

GUEST: MAKIA MALO

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He's a native Hawaiian storyteller, known internationally. His stories are personal, sometimes in pidgin English, and they're always embellished for fun—mostly about growing up in Kalaupapa where he spent most of his youth as a Hansen's disease patient. Elroy Makia Malo, next on Long Story Short.

Aloha mai kakou, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Welcome to "Long Story Short." The Belgian priest, Father Damien, served people with Hansen's Disease in Kalaupapa a full half-century before Makia Malo was banished there as a child. Yet Makia feels very close to Saint Damien across the span of time...because Damien treated patients like people. And even though there was no cure at that time for the dreaded disease, Damien was not afraid to embrace patients spiritually and physically. Makia Malo was once a boy living happily with his family in the Hawaiian homestead of Papakolea, near punchbowl national cemetery. He probably had leprosy or Hansen's disease as we call it in Hawaii, years before it was diagnosed.

When we kids used to—we cut short through then, we ran around bare feet. We rarely wore shoes. At least I rarely did. And so what happened was, one day I stepped on this glass and I didn't know.

How old were you then? Was that shortly before you went to Kalaupapa?

Oh, no. I was about third grade, maybe.

Because that's one of the signs of Hansen's Disease—

Right.

—right? Loss of sensation.

Right. And so that was the first time. But then later on, under the same spot of my foot, I remember I went with Daddy up Tantalus, they had this place where they get the gravel from the kind of pumice from the lava flow. And they had—I guess they call it, black sand—way up Tantalus. And they would haul it off in these big trucks. So we went up there and I was running around inside. The next day, oh, my leg hurt so bad, and Daddy ... I went to him, he called me out in the yard, we're sitting on this table. He said, Look, eh, put your foot up on this table. And I see him sharpening his knife. And then he was prodding and probing at something, and then this darn thing hurt. It just popped out. And it was an ulcer, I didn't know the word applied, but there

was a hole under my heel. And after that, that took care of it, and it healed. And years later when I was Kalaupapa, I realized way back how young I was then, that the sign of the disease was already on me. I was losing sensation.

At what point did Hansen's Disease come into your life? What do you remember?

When it first happened, I didn't know what it was. Mama ... one day, she said, Makia, tomorrow, you're not going to school. I said, Oh yeah, Mama? How come? Never mind question. I always needed to know why about things. And the next day, Friday morning, Mama takes me and my kid brother, Pilipili, to the old Kapahulu Theater. Are you familiar with—

I remember, long time ago.

Yeah.

Kapahulu.

Okay; the Kapahulu Theater. And we went there, and the movie, I still remember until today; They Died With Their Boots On, when it first came out. And so we went to the movie, and then next, she took us to eat ice cream, and then she took us home. Next morning, we had to get on the car, my brother and I, and then I didn't know Daddy went in the back of the car, and then he got in the car. I heard something slam behind. And then we were on the car, we were driving out. Mama didn't say anything. And we went straight down to this place. I didn't know it then, but this was the Kalihi Hospital. We drove right through the open gate and took a right, and then we took a left, and we stopped right in front of this long building. And then Mama says, Pilipili, get out this car, and you stand right here. She's pointing right outside of her door. And Mama turns and looks behind, and goes like that. [INDISTINCT] And then he gets out of the car and closes the door and stands in front Mama. And then I hear the thing slam in the back again, and I see Daddy putting the small suitcase next to him. Then he gets around the car, get in, and we drive straight down, and turns around, and coming back, and my kid brother is like this; his face up in the sky, and he starts crying, the tears just come. And we were together so often, when one cry, the other one, oh, just automatically cried. And I'm crying; I'm calling, Pilipili, Pilipili. And he's looking up the sky [INDISTINCT]. And what I saw next was this man coming off the porch of that long building, right across from where we dropped him off, and that man was walking on the steps to get him. And then we went home, and didn't see him for almost a week.

What did your parents say to you? What happened?

Nothing.

Nothing? Did you say, Why are we leaving—

No.

—Pili there?

No. Well, like I say, when I ask questions you know Mama's response.

What little Makia Malo did not know, and what Mama was not saying, was that having Hansen's disease or leprosy was actually considered a crime in

Hawaii! If you had the disease, or even if you were suspected of having it, you had to turn yourself in, or you'd be arrested. Beginning in 1865, Hawaii law required that people with the disease, then incurable, be banished to Kalaupapa, an isolated peninsula on the island of Molokai. It was a place of no return.

And then when it happened to me, all Daddy said was, Makia, tomorrow ... you're not going to school. I said, Oh, how come, Daddy? Don't ask questions.. I was thinking, oh, jeez, how come? So the next day, we got on the car, and we drove down to Dr. Chun Hoon's office. He was the head of the Health Department at the time. And we stayed there for about two hours. But when we first got in, we sat down for a while, and then he came out and he took snips from our ears, taking blood sample. They nick the ear. And so he took the blood, and about two hours, we stayed there waiting, and waiting. And when he came out, he said, Oh, Mr. Malo, I got good news for you. You don't have the disease, but I'm afraid your son, Elroy, does. And he has to go to Kalaupapa next week. He said, He has to go to Kalaupapa. And Daddy jumped up and he said, Doctor, I like my boy go Kalaupapa tomorrow to be with his brothers and sister. And Dr. Chun Hoon said, Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Malo, the flight is full. But he can go next week Friday. But he go next week Friday, he can stay at home. But he cannot go to school. In my young mind, the only part I heard was I didn't have to go to school.

And did anyone tell you they didn't expect you to ever leave Kalaupapa, based on the state of the disease?

Oh, that's what we were told.

You knew that, that—

Oh, yeah.

They were really banishing you as a kid.

Oh, yeah. But nobody said stuff like that to us. We were just there, we're locked up. We were never told we had choices. And so for me, as I was a teenager, oh, god, I loved that place. I was doing more hunting than anything. Even if I didn't catch anything, it didn't matter.

Well, what exactly did you experience and know you were experiencing when you were in Kalaupapa?

Oh, I used to go hunting. I love hunting. And in [INDISTINCT] Valley, the first valley that's directly opposite from the crater, oh, every day, I can go hunting, even if I had pain in my feet. And I had an ulcer under my heel, and I'd still go hunting, and I'm running in the dry riverbed, jumping on stone to stone. In the morning, I can run free, but by evening, I'm having so much pain that years later, I had five ulcers on my feet, three on one, two on the other. And so the dressings every day. And then we would try to take pain pills on days. The only thing we took [INDISTINCT —I can't think of the name.]

Codeine? No?

No, they never gave us codeine then.

Did you not feel the pain until it went deep?

Oh, yeah.

But—

That's right.

But in the beginning, you couldn't feel it, because it was surface—

No, it—

—level?

Yeah, it wasn't as bad. In the morning, I get up, there's no pain, so I just get dressed, I go hunting. But when I come back from all that running, and climbing, I just get so much pain in the evenings. And that never stopped me from doing that kinda stuff. And then I'd jump in the water, and in salt water. That's bad for the wound if you go swimming every day, because then, like running around up on the mountain, they don't heal. And for years, I think no, not seventeen years. Maybe thirteen or fifteen years, I had those ulcers under my foot.

So you were a young guy living an active lifestyle—

Yeah, very. And we never had that kind place in Honolulu. No place to hunt. We used to go hunt for birds.

So you were going crazy with hunting, but meanwhile, the disease was making itself felt?

Yeah.

In the sense that you couldn't feel in your outer extremities?

Yeah. The skin level, and being unaware of it. And there was no one telling you how to be careful. They don't caution you about what things to do, what not to do.

I thought there were—

So I—

—medical people.

Oh, yeah, there were.

But they didn't tell you about lifestyle—

No.

—changes you should make?

No. And even the time too, I wouldn't listen to them too.

[chuckle]

But what I'm saying is that they never cautioned the new patients, no one was cautioned about doing things. It's after you did it, and it happened to you; then they tell you, because you went—did this, and did that, and that's why it happened. And that's it.

So you learned by pain.

You learn it on your own, you had to. Because there wasn't anything around to really stop you.

I've heard there was a needle test, to see if you'd lost sensation in your face, in your hands, your feet.

Yeah, they would do that at the hospital.

Your hands, you don't have full fingers, right?

That's right. Because I don't feel, they were damaged. Starting a blister, and because they don't feel, you keep using your hand. Even you have it dressed. Sometimes you get the pain, but it doesn't last forever. And then next thing you know, you lose one finger, you lose the second finger, and you always have these slits on the bottom. Bottom of the base of the finger, in the palm. And ulcers in the feet. So those two places on the body suffer the most damages.

A drug cure for Hansen's disease came to Kalaupapa in the late 1950s. It was great news for the newly diagnosed. But for Makia Malo and those who developed the disease before the cure, the nerve and other physical damage to their bodies was irreversible.

Is going blind a—

Oh.

—a common effect of Hansen's Disease?

For many. Well, it's one of the things. Not everybody came blind, but many.

When you felt yourself going blind, and knowing that others at the settlement tended to be shut-ins once they were blind, did you tell anyone?

No; not even the doctor.

You were trying to keep it a secret, so that you could be—

I didn't know I was blind. And I thought this was just temporary. So the doctor asked me how I was doing. I said, Okay. A whole week, I couldn't see. But like I say, in my mind was only temporary. So I find my way to the bathroom by just hanging onto the wall, and crossing the floor, by counting the doors where I know the bathroom is.

M-hm.

I go in the bathroom, I take a bath. And the soap, because my hand didn't feel it, it kept dropping all over the damn shower while I'm taking a shower. Oh, god, was so hard. And then after that, I bathed in a bathtub. So then, I'm in my bed. I'm thinking, how the heck I going tell my parents? Oh, man. Oh, jeez, I know. So that evening I got up, and I'm looking around. I listening, rather. Nobody in the hallway. I walk out to the hallway. I come by the nurse's station, and nobody in there. And right across the nurse's station right alongside the continuing hallway down to the outside is this pillar. I can see the light inside the telephone booth.

H-m.

I walked straight to the light. I walked inside, close the door. I turned off the light, and I thought, How the heck I going call Mama them? And then I thought, I know what. When I used to dial, I didn't even bother looking at the telephone, so I going try the same thing. I did and I got through. I said, Oh, Mama, Mama, this is Makia. Mama, can you and Daddy come down tomorrow? She said, Oh, yeah, okay, son. They came down and Daddy end

up sitting at the end of the bed, Mama sits on my right. And Mama always did this; she sit by me and she grab my arm, she rubs my arm. You know, rubs my arm. And then I said, Mama, I have something to say. And Mama says, Yes, son. Mama, I blind. Yes, son. And keep rubbing. Mama, you heard me? She said, Yes, son. She continues rubbing; each time it's getting harder and harder. Mama, Mama, I'm blind. And I could hear her sobbing and she was rubbing harder and harder. And my daddy, I can tell when he's crying; he starts sniffing.

M-hm.

And that was how I told my parents how I was blind. And then I spent the rest of the time trying to figure out how to survive.

Makia Malo summoned up personal resilience and inventiveness, and he persevered. In 1971, after the drug cure, Makia bravely set off for Honolulu. He rented an apartment and earned a bachelor's degree in Hawaiian studies, plus a teaching certificate. He also started his career as a Hawaiian storyteller. That's when a cultural treasure whose name often turns up in recollections on this program, the late Auntie Nona Beamer, introduced Makia to somebody named Ann Grant. Indeed, Makia Malo fell in love with Ann. She had eyesight and she had never had Hansen's disease...they got married.

Who made the first move?

Oh, her.

[chuckle]

She wanted to take me to her apartment, and I was thinking, Oh, jeez, how I going get home? And anyway, she finally Auntie went tell me. She said, After we finished performing, Oh, Makia, I have to go to this, birthday party, so I going drop you off with Ann, okay? I said, Okay. She dropped me off with Ann. Went into the house, and Ann had these videos she wanted me to listen to. It was some professor. I forget what kind videos. And I was listening, and by the time I went back to Hale Mohalu, was after eleven. And it was from that day on. We just kept in touch and I just couldn't see this Haole girl from the mainland. I thought she crazy.

[chuckle]

I'm blind, I'm all jammed up. I have an embarrassing history. Didn't matter to her. But I felt bad for her.

Sounds like she didn't complain.

No.

Her whole long marriage with you.

No, she didn't complain. She got angry often. And now and then, I would get angry too. But she was my angel, man. Oh, god. What a life she helped me into.

Ann Grant Malo managed her husband's career as a storyteller. What kind of stories? Here's one of his favorite tales...he's refined it over the years.

It came out of one of the kids asking me one day, and I was waiting for my turn. 'Cause Ann was starting to talk to open up our program. And this young boy asking me, Why you wearing dark glasses? I said, What? Why you wearing dark glasses? And I didn't know what to say. I said, Oh you wouldn't want to know. And then I walked away. And then I kept thinking about it, then I had a fabulous line. And my line was, The reason why I'm wearing dark glasses is that I'm so ugly, I stop traffic. And the kids all laugh. I say, You guys believe me? No. I say, Oh, good. If you guys believe me, then I no can tell you the story. But if you no believe me, then I gotta prove it to you guys, right? And when I say, right, I waiting for answer. Then the kids, they start thinking. Oh ... something up, you know. [chuckle] And so then, that's when I really pace. So here's what I—I going count 'til three. If you're not scared, please look and enjoy yourself. But please, if you're scared, please do not look. And by this time, I told them guys and they were kinda scared already. By this time, I says, Oh, by the way, you boys, if you're scared, you can jump in the girls' lap.

[chuckle]

Ann told me after that, the girls all grabbed their chairs—

[chuckle]

—moved to the other end of ... so when the time, I started counting.

Ooooooone ...

[chuckle]

Twoooooooooooo ...

[chuckle]

I scream. Oh, they all scream.

[chuckle]

Then I yank off my glasses and they look at me.

What's the biggest mistake people make when they're reacting to someone who, today, is a former patient?

Well, it's not only us. The same thing happened to those who had AIDS. Another of that kind of contagion, you know. But for us we ended up in the Bible. And that's where so many people, I believe, use that as almost like a right to call us by that L-word.

I know what the L-word is.

M-hm.

I think the reason it is such a horrible word to residents and patients of Kalaupapa is because it describes a person in terms of the disease.

Right; right. You're not a person anymore; you're a disease.

What about the term leprosy, the disease?

Well, they know the word. They know the word, but that other word describes you.

So calling the disease leprosy or Hansen's Disease, no big deal. But it's describing—

The person.

—the person as a leper.

Yeah.

Has somebody said to you, You leper? Have they done that?

Not me personally, but describe me as part of Kalaupapa. You lepers of Kalaupapa.

Do you say anything when they say that? Do you correct them?

Oh, yeah.

What do you say?

I cuss them all out by saying, F you.

Very succinct. [chuckle]

Yeah. And I say, you and your family too.

It's that terrible a word.

Oh, it is.

'Cause it reduces you to a disease.

To a disease. And it's out of hate or fear. It's not because they embrace anything. Just because hate or fear, that's it.

These days, the disease that for so long separated so many Hawaii families is treated in office visits, with drug therapy. But patients say the stigma remains. Thank you Makia Malo, for your candor, and thank you for watching Long Story Short. For PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

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But at the time the patients have all passed, and it is what would you like to see happen to the settlement?

My preference is that Kalaupapa go back to the Hawaiians, as intended. When the program started to take over Kalaupapa, the Health Department, no, I think the Homestead program offered the Hawaiians who were given designated spots in Kalaupapa. They gave them homes on other islands.

I see.

Wherever—whichever island they wanted.