

GUEST: ANNE NAMBA
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Aloha no, I'm Leslie Wilcox welcoming you to another episode of Long Story Short. This one is a little different. Usually I'm getting to know the guest at the same time you are. But this time, our guest is someone I happen to have grown up with. Used to hang out at her home with her family, saw her go through school, boyfriends, marriage, major career moves. So I already know her--- and I also know she's full of surprises. Anne Namba is the creator of a fashion line blending vintage Japanese fabrics and contemporary fashion, "kimono couture." Her brand, Anne Namba Designs, is being picked up nationally by Nordstrom's and is featured in other select Mainland stores. Anne graduated from Kalani High School and went on to the prestigious Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City. After stints in the garment industry in New York and L.A., Anne started her own business.

When I met you, you were in third grade; I was in fifth. And you showed up at Aina Haina Elementary School with your sister—wearing an—you were so exotic, because you were carrying your books in a bag and the strap was on your forehead. It was a woven tribal bag. And everyone took about five second looks, if you can do such a thing.

Yeah. Okay; exotic would not be the correct term. I was like nerd. I was like weirdo. That's 'cause we had just come back from living in Thailand. And those were like our little book bags. And they were actually these ethnic bags from Thailand. And my mother was like, These are perfect to carry your books in. So that's how you carried 'em, was on your head, so you didn't get shoulder, you know, aches or anything. So we did that. Oh, my god.

I can't remember the year, but we were young, and you and I took sewing classes together. Your first formal sewing class.

That's right. Yeah; that was—I think it was yeah, it was soon after. I know I wanted to learn how to sew, and so Nodie came too.

Your sister.

My sister, Nodie, and you were there and Tammy Higa was there. And yeah, you guys were terrible; I remember that.

I don't remember that part; not at all.

Oh, you were terrible.

Well, you were about twelve. And is that—did you discover that you were so much better than the rest of us?

Well, I just loved it. I loved it, and it came natural—you know, very natural—

Did you know before that, that you'd be good at it?

Well, I think my mom will be horrified by this story. But it's true. Because I was the second daughter, I got all of my older sister's hand-me-downs. And I never had my own clothes. So the only way to get my own clothes was to actually make them, which is why I wanted to learn how to sew. And so I remember my grandmother died, my Japanese grandmother died, and she had one of those really old fashioned sewing machines that you pumped the pedal and it would go. And so I just started fooling around. I found some fabric, and I made this little outfit, not knowing what I was doing. And my mother saw that, and she was like, Oh, maybe you need to take sewing lessons. I'm like, Oh, yeah, I'd love it. So that's when I started doing it. And Nodie started wearing all of my clothes, so everyone thought that they were her clothes, and I was still wearing her hand-me-downs. So then I started renting them to her, which was my whole entrepreneurial start, so—

How much did you charge her?

I can't remember, but it was in high school. 'Cause I'm going, That's not fair. I buy the fabric, I make the outfit, and then you wear it like it's your clothes, and everyone just assumes that I'm wearing your old clothes.

Well, I remember at a certain point in that class, I was trying to follow the lines of my Simplicity pattern. And I looked over at you and you weren't even using a pattern. You were just free-forming it.

Yeah; I remember you would pin everything, like every inch apart. I was like, Oh, my god.

And you would just be done. Like, what's she still working on? And you would design your own clothes at that point.

Yeah; I started off by just like altering a pattern, or you know. And then I used to go to India Imports and buy the bedspreads there, and—you know, 'cause that was the hippie days, and make, you know, our long sort of muumuu things. And then people started asking me to sew it for them, so that's when I started doing that and charging money. So I started way back when.

Was that natural for you, the idea of the—you know, the creative part and the commerce part?

Oh, absolutely. I was like, I'm not doing this for free.

But tough, right? Because so many people asked you to do favors, and Anne could you help me with this.

Yeah. I still to this day have a hard time saying no.

Your family was very supportive of you in this business.

Yeah; yeah. They always—you know, when I announced that I wanted to be a fashion designer, it was like, oh. But they supported me all the way, and you know when I think back now, my parents, you know, they had to scrape together money to send me away to New York to go to school. And you know, back then, you just think, Well, that's what I want to do, of course they're gonna pay for it.

Because your father was a professor, he believed in higher ed.

Right.

Would he have liked you to have been a scientist like he is?

Oh, they knew that that was never a possibility. In fact, they saved some of my old reports cards. And my kids were shocked. They're all like, Mom, you got Ds? It's like, but look at Art; it's A's.

Picked the right job.

Yeah, right.

So you went away to New York, and was that like for you?

I remember um, when I first landed in New York—and nowadays, you know, parents take kids on college tours, and they set them up. I just got there, and got out of the train station with all my suitcases, and some man comes up and said, Do you need a cab? And I'm like, Yeah. And he picked up my bags and just took off through Madison Square Gardens. And I'm following him; he takes me to the curb, and he hails a cab for me. And I was like, Oh, I thought he was a cab driver. And then he asked me for a tip. And I was just like, Oh; what? And then the cab driver starts yelling at him for doing that, 'cause he was scamming me. So the cab driver and this guy then start fist fighting on the street. And then I'm just watching in horror. And then he yells at me; he says, Get in the cab. So I get in the cab, and I'm just like going, I just want to go to FIT, you know, just to the school. I was in shock. I was like, Oh, my god, this is New York. And then I got there and decided I was gonna go—there was a bagel shop, and I wanted to get a sandwich. And everyone's in there, shouting out their orders, and I'm politely standing, waiting and waiting. And finally, the bagel guy looks at me and he goes, You gonna order, or what? And I was like, Oh, I'm sorry. So that was my very first hour in New York City.

You realized, I'd better ratchet up my—

I was like, Oh, wow.

--confidence level here.

Yeah, right.

Well, by the time I visited you—and this was in the 80's—you were working in the fashion industry, Radio City Music Hall. Right?

Yeah; yeah.

You were costuming the dancers

That's right; that's right.

I remember thinking, What's happened to Anne? Because you walked—

Oh, I know.

--about five times faster than you ever had, and we were just walking. We weren't going to any particular place.

I thought, Where are they?

You talked faster, and you were very proactive in dealing with people. You know, just combative, as a matter of fact, as I recall.

Yeah; back—oh, back then—well, especially in fashion, and in school too, it's really a super competitive field. So you have to—you can be intimidated; you gotta just get out there and—

Did that come naturally for you?

No. I was shy. Remember? I was really shy as a kid. So yeah, I don't know what happened along the way.

But was it hard, or do you just remember thinking, This is what I have to do, therefore it's what I'll do?

No; it was hard. I remember feeling like a country bumpkin when I first got up there, and not being sophisticated, not knowing anything, not being fashionable, not being able to buy the latest you know, fashion.

Did you think you were gonna cut it? Did you think you might not make it?

I never thought that I wasn't gonna be a fashion designer; I always thought that's—you know, I'm gonna work in fashion. But I never thought I would be where I am today. I didn't have that in my fantasies.

What did you think you would do with your degree once you got out of this prestigious fashion school?

I thought I would just be probably designing for you know, companies in New York City. And that someday I might be able to, you know, design for, you know, one of the big—you know, Calvin Klein or something like that. And to me, that would have been like, wow. But then, you know, of course, I burnt out of the city and and left, so—

What did you think when you were leaving the city? Did you think—

Whew.

Oh, you were glad to go?

I was like, Oh—

And what next?

Well, I moved to L.A. because I thought there's a good fashion center there, so I moved to L.A. And then at that point, I still did not want my own company. So I moved there, and I wanted to get into costuming again. But it's so tough; that industry is really,

really a hard industry to get into. And I fell back into the garment district, into the—actually producing overseas. So that started a whole 'nother interest in overseas and producing over there. And then naively thought, you know, Oh, my bosses are a bunch of jokers, they don't know what they're doing. You know. I just thought, pff, I'm doing all the work here, I might as well open my own business and—you know, very naively. Because running a business and designing stuff is completely—it's a lot more than just designing pretty clothes. And so I moved back to Honolulu, because I thought, Well, at least if it doesn't work out, I have a roof over my head, and I know that my family will feed me. So I moved back to Hawaii, and worked here for about a year, just to sort of get the climate, figure out resources, and how it all works here, which is a lot slower.

Yeah; I noticed you started walking more slowly again. And talking more slowly.

And then I started my business. And it's been great.

And you did literally start your business under your parents' roof.

Yup. I got the old bedroom, and I updated the—my grandmother's sewing machine, though. And just—I was a one-man show. I did everything myself.

Anne launched a boutique in 1989 and Anne Namba Designs was born. Despite being what she terms a “one man show” during those early days of the business, Anne credits family members for their unwavering support. More on that as our conversation continues.

Must be a thrill to hear when somebody is wearing an Anne Namba.

The first time I heard my name used in that way, like, Oh, I wore my Anne Namba, and I'm like, Wait, that's me. What do you mean you wore my Anne Namba? You know. And now, you know, I'll just say, Oh, I'm gonna wear an Anne Namba. And so I'm very used to it now.

I remember your dad liked to help you pick the models.

That is my dad's main objective with all my shows.

And your mom is very long-suffering. Kind of rolls her eyes, and smiles.

No; all the models know that if my dad doesn't like them they don't get hired again. So they all make sure to say, Hello, Dr.

Namba, whenever he comes to my shows.

You had to find a niche for yourself when you got back home.

Yeah.

How did how did Eurasian clothes get to you? How did that idea get planted?

Well I think a lot of it had to do with the influence of always traveling, seeing different cultures, seeing different fabrics which—I love Japanese fabric; love the kimono, the culture, the food, everything. And so I was very taken with the fabric and the kimono, but you can't really wear a kimono, 'cause either you look like you're wearing a costume or a bathrobe. And so I decided, since I had the background of fashion and how to do, you know, Western contemporary style clothing and flattering lines, that I would incorporate the two. And it's nothing new; people had been doing it before. But you know, I have a different sort of take on it than—you know, everyone has their own sort of individual take. You know, and then slowly got into doing my own prints, because I'm running out of kimonos.

I was gonna ask you; where did you get all the kimono that you used, and how was that taken in Japan? Are they wild about you cutting up kimonos?

Actually, they're starting to do it now.

Ah.

You see a lot more of it happening.

Were they doing that at the time you started?

No; no, not at all. In fact, they would be just like, Why are you using that old stuff? And they would not themselves buy it, because it's almost looked upon, back then, as you couldn't afford new clothes so you had to remake one of your old kimonos. Nowadays, though, again, you see a lot of the younger generation. I was shopping some of the stores the last time I was there, and you're seeing Japanese labels, jeans with kimono pockets and patches on it. So things are changing. I have a lot of Chinese influence too, and some of my prints are Chinese inspired, as well as styles. I did one whole collection once for a showing that I did that was all based on Chinese different dynasties. And I researched it and did that whole thing.

That must be fun, the research. Historical research.

Oh, yeah. Yeah; yeah. It's a lot of fun.

Now, you said you're getting into prints too.

I've been doing prints for a long time, actually. If you have your own fabric, then you can mass produce the styles. So I started doing that, oh, gosh, quite a while ago. And right now, that's my main wholesale collection.

Who designs your fabrics?

My nephew. He started—that's Nodie's son. And he started when he was like fifteen; he's really talented artist, and so I started having him do some artwork for me. And nowadays, it's all done on the computer. So you know, we'll discuss ideas, and I'll look at things, and you know, if I don't like a color, you know, he presses a button, it's, How's that? It's much different today.

And he designed the fabric you're wearing now?

Yes; m-hm.

Wow.

Yeah.

What are women most concerned about when they dress, in general?

Well, my mission statement is to make every women look taller, thinner, and I just added younger, now that I can relate.

How do you do that, though? Just the cut of the—

The cut, yeah. You know, you don't want dowdy cuts. You know, you try to keep it modern, but wearable for people that don't have the most—you know, the perfect body. And it's funny that, you know, if you have a certain flattering style on people, and you know how to achieve it, then when they put on the garment, they're like, I love it. And they don't know particularly why, but they love the cut.

It must be frustrating, 'cause sometimes you probably want to design for fashion model types who can wear anything.

And you have to be realistic and design for people who are regular folks.

Actually, for me, I—mostly because I'm not built like a model, I always design with myself in mind. Like, what would I want to wear. And naturally, you know, I want to look taller, slimmer, younger, so I'll do that. And when the models put it on, I just see that as like, you know, icing on the cake. It's just like, oh, well, they're just so tall and thin. So I don't design for model figures at all, and I never have. And it's just when they throw it on and it's that much better, then you know, that's great. But you know, I'll have women that say, Well, of course it looks good on her, she's six feet tall and size, you know, zero. But I'm like, No, it's not true. If you put it on—it's actually too big on her, but you know, that's her job to make it look better. And put it on, 'cause it'll look good on you too. And I was just approached by another store for—to do plus sizes. So now I might expand into that.

Literally?

Not personally.

Yeah. So is there a new area of the business you're going to be moving into, or are you gonna be at this level for a while? How's it working?

Well, at this point, for me to expand in my wholesale division, that's the easiest, 'cause I contract everything out. So the hard part is designing the fabric, designing the collection, and then getting it produced. Once I do that, I can up my numbers. And so I could say, Cut 50 of these, or cut 500. It's just adding more numbers.

That could be an exponential move then.

Yeah; yeah. And it wouldn't be that much more for us to do; it's just upping the numbers when we order things. So we're looking at that. Another division of mine that is just going gangbusters is my bridal division. And that started out as you know, client coming in; Oh, my daughter's getting married, why don't you make a dress. And well, 500 people came to her wedding, and they all—you know, it was great advertising. So now we're going gangbusters with our bridal.

What do women look for in bridal dresses when they come to you? What do they want?

They want the Asian, you know, influence look. A lot of the girls want to have that. Different fabric, something you know, some of 'em, you know, it reflects their heritage. Just something—you know, a lot of times, they want something simple, but really different. And so when they come to us, then you know, that's what they get. We custom make all of our gowns for our brides.

So I understand you're gonna be appearing across the nation in a particular store. Something new is happening?

Yes; yes. I am, well, I'm participating in the new Nordstrom store, so we're just going gangbusters getting all the collections ready for them. And of course that goes nationwide. So that's big.

That's huge. How much do you think that'll add to your business in percentage?

Gosh; you know, like I said, I got a D in math, so I don't know; that's why I have my husband. Marriage is a business.

Another family member helping—

Yes; yes, yes.

--in the business and being a resource.

Yes; so we do and I'm using my daughter as a model now. So yeah. So we have lots of nepotism.

And it works for you.

Yes.

What do your kids take away from your running a business and being a fashion designer, do you think?

Well, I hope that they don't think that life is all about stress. That's really what I hope they—you know, they don't do. 'Cause you know, I worry that—a lot of times, I'm like, Mom's had a bad day, I'm really stressed. And I don't want them to think that's what running a business is about. So I try to watch that, but a lot of times, I know I'm, How was your day, Mom. It's like, [GROWL]. I think I—well, I constantly remind them that it is a business, so it can go up and down. And in fact, I've tried to get—my daughter has done a little bit of her own business. And this is just—you know, I'm trying to get her to have an entrepreneurial spirit, and to realize that if you work hard, and you know, you try to use your head about things and you know, if you have a little bit of talent and you just figure out how to take advantage of it, you know, that you can make money. And so she's been making money off of little things too. And so I think she's gonna be able to—and she wants to go into fashion and into business, so I think she's gotten that from the business, and she really enjoys that part of it. She's a great salesperson too, so—

Were there times where you wanted to rethink the whole business, or when it was really difficult to decide where to go next with it?

No. Actually, once I started, I never thought—I mean, before I started, I thought, well, you know, no guts, no glory, right, and I can always get a job. So—why not? And started doing it, and I never once said, I want to give up, or this isn't working, or I rather work for somebody. Never, ever. But then I've just been really lucky, and things have been going really well for me. So—

And you've seen other fashion businesses lose their way.

Yeah. Yeah; come and go. But you know, I've been able to sort of market my look, the image, and you know, create a good image. And just keep on top of things. Although my body's starting to revolt.

Speaking of that, you've done triathlons.

I know; that was like, my daughter calls it my midlife crisis. So she just said, All of a sudden, Mom decided to do triathlons, so—

Well, was it all of a sudden? I mean, were you ready?

Yeah. Yeah; no, I just thought, Oh, I can do that, that sounds like fun. And so I did it. And of course, now I have arthritis in my knees and tendonitis in my arms and—

And now you don't do those three events anymore?

No; I—yeah, I had to give up running. So then I started swimming and biking, and then now I can't swim anymore, so today I'm gonna try and do a spinning class. And I walk in the mornings, and I used to make fun of people that walked for the exercise, and now that's what I'm doing.

Several times now, I think you've paddled to Kalalau along the Na Pali Coastline of Kauai, which is rough, there are no lifeguards around to save you if you get into trouble. It's about a 27-mile paddle from the beginning to the end.

Well, we've done that now every year for, oh my goodness, maybe five, six years. And it's my spiritual renewal. And it's where we go and we sleep on the beach, and we have to pump our own water, and we look and you know, bathe in the waterfall. But we hike every day, and for me, that is just getting back to nature and realizing that in this world, you are very small. And then all of a sudden, it just doesn't really matter that the color was slightly, you know, too yellow—or you know.

And the main fashion garment is the pareau, right? Because you can wear it, you can towel off on it.

Yes. You sleep on it. You can—yeah. You can do everything with it.

The wilderness trips, the camping; that doesn't jive with your image as this fashion designer who's just perfect at your shows.

I know. I remember when one year we came back from Kalalau; and this was after being a week on the beach, right? And we came direct from the beach to the airport. And as I was checking in, the guy looks at my ID and he starts to laugh, and he goes, Hey, you have the same name as the fashion designer. I went like, Oh, yeah. And another time, I was up at a waterfall, and I don't know how it got out, but this guy there that works for advertising found out that I was there. And he goes, Oh, Anne, I always to meet you, and so I was a little embarrassed of the way I looked. So I thought, I'm just gonna be cool, like I'm cool, you know, I'm in nature, and so what if I look like this. So I was like, Oh, yeah, and I was doing my whole, you know, I'm nature too, and all that. And then all of a sudden, I'm talking to him, and one of the lenses from my sunglasses popped out and fell on the ground. And then I completely lost it. And I was like, Don't tell anyone you saw me here.

Do you think your position number two in a family of four kids—you know, they always talk about birth number being important somehow.

Yes. I think I was ignored as the middle child. Because—

Well, we know about the hand-me-downs.

Yes, Leslie. And you know, my older sister, she got all the new stuff, and she got to do things first. And then my younger brother was the baby, so he got babied. And the middle child always gets ignored.

But it seems to have worked out for you.

Yeah. I just like to use it.

The middle child has done very well for herself. I've overheard women saying with pride 'I'm wearing an Anne Namba.' Anne's clientele has grown to include Elizabeth Taylor, Aretha Franklin, Hillary Clinton, Olympic gold medalist Kristi Yamaguchi and many women throughout Hawaii. It was fun sharing stories with this successful Hawaii entrepreneur, creative force, and good friend – Anne Namba. But, as always, we have to keep this long story short. Mahalo for joining me. I'm Leslie Wilcox with PBS Hawaii. A hui hou kakou!

We lived in Thailand and Iran, and then just—

You lived in Iran when you were a kid.

Yes. That's right.

What was it like?

You know, it was really fun back then 'cause it was the Shah, and you know, we rode horses, and we went to a private little school and it was great fun; international school. And it was great back then.

Your dad was a professor from the University on sabbatical.

Right; and you know, he was basically, you know, looking for different experiences to do, and we went as a family. And so we all sort of got the travel bug and just curiosity in other cultures. I think it was just sort of you know, you grow up around it.