

GUEST: CANDY SUIISO

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When I left, I remember graduating from Waianae High School, thinking, I want to get the heck out of here, and I never, ever want to come back. I never want to come back. I remember that- thinking that way. But you know, you leave a place that you really love, and when you come back- every year, I would come back, it just felt better and better. And I knew I wanted to come back. When I realized that's what I wanted to do, I wanted to teach, I knew I wanted to be at Waianae High School.

There's a movement taking place on Oahu's leeward coast. You may have seen a part of it without realizing you were seeing part of a movement that's bringing in jobs in place of drugs, hope in place of homelessness, and a culture of doing the right thing. And where would you have seen this? On television!

Public service announcements, TV commercials, student news videos and music videos are some of the kinds of work of the multi-talented, award-winning high school students from Waianae High School's Searider Productions.

They're part of a movement that's encouraging, educating, enabling young people to learn life and workforce skills and give back to their community. A movement led, guided, nurtured by a graduate of Waianae High who returned to the community to live and work. This educator learned to find resources in and mostly OUTside the public school system to grow the largest and most successful high school multi-media production program in Hawaii. We'll sit down to chat with Candy Suiso – next.

Aloha no, I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. Today's *Long Story Short* features Candy Suiso, a graduate of Waianae High School who's been teaching there for more than 20 years. Her mother taught at Makaha Elementary for 30 years.

What Candy and a team of teachers have done at Waianae High is pretty simple. While teaching students to use different mediums of communication (print, audio, video and web), they're also teaching them to communicate – ask questions, seek different perspectives, present a story.

The teachers at Waianae have simply given students the tools they need to succeed, the skills they need to know, and the belief that they can achieve. And boy have they.

Success receiving grants... success producing broadcast TV commercials... success winning awards...

I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to give back to the community that was very good to me. I really felt that that's where I was the most needed. It felt right. I wanted to be in- I wanted to be home. I wanted to be in the community that raised me. And it was the right thing to do. I just felt that that was the right thing to do, and it was the right decision, when I look back.

Much of what you've done at Waianae High School wasn't done really within the system. You had to find ways to equip yourself and your students with grants. You had to become a grant writer—

M-hm.

--to get the proper equipment, the space.

M-hm. There's within the DOE, there's so many limitations, and there's only so much money to go around. And part of our success is, I believe, we've learned to work around the system and been very successful in going- like you said, going after a lot of grants. A lot of support, pulling together partners, pulling together people that believe in you; that's been our success. We had to prove ourself, you know, like you said, the right people at the right time started to notice these students, and started to give. And-

These were big grant makers.

[chuckle]

Kellogg Foundation. I mean—

We still-

--you were getting—

Yeah, and the- m-hm.

--hundreds of thousands of dollars in grant money.

We were- yeah, we were able to secure couple HUD grants, federal government grant- from the federal government. We received another federal- the Native Hawaiian Education Act, another federal U.S. DOE grant, and recently, W.K. Kellogg Foundation grant. Back to back; but prior to that, it was the little grants that we were able to get. Little donations from people like the, you know, Ko Olina Charities, HMSA, who've been very generous, the Campbell- James Campbell Company. Just people who really saw these kids' potential, and gave.

Because they were doing things with nothing. When we first started, we started in a classroom with no air conditioning, with very little equipment.

And by the way, heat isn't just bad for people, it's bad for—

It's so bad.

--equipment.

We would pack fifty kids, forty kids in a classroom, and it was hot, and no air conditioning. But you know, those kids never grumbled; they never grumbled, because they didn't have an air conditioned room or top of the line equipment like a lot of other schools did. Instead, they just started to create projects. And they did some pretty good projects, and people started to notice. That's what happened, is people started to notice.

How did they know they could do that? What got them started?

You just- you give them the tools. You, as educators you know, the team of educators, there was enough people out there that said, You can do it, of course you can do it.

You know, make a video; here;

here's the camera, here's your tool, here's how you do it.

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The essence of video production, as I look at it, is storytelling.

M-hm.

What kind of experience do you think your students had in storytelling?

They are born with a gift to tell a story. I really believe their success is because they are born with the gift to create. They- the kids out in Waianae, I really believe, are the most creative, loving, storytellers because- they don't grow up with a lot. I really believe that; they don't grow up with a lot, so they entertain themselves by playing the ukulele, sitting around, talking story, they draw, they doodle, they sing. And it carries over. When they come to us, they just- they're so strong and their heartfelt creativity carries over with this tool. All of a sudden, we have these expensive toys now that we give them, and we say, Go create. And they-

And they—

--create.

--just take to it.

It was amazing.

Now—

It's incredible.

--you didn't have the star pupils of Waianae High School. Some of your kids were doing really poorly in other—

M-hm.

--classes, they were reporting to school from their homes on the beach in tents.

M-hm. We have the homeless, we have kids whose parents have been in jail, they are abused. They come to us, we know they're a lot of dysfunction. So much. And you know, that's my world; I grew up there, and I know that world. And they come to us, and we give them hope. For a lot of these kids, it's their security; we're their family, we give- we teach them a tool, and they become successful at it. And they see something that they create, and for their self esteem, it's wow, I did that. You know, it gives them hope. And they realize, I have just learned something that I can do for life. And a lot of these kids' lives have been turned around. They would have dropped out, I really believe. And they do tell us that too. If it wasn't for this class, I would have dropped out, or I didn't know I was gonna go to college, or I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. And now, so many of our kids are college graduates.

They're being recruited by—

They're being recruited.

--television stations, and advertising—

Yes, yes-

--agencies.

--yes, yes.

I remember when your Seariders first started doing public service announcements for various clients. You—

M-hm.

You invited the business community to hire the kids and said, We'll see what we can come up with you. I just remember, as a professional television person at that time, how the students' work had so much more depth than what you would normally see in a PSA or public service announcement, because the kids knew that world, as you mentioned.

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M-hm.

When it was about crystal meth, they—

Yes.

--brought a reality to it that—

Yes.

--nobody had brought before.

They know.

these kids know what it's like to live in houses, in homes where there's crystal meth, or they have to be in a car with someone who's been drinking.

They know how it hurts.

They know it hurt. And it was their stories. If you look at any of those PSAs, those are their stories. They knew. That was either them, or that was someone that they knew, and they were able to come up with the idea from the heart, from real life. And I think that's what makes their work so powerful; it's real stories. They tell their stories, whether it's a news story, a public service announcement, a commercial, they're just telling their story.

You know, John Allen, who is the teacher now, I hear him say this all the time; you know, no matter what piece you do, you, you have to hit the emotion. If you can make someone laugh, you can make someone cry, you've done your job. And that's what you want to do as videographers, as filmmakers. Whatever your piece is, you want to—who's your subject, who's your audience, and what's your purpose. And they do a good job.

Knowing the audience and the purpose for every video they produce, students at Searider Productions have received rave reviews and numerous awards, including Robert F. Kennedy Foundation journalism honors and a prestigious national high school Emmy. By the way, it's NOT in an Emmy category for students from a low-income, minority, geographically isolated community. It's an Emmy open to the richest and poorest schools across the country. Waianae outdistanced everybody else.

A national high school Emmy, they got a free trip to New York to share it with some of the top journalists in the country. And what was so unique about that is, they showed it on these big screens, and it was a paddling story. And it showcased Pokai Bay in Waianae, our ocean, our mountains, the story of paddling, how it's not just a sport, it's a way of life for us out in Waianae. And Katy Hoppe, the student who won, got up there and spoke, said how proud she felt to be able to share the culture of Hawaii at a national level. Just to share what we do, and to share their work. And it was a very chicken skin moment. I cried; I sat there, and I cried.

[chuckle]

It was such a proud moment.

Candy Suiso, multimedia teacher at Waianae High School, is clearly very proud of her students' accomplishments. Historically, the school has turned in pretty dismal scores in standardized testing. It's excelling in its team-based multi-media program.

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Searider Productions is housed in its own building on-campus with 15 edit stations and HD cameras, still cameras, and computers for students to work on the school newspaper, yearbook, video news and video productions. Two bold statements posted on the walls at SP read: Lead, Follow, Or Get Out Of The Way and If Can Can, If No Can, No Can.

Tell me about, If can, can.

If can, can; if no can, no can. Because you know, there's nothing worse, we feel, than saying you're gonna do something, and not do it, and not follow through. And we tell these kids, if you're gonna do something, if you're gonna say you're gonna do something, hold yourself to it, and do it, follow through and do it. Because really, there's nothing worse than not completing something that you're committed to. And if we could teach them now in school, it will carry over in life, in a job, in a marriage, in a relationship.

And when you work in teams, you know other people are counting on you.

Yes; because it's teamwork, and the good thing about our program is, every project that these kids do is a team effort. And we always think, if you have- when you leave our program, if you have learned nothing about video production, about creating a webpage, about a page layout in a newspaper, we hope you're really learned the importance of teamwork, cooperation.

And getting things done on time?

It's meeting deadlines, respect, respect for self, respect for other people, respect for property.

So if you're gonna say you're gonna do something, you better do it, because if you don't, you're dropping the ball for your teammates.

But if no can, no can.

If no can, no can. And if you can't do it, it's okay; say you can't do it.

But just don't say you're gonna do something, if you can't do it. Cause you let everybody down. So if can, can; if no can, no can. And it's been out mantra, and the kids- they get it, the kids get it.

So sounds like you don't care if your students become these video producers extraordinaire; it's whatever they want to do in life, and this is just a tool to help them get there.

To teach them. You know, my mother would always say, You do what you want to. You know, what's gonna make you happy; and whatever you do, you do it the best that you can.

If you're gonna cook, if you're gonna be a teacher, if you're gonna be a lawyer. Well, no matter what it is you're gonna do, you do the best job you can possibly- you know, possibly do. And for our kids, they might not be the videographers and the Spielbergs, and whatever. We want them to know- we want them to be the best at whatever they choose to be. And be honest, contributing citizens to our community. To come back, to give back, and just to do what's right in life. Do what's right, even when no one's watching. You know, do what's right.

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What's the impact of Lead, follow, or get out of the way?

[chuckle] Well, you be a leader; we want to also promote leadership and be a leader, and lead; or follow. If overment you're not gonna take the lead, then do what you're told to do, or follow what needs to be done.

And in this world, you know, if you're negative, and if you don't like what's going on, and if you're gonna whine and complain, then get out of the way. Because we have so much work to do and if you're not gonna move with us, get out of the way.

With Candy Suiso guiding them, young people on Oahu's leeward coast are moving forward, together as a team. And, through Ms. Suiso's guidance, there are also opportunities for young people to return to the Waianae coast to work and live. Here's a sampling of the work of Waianae High School graduates at the for-profit social enterprise Makaha Studios located in the old Cornet Building

That's where they're based, in the old Cornet building. And it's, you know, people are, Whoa, that's kinda shady over there, because you have a lot of the homeless that'll hang out there, or the- oh, a lot of illegal activity going on, and it's kinda scary sometimes to be there. But they're not afraid. That's where their office is, they're making the most of it. It's their start, it's their humble beginning; they're gonna grow, and they're gonna flourish. I really believe that, and they believe that.

They want to give back; they want to grow that company. They want to stay in the community, which is good, we're finding out. Because there are no jobs out in Waianae. Really, if you look at it, it's a rural community, you have to drive out to work, and so this studio now is creating a lot of good jobs for these students that are coming out of Searider Productions.

Seems to me that something is happening on the Waianae Coast. It's the can-do that you—

M-hm.

--that's on your wall; if can, can.

If no can, no can. But we call it a movement. There's just- it's really- it's this generation of, I would say, the twenty to the thirty-year-olds I want to talk about. They get it. They are a generation, I feel- we can feel very hopeful that they want to give back. They are not- at least the ones that we're working with in our community, they're not so wrapped up in making big bucks, and they want to go and get educated, whether it's a trade school, whether it's through work, or through college. And they want to come back into the community, and they want to turn the community around so that people will no longer look at Waianae and say, Oh, it's bad, they have the drugs, they have the pregnancy, their scores are low. They want to do some positive things, and make some real positive changes for the community.

And it's all being done from within.

Yes; within.

With reaching out to national grantors.

Yes. Yes; and national grantors are seeing what we're doing, and And we're very thankful for that, that we have these national or local foundations and philanthropists that are saying, these- wow, this community is really trying to help themselves, and we want to help them. And we know that money will dry out, and we-

in fact, we want to get to the point where we don't have to ask anymore, that we can be sustainable, and not- and create jobs enough where we can stop depending on grants. That's what we want for the future of our community.

Where do you think this movement will take the Waianae Coast?

I hope eventually it will take them out of poverty. It might take decades, but this is certainly a start. You have a group of young adults that are really making a difference, because they have come back to the Waianae Coast, and they are giving back, and they believe in themselves, and they're believing in the students that are under them, and they're trying very hard to prove to the rest of the world that we're just as good as everybody else if you just give us a chance.

Candy Suiso... raised in Waianae... returned to Waianae to live and work. Like her mother, for 30 years a teacher at Makaha Elementary, Candy Suiso is an educator.

Your mom was a legendary teacher on the—

M-hm.

--Waianae Coast, right?

Oh, she- thirty-one years of her life, she dedicated her life to teaching out there. And really, that was her life. She impacted a community and thirty years, just taught at Makaha Elementary School. She went there, and she never left. Um, I remember the principal would always throw all of these hardcore kids and say, Okay, Mrs. Smith, you're the one that's gonna take these kids. And she would turn them around. She would just- she was mean, but she was very strict, and she was very fair, and she loved them all. And she did; she turned a lot of lives around.

What kept her going?

What kept her going is just seeing the results, seeing these kids turn around. You know, working out there in Waianae, there's a lot of dysfunction. There's not a whole lot. We have a bad reputation out there. And she would take kids and really give them hope. She would let them know, You can do anything you want. She would tell them that, and she would really make them believe that, you know, you can do anything that you want. And they would believe; and sure enough, they would. So many of them would turn their lives around. She believed in them, and I think that is why they believed in themselves. She really instilled in them, You can do, you can do and you can be anything you want. You just have to believe in yourself.

Did you ever see her at a moment where she just didn't have that hope, and she was miserable about—

Yeah.

--something that had happened?

Oh, yeah. She went through- she was very, you know, she- my mother, she literally raised four of us. She was

My mother and father divorced when I was nine.

my older sister was eleven; and I had a younger brother who was, I think, five; and then my other brother was three. And she just- her whole life was shattered. Um, moved us to Kauai, had my grandparents take care of us. I can't do this; she moved to Makaha and just literally really had to get her life back together. And a year later, we moved

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back, and she remarried. And it was a- there was a lot of dysfunction. I don't know what the word to say, but there was- she married an alcoholic, and there was a lot of abuse. He didn't really work much, and she carried, she struggled. She would live paycheck to paycheck. And there was a lot of times I know it was hard. It was really hard. She couldn't provide, I think, the way that she would want to for us. But she'd always say, you know, but she would always have a roof over our heads, we would always have clothes on our body, we'd always have- we had each other. And-

What about food?

We always had food on the table; always. My mother was the queen of Spam.

[chuckle]

She knew how to cook Spam, she knew how to cook corned beef hash. She knew how to make ends meet. You know, we always knew at the end of the month when the times were hard, a little harder, we'd have the bean soup and we'd have the ham hocks. And we hated it, but actually, it's something that we really love eating now.

M-hm.

We cook it, and it's good memories. It used to be bad memories, but there was always food on the table, and clothes on our back, and a roof over our head. And she kept us together.

she raised four of us, and it- you know, living out in Waianae, it would have been easy for any of us to either go the other way. But we all turned out really o

It must have been hard for her. She was the authority at the school—

M-hm.

--and somebody who was seen as having her life all together.

M-hm.

But then to go home and really have to—

M-hm.

--scrounge and work and scheme to keep things together for your family.

I don't know how she did it. When I look back now, I think, I don't know how you did it. And you know, my sister and I talk about this all the time. It's- she- to get away from what was going on at home. A lot of times it was pretty- it was nasty; it was pretty bad a lot of times. And she would just block it out and work. You know, I think that was a lot of how she would run away from what was happening at home her home life, with her husband. And she would just work. She would just involve herself with work, and keep busy. And my sister and I talk about this all the time. We have so much of her in us.

Because you work all the time.

Because we work all the time, or we keep busy when we want to avoid something or we want to- we just work. And so many times, we think things that used to bother us, the things that she would say, or maybe some of the things that she would do, it would just drive us nuts. And now, I hear myself say things that she would say, and you know, I find myself doing things that she would do, and I think, Oh, my gosh, I have become my mother. And it used to bother me, but now, it's a good thing. You know, it's a really good thing.

You were lucky that your mom lived long enough to see what you've accomplished on the Waianae Coast. What did she say to you?

[SIGH]

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She was always proud of me. She was just always proud of me. She was- she didn't say much, but I always knew. Um

I think she was most proud, because she saw that, you know, part of her lived through me and

continues. But she was always- I mean, she just always would tell me how proud she was of what I'm doing and the work that I chose. And that sometimes teaching is not a very prestige job, and you will not make a lot of money. It will not make you very rich with things and with money, but it will make you very rich with people. And she was right. You know, she was right.

Life is all about people, about relationships, about making a difference in people's lives, in giving and giving back.

When you give, you give from the heart.

And you don't expect—

And you don't expect-

--anything back.

--anything in return. You give because you want to,

not because you want or expect anything in return. And you give from the heart when you give.

Educator Candy Suiso... raised in Waianae... returned to Waianae to live and work. She knows about students' pain and tough times, because she too has first-hand experience.

Video clip with production credits:

I met you a long time ago in one of your Seariders' first triumphs. Do you remember?

I remember. That was our very first national recognition, and it was the first time we were ever on TV.

And you must have caught it, because you contacted us and you put us on your early morning show. And we remember getting up early in the morning, leaving Waianae at four o'clock in the morning. I thought, Oh, my god, there's Leslie Wilcox.

[chuckle]

And it was so exciting; we felt like rock stars.

[chuckle]

Thank you for that.

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