

GUEST: KEALOHA
LSS 321 (LENGTH: 26:46)
FIRST AIR DATE: 4/27/10

As you sit here, it—

[CHUCKLE]

—it seems like you have trouble sitting here.

[CHUCKLE]

Do you?

I have total trouble sitting and being still; yes. I'm always moving and shaking, or whatever.

Today we're talking with a nuclear engineer, a business consultant, and a slam poet. What do these three people have to do with each other? They're all one person...a young man who has collected his life experiences, and is turning them into positive messages.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in High Definition.

***Aloha mai kakou*, I'm Leslie Wilcox. In this edition of Long Story Short, we'll meet the young man who's been called the slam poet laureate of Hawaii. His early years have a comfortable familiarity to them...growing up in a small neighborhood, surrounded by family and friends, playing outdoors until the sun went down. He didn't know it at the time, but his destiny was to travel far away, in order to come home. He was born Steven Kealohapau'ole Hong Ming Wong, but now he is simply, Kealoha.**

[DRUMS] Connect to your roots. The rhythms of our ancestors smiling down on us each time we chant their chants, each time we dance their dances, each time we surf the waves that they did. Connect; we are the next generation carrying the flag to the United Nations, stating truce or peace, love, unity, and respect. The products of global consciousness mixed with cultural pride, we are raised to take our place in the history of the islands. We are raised that we will make love on shining sands, ride waves and play with times long past. Connect to your roots. The rhythms of our ancestors smiling down on us each time we chant their chants, each time we dance their dances, each time we surf the waves that they did. Connect.

Growing up with my parents was...I mean, it was just so genuine, you know. We grew up and a lot of stories were told, and just listening. A lot of just listening and playing, and just exploring our own little things that we did, whether it was me and my brother just playing games and making up games. We grew up spitting on the wall, and dancing, and singing about it [CHUCKLE] like seriously, honestly. We had a game called Juju on the Wall. [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE]

Me and my brother, or whether it was like, getting pieces of tape and winding them together, and throwing them, and hitting them, or whatever. We made up games. And then my parents were very involved in our extracurricular activities, so whether it was driving us to the soccer games, and then like, spending that time afterwards, where my dad would kind of critique my game, or whatever it is, and we would talk then and have those moments of interactions. Or else, with my mom, just kinda cruising with her, like, going on errands. You just had those moments where we're always—they were always involved in our lives, to the point where, like, sometimes it was just like, Mom, Dad, why you gotta be everywhere that I am?

[CHUCKLE]

It was all love. And that was the thing. We came to realize that later, that they just wanted to be a part of our lives. That was much—that was like, the best thing that they could have done for us, is just to be involved.

And you have two brothers?

Two brothers; two older brothers.

Did you all get along? Were you close in age?

We—I'm not. Those two are. The oldest one is seven years older than I am, and the next one is five years older than I am. My oldest bro, he was more distant from me. The middle one was more of the peace keeper, so I was kind of like the little kid trying to come up, and just like, do my thing, but all in all, I mean, when you look at it in the grand scheme of things, we're close now.

You didn't maim each other.

Yeah. We—[CHUCKLE] clearly. No limbs were lost, so we made it out of that.

So like many kids in the area, you started off going to elementary school at Koko Head.

M-hm; Koko Head Elementary. So public school, which was really cool. 'Cause it was all about the after school experience as well. I mean, like you're interfacing with kids in your neighborhood, so you're riding bikes, and just going to people's houses, and it was very safe. It was like you're in your neighborhood, you're safe. And then eventually, I ended up going to private school.

What was that like?

The transition?

M-hm.

It was a shock. I mean, all of a sudden I wasn't doing so well, in terms of my grades and all that kinda thing. It was just kinda like, here's all these other kids who are working really hard, and I had to learn how to work hard, and work

ethic. And my father, he was very...he didn't care about the grades; he cared about the extra little things on the side that the teachers write, that tell you about, like, how the effort was, and how engaged the student was. And I was getting bad marks in that. And my dad was like, that's what matters, what kind of effort are you putting into it? I don't care about the grades; put the effort in.

Did you work hard?

Yeah, absolutely.

Did you have to work hard?

I busted my butt throughout high school and throughout college. I had to in order to just learn the stuff.

Did your classmates have any idea of how hard you worked?

They didn't. Actually, I actually hid—I was good at hiding the amount of effort that I was putting in. 'Cause no one wants to be the nerd, right? I mean especially for me. I mean, I was so involved in sports, and all those things...the sports, and dancing, and playing music that I was able to hide the studying, the books and all that late night stuff.

So you'd do sports, you'd do music, and then you'd go home, and you'd hit the books?

Yeah; totally. I mean, I was in the car on the way to and from school and/or the soccer practices, or the basketball practices, whatever, studying. And then I would have this weird thing that I would do, is that if I had a test or something or a major homework assignment, I would do it until I fell asleep. The light would be on and then the next morning the homework assignment would be done, or whatever I was studying would be in my head. I would just wake up with it, with it there. I don't know what happened during the whole sleeping process.

You let it set overnight.

Yeah, like, it was just marinating, or I would—I probably was waking up in the middle of the night, and then studying, and then going back to sleep. And I had these cycles that would happen.

What about rebellion? What about, I don't think I want to do it your way, Mom and Dad?

[CHUCKLE] That happens to everybody, and that happened for me roughly around like eighth grade, ninth grade. It lasted for about a year and then I got through it once I realized—

What was your way of acting up? How did you let them know?

Just those little things that teenagers do, by making sly remarks, or ignoring them, or whatever. But the quicker—the way that I see it now is that the quicker you can get through that, the better it is. I mean, 'cause really, it's all about the love, and returning to those good values. I mean, we have so little time with our family and with our parents, I mean, in the grand scheme of things. I lost my father a couple years ago, and I'm just glad that we got through that stupid stuff quickly, so we could get to the good stuff, which was the love and the sharing, and just the exchange that should be happening between family members.

You went to school with quite a few wealthy children. What was it—

Sure.

—like? Were you feeling like, my parents are on a budget, I really gotta work here, and value what my parents are doing for me?

I mean, it was easy to stay grounded. I was never really concerned about looking at other people and seeing what they had. I was just really happy just being me. Of course, I had coaching along the way in terms of, like to stay grounded in that sense, and not worry about other people. Whether it was my parents or their friends, and I had a whole community kinda backing me up in terms of raising me, and raising me right, and not being concerned about judging other people and having them judge me.

You were admitted to MIT.

I was admitted to MIT, which was huge.

And you pursued your studies in science and math.

M-hm, m-hm. For me, it was...I mean, it was a full blast of information. And it was just like, you go there, and you get thrown all these thoughts and theories, and you just get fully immersed in this world of technology and science, and just theory.

Well, first of all, there was another culture adjustment you made.

Oh, yeah; East Coast.

East Coast; yeah.

Oh, man, local boy going to the East Coast, saw snow for the first time when I was there. I didn't do the whole college touring thing that a lot of kids do. I just said, This is where I want to go, and whatever. I mean, like, it's gonna be rough. I assumed it was gonna be, and—

And it was?

—it was, major, major culture shock. I spent the first year...I got really depressed, actually. 'Cause, I mean, you end up in a place where it's snowing, it's really cold, you can't go outside, there's not a whole lot of sunlight. So you get done with classes, and it's dark. And so I went through, seasonal affects disorder. Right?

M-hm.

It was—

Sure.

—just like—

And did you feel like you were up to the competition of the other kids, who were hand selected from all over the country?

[CHUCKLE] Sure. I busted my butt. I don't think I slept a whole lot during college.

So you were depressed and tired. [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE] Yeah. Well, they have this saying over there, right? It's—what is it? It's, sleep, grades, and friends; choose two out of the three.

Oh.

So—

That's rough.

—I chose friends and social life, and academics. And so I had to [CHUCKLE] sacrifice the sleep. I figured, I'll sleep when I'm older. [CHUCKLE]

But you made good friends at MIT?"

Yeah, sure. I mean, it's all about—and that's half of the experience for me. It was like, those late night cramming sessions where you're supposed to be studying, but really, you're talking about philosophy, or exploring thoughts that are new. And that's what it was all about. I got hooked deeply into just having good conversation, and philosophy, and thinking. I seek out those types of people. I mean, 'cause sure, you can be good at one thing, and that's cool and maybe I'll come to you and really engage with that one thing. But in essence, I'm looking for people who can interface on all different kinds of levels. And we can grow together, and spiral, and build off of each other's thoughts. I'm really not into debate, as much as I am into just elevation, and building on thoughts. Debate is all about tearing down the other person, right? That's not for me.

So what you were most interested in when you went to MIT, actually maybe symbolic, nuclear fusion.

[CHUCKLE] Exactly. Nuclear fusion; the combination of particles to create immense amounts of energy. I mean, to me, it's the Holy Grail, right, and to a lot of people, it's the Holy Grail. It was to me. I mean I still hope it's gonna happen sometime soon.

And so is that what you studied? What was your degree in?

My degree was nuclear engineering. Which is sort of a fancy way of saying just like nuclear physics, applied nuclear physics. What can you do with nuclear physics?

Well, what—

[CHUCKLE] What can you do?

What were you planning to do with it? [CHUCKLE]

I wanted to create fusion energy. The next Holy Grail, and just be a part of that movement. But I definitely found out during my college that that's not necessarily—it's kind of a fantasy world. I mean, the politics that goes on is not in place to support a technology like fusion energy. I mean, 'cause you think about it, right? A politician needs to get reelected in four to six years. Investing in a technology that's gonna come fifty years from now; not a whole lot of politicians want to devote that kind of money to it. And most of this country is concerned about the everyday things, like jobs, which is great; people need to work and people need to eat. But if we're looking at the long-term survival of our society, we need to start thinking big. And fusion energy is a really big idea that needs a lot of money in order to develop.

I can picture this island boy at MIT studying nuclear fusion. Even when you sit with Kealoha it's as if he himself is a source of energy...he really does have a tough time sitting in one place. And when you first meet him, he leaps out of his

chair to shake your hand. It's not just physical. His mind seems to always be on the move, searching for something new, fresh, and challenging.

Okay; so you graduated with your degree in nuclear engineering.

M-hm.

And then, what?

[CHUCKLE] And then I thought, I need a break. It was really cool to be an engineer for a while, but I realized that I didn't want to be in a laboratory all day. For me, I needed to be outside, interfacing with people, and just have that interaction stuff going on. So I went into business consulting. I made a full one-eighty switch.

In a warmer place, by any chance?

In a warmer place. I was like, get me out of the East Coast. I went to California. So I ended up in San Francisco, which is actually kinda cold in itself, but a lot more temperate than the East Coast. And for me, it was like a really great stomping grounds, 'cause there's a lot of artists in there, and it's a very progressive city.

But your role was business consulting.

It's true; my role was business consultant.

And so how did that work out?

[CHUCKLE]

Because you didn't go to school for that.

I didn't. So the idea was that you're going through MIT, and there's a lot of recruiting going on. And so these business companies would come; they knew that none of us had any business experience, they just cared that we could solve problems and think.

Oh.

So they would come in, and they would ask us sort of brain teasers.

M-hm.

To have us think on the spot. They would ask, How many telephone booths are in New York City? And so we'd have to sit there and show them our process of thinking, of how many telephone booths are in New York City. And just kinda like show them the way that we logically deduced things.

M-hm.

Because that's what happens in business, you get presented with a problem, and you have to break it down, and solve the problem. So that's all it was. They knew that they could teach us business.

So it was a natural adjustment, it was a natural move.

Sure. But it took a lot of extra studying, because you're going into this environment where there were a lot of business people who had studied and got their MBAs and all that kind of a thing. So I had to learn the basics of business in order to sort of keep up with that.

Did you enjoy it?

Yeah, I loved it. It was fun. I mean, it was a love-hate relationship. It really freaked my brain out and sort of got me into another level of thinking.

M-hm.

But at the same time, what I realized was I was working for these companies that really weren't doing a whole lot of good in the world. I mean, it was these large corporations, and helping large corporations get richer. That's really what it was. So I thought to myself, Well, how can I devote my time—if I'm gonna devote hours, and hours, and hours of my time, I want it to be towards something that's doing societal good.

M-hm.

So I had to get out of there. I spent two years in consulting, and it really taught me a lot of the way that the world works, and the way that business works, and marketing, and saving money, and all that kind of a thing.

M-hm.

So I was able to take those skills and start my own thing in Hawaii.

Because that seemed like a natural thing to do; go to where you're from.

[CHUCKLE]

After going East Coast, West Coast.

Yeah. [CHUCKLE]

Science, business.

Yeah; come home, return to the source. It had always been my goal. Ever since I left I was like, Okay, I'm gonna have these experiences, but I want to come home. Home is—this is—I mean, come on; Hawaii is the greatest place on Earth, as far as I'm concerned.

But had you intended on coming home to look, to continue to look for—

[CHUCKLE]

—nuclear fusion? Or how did you imagine yourself coming home?

I wasn't exactly sure what was gonna happen to get me home. I never really knew what the path was gonna be. Even when I did come home, I didn't know how long I was gonna be able to be here for.

M-hm.

I just knew I needed to be home, and that it would work itself out somehow. So I came home. I had saved up enough money to sort of take some time off and just really just figure out, Okay, well, what am I about?

M-hm.

I talk all these big things about how I want to do good for society. But what is that? What are you gonna do? So I just spent the year thinking, hiking, surfing, just getting back to, like, who I was when I was growing up.

A whole year?

Yeah. I saved up—well, here's the thing. Right? I was sleeping on my brother's couch, my parents' living room, in my car sometimes. I was just kinda like a nomad, and I just pared down all my expenses to be able to just survive as long as I could without having to worry about making money.

M-hm.

I mean, consulting paid well.

M-hm.

That's kind of the reason why a lot of kids go into that, is just 'cause it pays really well. So I was able to save that money and invest in my thinking and in my life, which was a really good investment, because I found my calling, which was to write poetry and perform it.

How did you find that?

[SIGH] Well [CHUCKLE] the first time I saw slam poetry was when I was in San Francisco. I just happened to—I was reading the newspaper, trying to look for something to do during the weekend, and I saw this slam poetry thing. I was like, Okay, let's go check it out.

M-hm.

And when I went there, my brain just got...you have those moments where you're watching a performance, you're watching something, and your whole body just starts tingling, because you're really just engaged in everything that's being said. And like, I just got in my mind [CLAPS], blown.

M-m.

Uh, and I was hooked from that point on, and I just started writing a lot right then and there. So that was like, what, uh, the year 2000. Still in San Francisco, kind of all my work just sort of got pushed to the side, 'cause I would spend all my time writing. I was spending all those late nights, on Sunday night going to these poetry slams. And Monday morning, going to work all tired. And I didn't care; I was living again. I had something that really inspired me. So when I came home, I was doing all that hiking and surfing, and just thinking, but my way of processing all of that was through writing.

M-hm.

So I would find myself hiking up to the top of the Koolaus, and I got the journal and the pen, and I'd get to the top, and I'd just write a poem. These things were happening. So then I'd come back from the mountain and go to the—whatever—the coffee shop, and there's a open mic going on, and I'd read that poem.

What are most of your poems about? Or are they very, very different?

I try and keep myself open to whatever comes in. But I mean, I guess if you had to pare it down to something that's always there, there's always some level of positive messaging in there. Like how can we shift our thinking or our lives to get to a better place.

M-hm. Well, you seem like a positive person.

[CHUCKLE]

There's that slam poetry poem you wrote, Recess. And it's all—

Yeah.

—about—

Yeah, yeah.

—the mad joy of recess.

Yeah; absolutely. I mean, I wrote that piece. I used to do acting for kids, so I would go into these schools and the cafeterias and like, we'd do crazy songs and act.

M-hm.

And just one day, after doing that, I was just so inspired by the kids' laughter and I was driving up the Pali, and I was like, Oh, yeah, remember the days when we used to play in the playground every—you know, like, the poem just started coming. So I just pulled off to the side of the road, turned on my hazards, and just wrote the poem right then and there on the Pali Highway, cars are whizzing by at thirty-five miles per hour, whatever it was. And people are thinking, What is this kid doing, right? That's about, hmm, four hours.

Do you remember the days when we used to play on the playground every day? [SCREAMS] And what was that thing we took? Recess! Yeah, that's right; recess. Fifteen minutes of sheer madness. Fifteen minutes of running around, getting down with all of your friends until the bell sounded. That inevitable bell that wrought the well of time dry. And I remember those days so vividly. Licking Jell-O Instant Pudding off our hands, making forms out of sand, and doing everything you can to just play. When's the last time you took fifteen minutes out of your day to just run around and play? I mean, we used to do this every day. It was a staple of our existence in those days, are now distant. But if you close your eyes, you can remember those fifteen minutes that now seem trivial. But when you're a kid, fifteen minutes is ephemeral everlasting. It was a fleeting moment, but it was so dang real.

The best subjects are the ones that when you're writing them, move you in some way, shape, or form. Either you laugh out loud, or you cry, or you feel yourself just compelled to some kind of emotional whatever, response. And then when you communicate that to an audience, you're aiming to get that same emotional response from them. As a performance artist, you're searching for those audiences that get you, or that get the type of work that you're doing.

M-hm.

So what I've tried to do is, in Hawaii, I've tried to create an audience that treasures, or that values the messaging.

Well, you said this type of poetry, or any type of poetry, perhaps, can make your life better. How has hearing all of these wonderful poems, and maybe not so wonderful ones too—

Sure; sure, sure.

—changed your life?

Whenever you go to one of these events, something is gonna connect with you, hopefully.

M-hm.

And then you go home, and you think about it. And you write about it, and then it just makes your life better.

You can't fool the youth
Cause we know the truth
Said your fact is fiction
And addiction is the only thing you're selling
And we're not buying
The rebellious-glamorous-pimped up-hyped up-gullible-transparent-everybody's
doing it-inflated-played out-image you've created
You see we've done our research and found that out of *all* the teens in Hawai'i
Only fifteen percent are smokers
That's:
Fifteen percent of us think that cigarettes have a physical effect that's worth
risking lung cancer
Fifteen percent of us are inconsiderate to our neighbors
Fifteen percent of us actually think that cigarettes make you look like the hot
model in the commercial who obviously doesn't smoke 'cause she knows
that if she did then ten years from now,
she'd be sporting yellow teeth, wrinkles, and whacked-out breath
And the other 85 percent of us?
We're the ones running courts, running squads, running circles
Dunking, jumping, riding decks
Scoring points, meeting cuties, looking hot as all heck
Caring about our bodies, getting A's, getting grades
Saving our lives, smelling like we're supposed to
Throwing spray, getting barreled
Living dreams, scaling mountains
Flying, thriving, diving, striving, hiking, riding, climbing
And we're tired of the smoke ad fads
Pushing fictional fact
And when they offer me a smoke
I laugh, then just give it right back
Said you can't fool the youth
Cause we know the truth
Yeah you can't fool the youth
Cause we know...

So lots of transitions in your life.

Lots and lots of—

Navigating cultures, and then moving between one poem and another, one song and another.

Yeah, absolutely. And I love it, I embrace it. Really, I feel like I'm just here to learn about everything that I possibly can. I'm a sponge, so I'm trying to soak up everything. If there's some weird thing going on, some event that I've never been to, I want to go. And I just want to be in the middle of it, and learn everything that I can about it.

I have a feeling you don't have a five-year or ten-year plan—

[CHUCKLE]

—it's a straight course, do you?

I don't think I have ever had a five or ten-year plan. I don't even know what I'm gonna do tomorrow. [CHUCKLE] That's the way that I live my life, though. I try and keep myself open to the possibilities. For me, it's comfortable. I'm comfortable not knowing what's gonna happen in the future.

After the unpredictable path that his life has already taken, who knows in which direction Kealoha will turn next. But with his positive messaging, his boundless energy, and his ability to lead and mentor people of all ages, we can't wait to see what he's going to do. For Long Story Short and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and *all* episodes of **Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox**, visit pbshawaii.org.

Video clip with production credits:

The first time that I saw a poet who completely resonated with me, and opened me up to...wow, like, that voice is mine. I felt like she was speaking for me; it was Lois Ann Yamanaka. She came to my high school, and she just read poems. And I went away from that session going, Wow, you can do that with words? Really?