

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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My grandfather was a cockfighter on Kaua'i for 50 years. My grandmother was a gambler, a card gambler. And I think I have that high tolerance for risk-taking that comes with their blood.

Maybe you seek it?

Oh, I think you have to if you are gonna do what I do.

She's fearless in her determination to tell a good story. Meet this Hawai'i filmmaker 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. Stephanie Castillo of Kapa'a, Kaua'i, is an award-winning documentary filmmaker and a former newspaper journalist who's been writing, producing, and directing documentaries for the last 30 years. She explores stories of redemption and tolerance through documentaries, like the Emmy-award winning film *Simple Courage*, an historical portrait for the age of AIDS, which draws parallels between Hawai'i's leprosy story and the AIDS epidemic. Several of her projects, such as *An Untold Triumph*, the story of the 1st and 2nd Filipino Infantry Regiment U.S. Army have aired nationally on PBS. Stephanie was inspired to revisit the World War II era several times. For example, the film *Strange Land: My Mother's War Bride Story*, was based on the experiences of her mother, Norma Vega Castillo. Another film, *Remember the Boys*, was based on her father, Wallace Castillo, a second-generation Filipino-American who joined the U.S. Army during World War II.

And he was a Second Lieutenant. Went in with MacArthur, General MacArthur, to retake the Philippines from the Japanese occupiers. And my dad's job was, uh, military intelligence. He was supposed to figure out which Filipinos collaborated with the Japanese. And, uh, during that time in Manila, he met my mom and, uh, she was 18 years old, and I think he was like, 26. And, uh...they started dating, and he said he's coming back and he wanted to marry her. Asked his mom-her mom, uh, and, uh, her mom said yes, and...but my mom wasn't sure. But my...my mom's family said, you

know, "He's a good man. Go with him because we're devastated here in the Philippines, you know. And you can start new, make a new beginning." And so he brought-he came back and got her, they got married, brought her back, and brought her to Kua'i, which is where they started their life and they had their first daughter on Kua'i.

And then how many other daughters?

Six more.

And you were which number?

I'm number two.

Two.

Yeah.

Well, I was born in Kapi'olani Hospital. I'm told that my mom was supposed to be giving birth at Tripler, but she couldn't make it. So I was born in Kapi'olani. And as she tells the story, I just slid right out. I was so ready to come into the world, that I slid right out. And, and we spent the first five years of my life here in Honolulu. Pālolo Valley is where I grew up, and my dad was in the Army. He was in Military Intelligence. And at age five we got orders to go to Japan, and that's when everything began. We went to Japan, lived there for two years, and then we moved to Texas, and Maryland, and went back to Japan for four more years and then came back, and we were in D.C. and -

How, how was that for you to be uprooted like that?

You know, I, I don't think it, it really impacted me, other than to say it made me very cosmopolitan.

So-oh, that's interesting. So, it's a, a big plus. You, you knew that, even then?

Yeah, yeah. Maybe...and I, and I don't have trouble making friends or meeting people. Uh, you know, it's, uh, uh, it was a time in, in which maybe just my own personal self is a curious person, so, living in other cultures and, uh, just discovering other worlds. And I'm, I'm very thankful for that kind of an upbringing 'cause it's really made me a very cosmopolitan person.

Kaua'i filmmaker Stephanie Castillo spend her high school years in the Philippines, where she attended the American School in Manila, a college prep school attended by the children of multinational corporation heads, also U.S. military dependents and

upper-class Filipinos. She says her classmates broadened her worldview, and helped her discover a love of media production. She kept herself busy producing music and rap shows, writing for a teen magazine, and working as a radio disc jockey.

And when I was nineteen, and we'd come back from the Philippines and back to Honolulu, I left for Hollywood, and I lived in Hollywood.

What, uh, got you to do that?

Well my best friend, who was my best friend in high school in the Philippines, she was a folksinger from, uh, from Ohio, but her father was a diplomat, and she said, "I'm going to go to Hollywood and I'm going to become a famous folksinger. Why don't you come with me and you can become a famous disc jockey?" 'Cause I was a disc jockey on the weekends. I, I worked at a rock radio station in the Philippines. And I said, "Okay." So, we went to Hollywood and she got a place, and I came, and – this was right around the time of the Manson murders. The Manson Murders – Charley Manson's murders just happened. So, it was kind of a scary time to go to L.A., but, um, I ended up getting a job and Hollywood Boulevard at an all-news radio station, worked, uh, in news, and–

That's amazing, to break in that fast.

Yeah, well, it was a foot in the door. I got hired as a typist. For six months, I worked as a typist, typing up the, the logs.

So, no promises.

No promise. But I would go into the newsroom and get to know the news, news guys and the news editor, and one day he said, "Hey, how would you like a job in here?" You know, so, uh, I moved into the newsroom and started writing, you know, weather and stock market and–

So that was a good investment of your time, as a typist.

Yes. Yeah, it was. It was.

Well, did you get close to becoming that famous DJ?

Let's see...no, no I didn't, 'cause I...then I started my career in, in, in media, basically, and from that job I went into multimedia making slide and tape shows for a production company in Pasadena, California. And I just stayed on the track of making media, uh, and, uh, eventually, uh, ended up going back to school to get a college degree.

Okay, but what happened to your friend, who was also going to make it big in folk singing?

She met her husband and got married, and forget about...

Did she leave?

Yeah, after one year.

You went to school for the first time at, at 30?

At 27.

27.

I was told by a therapist-at the time, I was seeing a therapist, I could not see my future. I could not see where, where was I going? What was my life going to be? I could only see a year at a time, and I think part of that was because I had grown up in a military family and we travel so much and change so much, and she noticed that I, I, I didn't have any plans. I didn't have any, you know, wishes or dreams, other than to be the famous disc jockey. And she said, "You know, I think if you would go to college, you might, you might develop the ability to make plans, because college will take you five years. You set a five-year goal, you accomplish that goal, and you'll learn what it's like to make a five-year goal." And so, I said, "Okay." I went to night school. I was working during the day, and then I went up to northern California because I wanted to go into, uh, a film program. I was very interested in the cinema, and, uh, my dad was ill, so I came home, went to Kua'i Community College for a year, and then I ended up at the UH in Journalism because there was no film school at the time. So, I finished up in Journalism, and then I was hired by the Star Bulletin.

What did you learn in the journalist realm?

I learned how to tell a story. I learned how to write a story. I was...initially, I didn't want to be a - I didn't want to take this newspaper job. I wanted to go to film school.

But you, you know at, at the time, it was hard to get a newspaper job in town. I mean, it-there's a lot of people competing.

I didn't know that, and I, I wasn't looking. I did a internship at the legislature for the Star Bulletin when I was a Journalism student, and, uh, I was going to go back to film school after I got my degree; go to-go get my, uh, Masters in, in film, and I was turned down by Temple University and New York University. And the only door that was open was the Honolulu Star Bulletin offered me a job because they knew me from the internship. They

liked me I guess, and, uh, so this friend says to me, "Don't worry. Take the job. You know...use this to, to hone your writing skills. You know, you can always go back to films, but you've got this opportunity to hone your writing skills." So, I did. That's what I did. I said, "Okay, I'm going to focus for five years. I'll do it for five years." And I was a Star Bulletin reporter for five years: three years on Maui, and three years-or two years on-in Honolulu, and two stints with the USA Today. And I honed, and honed, and honed. Every day I wrote a story. And he said, "See it as-see every story you write as a film script. It has a middle, beginning, and an end. It has characters; it's got drama; it's got conflict.

You must've met a, a lot of different kinds of people. And...you're on Maui; you're in Honolulu-

Yes.

You went to-USA Today was in D.C., right?

Yes.

So, you had a great, um, opportunity to meet with people from all walks of life.

And the most influential person I think that that I met...well, two, actually. One was, uh, Dr. C. Everett Koop, who was the Surgeon General at the time. I went down to Kalaupapa with him. And the other one that was famous was Caroline Kennedy. And I was told...at the time I was the correspondent on Maui, and I got a phone call from the desk and they said, "She's on Maui for her honeymoon. Find her." Okay...

Was that easy to do on Maui, since...

I'd been on Maui almost, almost three years...

Coconut wireless...

And I called up some people. I said, "Do you know where she is? Can you find out where she is?" They did find out where she is immediately, and I had a moral dilemma. Do I barge in onto their honeymoon and, you know, become a paparazzi, basically? And I decided not to. and I decided to wait for three days before going down to the Hana Hotel, which is where they were staying, and I kind of did it my way.

So, did you get beaten on the story?

No.

Nobody got in.

Nobody got that story but me. In fact, it went out to the AP and USA Today, and I got the only photograph that was taken on their honeymoon.

How did you approach them?

Well, uh...first of all, you know the Hana Hotel's very expensive.

Yes.

And I told my paper, "Okay, I know where they are. They're at the Hana Hotel. I can find them, but you're going to have to put me up in the hotel so I'm not trespassing." It was \$500 a night, okay. And they put me up. The Star Bulletin put me up for several nights, and I ran into them at breakfast. And I, you know, I, I wanted to be really upfront, so I said, "Uh, excuse me sir. You know, I'm a reporter and I don't mean to bother you, uh, but I would love...like to interview you and have a picture." And he was very adamant, "No picture. No interview. Leave us alone." And I said, "well, I'm sorry to, you know..." So, I went away, and then I saw him again. I said, "Sir, I, I don't mean to bother you, but honestly I won't bother you. I will leave you alone if you promise me to a, a photograph. You know, I'll take a photograph." He said, "Okay. We'll let you know when we're ready to leave and you can come and take our photograph." So that's how it happened. I got a phone call...

When they left the hotel?

Yep. I got a phone call from him, Ed Schlossberg, and he said, "Okay, we're leaving now. You can have a photo." And, uh...and so I took three photographs of them. And one of 'em landed on, uh, USA Today, and that went-AP, to send it out around the world. I think, for me, it was important that I did it with integrity, and that I put my up-integrity up against what I think was not going to be the way to do this job, and I think I was right. I could live with myself, and that was important; uh, not, not just for this story, but for all, all the work that I do as a journalist, as a filmmaker. I feel my standards are really, really important, and that I, I want to hold to that journalist standard because I really respect what it makes you.

After five years as a newspaper journalist, Stephanie Castillo decided she was ready to pursue documentary filmmaking. However, she didn't have a story for a film just yet. Then she was assigned to follow the U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. C. Everett Koop, on a visit to Kalaupapa, Moloka'i.

So, you have this stable job that's interesting, but you are going to leave it, aren't you, after five years?

Yes, yes, yes. Yes, and, and because, because, uh, I wanted to make a documentary. That was really what I wanted to make, and after five years...I, I said I would give it five years, and I gave it five years, and that's when I went down to Kalaupapa with Dr. Koop. I had been covering Kalaupapa and the people of Kalaupapa for three years as Maui correspondent, so I knew the people down there. Olivia, and Richard, and, you know, so many of the others, and uh...so when Dr. Koop and I were down there, they came up to him and said, "Dr. Koop, they're going to put people with AIDS down here." And this was the height of the AIDS epidemic. "We're afraid they're going to put people with AIDS what they did to us." You know. And Dr. Koop said, "Yes, I know. They've been calling my office and asking if we can isolate people with AIDS." And then the Park Service Director, 'cause Kalaupapa's a national park, said, "They've been calling my office, also, wanting to know if we could put people with AIDS down here at Kalaupapa." And then in that moment, the story just, sort of...bing! Oh, leprosy, AIDS. Why don't I take a look at this history of leprosy and see what we can learn about how we're going to deal with AIDS. So, looking back so that we can look forward. And that's what the first film I did. It took me five years. I co-partnered with public television, and I had to raise \$500,000, and, uh, I finished the film in '92. I had a brilliant editor, Dan Zeigler, who co-produced it with me, and, uh, '90, '93 we won the Emmy award for that film.

Congratulations.

Yeah. Thank you.

That was, that was a wonderful, um, you know, uh, societal point you made.

Yeah.

And did the, um, patients at Kalaupapa...were they afraid of AIDS?

Uh, no, because they were-because they understood what the people with AIDS were going through. There had apparently been some people with AIDS that had walked down the cliff, and, uh, wanted, you know, to see the place, and met Richard Marks and-

So, did they identify with them closely?

Yes, I think so. I think-in fact, the, the people with AIDS were already identifying with people with leprosy. Before I even started this story, they were being called modern-day lepers. So, it wasn't a far-fetched thing to, to, uh, look at the history of Kalaupapa to see how we dealt with fear and hysteria around a disease that nobody knew how you got it. And, uh, and then to say, "How, how are we going to deal with AIDS? How

are we going to treat people with AIDS?" And Damien becomes that model of compassionate care. And I, I just think that that's where I wanted to go. I wanted to give some kind of inspiration that we could hold onto as we were going through this terrifying disease.

People were sent to Kalihi because they had a disease. It really wasn't a hospital because only patients with this disease were accepted there, were sent there, supposedly to be cured. There was no medicine to cure. Nothing.

Stephanie Castillo continued down the path as an independent filmmaker, full-time. Sometimes it's been a difficult road to travel, but she's found fulfillment in exploring human stories through documentary film.

When you're working on a film, does it just consume you? Is it part of your sleep? Is it, is it something that you just live to do? Because you're giving up a lot to do it.

Yeah, I think it...I think it does. I-to me, in a way, it's not consuming. It's purposeful, in that I have something to wake up to everyday that's meaningful. And, and these projects demand that things have to be done. You know, I've gotta do this, this, this, and this. And so, every day I get up and I do the things that need to be done, and as I do them, I get further down the path, you know. And, and it's...there's just a, a natural, uh, source of power that comes with an idea, that takes you down the road. And you meet people, and you-people want to help you, or...you know, serendipity and faith. You know, I'm a, a person of faith, and, uh, that carries me as well, and I don't think that I could do this without, you know, uh, being a person of faith. I just-

I think you've said, in fact, that your stories always seem to have a quality of redemption as part of the story.

Yes. Yes. That's, that's so true. I, I find the, the story of redemption in our lives to be very key, and I find that I'm drawn to stories in which people redeem a situation. Father Damien redeemed the Kalaupapa situation.

By the providence of our divine Lord, who, during his public life, showed a particular sympathy for lepers, my way was traced toward Kalawao in May 1873. A great many lepers had lately arrived from the different islands. They numbered 816.

Why do you think that is? Why do you think redemption is a recurring theme in your life, or a continuous theme?

Um...I, I think as a, as a child growing up, I had a really difficult childhood; very difficult childhood.

Why is that?

I was fat as a little kid, and got teased mercilessly. Uh, I, I was bullied, and, uh...and in, in a family of seven, you know, it's not all roses. And, and I, I think, uh, it was just hard to survive as, as a child. And, and I found comfort in my faith. I, I was raised Catholic, and I found comfort in God and in my faith, and I think the more I grew and, and came to understand what that faith was about, uh, what I see is a God of redemption. What I see is, is a, is a, is a spirit of redemption that is available to us as we live our lives that are challenging and hard. Uh, there's always second chances. There's always a way through, a way around, to keep going, to keep trying. And I think that is just part of humanity. And I love that theme because it shows the best of us. It brings out the best of us. It, not just, uh, in the way we see ourselves, but in how we treat others and how we want to help others.

Was there a film you've done where you couldn't see the redemption factor, but you pursued the film anyway?

Cockfighters.

Right, so yeah, you did a lot of interviews with cockfighters.

Yeah, over 30 interviews.

At a time, it was-in some places it was legal, and in some places, it was not legal.

Well, at the time that I did it, which was the year 2000, it was still legal in, uh, several states. Uh, it, it became illegal after I did my film. But it was illegal in Hawai'i, and it was illegal in, I think, forty-some states. But I went to the legal states. I went to the legal pits, and, uh, I talked to, you know, people who were involved in the sport. I thought I was doing a film to understand my grandfather, and, and why he did cockfighting for fifty years. You know, this is an American subculture with 500,000 people.

The sport isn't about killing an animals or being mean to animals, the sport is about producing the best animal you can. This is what we're shooting for right here. This is real nice. I, I've become emotionally attached to my, my birds. If I were to lose one, you know, it's, it's a bad thing. So, I definitely want to do everything I can to produce a winner.

Did, did you end up, um, understanding your grandfather as a result?

Yes, yes, I did. And I came to understand that this is a multicultural sport that is everywhere in the world. Every country has it. But I came to understand that you cannot understand it unless you're standing inside of it, 'cause otherwise it looks really weird.

And redemption?

The closest thing that I can say about what I learned from them was how important tolerance is.

Do you know anybody else like you? Have they followed the same path as you?

Not exactly, but I know filmmakers who sell their houses.

True, true.

I, or take out another mortgage. Uh, I, I know that sometimes an idea is so powerful that you make that sacrifice, and, uh...the temptation is to go and get a job, you know, so you have security, so that you have, uh, uh, no worries about how you're gonna make it tomorrow. I don't know how, how I've done it. It's hard to believe I've done it for thirty years. But I'm not rich. I'm a little famous, but I'm not rich. But I have richness of life and experience, and these stories have introduced me to so many wonderful people, taken me to so many wonderful places. Uh, I never have gotten to some of the places that I went to. So, it's, I guess it's how you look at your, your own life, you know. It's what...what it is that's, uh, important, and what you're willing to sacrifice your life on.

As of the time of this conversation in the Spring of 2020, Stephanie Castillo is working on her 11th film, a documentary about the 1924 Hanapepe massacre on Kaua'i. The film examines a confrontation between striking Filipino sugarcane workers and sheriff's deputies that resulted in the deaths of 16 workers and 4 deputies. Castillo is exploring telling the story in a non-traditional, out-of-the-box format, as a documentary drama in the style of rock-opera. Mahalo to Stephanie Castillo of Kapa'a, Kauai, and thank you for joining us for this edition of Long Story Short on PBS Hawaii. I'm Leslie Wilcox.

I'm always getting ideas. I'm always having things come to me, and I'm not fearful. You know, I'm fearless about going and tackling these things if they grab me. I mean, I had somebody the other day say, "Oh, you should do a documentary on street art in Kaka'ako." I was like...

Doesn't grab me.

Doesn't grab me.

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