LONGstorySHORT with LESLIE WILCOX

PBS Hawaii

GUEST: AMY KALILI
LSS 219 (LENGTH 26:16)
FIRST AIR DATE: 4/14/09

Believe it or not, the young woman you've just seen came to a career in television by happenstance. With her charismatic on-camera presence, mellifluous speaking voice, and obvious command of the language, you might think that she had always planned on anchoring the first-ever daily Hawaiian-language news segment on a commercial TV newscast. Well, there's a lot more than meets the eye, and the ear, when it comes to Amy Kalili. You'll meet her in just a moment, on Long Story Short.

Aloha kakou, I'm Leslie Wilcox. The first Hawaiian-language news segment on a network affiliate aired for the first time in March 2008…. a daily weekday feature in KGMB 9's Sunrise show. That marked a major breakthrough in the promotion of the Hawaiian language to the entire state. With Na'alehu Anthony as producer and videographer, special correspondent Amy Kalili is so good on camera, she seems like a career broadcast journalist who just happens to be fluent in Hawaiian. Not so. Amy's journey to becoming the first Hawaiian-language news anchor was a long one, with many twists and turns along the way.

You're the first, ever, Hawaiian language reporter for a Hawaii television station.
M-hm.
So you're a professional storyteller.
[chuckle]
How would you begin your own personal story?
Um … oh, I think having … I mean, it started that way with what I'm doing currently in the news, I think it's only appropriate to talk about my family and where I'm from, and how that has impacted who I am. And so I'm … my father is—my Hawaiian side of my family is—um, that's my father's side. My father was Thomas Kirkwood Kalili, um, and he's one of a big family. Um, his mother was in Hawaii from the Waialua-Haleiwa area of the ahupua'a of Paala—
Very well known family on the—
Yeah.

--north shore.
And my mom is actually an only child, to contrast my father's background and his family life. Um, she was born to Horace Greely Patrick and Lillian Grace Kennedy, um, totally opposite spectrum, born and raised in Memphis, Tennessee. And Mom and Dad actually met um, in the states going to college, and so they both went to a bible school, they went to Bob Jones University. And my brother and I were actually born in the states; we were born in Mobile, Alabama. But having stated all that, I think um, it's evident that that kind of um, family for me has been really important; a strong sense of faith um, and just knowing that there are things that are gonna happen to you and you're gonna go places in your life that maybe you don't know what's planned, but there is a greater plan. And so that, I think, has kind of shaped me a lot. I mean, who would ever have thought that this little girl that grew up in Mobile, Alabama would somehow get back to Hawaii, get involved with the Hawaiian language movement, and then be arguably, as you said, the first person who's been given an opportunity to report on stories in the Hawaiian community, in our own Hawaiian language?
Well, when you were a little girl in Mobile, Alabama—
M-hm.
--did you have a sense of your Hawaiian identity?
…I think I was aware of it, um, but never truly understood and had a real strong connection to it until I came back, and then definitely, once I got involved in um, aloha Hawaii things.
Did you grow up with a Southern twang?
I sure did.
[chuckle]
I can remem—
Can you still do it?
Well, I don't know how um, true to form it's gonna be. But I remember when I first moved to—when we moved back, like, my family, my dad moved us back to Hilo, Hawaii. And so I think I've heard, like, for the first maybe two weeks, I still used to talk like this.
[chuckle]
How y'all doing? But two weeks, and Pidgin took over, and that was the end of that. [chuckle]
And so uh, you were in uh, Mobile 'til you were about eight years old.
M-hm.
And then moved to Hilo.
Yes; yes, that's correct.
…**you must have decided to learn the Hawaiian language. What prompted that?**

Well, you know, initially, I—although I grew up in Hilo, went to a small Catholic school there, I did apply and get accepted to Kamehameha. And so I went there as a freshman—

And boarded in Honolulu?

Yes. Yes, I was a boarder at Kamehameha for four years. Um, and while I was there, I took a Hawaiian language course. More so, because it was a requirement, you know, and it was that or, I think, Japanese and Spanish at the time, and French. There weren't a lot of choices. So that was kinda my first exposure to Hawaiian language in terms of acquiring some kind of working knowledge of the language. Um, but after I graduated from Kamehameha, I went away for a year. I went to uh, a small college in California in Orange County. And I came home and went to UH Hilo, and I had a bunch of friends who were actually friends who I'd taken language with at Kamehameha, who were taking language at UH Hilo. And it was more like, Oh, you gotta come take 'olelo, it's so fun and—

An—and UH Hilo was, and is a—

Yeah.

--hotbed of Hawaiian language.

Yeah; definitely.

Didn't UH Hilo have the first uh, p—provide the first uh, MA in Hawaiian language?

Yes; specific um, directly relevant to Hawaiian language and literature. Yes. So yeah, I was really fortunate to um, end up there, I guess you could say, and to have the opportunity to continue my language learning there. I had some wonderful mentor…one thing that really helped was, I was able to get a job while I was in college. While I was at UH Hilo, I worked in the Hawaiian language center at UH Hilo. And having those venues where you can actually apply your language learning, instead of just keeping it confined to fifty minutes day as a language course, I think that's what really helped me acquire my fluency.

I remember when I was a kid, all the textbooks said, oh, Hawaiian language has twelve letters of the alphabet.

M-hm**.**

How many do you think it has?

Okay; here we go. A, E, I, O, U, he, ke, la, mu, nu, pi, we, okina. Umikumakolu; thirteen.

[chuckle] Okay. And what about the kahako?

I don't—it's not considered another letter, but it is very important in terms of spelling and meaning, and how it changes, you know, a simple line in a—what … at first glance, for many would seem like a simple marking on the top of a letter.

Right; macron is what I—

Yeah.

--guess it's called.
You know, would change the whole meaning of something.
How does it change the meaning?
Um … what's a good example? A simple example, like um … kau, the word K-A-U, can be, like um, a word to put something, to place something on something else. But if you put a kahako or if you put that macron over the A in the middle, kau, it has to do um, possession and ownership. So … it's—
Pretty important distinction.
Yeah. Well—
An—and of course, many of the computer templates we use today, an—
M-hm.
--and uh …uh, old street signs didn't have um, the okina, didn't have—
M-hm.
--the kahoko. And—
M-hm.
--so meanings were lost.
I think—you know, definitely, I think at the time, it's—it's relative to the context and the um, the situation. When there are a lot of speakers and when—at a time when Hawaiian language was the language of everything in Hawaii, it was the main language. Even after, you know, different people, different um, ethnic groups had moved into Hawaii, Hawaiian language was still the language of business and politics, and government; everything. So if everyone has this working knowledge, it's not necessary, perhaps, to have these diacriticals that will confirm meaning and the differences and things. But you're right; I think over time, as the Hawaiian language moved closer to this purported brink of extinction, you don't have as many people who understand these things. And so there's a whole bunch of variables that lead to this loss of understanding.

Amy Kalili's commitment to the revitalization of the Hawaiian language eventually led her to a pivotal position in her pre-television career—and its an organization she leads today.

And a lot of people don't realize that besides being that visible Hawaiian language reporter on KGMB Sunrise Morning Show, you—you're the executive director of a Hawaiian language school.
M-hm.
How many students?
I'm the executive director for 'Aha Punana Leo, which is … the umbrella organization, for lack of a better term, that has—um, that administers the eleven punana leo preschool throughout the state. And currently, there are about two hundred and thirty-five um, keiki and their families who are

involved in those eleven sites throughout the state. However, over the years, the past twenty-five to thirty years, um, that program led to the establishment of a K to 12 Hawaiian immersion program within the State Department of Education. So it's not a Punana Leo program per se. We do partner with the DOE to provide supplemental um, support for the immersion program. But that program alone…at any time has twelve to fifteen hundred students in it. And … we graduated the first group of haumana who were Punana Leo babies, and went all the way up through twelfth grade back in 1999. So we've seen, you know, these numbers um, duplicate themselves for these past, what, nine years, I think. You know, there's more and more people, more students that are coming into the program.

And the students are encouraged to speak Hawaiian in the home?

M-hm.

And … 'Aha Punana Leo employees speak Hawaiian in the business offices.

Yes; that's correct. And it kinda goes back to what I'm—you know, when I was referring to the Hawaiian language center that I worked in at UH Hilo, and just having the opportunity to be in an environment where you're immersed in the language. So that's the um, premise for the preschools themselves. You know, it was—initially, it wasn't even thought, you know, Oh, let's make a preschool. You know, the thought was, by the people who—the—those who founded 'Aha Punana Leo, were to bring together what you call these manaleo or these native speakers with babies, literally, because the generations in between didn't have the opportunity to learn their language, and there—

M-hm.

--weren't as many manaleo. So it was to bring them together in some kind of environment, in close proximity, where the keiki would just acquire the language because they're hearing it. And so I think the decision by the 'Aha Punana Leo to also run their business that same way was critical to the success of the organization overall, that we want to be able to walk the talk….having people be able to discuss and … function around all kind of content areas, if you will, or topics in the Hawaiian language. I think something that is important to that is the fact that we have these haumana, we have these keiki who were educated entirely in Hawaiian. You know, there's introduction of English over time, and they're gonna be influenced by English; it's everywhere around there, except you know, for this time that they spend in school. But thinking specifically when I was at um, at Richardson um—

Law school.

Yeah, when I went to law school, the—there was um, um, a boy that came in, I think, my—when I was in my second year or my third year, who went to Punana Leo, and was—was an immersion student. And since

then, um, now that that ceded lands issue is so important, we went out to do a story about it, and we were able to interview him about his perspective and the legal issue that um, surrounds this um, ceded lands case.

Yes, you heard correctly. With everything else going on in her life, Amy Kalili also attended law school and at the same time she worked to obtain a Master's Degree in Business Administration. This young professional could teach a very effective seminar on multi-tasking.

Why did you decide to get a law degree and a masters in business?
You know, um, backing up to when I first started at 'Aha Punana Leo. I started doing, you know, that specific thing, and then over time, I … like I said, I knew that this was something that I was gonna do for a really long time, 'cause I was so passionate about it. So I talked to the executive director at the time, and with all sincerity, I was like, You know what, I really want to be involved, and if there's other ways that you can use whatever my skill set is, let me know. All of that to say, I ended up working closely with the executive director, doing grant writing and project management, and then eventually trying to just help solidify operations from a business perspective, given my business background. And then I got to a place where I was, like, Okay, I—I could…use some more education…it was more so … in order to take the organization and the work that was being done to a different level. What else could I learn externally of what I'm learning here on the job, to be able to come back and apply it in a different way, and help—
Did you need a law degree?
I didn't need a law degree. [chuckle] I um—
But you got one.
I … applied for MBA programs. One of my undergraduate degrees, like you said, is a bachelors in business administration, and I also have a bachelors in Hawaiian studies just as a natural progression of me taking a bunch of Hawaiian language courses in Hawaiian studies courses. Um, but I wanted to go get an MBA, just to, like I said, help more on an administrative level at 'Aha Punana Leo. And in applying for MBA programs, I came across the joint JDA—JD MBA program at Manoa. I'd never seriously considered um, going to law school. Maybe when I was like in sixth grade, I was like, Yeah, I want to be lawyer. But … so I applied; I had to apply to both schools, and I got accepted. And I still wasn't convinced that it was something that I needed to, wanted to, or should do. But talked to a bunch of people who um, had gone to law school; some were, and some weren't practicing. And the common uh, response was that a law school experience is something that you'll use and cherish, regardless of what you do.

So honestly, I took a leap of faith, basically. And my perspective on it was, uh, do it for a semester and if I survive, maybe I'll keep doing it. And if not, I'll finish my MBA. I'll still get some of this knowledge that I'm trying to seek out, and I'm still gonna be able to help more. And so I survived the first semester, and the first year, and finished it. And of course, hindsight, twenty-twenty now, I—it was a wonderful experience. It was work, it was a transition for me, um, but it's not something—I wouldn't trade it for the world. I worked really hard, though. [chuckle]

When did you end—when did you get your degrees; in '07?

In '06.

But you didn't go out and seek jobs out in the—the wide world. You knew where you were going after that.

Yeah. There was always this intention to go back to 'Aha Punana Leo. And … only because I think it's my passion for the language, and that organization has been the perfect vehicle, I think, for me to apply my skills and my knowledge in order to, you know, be a part of this movement. So I knew before I went to—even if it was just gonna be an M—MBA, I knew before I went to school that that's where I was gonna come back to. There was that commitment. And so I did. As soon as I graduated, I actually went back to um, 'Aha Punana Leo fulltime.

Up to this point in her career, Amy Kalili had never even thought of becoming involved in a Hawaiian language newscast. But it was meant to be. Amy was destined for a life in front of the camera.

—that began as a short experiment and lead-in to the Kamehameha Schools Song Contest.

Yes; that's correct. It was um, the 2007 Song Contest, the theme of which was E Ola Ka 'Olelo—'Olelo O Iwi O Ka Aina, which has to do with um … perpetuating and revitalizing the language, the native language of this land. And so um, it's—the song—the contest is n—now aired on KGMB, and somebody approached the leadership there, you know, to say that—I think it—Heather Giugni had a lot do with this. She approached them to say, you know, What a neat idea; uh, you have all of this—Hawaiian language is the theme of the contest, the pre-show which is aired, you know, right before the Song Contest is aired. Had a lot of Hawaiian language interviews, and it—it was about the Hawaiian language movement. Even within the contest them—itself, there were gonna be a lot of Hawaiian language um, interviews. So her idea was, do something to get your viewers used to hearing Hawaiian language and seeing it, um, and use it—seeing it in broadcast. So they agreed, and um, Randi Fong at Kamehameha said, You know what, you need to go talk to the people at Punana Leo, because it's definitely something they can pull off. And so

I was at home in Hale'iwa, and I got a phone call, I think, on a Wednesday. And it was actually Kauanoe, and she was like, Okay, you heard about this Hawaiian language—Hawaiian news thing? And I was like, No. She was like, Okay, come home, we'll talk story about it. Went home to Hilo. I came back on Thursday. We went to the studio Thursday morning, and Friday we went back and we shot the first five segments. Um, it literally just happened like that. Um, when I went home to talk story with them, it wasn't uh, this long decision making process about whether we should do it, and whether I'd be willing to do it. I have no experience, no background at all in TV, much less news. And I think for all of us, it was just, okay, nobody else is out there giving us this opportunity to put our language on news, every day. And at that time, it was for five days. We were just like, okay, yup, yup, hiki no, we're gonna do it. So we did that. Friday, we recorded all of these—these segments for the following week that were to air right up until Song Contest. And that was gonna be it. And I think it was the Tuesday or Wednesday that—of that week, KGMB decided to do it indefinitely, and—

Because there was such a huge, positive response.

Yeah; there was.

An—and it's—it's um—I really like your segments, because they … they're not geared only for those who already speak Hawaiian—

M-hm.

But there's—there's captioning, so—

M-hm.

--when someone's speaking English, you know the Hawaiian, and when someone's—when you're speaking Hawaiian, we—

M-hm.

--we see the English.

Yeah. And I think that was … they said that first week, we just—we didn't think about much of anything, except just getting it done. But subsequent to that, it's—you know, for the 'Aha Punana Leo, the preschools and these environments where we try to bring in the families, in—intense hundred percent Hawaiian for as much of the day as we can; that is a strategy for bringing our language back and getting it into the community. I think this initiative, via broadcast TV, has the ability to reach more people if we can cast a larger net. And that, you know, includes what you're talking about; people who may not have the time to learn language, and may not have this goal of being fluent, but just to let people know even here in Hawaii, Hawaii does have a native language, and it's capable of being used on the news.

Use of the Hawaiian language has certainly come a long way. Back when I started in local television news, even the authentic pronunciation of Hawaiian words was met with resistance.

You know, I was uh, I was a Hawaii TV reporter in the 70s, and I started saying, MAnoa.
M-hm.
At that time, mainstream was just, Manoa.
M-hm.
And my boss was saying, What is—
What is she doing?
--with you? [chuckle]
And even my mom called me and she said, You know, I grew up in Kapalama, not KapAlama.
Are there some words that now, as somebody who's just steeped in the Hawaiian language, you hear in the mainstream, and it—they just kind of … they're like, you know, fingernails on chalkboard?
[chuckle] Um, I'm sure there are. Um, Kapi'olani is one of—is a favorite; Honolulu. I mean, you know, they—and like I said, I think it's just a matter of … it's not 'cause people don't want to um, or don't have the time to learn the correct pronunciation; they just don't know yet. So just by using it, you know, mahalo to you for what you just said. Just you, and having … especially for people who have an opportunity to—to impact a large part of the community, being on TV or whatever it is. Just those—you know, those—the little baby steps to getting people to um, learn and acquire cri—correct pronunciation, even. So …
What has come out of your Hawaiian language segments? From the public—
M-hm.
--**what have you been hearing?**
Um, you know, from the first week, it's just been … the comments sent to me, and one of my favorite responses from the first week was, It's about time that um, there is something like this. That it—there is this opportunity to show um, our community that there is this thing called Hawaiian language, and it's a living language, he ola olelo ka olelo Hawaii. So I think that's one thing um … people in the Hawaiian community, in the Hawaiian speaking community, very appreciative that … we're out there not only exposing the Hawaiian language, but … letting the rest of Hawaii know about these wonderful things that are being done in the Hawaiian community. That's been, you know, one response, is just you know, mahalo…

Ahai Olelo Ola not only presents the news in the Hawaiian language, it reports different perspectives within the native Hawaiian community.

…we've covered things that are arguably hot topics in the Hawaiian community, such as genetically modified kalo, and the two sides of that

issue. But we also cover things like when the market just tanked. We did several stories about the—how that impacts the Hawaiian community.
Do you um, observe Western style journalism in the sense that you get, you know, various sides to the story, whether or not your particular community thinks it's …
Yeah.
It's pono.
Yeah. It's um … it's a process, I think. It is something, however, that we um … don't take lightly, and that is being as objective as possible, you know. And especially for these issues that are really important and, you know, these hot topics
for the Hawaiian community. Um, for example, whether it was the GMO piece that we did, even the ceded lands; we've done several stories on the ceded lands case.
And there's a lot of division within the Hawaiian community—
Yes.
--about that.
Definitely. And I think it's important individually, and I'm sure this is the case for journalists and people who are in the industry everywhere. You have your own personal views, um, and your own personal stance. But I think it important, even when it comes to these Hawaiian issues, to give as much information as possible to the community, and let the community decide.
By the same token, have you taken issues that have been given generally just a mainstream broad brush, and brought—zeroed in on the Hawaiian community viewpoint, or a Hawaiian community viewpoint, that hasn't come up before?
I think um … you know, one example, perhaps may be the stuff that we've—we did in DC. You know, and that whole inauguration and everything was everywhere. I mean, it impacted not only the nation, the world. And so when we went up there, we were there for a total of ten days. And that was kind of our um, our focus and our purpose, was to be there, be a part of KGMB's coverage of the event. Um, but while we we're up there, to talk story with the delegation, which a lot of people, you know, I'm assuming did when they were there; they had the opportunity to speak to their um, congress—their representatives there in Congress. But that was important to us, is to go talk story with them about things that are relative to the Hawaiian community, and try to bring those things to light. So … yes, definitely.
Now, your um, your partner in all of this, your producer, your cameraman; you and he speak Hawaiian to each other in the field too.
M-hm. Yeah. It's a um … you know, I talked, when we first started, about how … things just kinda happen, and you have to realize that there's a plan out there somewhere. Us being able to partner with Paliku

Documentary Films that Naalehu Anthony owns, even that, the way that that came about after that first week, um, that we aired Ahai Olelo Ola for the Song Contest, we had a crew that flew down. After the second or third day, we had a crew that flew down uh, from Maori TV from New Zealand, um, to do a story on us for one of their news programs. And … subsequent to that, maybe with the next two weeks, there was a conference that was held down in New Zealand, the World Indigenous Television Broadcasting Conference, the first annual. And we ran into Naalehu there, and we started to talk story and tell him, you know, we've got this opportunity, we're doing this news thing, we're barely keeping our nose above the surface. And so he offered to help, and eventually we built this relationship between 'Aha Punana Leo and Paliku Documentary Films, um, that has allowed us to kind of um … smooth out the workflow process. Because Naalehu and uh, a bunch of other people that are working with us, Kehau Fernandez, Scott Kanda, they have background in news, but they also, which I think is um, what you're talking about, the fact that there is this aloha and this understanding of the language, whether it's the ability to converse in it. But I think like, for Naalehu and I, we're fortunate that we have this desire to see this thing grow, and we both have a language background, and we're able to um … do our work through Hawaiian as much as possible.

Amy Kalili also hosts programs on 'Owi, a digital cable channel dedicated to native Hawaiian content. She see it all as the beginning of an exciting wave of Hawaiian language television programming.

… a prime example is what the Maori people of Aotearoa have been able to do with Maori TV. Um … for me, that—that's a goal; it's a goal to shoot for. It may—definitely wouldn't be the end-all, be-all, but having content that covers that gamut, from news, drama, comedy, um, documentaries; having all of these things being done in the Hawaiian language, from a Hawaiian perspective, I don't see any reason why we can't get there. You know, the financial resources to do so are always gonna be an obstacle, but you know, it's something that we'll overcome. And just finding the right people, growing a cadre of people who have the skill and who have the perspective to um, make it happen, I think, is—it's—it's a wonderful opportunity that's out there on the horizon, and we just gotta keep moving closer to it, day-by-day, one two-minute story at a time. (laugh)

From Mobile Alabama, to Hilo, to Oahu, and then the statewide airwaves, Amy Kalili's journey has been as diverse, challenging, and rewarding as Hawaii's constantly growing awareness of its language of origin. Remember, Hawaiian remains one of our two official State languages. I

have a feeling we'll be seeing, and hearing, a lot more of Amy in the near future. Thank you for joining me on this edition of Long Story Short. I'm Leslie Wilcox with PBS Hawaii. A hui ho ka kou.