LONGstorySHORT
with LESLIE WILCOX

PBS Hawaii

GUEST: MOMI CAZIMERO
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I think there was enough of a—what I call a competitive spirit about me that sometimes I wanted to do it, just because somebody said I couldn't. To some extent, I think I thrived on competition. And so if somebody said I couldn't, that was a reason to do it.

Meet Momi Cazimero, creative spirit, pioneering business leader, and living proof that you can turn great adversity into great success. Next, on Long Story Short.

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. May Momi Waihee Cazimero is of Hawaiian, Okinawan, and English ancestry. She spent her earliest years with her grandparents in Pepeekeo on the Big Island in a warm and loving household that included aunties, uncles, and cousins. After her dear grandfather died, life changed drastically. Momi was sent to live in her parents' home, ruled by her father, Matsutaru Jitchaku, a mechanic. Her mother Lucy was a seamstress, and there were four other children. Momi would spend this chapter of her childhood hearing she was worthless, and being harshly punished. Instead of letting this defeat her, she developed a competitive fire that propelled her to success in the corporate world.**

Being raised by grandparents … I'm not just talking about being spoiled, but somehow, you grow up with more of the relaxed part of their life, because they've already raised their children. But there are reinforcements in terms of values and support, and love, that is just so special about being a grandchild. The primary lessons I learned from my grandparents were all by example, which is why I think I remember those experiences more. For instance, if I would be struggling with something, and feeling like maybe I couldn't, he would say, If you like, you can. And that's the Pidgin version of, If you really want to, if you're committed to this, you can.
So, at nine, you went to live with your mother and father in Hilo?
Right. And that was when I had the experience of living fulltime with a family that already had a pattern to their life. And my father, being pure Okinawan,

my mother Hawaiian and English, it wasn't a very common—let me say, it wasn't a common union at that time. But my sister was raised in what I call a Japanese family tradition. By the time I moved there, I was nine; she was seven and a half. At seven and a half, she could cook. And I was not able to do any of the things that she could do.

And that's your father's side, saying—

Right.

—You're a girl, you should cook.

Right. And not only that, because my mother had children so close, by the time she had my youngest brother, my sister, who was, what, probably about five, she was already helping my mother with my youngest brother. So she was a little mommy by the time I moved in with them. I was raised as a grandchild who was waited on. I didn't have to do things. And it was awfully difficult for me to grow up in this—start life in a home with my family, where I was the one who was incompetent.

What about discipline in the house? Your grandparents were easygoing?

The incident I remember was when somebody cut the *ulu* tree. Now, cutting the *ulu* tree means cutting off a source of food. So I don't remember being punished or scolded for things. But that, he lined up everybody. And he went down the line, and he asked every single person who cut the *ulu* tree. And nobody would admit. So then, he took out the guava. Stripped it … Who's gonna tell me who cut that? And we each got it at—on our legs, you know, until somebody told the truth.

Who did it?

It was a cousin, my … a young man who did it. And but that was the only time I remember. There was another incident, where because I was a spoiled child and getting into mischief, I used to get a lot of whacks from my aunts. And he said, Nobody punishes this child. I feed her, I punish her. And so he really gave me a good spanking, and everybody watched it. And I was just stunned that he was punishing me that way. But that was his clear rules. You don't feed this child; I feed her, I punish her. So in other words, they could not use me as a means of venting their own feelings.

And he was fair in when he—

Yes.

—chose to discipline you.

Yes, yes. And in my father's home, I was the one who was punished, because I was the one who was oldest, and I should know better, and I should be responsible for the other children.

So even if somebody else did something wrong, it was your fault?

Right.

Did they do a lot wrong?

I think, I wouldn't say it was wrong, because they were children. But in my father's eyes, anything that was out of place … was a problem. All the

discipline was at my father's hand. My mother talked to us. She was not one to discipline any other way, than to talk.

Momi Cazimero left home at age eleven to get away from physical and verbal abuse. On a work scholarship, she attended Kamehameha School in Honolulu. There, her beloved auntie and Kamehameha schoolteacher, Esther Waihee McClellan, was an inspiration to her, and Momi decided she too would become a teacher. Momi lived in the school dorms during the academic year, and spent summers in her auntie's home. For the remainder of her years as a minor, Momi avoided returning to her father's household. Even before that, a teacher's encouragement had gone a long way with Momi.

I was in the fourth grade at Kapiolani Elementary. And the assignment was that we should select something that we thought was very unique and unusual. There was this upside-down hibiscus I used to see—by the way, we had to go to Japanese school too. So on the way to Japanese school, I walked past this home that had this beautiful hibiscus hedge. So I decided I would select that. So I drew it, and then I did some write-up on it, and I put a cover to it. I mean, this turned into a real elaborate project for me. I was only asked to describe this particular thing. And so when I took it to class, the teacher complimented two things. She said, You're a very good artist. That's the first time I heard I was a very good anything. She said, What I liked about what you did was that you didn't give me the minimum, you gave me something more than I asked. I never forgot that. She set something in place for me that became part of the way I worked. And I think it got me ahead through life. That you just don't do the minimum. It pointed me to a direction I thought at least I had an opportunity to be good at. And it's interesting, because then when I went to Kamehameha, I got selected to do art projects. So if something comes easy to you, chances are you're—you have the inclination to develop that. And the other thing is that, if your—others are recognizing, they help shape the direction you take. So from an external and internal perspective, you're going to find a better solution to your goal, meaning, something that you're going to be more capable of satisfying.

Did you set higher and higher goals for yourself?

Yes. This attachment I had to my grandfather; so when I was away from my family, and especially in boarding school, when things were just—I felt I couldn't cope with it, I would just sit on the edge of my bed, and just say, Okay, Grandpa, I'm waiting for you. Thinking, well, he doesn't want me to suffer. The next morning, I'd get up in bed, right, and he hadn't rescued me. And I'd rationalize; he didn't come, because it wasn't that bad. Okay? Follow that story. After it happens enough times … so I got to the point when I said to myself, Okay, no more of this fairytale. What you have to remember is that you overcame all of these things. And once I could do that, it was like weaning

myself away from being rescued by my grandfather. And I think that's when the first step comes in. You're capable of overcoming things on your own.
Did you fail at anything?
Oh, sure, I did. But then, I also rationalized that too.
[CHUCKLE]
It wasn't worth fighting for, right?

While attending the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Momi Cazimero changed her career objective from teaching to graphic design. She earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. Next, she aspired to start her own business, eventually founding Graphic House, the first woman-owned Hawaii design company.

My first job was with Stanley Stubenberg. He was referred to as a commercial artist, because there still was not graphic design. And the difference between commercial art and graphic design is that the commercial artist creates the piece of art that goes into an ad, as an example. So you either photograph something, or you illustrate something that depicts the subject matter. With graphic design, you're developing the entire piece. You're setting up the type, you're setting up how it's laid out, and you're selecting the artist, or the photographer. So you have complete supervision over the piece that you're working on. And because at the time, I was working with a small company, a single owner, I had to learn everything. My commitment was to go work for others, so that I could learn the business part of it, in order to one day have my own business. And I think, basically, I think I just wanted to be my own boss. When you're working for someone else, you don't control your own destiny, or how you're going to accomplish what it is you want to accomplish. And because I was determined to have my own business, I was gonna be a woman boss, which was not considered popular those days, I really wanted to create an environment that people wanted to work in. So I was focused on … certainly, wanting to be a graphic designer, a businessperson, and a good boss.
And what about being native Hawaiian in a business that didn't see very many native Hawaiians at that time?
It was not something—I was more focused on what it was I wanted to do. There were enough people telling me about why I couldn't do something, all throughout my life. But, for everything that somebody said I couldn't do, that I overcame, after a while, you don't listen to all of those in a serious way.
You were in the workforce at a time when there were a lot more stereotypes of women going on, and women weren't expected to say no. They were expected to go along. But that didn't fit you, did it?
No. No, it didn't. During the period that I was at the University, I was given an assignment. And that was to work on the yearbook. And that was really considered something special, if the professor selected you to do it. And I remember going to the particular print shop who was going to work on it at the time … and just being told some really awful things. Which I can't repeat. This

man called all the people who were there around this table … to tell them this, in my presence. And I just felt this is what I have to face in this profession. I'm not sure I'm that eager, because it was just so … it was humiliating, it was nasty, it was cheap, it was mean; it was everything. I left the print shop, and went back to the University and was talking with my professor. And he says to me, You get in my car right now. Now, this man was a very meek kind of person.

What's his name?

Kenneth Kingrey. He had a very gentle manner about him. And he drove me to that print shop, and he marched me into that print shop, and he told all of them, starting with the boss, about how disappointed he was in them. He told them that they were working with someone who was a student, who was focused on a particular career, and instead of putting themselves in an encouraging position, they were doing everything they could to discourage and demean the profession. And in fact, they didn't demean me, they demeaned themselves. And he finished his statement with saying to them, She will one day amount to more than you will ever be. I'll never forget that, because you do not judge a person for courage based on who you think they are, but by their actions. And that courageous stand—and in my behalf to be made to feel that I was worthy of his support and his praise, both. But he taught me something about character that day, I forever kept. And I never once ever afterwards took an insult from anyone. I was decisive; and by the way, I even, in my posture and the way I walked … made certain it described who I was. And what I wanted to be was a decisive person. 'Cause there's nothing worse than to work with somebody who doesn't know what they want.

Did working in a man's world affect the way you presented yourself as a woman?

Yes. I decided that I would make myself look the most unfeminine I could. So the hair got pulled back and I wore things that were simple and tailored. And so, believe it or not, pulling my hair back had to do with the fact that this is before techie days. So you literally leaned over the drawing table. So that was the outward appearance. But beyond that, it was always to stay right on topic, stay right on subject. I'm not gonna tell you there weren't instances when there was sexual harassment and all of that. But I just made sure they stayed on point, and on topic, and just avoided any way that they may interpret something otherwise. So there was this constant balancing. You don't want to overdo it, you don't want to under-do it. I appreciated the fact, too, though, that I had male mentors who were willing to give advice. They were all these individuals who were in business, who could help, you know, direct me to the appropriate parties to engage in my business. And that really makes a difference.

How would you describe your style as a graphic designer?

I did the logo design for the Kapiolani Medical Center. When you look at a logo, it should be implicitly implied what it represents. This was when they first combined the Children's Hospital with the Women's Hospital; so the children and the women had to be represented. So I chose to use a Hawaiian woman,

but then the children were what I call *hapa* looking, so that you had this Asian influence and the *haole* influence working, and so that you were more like we are, cosmopolitan. And I put a *lei* on her, so that it would depict that she was from Hawaii. When you asked me the kind of designer I wanted to be, I wanted to create designs that were simple, that were timeless, that were elegant, and that were appropriate to the subject. And so, when they looked at that logo, as an example, they would immediately identify it with a hospital. And even if they didn't know it was a hospital, there was something in its communication. The woman has her hand holding the child. You always … show caring and nurturing with hands. There's an open end where her hand is, and what that does is, it brings you in. So you're not a circle that excludes, you're a circle that includes. So all of these things, Kenneth Kingrey taught us how to think very deeply, to get into the very essence of something. I felt that he taught us the basic concepts and principles of design, that we could create in Hawaii, the kinds of designs that will stand up to any other part of the world, but that would be truly who we were. Integrity and honesty, and true to the culture, is what I wanted to portray.

Momi took the name Cazimero in her first marriage. In addition to growing her business, she raised four children. At a surprisingly early age in early adulthood, Momi Cazimero knew she had to release her anger and bitterness against her father, for her own sake.

The man controlled his home, and quote, the woman was to do his bidding. And I think that might have also come as a result that my father, too, was abused by his father. And so eventually, he learned that that's the way you discipline, and so when he had children, that's what he also did. The difference was that I was his target. And actually, so was my mother. And that was the reason she wanted me out of the home.

And when you think of your dad today—he's passed on, what do you take from what he gave you?

Well, in a negative way, what he gave me was the drive to prove him wrong. And my—

Because he said, you're worthless, you're wrong?

Yes; yes. He—well, first of all, he said I was stupid, I would never amount to anything, and that's why he was not going to pay for my tuition to Kamehameha. So my mother took in laundry, she took in sewing, she took care of foster children. And that's why I worked. She had no way of supporting the children. I was the oldest; she had all these other children to care for. Many women are caught in a bind like that.

So she was a realist and said—

That's right.

—That's where I am.

Yes. But—

So she helped you to get away.
She helped me to get away. And both—I say both of us put me through school. I've learned along the way that the most important thing that I did was to forgive him. When I completed my senior year at Kamehameha—that's a funny story I—well, it's funny now. But the story about sitting on the edge of the bed, waiting for my grandfather to come and get me … I learned from that, that I was the one who was able to overcome those obstacles. So then I decided, okay, what do I do with this situation about my father? Because I was aware that in the time that I was at Kamehameha, I had a very difficult time in relationships.
With boys?
With girls. I was in a boarding situation, and I didn't even know how to interpret the clue, you can catch more flies with sugar than you can—with honey than you can with vinegar. Well, I think that was their way of saying that I had a chip on my shoulder. I was trying to prove that I was worthy, and that I was competent, I wasn't stupid, all those things. I knew if I was going to survive, I had to do it alone. I could never go home again. And I wrote my father a letter, and I said, I've spent six years resenting—I didn't say that, I said, hating you. But I'm going—I'm not going to continue doing that, because in a way, because I was trying to prove you wrong, I have now graduated, and I'm going to the University.
Did he respond to this letter?
He never did. But it didn't matter, because what it did was, it got me to the point where I was going to simply do what I needed to do, without doing it out of resentment for some other person. But when I started my business, my father and I mended our relationship. If you can believe this, this is a man who never picked up a broom in his life. And when I started my business, I found this office, and he, on his hands and knees, scrubbed my entire floor. I recognized in everything that he was doing to help me do this, it was his way of saying he was sorry. He's not—he's not a man who ever says he's sorry, but in his actions, he was showing that he was.
Did your father's abuse affect your relationships with men?
I think it did because it … oh, what's that word? You set up walls, you set up barriers. But I think I had enough of this loving relationship in my family. I talk about my grandfather, John Waihee—the next John Waihee was my uncle—and he was so unconditional in his love. I never had this black and white portrait of men, because they were men I loved and absolutely adored in my life, who were so good and so loving to me, I didn't have just one picture, based on my father's experience.

The important man now sharing Momi Cazimero's life is her husband, Lester Nakasone. In addition to Momi's trailblazing business accomplishments, she has volunteered countless hours of public service, having served on the State Judicial Selection Commission, the University Community Partnership, and as

vice chair of the University of Hawaii Board of Regents. *Mahalo piha*, Momi Cazimero, for sharing your Long Story Short. And thank you, for watching and supporting PBS Hawaii. I'm Leslie Wilcox. *A hui hou kakou*.

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And if there's anything that annoys me, it is something that is shallow and superficial, and doesn't even portray what it is it's supposed to represent. When I was in the University, what I was aware of was that so much of what we were seeing in advertisements depicted the mainland. It was not about Hawaii. Things about Hawaii were supposed to look like the mainland. And I wanted to be sure that I preserved our identity. And I don't mean just Hawaiian, Hawaiians. I mean who we are as local people. I respected Hawaii. I love where I'm from. And I wanted what I did to reflect that. And I felt that Kenneth Kingrey gave us the proper foundation to create design, and I wanted to be, by the way, competitive to the mainland. I didn't want to be the mainland, but I wanted to be competitive with the mainland.