LONGstorySHORT
with LESLIE WILCOX

PBS Hawaii

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But I was very mindful of something that my father used to talk about. The word is a Japanese word; it's *haji*, shame. Don't bring shame on your friends, your family, to anybody. Be honorable in everything that you do. And I was very mindful of the fact that if I didn't do a good job, it would not only be a reflection on the work that had to be done, but be a great reflection on the minority people that I felt were part of the government.

Coming up on Long Story Short. George Ariyoshi decided early on he wanted to be a lawyer, but he didn't start out with political ambition, let alone dream he'd become Hawaii's longest serving Chief Executive. On the way to the Governor's Office, he'd make history, breaking down racial barriers and paving the way for future generations of Hawaii political business and government leaders. George Ariyoshi's unlikely Journey to Washington Place is next.

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 the early years of my reporting career, I was involved in news coverage of the administration of Hawaii Governor, George Ariyoshi, who held office from 1974 until 1986. In this edition of Long Story Short, I sit down with the still active elder statesman to explore his life. Billed in a campaign film as The Kid From Kalihi, this son of Japanse immigrant parents came of age in Hawaii during World War II, and went on to build a political career that spanned more than three decades during a pivotal time in island history. Along the way, he became a man of records: the first non-Caucasian governor in the United States, first Hawaii-born governor to be elected, and longest serving governor in our State's history. Despite his political power and stature, and the fierce nature of politics, observers tend to agree that Governor Ariyoshi managed to stay true to himself and the cultural values he learned at home.**

Lots of my cultural values came from my parents. And when I say close, we were really close. When I wanted to do anything, I would have to tell my mother, Oh, I'm going to do this, and I'm going to a certain place. And if I went from there to some other place, I had to come back and tell my parents that I

was gonna go someplace else. So, we were that kind of family. They didn't speak English ever. Almost not at all. And so, when they went to PTA meetings, for example, they would say only, My boy good boy, bad boy? [CHUCKLE]

They understood English, but didn't speak it?

They didn't speak English, they didn't understand English.

But they trusted the school to do a good job, and just—

That's right.

—wanted to know that you were behaving.

Uh-huh. And all they wanted to know was, was I good or bad. [CHUCKLE]

Wow. But they showed up.

Yeah; and that's right. And that showing up, to me, is very important. Sometimes, people don't appreciate how important it is for parents to get involved in the things that their children do.

What brought your parents here from Japan?

My father was working on a ship that stopped by in Hawaii for provisions. And they all got off the ship to look around, and said, Oh, Hawaii nice place. So about ten of them didn't go back on the ship. It was an illegal entry that was made at that time. And I did not know about this. This happened in 1919, and I did not know about this until my last summer back here before I graduated from law school in 1951. And my father told me this story. I was flabbergasted. I said, Papa, won't you concerned during the war that they were gonna pick you up? And he said, oh, he had made up his mind that he was going to be picked up. But nothing happened. And I guess he tried to keep us from getting involved, or worrying about things that had might happen. So he was very grateful that nothing happened. At the time that he was saying this to me, the Walter McCarren Act was passed in Congress, which provided that any person who was in the United States in 1924, and could show continuous presence since then, could get long term permanent residency. So when I became a lawyer in 1952, my first project was to get that long-term residence for my father. But when you start thinking about today, we have Social Security, we pay taxes, and it's very easy to get those records. But you go back to 1924, if you paid taxes, somebody wrote the receipt, and you got it, but nobody keeps those things. No Social Security.

How did you prove he was there?

I had to go find people who knew my father during that period and get affidavits. Oh, I had so many affidavits from people who worked to get it. My father was a stevedore, and even though he worked all those years, there were no records.

And what did he say when he finally became a citizen?

Oh, he was very happy, and he said, Oh, now, I can travel. He never went anywhere. Even when I graduated from Michigan State, he never came because he was concerned that if he got on the airplane he may be identified and picked up.

Your mom was born in Hawaii?
No, my mother was born in Japan, but she came to Hawaii the same year that my father got off the ship here. And her parents had come ahead of time. They worked on the plantation, and they called my mother after she became a little older.
And so, how did they meet, your parents?
I don't know. [CHUCKLE]
They didn't talk about that romance—
No. [CHUCKLE]
—of that first courtship. No.
[CHUCKLE]

The Ariyoshis eventually had six children, and the family moved around Oahu, living in Waialae, Laie, Palama, and of course, Kalihi. George Ariyoshi attended public schools, and as a boy, he also went to Japanese language school in Palama. Unlike many *Nisei*, George enjoyed Japanese classes, despite being singled out by a school bully.

Class was over, I came out, and all of a sudden, somebody came up and grabbed me by the shirt like this. I didn't know what was going on. And so, my initial response was to push back, and I got into a fight with that person, who turned out to be, I found out later on, the second grade bully. And that was not a good way to get started at least in Japanese school, especially. So I ended up having many, many confrontations and fights. My principal one day, because of a fight, he called me in and he told me I can't come back to school unless I get my parents. So, I went home and I told my mother that, and my mother said, Okay, you won't go back to school, we'll put in another school. So, I changed from that Palama school to a school on Fort Street. And the principal came back later on and wanted me to come back to school. He felt that I was a good student, and wanted me as a student there. But my mother told him, You never asked him why he got into these fights, and he's had enough, so he changed school and the all fighting stopped after that.
And what happened to the bully?
I got to know him when we became adults. They were two individuals who became very active and came in with my campaign in 1954.
Is that right? So, what was that conversation like when you saw them in your campaign?
Nothing happened; nobody said anything. I was very happy to have them come in. We never talked about the fights that we had.
I understand that well, a lot of kids didn't like going to Japanese school after regular school. But even though you had a bully waiting for you, you didn't mind.
Yeah, I didn't mind.

You liked your school.
Because I knew what I had to do. My parents, my father especially, wanted me to go to Japanese school. And I tell people, Oh, I kinda went to Japanese school because my father told me, and I was there to have fun also. But in the process, I learned a little bit Japanese.
And both of your parents speak Japanese, you're going to school learning English and then also Japanese school later. But your parents couldn't help you with, say, your English homework, with your writing assignments, with your spelling work; right?
No, they couldn't. But I was very lucky. When I went to intermediate school, Central Intermediate, I had a teacher, Mrs. Hamada, who was my core studies teacher two periods every day, for three years, so during my entire period there. We talked about what I wanted to be when I grew up. I worked on the school paper as a reporter, so I told her, I want to be a journalist, or I want to become a lawyer. And she told me, Oh, good. She sent me to see a lawyer, set up an appointment. I went, and I came back, and I told her, I really want to become a lawyer, because I found out that a lawyer can help people. And my father was so happy. He told me, Oh, good. He said, I'll give you the shirt off my back to help make that possible. He said, Go do it, and stick by it, that's really good.
Let's go back to high school; McKinley High School.
The war got started during my sophomore year, and we had curfews, we had blackouts, we had to be off the street by six o'clock every evening.
You were not dating?
No. Well, dating during the day.
Oh, okay. So, what did you do during the day?
Well, we had dancing, we went to friend's house, we moved around. And we had phonograph records playing, and we had dancing, like that.
At houses?
M-hm.
People's houses?
People's houses. So we had a group of maybe, oh fifteen, twenty people that got together like that. But at night, we had to be off the street. My senior prom was at the Mormon Tabernacle. We rented a hallway there, auditorium. We pulled all the drapes, made it really dark, put on very nice lights, soft lights, and made it look like it was at night. But our graduation prom, senior prom was from one-thirty until four o'clock. [CHUCKLE] And so, our close family got even closer, because we spent nights—all during my high school years, I never went out at night. And we were all at home with my brothers and sister.
What did you do in the dark?
In the dark, we played Chinese Checkers [CHUCKLE], Chess, and all kinds of things. So, I became a pretty good Checkers player.
[CHUCKLE] Did you feel like you missed out, because you didn't have the nightlife and the rowdy teenaged years?

Not really, because I didn't know what it was all about, not having experienced that kind of, open, more free life. But I was content with doing the things we did. But I think what it did also was, bring my family close together. We were able to learn a lot from each other and from my parents. We learned about our own school experience, we shared those things. Now, when I went to law school, when I went to Michigan State, I enjoyed my years there. I was learning a great deal when I was there. I even worked on a construction job.

How did you afford that?

I used to get seventy-five dollars a month from the GI Bill. They took care of my tuition. And at that time, the tuition, even for out of state, was I think, around two hundred fifty or three hundred dollars.

Wow. But it was a lot then.

Yeah, it was a lot. And, I remember living in the dormitory at Michigan State. We had a quarterly system, three months. So every three months, I paid about a hundred and eighty dollars for room and for board. So now, when I think about what students have to do, how much they have to get, I feel bad for them. And that's why I feel strongly about the tuition, that we have to make it possible for people in Hawaii to be able to go to school without having to pay a huge tuition. And I'm told that, oh, they have all kind of loan programs. But, I ask myself, how would I have gotten started with my own life if I had to start off with forty, fifty thousand, hundred thousand dollars debt that had to be repaid.

George Ariyoshi was eligible for the GI Bill because he served in the Military Intelligence Service at the end of the war between high school and college. Part of that time, he was stationed in Japan, where he witnessed the post-war destruction. After he finished law school in 1951, Ariyoshi returned to Honolulu and started the law practice he'd dreamed of since the eighth grade, and a short time later, he met the girl of his dreams, the former Jean Hayashi.

I was invited to a party. My friend's home we had a party, and she was part of the Wakaba Kai Sorority. The sorority was invited also. So, when we got there, I had heard about Jeannie.

What did you hear about her? That she was hot-looking? Is that what I'm gathering?

Yeah, she was a very beautiful girl. And I had seen a picture of her, and somebody told me, Oh, that's Hash's cousin; Yoshimi Hayashi.

And were you actually at the party looking for her? Were you kinda hoping to spot her?

No. No, I didn't, I didn't know she was there. Because I had a date also at that point; I had gone there with a date. But I just happened to come into the kitchen. I don't know why I went into the kitchen, but I walked into the kitchen and I saw Jeannie, and I recognized her. And so, my way of starting a conversation was, Oh, are you related to Hash?

Knowing the answer already. [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE] And Hash was Yoshimi Hayashi, who became Supreme Court Justice, was her cousin. And so, we talked, and then I said, Oh she was getting ready to leave, so I told her, Can I steal a dance? [CHUCKLE] So, we went out on the dance floor, and they started to play some very fast music. And Jeannie tells me later on, oh, she didn't think that we could do that dance, but she was surprised when I started to Jitterbug. And I had learned that when I was in Minnesota at Fort Snelling. We called it then the Lindy Hop. I learned that, and I started to dance, and she told me, Wow. She was really surprised that she could dance with me. [CHUCKLE]

Oh! Now, what happened to your date?

Uh [CHUCKLE] …

[CHUCKLE] Oops.

[CHUCKLE] Well, she was there. But I went to many parties with the person that I was dating at that time. But after I met Jeannie, I stopped dating her, and I invited Jeannie to the Cherry Blossom Prom that they were gonna have, and I never dated anybody else after that.

Now, at that time, you already were known as somebody with political prospects and a possible political career ahead. When you were dating Jeannie, did you evaluate her from that standpoint?

No. I never knew, I never knew that I was gonna be in politics. And it was only in 1954—and her birthday was October 30th, and when I ran for office, she couldn't vote for me in the primary. And she could only vote for me in the general; she became of age. [CHUCKLE]

Wow.

I never even thought about running for office or being a politician at the time that I started to date her.

And so, I mean, really, it is a very hard thing to be the wife of a politician. And so, she had that ability, even though that's really not what you were looking for.

M-hm; m-hm. She was a very flexible person, very good-natured, and she was very friendly. She made friends, meeting new people, they began to feel, Oh, I've known her for years and years, even though that the first time. As a matter of fact, we asked one time on a political campaign for an endorsement from one of the governors to speak, make a tape. And he talked about me, but he said that I was a very well known person amongst the governor's circle, very well liked, but I was only second to somebody else, second to Jean Ariyoshi. So Jean was very … she helped me a lot. I'm a shy person, and I don't move around. I can't go around shaking hands with everybody, and I kinda stand still. But Jeannie can make up for that by being the warm person. I used to go to Big Island, for example, and people would come up to me at a rally, and the first question they would ask me is, Where's Jeannie?

[CHUCKLE]

We'll have been married for fifty-seven years this year. And Jean and I learned to get closer, and we have learned to love our children and our grandchildren even more so, because of our personal relationship. So my family side is very,

very good. I get the biggest thrill out of my grandchildren when they were younger. And my great-grandchildren now, when they see me, they come running up to me, Grandpa!, and give me a big hug.

While George Ariyoshi was courting his future wife, a man who was the driving force in Hawaii's rising Democratic Party began courting him to join what came to be known as the Democratic Revolution in Hawaii. Then party chair and future governor, John Burns, persuaded the twenty-eight-year-old Ariyoshi to run for the Territorial House in the historic 1954 election. Ariyoshi would become the youngest member of the first Democrat-controlled Legislature. Burns inspired Ariyoshi to consider politics as the path to social change.

I told him I was not a plantation child. I grew up away from that, so that I didn't have that kind of discriminatory experience. And so, he told me, Well, what about now? Are you starting your own law practice? And I mentioned that, oh, I began to feel this control over the economy by the Big Five. That's when he told me, Run for office. I thought he was talking to somebody else and turned around. He said, No, you, you run for office. And my response was, No, I'm too young and nobody knows me. And he said, No, it's not that, it's where the heart is. And that's when he encouraged me to run. So I ran … not because I wanted, but because I felt that maybe something could happen. In 1970, when he asked me to run for Lieutenant Governor, he was not talking about 1970; he was looking at 1974. And when I expressed some concerns about being committed, because my law practice was my first love. And he told me, Please listen to me very carefully. He said, There's never been a Governor of Hawaii who was born here in Hawaii, there's never been a Governor here in Hawaii except a person who was White, and I want you to break that, I want you to open it up so that it'll open up, and other people can also become a part of the government structure. That's why I ran. When I became Governor, I was very conscious of the obligation that I had to the citizens of this community to do the best I can as Governor. But I was very mindful of something that my father used to talk about. The word is a Japanese word; it's *haji*, shame. Don't bring shame on your friends, your family, to anybody. Be honorable in everything that you do. And I was very mindful of the fact that if I didn't do a good job, it would not only be a reflection on the work that had to be done, but be a great reflection on the minority people that I felt were part of the government. And my father, you know, he encouraged me, but in so many other ways, I learned from my parents. He talked to me about how important it is to get people to help you. No matter how good you are, you can't do things by yourself.
Mm.
You gotta get help. He said, Don't boast about doing things, always remember that many other people helped you. Your teachers helped so that you can become whatever you want to become. When you have something you want to do, other people are gonna help you. And so, acknowledge that so much

help that you get. He used a Japanese word at that time, *okage sama de*. *Kage* is somebody's shade. *O* is honorific. Because of your help, because of your shade, I have become or been able to do what I wanted to do.

And that became your mantra throughout your time in office.

Yes; yes. And then, my father was very frugal. He said, Spend money if you have to, but don't spend it unnecessarily, and to not pinch and not deny yourself anything, but be sure that you spend it in the right kind of ways, in the right amounts. And that also helped me when I was looking at budget problems. I remembered my father telling me the Japanese word, *mudatsukai*; wasteful spending, don't do that. My father was also very firm about doing things in the right way. In fact, during the 1954 election, when I first got elected, my first campaign, I recall some problems I had with the labor unions. They wanted to control me. One way to do that was tell us how we're gonna go about campaigning. And when I didn't agree on how the campaign should be run, they were very angry with me. But my father telling me that what you think is right, you gotta stand up and do what you think you ought to do.

So did you lose the union's support? I don't think so; right?

They I didn't, that 1954 election, because we came to an agreement on how to go about campaigning. And that agreement was what we could pass out. They were telling me I had to pass out only one card with all six candidates, the Democratic Party candidates' names, and nothing else. I was going to go along with that, but when they told me nothing else, that's what I really got affected by. But we came to a compromise. They said, The last week, let's pass this card with six names, but until then, you can pass your own things. And so, they supported me. But I lost their support in the next election.

Why did you lose it?

Because at that time, the unions were very tough. And it was not just you're going along with the programs that they had, but if they told you they want you to jump, they wanted to have you ask them, Oh, how many feet? It was a time when it was almost raw strength that they had, and they wanted to be sure that they didn't lose and they were in control.

Did you get the same kind of attempts to control you on the other side from big business?

When I got involved in the 1954 election, it was because of the big business, Big Five, and how they tried to control the economy. And that was very wrong for them to dictate not only what happened to the economy, but who gets involved. And at that time, if you were an outsider, you could work for any big company and get up to a certain point, but you could never hope to get above that. And to me, that was very, very wrong, because it was not being advancing to one's ability. I learned that there were individuals within the Big Five who shared a lot of our hopes and our aspirations, and who were willing to help. Companies that I thought were really bad people turned out not to be all that bad, and they were used to a certain kind of practice before, but they

were beginning to change also. And I can name people, like Henry Walker, and Harold Eichelberger, and Lowell Dillingham all came around.
Did you think they were more open than big unions?
I think the unions started to come along also.

Ariyoshi served in the Territorial House, the Territorial Senate, and the first State Senate before he was elected Lieutenant Governor with Governor John Burns in 1970. When Burns became too ill to serve before his third term was up, Ariyoshi became Acting Governor, and then he won the position in his own right, elected to three terms starting in 1974. He served as Governor for more than thirteen years, and because of term limits in place today, no one is ever likely to serve longer. We'll have more on his legacy in an upcoming episode. At age eighty-six at the time of this conversation, Ariyoshi continues to go to work as a businessman, connecting people. He travels widely in Asia and the Pacific, and he enjoys his grandchildren and engaging other young people in thinking of the future.

Thank you, Governor Ariyoshi, 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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When I was Governor, my secretary knew that when one of my kids comes in during the day over there, they were to let me know so that as soon as I got through with what I was doing, I would see my children. And I think it was a way for them to test me, to see whether or not they had access to me. And they knew they had access. And every time, no matter what I was doing, when I took a break, I would see them. And my youngest, Donn, who was only twelve years old at the time, was the one who did this all the time. He would come up; How's my father? [CHUCKLE]