

GUEST: THE MAUNAKEA-FORTHS

LSS 308 (LEGTH: 27:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 10/06/09

GARY: I think the first place it came down to was the fact that we weren't growing our own food. We definitely worried about the kids in our community, but I think because we saw all this land that was being wrongly used. And so we just kept asking ourselves, Why aren't we feeding ourselves?

Kukui and Gary Maunakea-Forth, a married couple of common purpose and ideals that led to the formation of the largest organic farm in Hawaii...next on LONG STORY SHORT.

Aloha and welcome to LONG STORY SHORT, I'm Leslie Wilcox. The Waianae Coast is home to Mala 'Ai 'Opio, or youth organic farm, MA'O for short. It's the creation of KUKUI and GARY MAUNKEA-FORTH. Today, nonprofit MA'O Organic Farms grows more than 25 types of certified organic fruits and vegetables in Waianae's Lualualei Valley and it supplies some of Hawaii's most celebrated restaurants and natural food stores. MA'O Farms' innovative internship program also nurtures and \ supports the training and college education of young adults as future farmers and leaders in the community. A love of sport and travel set in motion the union of Kukui, a native Hawaiian raised in Nanakuli, and Gary, a former banking industry employee from New Zealand. He first came to Hawaii to play rugby in the late 1980s. The couple forged a partnership to help rejuvenate the Waianae Coast community. Each partner was moved by a longtime passion for social justice.

GARY: I guess growing up, New Zealanders are sort of an alternative lot. A little bit feisty, and a little bit like the underdog; and so as a kid growing up, New Zealand went nuclear free probably thirty years ago. So I grew up there as a kid. And then New Zealand plays a lot of rugby against South Africa, so during the end of the apartheid years, there was a lot of politics going on in New Zealand. So that stuff sort of sobered me to the realities of the world, they were used as teaching things when we were in secondary school, we were in high school. So coming to Hawaii, I thought I was coming to paradise. And I did. I mean, it is paradise. But there's obviously a few social issues going on here that I didn't know about, and I think the rest of the world doesn't know about. And so when I got here, I started to get to twenty-three, twenty-four, and I thought I would go back to university. And so I had some friends on the rugby team here,

and I ended up going back to the University of Hawaii for both undergraduate and grad school, and that was probably the best thing I ever did.

What did you major in?

Environmental studies and political science. And I think this was back in the early 90s; this was when people started to talk about sustainability and about the carrying capacity of Hawaii and whether very popular things like tourism, were really having a diver—having an adverse impact on Hawaii.

Was your interest in social justice, is that what took you out to Waianae? Is that how you find your way out there?

Yeah. I think I was in grad school, and I got a job working in Waianae, it was not a social activist type of job. It was like an ecotourism type of job. But I'd been going to Waianae before that, because I liked to surf, and I was surfing Makaha. I got to know Eric Enos fairly well, and I went to the taro farm quite a lot. And then a couple of guys on the rugby team used to box, and Waianae has got a great boxing club. So we used to go and watch them box in Waianae.

And where did yours and Kukui's paths cross?

GARY: I was working for an organization that did community development projects. And I remember knowing her fairly well, but really getting to know her through some community visioning sessions where she kinda called me out of the meeting, and—

KUKUI: I did?

GARY: Uh, yeah.

KUKUI: No...

GARY: I remember sort of clearly that—

KUKUI: That wasn't me.

GARY: —that I was part of a group that was advocating ecotourism on the Waianae coast. I think she asked me a question like, What is this gonna do for our coral reefs?

[CHUCKLE]

Do you remember that?

KUKUI: Yeah. [CHUCKLE] I did.

You called him out.

KUKUI: I did; many, many times. May—

GARY: Yeah; and it was a good question.

KUKUI: But definitely, what we connected on were some of the things that was going on in the community at the time. And I couldn't quite wrap my mind around some of the issues. We were going through this momentous growth as a community, we were struggling a lot with educational attainment for youth. We were going through a lot of things, around the aina, about the exploitation, and sort of coming from that history of sort of anti-development on the Waianae coast, it just seemed like we had a lot in common in terms of how we were speaking about how people and place needed to be reconnected. And, the experiences that he talked about early on, it sparked my imagination.

While Gary was growing up in New Zealand, what about your upbringing?

KUKUI: I grew up on Hawaiian homestead land. Our growing up was wonderful. We were one of the first homesteaders in Nanakuli. I think my grandmother moved there in 1931. And so many of the things that she had gone through, in growing her own family and her own household was within the context of growing a brand new community. And because of her mana and mana as a kupuna, she was a native speaker, she was well acquainted with laau lapaau, with Hawaiian medicine, all the practical things too of how to plant, how harvest and cook, how to really live off of the land, and live with very little. Growing up with her, I was able to capture some of that in my learnings and in the way that I developed. I think it's a very different place. But I think some of the elements are definitely there, that it wouldn't take that much to really reconnect the community. And I think it starts with the aina. I think that's what sort of the forces that brought us together was that idea of appreciation. And I know Gary hasn't sort of mentioned it yet, but he comes from a rural town where farming and growing food is a wonderful occupation. And I sort of had that similar experience of being very close to the food, and close to the land. As the family started to be less close knit, the same thing happened to communities, and especially in our schools. And so our school was the same thing. I couldn't believe that in my last year there, we didn't have Hawaiian language, because they would not allocate budgetary funds. And here you were with a whole school full of native Hawaiian students, and—

A Hawaiian homestead community.

KUKUI: And a Hawaiian homestead community, and no Hawaiian language. And that was very hurtful. Having had that in my own family, and with my own grandma. And if she had been alive at the time, she would have been the first to be there, going, This is not pono, this is not ... right. And so when the opportunity came to sort of question what had happened in the Hawaiian experience, we sort of came out and started to say, Hey, you know, we have to do something as community people. I had just started having my children then, and so that was definitely burning, and I had a lot of questions. And right around the same time, I discovered this wonderful link that I had with some wahine at UH. Mililani Trask, and Haunani Trask, and Lilikala Kame'eleihiwa; and I was lucky enough to pass right around the same time that they were organizing community around saving loi kalo making sure the olelo was taken care of. It was an exciting time. And I think people came into my life that helped me to mold ... this person that's sitting here with you today.

Kukui and Gary Maunakea Forth spent more than 3 years, in collaboration with friends and community members, formulating the essential touchstones that would become MA'O Organic Farms. In the face of Waianae's generational poverty, two main objectives emerged: growing food for self-sufficiency and empowering the area's at-risk-youth. Both of these goals were to be achieved through the perpetuation of the Hawaiian culture.

GARY: I think the first place it came down to was the fact that we weren't growing our own food. We definitely worried about the kids in our community, but I think because we saw all this land that was being wrongly used—Lualualei Naval Base, seven and a half thousand acres are still used by the military, and the base is really closed. And so we just kept asking ourselves, Why, why aren't we feeding ourselves? And then we dug a little bit deeper, and one of our friends who's a soil scientist, and it turns out that the soil in Lualualei Valley is one of the most unique and nutrient rich soils in the world. And we didn't know that, and kids in our community weren't taught that. They'd been taught that, you know, Makaha is a great beach, and we have beautiful oceans, and we should be proud of our water, and we should be proud of our culture and heritage. But the connection to the land had been severed. And still to this day, there's kids that come up to the farm who have never been up into the valleys. And that's because some of the valleys are off limits. And so I think that's where it started. And then definitely as our kids started to get a little bit older and go through the same problems that other kids were going through, our connection to what kids in Waianae, what kids in rural Hawaii are going through started to just really sort of slap us in the face. The idea that a good public education is very difficult to get in Hawaii.

Is that where you thought about fusing the two needs?

GARY: M-hm. Yeah. M-hm. We looked at the community, and Kukui at the time, in 1990, was working for the census, and then in 2000 she worked for the census after ten years. And you can tell that story a bit. But I remember her coming home and going like, Wow, things have got definitely worse in ten years. And telling stories like a family in a cul de sac all sharing the same power with extension cords going from house to house.

That's right; you go to door-to-door, and you really see people, and look at how they live.

KUKUI: M-hm.

Well, what were the differences?

And they were friends that I had grown up with, when we were children they were very poor, but you would never have known that. And because they were super smart. And I believe that one of them went on and got a masters degree, but they were very poor. And then to see the next generation so disconnected, and poorer than poor. The porch leading up to where the doorway was, when in the old home, had been demolished. And they were basically just using like a little stepstool to climb up into the house. And then no icebox. They had coolers all outside full of food, and the children were going in there to go get their food. And just dozens of electrical cords coming from another neighbor's home, and I guess for emergency or whatever. And still 'til today, we see people living in garages, multiple families, being told to leave, told to come. It's just crazy.

Kukui and Gary Maunakea-Forth talked with young people about the 'aina and its importance culturally, historically, spiritually. The couple drew upon the

assistance of elders such as Uncle William Aila Senior and other community collaborators to help run the MA'O Organic Farms.

GARY: We didn't want to just grow food, and eat it ourselves. We wanted it to be highly marketable. Because when we analyzed our community, the state of poverty was multigenerational. And we thought that if we sell our own food for a premium price, that money wouldn't go back into our community. And so we looked at the kind of social service kinds of things that we had been doing ourselves and that others were doing, and we wanted to add this ... what at the time was called community based economic development. But we wanted to add this economic development layer that now has become social enterprise. And so that's where it started. And we were fortunate to get a lease from the Community of Christ Church for five acres, kind of almost immediately as we started. And we wrote a business plan, and we got friends and family together, and we got a board of directors together, and we did all those things. I think the product of three years of talking and researching, and having meetings was the first two grants that we received were the first, we got a local grant from the Bank of Hawaii. And then the first two large grants were federal grants, and we got them very quickly.

KUKUI: There's no one right way. And we've all sort of figured out this thing, that we bring everything to the table, you put it down. If your idea is better than ours, then hey, we're gonna go with your idea. And that's how it even happened with that very first class. And I wanted it to be this great education program, and I wanted this element of culture and this element of vocational skills being taught, and this element of community work being done. And it just didn't happen like that at all. It was whatever, you know, resources and people that were sort of there at the time. And it started off as a ten-month-long experience, farmwork experience.

So who were you first enrollees?

KUKUI: Mostly people that we had talked to their parents at Tamura's. Or we saw down at the beach park, and said, Hey, we're starting a program, would you guys like to send your daughter? Oh, yeah, my daughter is graduating, and she doesn't really have plans; sure, we'll sign her up. Those people that were meant to be there, ended up there. And all of us growing up on the coast, the fact that there's only eleven percent that will go on to college, that's a small number. So what about the other eighty-eight, ninety percent that aren't going to college? Where are those guys? We thought long and hard about who we wanted to have this opportunity and to have this experience. And it was really those that were going to become the leaders. So this eighteen to twenty-four-year-old, Waianae or Nanakuli graduate that had a desire to do something different, and to connect with not only the culture, but with a future in the community.

GARY: Almost every young person that has been in touch with MA'O are—and this is pretty much the condition of the Waianae coast, the federal government

calls them at risk. And if you look deep at the statistics, you'll find that Waianae has twice the teen pregnancy rate, twice the substance abuse rate. All of these indicators are terrible, twice as bad as anywhere else. And so most of the kids that come have issues at home or in their own lives that they've got to deal with. On top of that, we're told in this society that if you go and get a college education, you can get ahead in life, you can get your American dream. Most of the kids coming out of the school, public schools in the State of Hawaii, in Waianae are what's termed remedial. So in the first year of college, they generally can't take one hundred level classes. So what it does is add a whole year to their college experience and so they have to pay for their college, they have to somehow find the resources to get through college. And so they have to be highly motivated 'cause when we started Ma'o, we wanted to start it with a college program, an associate degree program. That took us three or four years to gain momentum, because when we went to Leeward Community College, initially, they were like, Well, you know, let's do a non-credit program. And so we started with this ten-month-long program. And now the various programs we have through Ma'o are sort of designed to be like a movement, to have this environment of entrepreneurship, of I want to get ahead, of I want to work hard, I want to give to my community.

KUKUI: Over time, we nurture, trust and respect, and love. And for Kainoa, who came into the program... he was a wonderful digital media specialist, and so straight out of high school from Sea Rider Productions, he was sent out into the world to unleash himself onto the college scene. And he didn't do that well. Because William, worked at the farm, he said, Well, you know, Kainoa's not doing anything. Why don't you guys come and then be a part of this college program? You still want to go to college, right, Kainoa? And, Yeah, Papa, I do. And so he did. And over the time that he was at the farm, he learned along with his peers not only how to handle college, but also how to manage work and family life. Because he still lived at home. And then he went through this physical transformation. About a year ago he really started to appreciate the stuff that he was learning on the farm, and so he would take home food to cook at home. And then on Sundays, when everybody else is sleeping or having fun, he and another boy would come to the farm and help water the farm for Uncle William. And because we have wireless access, they would do their homework out on the picnic table outside of the offices. They would cook for themselves. They would go harvest some food, cook, and I think over the last year, he lost about a hundred and forty pounds. And he'll be graduating next semester, and his plan is to go to UH and get his four-year degree. So very proud of him.

GARY: The cool thing is, we've got a ton of these stories. And we've got the stories of the kids that are still in the program, or have graduated, but also the kids who've left early. There's a lot of kids who leave early, because mainly they find that farming is not part of what they want to do. Because the farm is set up, the work is three to four days a week, and it's tough. And you go to college. And when kids first come to the farm, they generally come because we're

gonna help them pay for college and give them a stipend. And the farming ... they could live without, some of them. And that's part of the stereotype of working on a farm in Hawaii and the US that we had to deal with. So in 2003, I think, was our first real official ten-person youth leadership training of these young people straight out of college. And one of them went through the whole ten months, and during that ten months, he turned eighteen, and he was all over the place. He would argue with the young women. He was just growing up. And he graduated, and he did what a lot of young guys in Waianae, when they have family resources, he went to work for his uncle. And that's what happens a lot, you know. I'm gonna work for my uncle—he's a contractor, and he was gonna go get a plumbing apprenticeship. And anyway, it fell through, and so he came back, and he came back up to the farm and he said, Uncle Gary, I know the farm's growing, can you give me a job? And I said, Okay, I'll give you a job if you make your salary. We've gotta make more money, and that's what you're gonna get paid. And anyway, he stuck it out, and now he's still with us, and he's twenty-five years old, and he's now the assistant farm manager ... His name is Manny. He represents what we believe is the untapped potential of young men in Waianae. He could run the farm himself. I've seen him, talk story with Alan Wong about food, talk story with Ed Kenney about food. At one of the fundraisers, he was talking about the farm to Pierre Omidyar who's a billionaire. He represents, I believe, what a young farmer in the State of Hawaii should be. Not just a person who's able to toil in the fields, but he can talk about the vegetables, he can cook the vegetables, he can inspire other young people to want to do the job he's doing.

Well, farming has become remarkably complex. You've got to be a weather person, and a scientist, and a marketer. It's a very—

That—lots of fun too.

—tough way to make a living.

Gary: Well, I think, we've tried to take the farming and make it sexy, and make it interesting. And the best and easiest way to do that is to allow the young people do, firstly, a bit of everything. So that they a typecast, weeding a lot. But they also get to do all the other jobs. And you know, packing vegetables to go to Town Restaurant or to Whole Foods is one of those things where they start to see the pride in doing it.

And the connections.

GARY: And the connection. The KCC Farmers' Market selling vegetables, that's the ultimate job. And we're hoping now that the next step for us is that especially some of the young people who really have all of a sudden like farming will be farmers, and will either farm larger spaces with us, or go on by themselves. And Manny and his now wife, Summer are talking about buying a piece of property or they've saved a deposit to buy a house.

KUKUI: And I think that's what I love most about what we do, that we're providing this way for young people, at an early age, to build equity. It's not just equity, financial equity, and also equity in terms of the relationships that we're

creating with other people in our community, and with the land that feeds them. So you know, it's so nice.

Despite the ongoing success of MA'O Organic Farms, there are still many challenges for the Waianae community—particularly for its young people. But for those who work the land, the farm gives them a chance to work through their frustrations.

GARY: I get angry every single day at the farm when we're sitting on ... you know, we had five acres, now we have a eleven more, and I look south and I see Lualualei Naval Base with antennas everywhere. And it was tough to be angry at that, eight or nine years ago when the base was operating. But now, it's closed. We drive past seven and a half thousand acres of land that and we have everyday normal people saying, Why aren't we feeding ourselves. What makes it even more ridiculous is we drive past the beach parks, and we see family, friends—kids, you know, in the farm, their families and friends, our families and friends homeless.

KUKUI: Young people are coming from those places where there is a lot of injustice being felt. Dad losing a job because he's too low, or he didn't have the right educational attainment, or Sister is gonna be kicked off of welfare because she no longer qualifies; or I gotta continue to go work three jobs just to keep the lights on. We know too that some of them are the only wage earners in their homes right now. They're going to school to make sure that they have some sort of future to get a better job, but at the same time, they're at a very low wage sort of job. And sometimes those issues all sort of bubble up, and they come to the surface. And I think Ma'o provides that wonderful opportunity to help them deal with it, so that it doesn't become anger, so that there's some constructive way to talk about how that happened to their family, to themselves. We give them an opportunity and a way to sort of come to terms with that anger. And we've been lucky enough to work through a lot of those issues and understand that it's so complex that we really do need to build those times in our families, build that capacity in our youth and ourselves to take care of that.

In 2009, after almost a decade of hard work, MA'O Organic Farms is expanding its acreage and its packing facilities. Kukui and Gary Maunakea-Forths' social enterprise is not only enriching the lives of young people, it is setting a standard for sustainability in Hawaii's future. Thank you for joining us. For LONG STORY SHORT and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Until next time Aloha A hui hou kakou.

Video clip with production credits:

GARY: I think that rootedness is the first step for the young adults to really understand where they situate themselves in the world. We call it the context that they come with yeah?

KUKUI: We're still learning about what is the best way to convey that, and to teach that, and to make our youth and our community comfortable with the images that both they perceive of themselves as having or being, and what outside of Waianae is looking in and seeing, or acceptance of who you are, and being okay with that, its really critical for our youth to develop well. And, you know, sometimes it's just a matter of creating time and space for them to be able to discuss that very question. And taking us out of the decision making, and putting them into the place where they decide, and empower them to have that conversation.