

GUEST: PUAKEA NOGELMEIER

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I say to people that Hawaiian is an easy language to learn. But it's a really difficult language to learn well.

How did a restless young man from Minnesota become one of Hawaii's leading Hawaiian language scholars? Next on LONG STORY SHORT, the remarkable journey of former post office worker Marvin Nogelmeier, now Dr. Puakea Nogelmeier.

Aloha Mai Kakou, I'm Leslie Wilcox.

In this edition of LONG STORY SHORT...Puakea Nogelmeier, Hawaiian language advocate and teacher at the Manoa campus of the University of Hawaii for more than a quarter of a century. He was Marvin Nogelmeier when he landed in the islands on an adventure. He didn't mean to stick around; Hawaii was supposed to be just a stop-over on the way to Japan.

But this is where he stayed. And it's where the young man in his early twenties was singled out by one of Hawaii's most respected Hula Masters

Well, the name was given to me by Maiki Aiu Lake, and it was her name. And it blindsided me [chuckle], and I didn't understand it. I was in hula with one of her students from the first graduating class, Mili Allen, out in Waianae. Maiki used to borrow us; but we didn't really know her. I mean, she was the mother.

M-m.

She was the head of it all. And so she'd borrow the men dancers especially. So we had performed for her, there was thank you *luau* afterwards. And she's the one talking, so we have to wait until Maiki finishes. And she's thanking, seemingly, everyone in the Honolulu phone book. And then she launched in talking about the man with the spear, and I want you meet the man with the spear. Well, we had done hula it was done with a spear in hand. And so she starts going, So I want you to all meet Puakea. Puakea, stand up and show them who you are. Now, I'm three or four rows back. And she keeps pointing right to me, and going, Stand up—this is Puakea. And I'm still not standing up. And my hula brothers and sisters are going, Marvin, I think she's talking to you. [chuckle] So I stand up with one of these, you know, you're the wrong guy—**[chuckle]**

Or, it occurred to me, maybe she just got me confused with someone else.

[chuckle]

So I'm blushing to the roots of my hair. And she goes on real naturally; This is Puakea, and he's out in Waianae, and he's dancing with Mili, and so I sit down, totally befuddled. And we go to leave and we're gonna ask about, by the way, I'm [WHISPERS] Marvin.

[chuckle]

And from across the way, she goes, That was my name when I entered the *hula*, and now it's your name.

What an honor.

It's an honor, and it's part of her method. 'Cause then we all get in the car, and my *kumu* now is left to explain all that. So I'm thinking, It can't be my name, I was born Marvin.

[chuckle]

And so Mili explained that that's a really heavy thing, to gift a name, and to gift her own name. And so from now on, that's it. So in *halau* is where it started. I was always referred to Puakea. But it signifies, fair child, in effect. So I was the pale one in our line. That works. She never really explained why that name, or why she gave me her name. She just said, I expect you to do good things.

The fair child born as Marvin Nogelmeier spent his early years moving with his family throughout California and Nebraska, finally settling in Minnesota when he was seven. One year after high school and during a particularly vicious winter, he was persuaded by friends to quit his job at the post office and head off on an adventure to Japan with a brief stop in Honolulu.

Lost my wallet in the San Diego airport. So we had driven cross country, gone to San Diego. We had an airline ticket to as far as Honolulu. I would pick up passport here. I didn't even have a license, I didn't have my birth certificate, no money, really. I had my plane ticket. So I came to Honolulu. Had to call and say, okay big adventurer, already blew it, lost my wallet.

M-hm.

Mom—

Send money.

Yeah. Mom, get me a birth certificate. My money came first, birth certificate took probably a month. By the time the birth certificate came, it just seemed there was no rush to get to Japan. So put that off, and put that off.

Why did you decide to stay? What happened in that month?

Oh; from the airport, we ended up going out. We stayed at Makua Beach.

How did you—

It's 1970—

—find you way to Makua Beach from the airport?

The two kids I'm traveling with actually knew people here. There was a Minnesota house at Makua Beach.

Oh.

Mostly, this is a leftover—a lot of that was Vietnam War folks; guys who had come back. They weren't ready to go back to the states. And a whole bunch of folks ended up out there. So we end up in this handmade little, *nadas* in Makua Beach. I lived there for three months. Maybe the nicest three months of my life. Really. Just blissful ignorance. I didn't read a newspaper, I didn't think about anything. Just wandered along, enjoyed water, enjoyed sand. And I guess they would have thought of this as homeless, although it's really the most organized homeless that I'd ever seen. There were full houses, fully equipped.

And this is right on the edge of the beach?

Right on the edge of the sand.

Ah.

Up against the *keawe* trees and the *haole koa*.

Right.

And I mean, it was really a remarkable place. There were probably fifty people. The Minnesota Hooch had two bedrooms. Two like formal [INDISTINCT] and a bunk bed.

Wow.

I mean, made out of plywood, made out of leftovers that were found all over the place. Kept very tidy, actually. Full kitchen setup, dishes, everything. It's not exactly the way the homeless are running today.

[chuckle]

It did fall into decline, and by the late 70s, they were doing cleanups. It had gotten pretty ... just a lot of rubbish, but it was actually tidy, nice place to be. The beach was pristine. Chilled there for three months. I actually got an infection on my foot, and had to go to the hospital. They would not let me out of the hospital if I didn't have a residence. So I ended up moving in to Makaha; moved in with friends in Makaha.

Puakea Nogelmeier confesses that his first means of support in Hawaii was living off his unemployment checks. Then he linked up with a community of artists in Waianae and became a goldsmith.

Oh; that was my career. That was something I could do for the rest of my life. And I've not done it now for thirty years. But who would have thought. And one of my co-crafts persons was Mililani Allen, who became my *kumu hula*. She did beautiful silk batik, with Hawaiian motifs and just beautiful things. But one day, she was talking about, Well, I'm teaching *hula*. We didn't know she taught *hula*. And I want to open a men's class, but guys are so gun shy, they won't take it. And so we pretty much said, Well, you should open your class. We'll take your class. And she said, Would you? Okay. So now we're all committed, so her class of men started up with all these a motley crew of crafts people. They were not dancers.

What was the name of the *halau*?

Halau Hula O Mililani. [chuckle] Which—

M-hm.

—that was her name. She had been teaching maybe two years. She had graduated from Maiki Aiu Lake. She'd been teaching women, this very formal halau structure. Classes run for an hour once a week, et cetera, et cetera. So she opens the men's class. Now, I gotta say, we were all dummies.

M-m.

We didn't know anything. I didn't know any Hawaiian history. I didn't know Hawaii had a kingdom, or kings. I didn't even know they had a language. I came as an empty calabash. I'd been here for a while, but I learned Waianae stuff, not necessarily Hawaii stuff. So we step into class and it's just a doorway to a whole new world I didn't know was there. So while all the girls' classes were an hour a week, the guys' classes we'd start at six, we'd go 'til midnight. 'Cause we were so intrigued, and we were so empty. [chuckle] And so engaged. The *halau* became a social center—

M-hm.

—for us.

You were doing more than—dance, you were doing language?

Well, we were doing dance. And with dance, in the Maiki school of dance, you have to do research, and you have to—

I see.

—attempt translation, and you have to write notes for all your dances. You have to keep notebooks, there's quizzes. It's like an academy of dance, right? So we did that. So I started to learn language just sort of randomly. Then we started to learn chant. There was project in 1 75, 76 maybe, called The Mele Project. Keahi Allen, it was the board she was on. They felt that chanting was gonna go away, 'cause the only ones who knew it were elders, and nobody was teaching it and it wasn't seen. So they set up to have Edith Kanakaole and Edith McKinzie teach chanting to young people. To people that are involved in *halau*. I end up in a class. That's fascinating stuff, the chants. They come from everywhere. Some of them are really ancient, some of them are more recent. That's what led me into language. And there's actually an epiphany that happens, 'cause I have a good short-term memory, so I could look at a chant and memorize it. And under pressure, I could keep that for a while. So we could memorize these things. And I'd have to memorize the Hawaiian, and then memorize the English to make sense out of it. And the payback for these classes was, we had to do presentations. You had to go out to schools and what not, make it living practice kinda thing. So we did a presentation, and it might have been at McKinley, I don't remember. This old gentleman walks up to me and talks to me in Hawaiian. And I was stunned. I said, Oh, sorry, Uncle, I don't speak Hawaiian. And he looked a little crestfallen, and he said, Well, but how can you understand what you're chanting? I said, Well, I memorized the English. And it sounded dumb. It still sounds a little dumb.

[chuckle]

But he says, But how can you tell how well you did?

How can you tell how well you did.

Yeah.

Who was this man?

Well I didn't know who he was. He walks away. And I thought, You're right. And then I thought—right there, I just thought, You're right. Why would I engage if I'm not trying to learn what this is about. So then I started to try and learn Hawaiian language. Now, it's probably ten years later that I realize who that old man is. He's Auntie Edith's husband, Luka. Yeah, tall, handsome man. And you know, I was so blown and intimidated, I never even asked, Who you?

M-hm.

So we started, we went back to Auntie Edith McKinzie, who was running our class with Auntie Edith Kanakaole would come teach us, but Auntie Edith was the main one. We want to learn some language. Well, she was a student herself, really. She wasn't a native speaker. Her mother spoke it, and her grandmother, so she had a good handle, but she'd gone to classes. And she says, Well, I'll teach you what I know. So we started with a class on her back porch.

That back-porch class would lead him to another home-style learning experience, with an elderly man, born in 1891, a cultural expert and noted photographer who'd taken pictures at the funeral of Queen Liliuokalani. His name was Theodore Kelsey. Young Puakea was introduced by Mr. Kelsey's caretaker, the writer/historian June Gutmanis.

She researched Hawaiian stuff, and she had written a number of books. *Na Pule Kahiko, Kahuna Laau Lapaau*; she would assemble Hawaiian language material. And she could do that 'cause she had this old gentleman living with her; he was eighty-eight, I think, when I met him. And he was fluent in Hawaiian. And he would help translate. He would translate all her things, and then she would make sense out of it. So when I met him, and I asked him, Would you be able to teach Hawaiian? He said, No. [chuckle] He said, I'm not a teacher. He says, There's some books on that.

M-m.

But with what Auntie Edith was doing. See, I'm a highly motivated [chuckle] character. If I want something, I'll usually figure out a way to—

M-hm.

—try and make that happen. So I would take what Auntie Edith was teaching us, which was pretty simple Hawaiian, and I would talk to him when I went up to visit, and he'd talk back in Hawaiian. He wouldn't teach me Hawaiian, but he'd engage. So my Hawaiian was atrocious.

So you must have gotten to some dead ends in the conversation.

Oh, dead ends; lot of dead ends, or misunderstandings. 'Cause I would say, of course, what I thought ... meant A, and he would understand it very clearly for what I'd really said, which was B. So he'd respond to B, and I'm still in A—

Was he able to correct you? Did he do that?

It started off so slow, I took to going up three days a week. I would be there and he welcomed that, and June welcomed that. It was sort of an interesting triangle there. June would give him things to translate. He was a gentleman; he was born in 1891, so he had a whole different set of ethics. He would not translate anything for her that was sexual or inappropriate for a lady.

Oh.

She'd always tell him, I'm no lady.

[chuckle]

But he'd just say, Oh, I can't understand this. So she would give me things that he had sent back to her saying, I can't interpret this, and he'd interpret it for me.

Oh, I see. Oh, you—

So this became—

You were the guy.

Yeah, so this became an interesting little triangle. So in the course of this, he would correct me the next visit. Way too gentle. So let's say that instead of saying *wai-a-nae*, I say *wai-nae*. So the next visit we'll be in the middle of something, and he would go, Oh, and *I ku manao, o Waianae ka pololei*. Oh, by the way, I think that *Waianae* is probably correct. Correct for what? And it took a while for me to recognize that he's actually dealing with something that I misunderstood, mis-said, mis-translated and something-something from the last—

And that's his way—

—visit.

—of being gentle and polite, and old school.

In the course of a few years, and it took a few years, he would correct me as I said it.

Oh, okay.

Whew. [chuckle] Big, what do you call, progress. So then it became more workable. The other thing is, he was going deaf rapidly in English, and not in Hawaiian.

How does that happen?

June was insistent. It's just 'cause he likes Hawaiian. It has nothing do with it. Actually, we run into a lot of elders who can hear in Hawaiian, and cannot hear in English. The structure of the language is different enough. Hawaiian is very projectile in its way. Every word ends in a vowel. So every word exits.

M-m.

And a lot of English words don't.

You swallow the syllable.

And the end word is a consonant. Like a word like consonant. [CHOKING SOUND] You know, it all goes in. So just too much of it is unheard. In Hawaiian, every single word ends in a vowel. Every syllable ends in a vowel. So it's actually a lot more hearable. Also, this, the low resonant voice goes in, in a way that upper range wouldn't go. And even in Hawaiian, he could only hear a male voice. And June would get real frustrated, 'cause he just was so deaf to

her tone. So she'd come to the table and say, Do you want more eggs? At first, he wouldn't hear anything. And then finally, she'd tap and he'd have to look and she'd end up shouting. YOU WANT EGGS? YOU WANT EGGS? And he says, My leg? What?

[chuckle]

What? What you want? And then if I just turned and said, *I hua moa ho nau?* Oh, no, no, no, I'm fine, he'd answer.

M-hm.

And it'd be so frustrating for her. But that's the level and the language.

Sounds like you're making progress, then. You're learning Hawaiian.

Oh, by then, we were rolling. We were rolling. Once it started, I mean, I was so fascinated.

And were you learning more than basic words? Did he actually explain nuances, or were you able to tell nuances from how he spoke to you?

It's so funny, he's born ... I don't know, what, seventy years before? He was born in 1891. So we weren't gonna exist in the same worlds. He's the oldest living human I'd ever met. [chuckle] So what do you talk about? Actually, we kind of just jumped off the cliff and went into deep water. Later on, I had to learn stuff that made sense. We would go mostly into things that June was trying to get translated, were either chants or articles that were really kinda dense articles about opinion pieces in the newspapers. So we're working on language that's way over my head. And he'd walk through and go, Well, this is this, and this is why, and this is ..., but doing grammar, doing phrasing, and why this would be said here, and what this place name really means, so if it shows up in this chant it's ... Well, this is stuff my little fragile head really wasn't ready to get a hold of yet. So we're playing there. That's where I went to university. So I'd go in to UH. I'm gonna be an academic, and I launched in taking Hawaiian language as fast as I could. Thank goodness, Noe Losch, who you might know—

M-hm.

—was my teacher. And she knew what I was doing already, so she let me take 101 and 201 at the same time. And I may miss two days a week, because I went to see Mr. Kelsey on Tuesdays and Thursdays. So she let that go. And so I showed up three days a week, and did class. And that made sense out of the pieces. 'Cause I could always bring something—

M-hm.

—interesting back, and on Monday, she'd go, Well, if you see Mr. Kelsey tomorrow, ask him about this.

It's—

You know.

—experiential learning, so that—

[COUGH]

—that fits.

It made it so usable. 'Cause I wasn't in school. I didn't even necessarily want a degree. I was in school 'cause they had the toys. And I wanted that.

You were continuing to do your ...

Yes.

Your metal work, your craft work?

Yeah, yeah.

Jewelry.

Actually, I start to step away from that about the time I launch into school. I'm doing it part-time now, I'm doing it special, for a special event or something.

And then we step away from it. That's about the time I step away.

That's when you decided, this is where I'm turning my body?

Well, and I make money different there; I'm a student aide at school, or I got paid for where I lived. I was a caretaker for a house.

Oh.

On the beach in Waianae. So they paid me to live in this house. To go to the beach. [chuckle] It was a nice life. So that pretty much covered expenses, and then school paid for itself. I got scholarships for school, just enough to cover tuition. Tuition at Leeward Community College wasn't real intimidating yet; it was forty dollars a—

[chuckle]

—semester.

Is that right? Forty dollars?

I think that was it, for fulltime.

Had you learned any languages before this?

I learned Spanish badly when I was in high school.

And did you have an ear for language? You must have.

People say that I do, and I think, Then why did I have to work so hard at it?

At what? At Hawaiian as well?

At learning, at any language. Yeah, I'd have to like go over vocab lists and talk to myself, and if I really had an ear for it, I would think you'd just kinda fall in. But I think maybe I have a little ear, but not a whole lot of ear.

And you're willing to work at it.

That's a big piece. I'm willing to work. And I will. Because I used to ride the bus back and forth to Waianae, and I'd be mumble—muttering to myself the whole way, 'cause I'm using a new pattern that we just covered in class, or just, you know, oh, that lady is doing this, that guy is doing this, or they are doing this.

God, just run the pattern through in my head to kinda familiarize it, normalize it. So I think if I was wiz, it would have happened, like you wake up and you're just good at it.

H-m.

[chuckle] I don't know.

Do you think Hawaiian is different from other languages to learn? Some people say, Oh, it's a simple language, it only has, what, is it twelve letters or thirteen?

Thirteen, with the okina.

But of course, it's a very dense and rich language. But I'm not sure, since I don't speak it fluently, how and why. If it ...

I think it's—

There's a lot of—

—it's different.

There's a lot of layers of meaning, and how does that work?

Yeah, I say to people that Hawaiian is an easy language to learn. But it's a really difficult language to learn well.

M-m.

But there's an entry level to language, but I think it's easier.

Because it's a logical language, right? Unlike English, which is not terribly logical.

It follows its rules much better [chuckle] than English does. And it doesn't conjugate verbs, and it uh—I mean, so there's a lot of ... just the structural part of the language makes it easier to access.

M-hm.

But then you get into multiple meanings, and you get into, you know, just juxtaposition that allows things to happen in language that I don't think is nearly as common in English, it certainly wasn't in Spanish. Um, Spanish to me was more mechanical.

How do you understand the multiple meanings if you're away from the context in which the language was formed?

Some of them, I think, are probably beyond full grasp, without some of those original contexts. So you can read texts that were written in a time and with reference to things that are just impossible to get your head around today. So you might be able to get some inkling, but you're not gonna get the details of it. When we translated the *Hiiaka* from Hawaiian into English. Now, that's five hundred pages of text, and it goes everywhere. The narrator and the author are both having fun. Basically the same guy, but it's officially, the narrator is having fun in the telling of the story, 'cause he injects himself all the time. But the author, then, all the way through the story, is doing little plays [INDISTINCT] words and just—you know, this. Saho Fukushima, who was the collaborator on this, he and Kamaoli Kuwada, he turned at one point when we were done, I think. And he says, How much of this do you think we really got? Now, we had translated it, we had edited that translation, we'd been on it for a year and a half on this one text.

And you've pointed out different things in your text about how, you know, this is what some people say, but this is what you think, and you really did a lot of interpretive work on that. And you explain to the reader.

Well, we really tried to minimize that in the book itself. But a whole lot of that happened in the processing.

Uh-huh.

While we were doing this, there was so much dialog. Now, look at this, look at how this is working. And so he says, How much of this do you really think we got? And we sat there, and we were trying to imagine. I said, If we're really lucky, sixty percent maybe.

Wow.

What do you think?

And—

That there might be that much more of the humor and the sarcasm, and maybe cynicism in other pieces that they're there, and we might have caught some flavor. We know some things there.

Yeah. And it had so many human emotions and values in there.

Oh, yeah, yeah.

Epic.

Yeah. And a great challenge. But you're right; there's some of it that I think is simply sort of beyond grasp in some ways. You keep trying, keep reaching. I'm a better student today than I was.

Because?

I'm older and I'm more entertained. [chuckle] I think I get more out of the interaction. How's that?

If Puakea Nogelmeier's voice sounds familiar to you, perhaps you've heard it, taking The Bus on Oahu. It's his voice announcing the street names at all of the stops. In 2009, Puakea is busy working with collaborators on a groundbreaking online Hawaiian-language project to make accessible 19th and 20th century newspaper articles. These represent an archive of largely untapped resources rich in cultural knowledge and history. The online project is called *Ho'olaupa'i*, which means to generate abundance and can be found at nupepa.org. Among other projects he's worked on, a 500-page text that represents the first English translation of the epic tale of *Hi'iakaikapoliopele*. And Puakea Nogelmeier continues to share the Hawaiian language, teaching others as he was taught long ago as a young *malihini*. Until next time...for Long Story Short on PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. *A Hui Hou Kakou*.

Video clip with production credits:

Mr. Kelsey had become kind of a pivotal part of my life. He was like a window on another world. He was an adult photographer at the funeral of Lili'uokalani. It was actually the funeral of Liliu that made him think, The things I love most are going away. He made a promise to spend the rest of his life documenting.

M-m.

Well, he didn't know he'd do it for the next seventy years. He lived to be ninety-six.

Did you see his documentations, his journals?

His material at the archives is like seven, eight feet of paper. So he really did spend the rest of his life writing things down.

So he became widely recognized for his—

He didn't publish hardly anything. He was actually part of a group that was outside of the Bishop Museum, but documenting Hawaiian culture.