woman who had a stroke who could not find her words, and I was supposed to find an aphasic person to work with for my term paper. So, it took me to really interesting places, but then I took a job that required me to stand up in front of groups.

Why did you take a job requiring you to stand up in front of groups?

I didn't know they – I, I didn't know that I would have to. They, they left out that part. I was working for a company called Actualizations, a self-improvement company in San Francisco. That's where I was the sales manager, mostly doing one on one sales or very tiny groups. But once a month, I would have to stand in front of 300 people and introduce the seminar leader. So once a month I would have to be on a riser in a fancy ballroom introducing Stewart Emory, was his name, and once a month a minute; it's just not enough to get over anything. So I would quiver and tremble and shake visibly.

How did you get over this?

Well I, I did the unthinkable. I said to them, "I want to conquer my fear. I need more speaking opportunities, please." And they said, "Okay. Once a week, you can lead a preview about this seminar, and we'll get hotel rooms and we'll maybe attract 20 people that you can speak to." And that's how I got over it.

That is so smart, because if something is unnatural to you, it's hard to feel natural, so you do it until it feels natural.

Exactly. And I knew and loved my subject. I loved the seminar. I knew the seminar. I knew exactly what I was talking about, which is key. And once a week was all it – was what it took. We were in four cities on the mainland, and Stewart Emory and Carol Augustus, the owners, said, "Who wants to go to Hawai'i to see if we can get the seminar going there?" And I said, "I would." I was the only one who raised a hand. Well, if I had known how hard that was gonna be, I wouldn't be sitting with you right now. it was not easy, coming from the mainland with a bunch of registration cards expecting people to sign up for something they had never heard of. But I got 80 people in the room.

How'd you do that?

Oh, ugh, it was so hard. I, I was here for three months, and so I was here – they paid for me to rent, you know, a little apartment, and they paid my paycheck and I got the people together. I had a lot of help. I had some support. And at the end of that three months, I realized I don't want to leave here. I want to...I, I –

Even though it was hard to do your job here?

Well I, I had made a number of really good friends and I loved everything about it. So, but I didn't have the courage to quit, so I went back to San Francisco and I misbehaved.

Purposely, I take it?

Un – subconsciously. I, I can look back, and I look back at the mistakes I made. In my right mind, I would never have done those things that I did. They were egregious. I got fired.

You did get fired?

I did. My – Carol called me. She said, "It was clear to me by your behavior at the Women's Workshop last week that you don't want to be here anymore. So we are releasing you."

How were you acting at the Women's Workshop?

Oh, I left her out of the group photo. There was a group photo of all the people in the workshop, and I had the photographer take the picture without waiting for Carol Augustus to be in the picture. How passive aggressive is that?

But you're not regretting getting fired?

No, I, I cried for about ten minutes, and then I said to my boyfriend, "Doug, let's go, let's go to Hawai'i." So we packed fourteen boxes of things, came here, no place to live. Uh, someone lent us a spare room for a while. No job, no, no nothing. Fourteen boxes of stuff, and we, both of us has - have been here ever since. That was forty years ago.

Pam Chambers secured a job in Hawai'i that continued to put her in a public speaking role. It eventually led her into creating her own business.

I ran the Winner's Circle Breakfast Club in the eighties, maybe you've heard of it? It was a weekly motivational meeting held in various places over that ten-year period, and I was the director of it, and I was the emcee. So, every single week I was in front of a hundred people running the breakfast. It was so much fun, and then one day a man named Howard Wolf said, "We have architects who need to be better at presenting their work. Do you think that you could help them?" And I said, "I don't know. I, I don't know a thing about architecture. Let's give it a try." So we had one pilot class with twelve people, and I talked to them about body language, voice, words and image, and they loved it. So they hired me for several more classes, and that was the beginning of my career.

Did it grow because you got feedback and then you would change and evolve?

Yes, I always, I always listen. Sometimes I get feedback that's painful. Oh my goodness, I, I don't love critical feedback any more than anyone else does, but sometimes I get it. And I vow, 'let me not make the same mistake twice.' I got feedback about handling my lei too many times. A woman in the audience counted the number of times –

You're right. you are judged, aren't you, when you're speaking?

Oh, yeah. She said, "I thought you might want to know that you handled your lei thirty-seven times." And that is the moment I decided to say to people, "If you plan to give me a lei, which is lovely, I would prefer to have it when I'm done speaking," because I know myself. I know that I'll be handling it.

This is a really interesting subject because we know that public speaking is the, is probably the number one fear, right, that people have.

Right.

And um, and so just, just, um, being there for lessons is probably pretty daunting.

Yes, it takes a lot of work for me to fill a class. It is a very hard sell. People will go to Toastmasters because that's very, very easy, and very safe, and they're not gonna get the level of feedback that they're afraid they're gonna get from me. I have a reputation of being, "She leaves no stone unturned." And that's not true. I don't turn over stones that can't be fixed.

Well it is very personal.

It is.

Even if it's not – I mean, what's personal to one is, you know, no big deal to another.

Right, that's right. One man came into my classroom and he sat down and spread his arms; his tall and long arms. He spread his arms. He took a lot of space, and after about forty-five minutes when enough rapport was there among all of us, I said, "I want to give you some feedback about your body language." And he said, "What?" And I said, "Just freeze. Freeze just as you are." I said, "Notice how much space you're taking. Notice that you're encroaching on the space of the people to either side of you." And he pulled his arms in, and he said, "Thank you. No one has told me that before." And I said, "I know. That's why we're here."

Because sometimes people just don't know.

They don't know.

And, and it may be obvious to everybody else.

They don't know what they don't know. And they're usually very grateful that someone finally told them about something that they can easily fix. Now the voice, that's not easy. But pulling your arms in, that's easy.

You know, I thought that most people would know, 'I, I don't like to speak. I'm fearful.' But it turns out that some people don't know they're bad speakers, and you have to tell them. And, and you're considered an expert in this area because you, you have to identify, and give them feedback, and get them to change. I, that's, I, that's, that's pretty sensitive stuff.

I could laugh for an hour about this, but I won't. Uh, yes, there's one woman who I have to break it to her that she talks like Minnie Mouse. She, or a chipmunk. She has a, has a very nasal, up here way, nasal high voice and she does up talk, and so she sounds like a eight-year-old.

What's up talk? Oh, you end up at the sentence.

You end with a – with a question. "So like I was at the mall and I met this really cute guy, and like, I wanted to go up to him." That's up talk. And she does that, plus she's nasal, plus her voice is high, and –

And she doesn't know this?

I don't know if she knows it. I, that, that's something I need to find out. I need to say to her, "So what kinds of feedback have you gotten about your communication skills?" And if she says, "Well, I'm told that I fidget too much." Then I'll say, "Okay we can work on body language. Have you ever had any feedback about your voice?"

And she says? What if she says, “No, no, not at all” ?

Then if she says no, then I'll say, “Well I am going to give you feedback about your voice, because your voice is one of your four instruments. We have our body language, our voice, our words, and the way we look, and I'm going to be giving you feedback about all of those.”

Are people threatened, or do they say, “Oh good, help me.”

Yes, most people love feedback because I'm gentle but clear when I give it, and I never give feedback about something they can't change, and I tell them the benefit to them of changing this.

Can you change a nasally voice?

Yes.

How do you do that?

You - it takes a lot of work, but you can do it. I mean, why are there vocal coaches if we can't change our voice. There, there wouldn't be vocal coaches if our voice weren't changeable.

You can know you're not doing well, but you don't know how to change it.

Right. Well, luckily for me, I've been in business helping people who want to be helped for thirty four years, and it's really astonishing because Hawai'i is, is a place where we're kind of not supposed to stand out a lot, but those who want to get somewhere in their career, if they realize that there are things that they're doing in their communication that are holding them back, they want to know what that is and they want to move it out of the way. Resistant people are defensive people, so if people are defensive, they're most likely to be resistant to any new idea that comes their way about what they could be doing different. So, so resistant people...I don't get a lot of those in my public classes because usually those are people who chose to be there.

It is really, um, I mean, it seems like in most jobs you would have to – even if it's to ask for a raise, you need to, you know – any, any...it could be a small, seemingly small human interaction with just another person, but it's still a presentation skill.

Yeah, it is.

And you still have to tell a story, and, and, and uh, and be able to present.

Right. and I tell people if you're shy and you're like the way I was, if you don't want to speak out, at every single meeting, do three things: ask a question, make a suggestion, and offer your opinion. You don't have to be an expert to do any of those things, but slowly but surely you will be perceived as a participant, not a wallflower. So, do those three things and then be silent if you want, and if you do those everywhere you go, you're gonna gain confidence. You'll, you'll - you won't mind the sound of your own voice entering.

What's the, the most, uh, startling transformation you've been part of?

Startling, what a great word. Okay, the one that comes to mind was a woman who was, still is, the CEO of her own company, and she looked like she ran a plant nursery. That's what she looked like, and when it came time – one of my sessions is about image only, session two. I always ask them, "On a scale of one to ten, how much feedback do you want?" And I tell them what a five would sound like, and I tell them what a ten would sound like, and everyone chooses the ten.

They want to hear it all.

They want it, 'cause they realize the ten isn't unsafe, it's more complete. So I said to her, "If I had to guess what profession you're in, I would say you either work at a preschool or you work at a nursery. Maybe the nursery in Kailua." And she said, "Really? Why?" And I said, "You don't look like a CEO."

So did you, did you give her styling tips?

Yes. She - actually, she asked me to take her shopping, and, and I did. I recommended a hair stylist to her. Here's the sad part: her husband didn't like it.

Her hair or her new image?

Her whole new beautiful, powerful, leader-like image. He said, "I thought you were fine the way you were." And he was a chauvinistic, sexist, old-fashioned guy that didn't want a woman who turned heads.

What'd she do?

She stayed good. And they're still married.

Very good.

Yeah.

What about a, a man's transformation?

A man – there was a man, also a CEO dressed very poorly: shabby, sloppy, pants too long, unshined shoes. Just, just a wreck. And his HR person, it was, said, "I'd like you to clean up your image, and there's someone in town who can help you." And we met, and I said, "I want to take you shopping." And, oh, it was so much fun because he was so open. I said, "Wear – get this pink shirt. This pink shirt. Not fuchsia, the pale Ralph Lauren pink shirt. Women love it. Get this shirt. Here's the tie to go with it. Get these pants." And he put them on in the dressing room and he stood taller and he was so proud of himself, and he, he...those changes stayed. He didn't go sliding back.

Pam Chambers of Honolulu conducts workplace training, holds her own classes, does individual coaching, and writes books on self-improvement. She's operated her own business for more than three decades and has always done everything herself.

You prefer to be solo?

Yeah, I really like it. I really like being single and solo and making my own decisions. I am considered – I'm a polite, very polite person, but I don't want to have to compromise on how I live my life. I think I've witnessed many, many people not being able to do what they want because their boss wouldn't let them. For example, there is someone who wants to come to my class but his boss won't let him. And I don't want to have a life like that, so I don't have a paycheck, I don't have a pension, but I have freedom. And I just, I value it more than anything else.

That is a hard way to live, though. I mean, it, it really takes enormous, uh, uh, I mean you're always thinking...you, you not only have to plan your content, but you've got to get your own business, take care of your own finances.

Oh, I know. I have to do my marketing. I have to do my own social media. I have to make my own nametags. I mean, I could probably hire someone to help me, but it would take more time to train them to - than to do it myself. So yes, I do do it all.

Really, what you do is a lot because you're doing different subjects and you're doing very different groupings.

Yeah.

And they come to you different ways.

Yes. Yes. I love it.

May, maybe that's why you like being solo because you have so much interaction and stimulation in your, in your job.

That's true. I love living alone. I, I love my alone time and I give myself a lot of it. A lot of it, and I, I'm sure it's because of all that I put out.

Right, because you're...essentially, you're teaching people how to be more social.

More social, more considerate, more aware of others. I teach them don't be walking down the sidewalk and stop smack in the middle of the sidewalk. Do you think that you're the only one on the street? Or I'll say, "Do – are you aware that you just interrupted her when she was trying to give you helpful feedback?" There's no – nothing that I won't say if it can be changed.

So, I do think that comes from a place of abundance because you're, you know, you'll share it, but on the other hand, it's, it's expertise that you, you know, that you take a lifetime to build up to get.

I - It took me thirty-four years to know what I know now. So, so if you think I'm charging too much for an hour, you're not paying me for that hour; you're paying me for all the blood, sweat, and tears I suffered learning how to do this.

You like to fly solo and, and you've, you built this incredible business, um, and, and basically, you've done it a long time so you could retire –

I could.

But you, but you keep working. What is it that – what is it that's special to you about Hawai'i?

Oh, so many things, but mainly the diversity: the languages that we hear, the different cultures, the different values. I love it! And, and when I have someone in my class who is fretting because she has an accent, I say, "No, I am not helping you get rid of that accent. We like it. We like to hear something that's different." The weather, except it's been too hot lately. The, the plumerias; the, the weather, the seasons that we have...the roots I have here, the people I know. I know thousands of people, and, and I feel like I belong here. And you're right, I could retire, but I don't want to. I want to do what I'm doing.

Mahalo to Pam Chambers of Kaka'ako, Honolulu for sharing your stories with us. And thank you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

You're known for wearing hats. I wonder, I mean, and all kinds of hats for lots of variety, which is not common in Hawai'i nei, so tell me about that.

Well, I have a – I sent your staff a picture of me at the age of three wearing a beret. Somehow my mom, or maybe my grandmother, put that beret on me, and I always liked that picture. But I didn't wear hats my whole life. I started wearing hats probably about twenty years ago, and I don't...I think, oh I, I do know why: because I was really into vintage at that time. I still am. And I bought vintage hats, and I liked wearing them because they got so many comments. "Oh, your vintage hat. I always wonder what hat you're gonna wear." Well, I got out of the vintage stage, but I got in the habit of wanting something on my head, so if it's not a hat, it might be a scarf. If it's not a scarf, it might be a bandana. There needs – I need something on my head.

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