

GUEST: LAYLA DEDRICK

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My parents' business; they owned a gas station in Maili, right on Farrington. So we were either at home, in the service station, grease monkeys running around, and right across the street was the beach. And that was our playground. So my memories of Maili are very much about the ocean, and that is still a really strong connection for me.

Born and raised on Oahu's ruggedly beautiful Waianae coast, Layla Dedrick grew up in a family business. Before she turned 40, she would establish her own business and win recognition as a business leader. It's her second career. First she was a special education teacher. She says that special-ed background has helped her tremendously in business...because she knows how to set clear expectations and give positive feedback. Layla Dedrick's "Long Story Short" is next.

Aloha mai kakou, I'm Leslie Wilcox. In this edition of "Long Story Short", we'll meet Layla Dedrick, C-E-O and owner of a natural stone company, Bella Pietra...and the 2009 recipient of the "Young Business Leader of the Year" award, from Pacific Business News. Layla Dedrick is a graduate of the Kamehameha Schools and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, and she's a former public-school teacher. With her husband Andrew, she founded Bella Pietra in 2001. The first year out, their business brought in revenues of 600,000 dollars. By 2008, the revenues were up to 11 million dollars. At that point, the economic crisis slowed things down. Through it all, Layla Dedrick looks to her Hawaiian upbringing and she remains committed to doing business in a culturally correct way.

I think one of the other things that I think about Maili is a kind of...not just natural, but a ruggedness in the natural environment, as well as the people. It's a hot, dry place by climate, economically has been and still is depressed. So a very kind—I think resoluteness about that affects how you grow up there. Our family business being very public—I mean, it was a service station and repair, so everybody in Waianae at that time literally drove through my family business. It made us very aware of the role that you play in the community. It's real easy to look at Waianae and see the

negative, but I learned from early on that you need to be a positive influence in the community in however you choose to do that.

You mentioned the community was depressed economically, and your parents owned a business.

M-m.

That must have been tough for them to operate the business and they must have been asked for credit a lot, is my guess.

I still remember to this day an old cash register, the kind you punch the buttons and, *cha-king*, and it opens the drawer. And in one of the drawers that didn't have dollar bills in it was an old beat-up Casio watch and a little, very small, tiny diamond ring back sitting the drawer. And those were collateral that they had taken from people who say, Well, you know, if I don't fix my car, I can't drive to town and go to work, but I can give you this, can you fix my car. And my parents would do that, and they'd put it in the drawer, and they were supposed to, you know, come back and pay cash. Those are the kinds of things they did, because they knew that's something little they could contribute.

Did you always hang out at the service station? Did you work there?

I did. I'm the last of six children. We stood out a little bit in the community, because there were all these *hapa Haole* girls working in this dirty, grimy service station and pumping gas, and fixing tires.

Can you fix a car these days?

Not anymore. It's more computer than car nowadays. But I did pump gas and help my mom fix tires, and that kinda thing. It was great life experience.

Back in the days when—

For sure.

—gas was pumped for the customer.

That's right. Yeah, no automated anything.

After attending Maili elementary, Layla Dedrick enrolled at the Kamehameha schools, like her older sisters before her. Just getting to the Honolulu campus in Kapalama was a daily challenge.

Was it a bus ride for you?

It was a bus ride.

That's a long—

So—

—way.

Up at four-thirty, five, at the bus stop before six behind Tamura's Supermarket with Clancy the bus driver, who was the bus driver for my sisters. And that was—it was a long ride in the dark in early morning. And then getting home at four-thirty, five-thirty in the afternoon. That was a big change, having pretty much grown up all of my days, my social

activities and schooling in Waianae. Soon, I think maybe about my tenth grade year, started to get an inkling of, I better not waste this. You know—began to see the opportunities that Kamehameha offered. And then just fell in love with the whole experience, academically, involved in sports.

You did sports even though you had to take this bus ride home?

Well, from tenth grade, I started driving.

I see.

So my mom's rule was, if you want a car, give me a reason that you need a car. If you're just gonna go to school and come home, ride the bus.

But I was starting to be interested in sports, swimming and water polo and with sports, again, leaving home at four or five in the morning to get in the pool at six. Practice after school, getting home at seven o'clock at night, just enough time to sit down and wolf down a dinner with Mom and Dad, and then hit the books. So high school is a blur, but very fond memories.

Did you become less of a *tita*?

[chuckle] I hope so. [chuckle] I hope I can—

At Kamehameha.

I hope I can—there's a lot of great qualities about the *tita*-ness...self reliance, not being afraid to speak up for yourself, that helps me, I think, on a daily basis, try to cut through kind of all of...when you're running a business and have lots of employees, and work with the public like we do.

Any drawbacks to the *tita* background?

Yes. [chuckle] How candid do you want to be?

[chuckle]

Let's see. I would say, delivery, how you say something has a huge impact on how it's received. And so that same quality of wanting to cut to the chase to help solve a problem doesn't mean that you get to be rude...

What about—you were one of six kids, and—

M-m.

—sometimes you've gotta fight for position. I know sometimes people say the youngest has it easiest.

M-m.

But on the other hand, it's a group, and sometimes you get put aside. How did you—

Ah.

—handle that?

I would say that but truly, I was really, really blessed, because I think I had the best of both worlds. I was the youngest, but there's a big span between me and the other five.

So there was not a lot of sibling rivalry.

Not sibling rivalry. I had more than one mom. I had my mom and my sisters, who all helped take care of me. My mom had me when she was almost forty-three, which is late.

M-hm.

And so I have the perspective of kind of the older generation, her values. But then I also have the values of...most of my siblings are Baby Boomers. I was actually spoiled, would be a good word. But in a good way, in that I was showered with love in a healthy way.

You did a newspaper article I read, and you introduced yourself in the article in Hawaiian style. You—

M-m.

—began with your genealogy.

M-m. Yes, and that's important to me, and something that's become really clear as a business owner. 'Cause I've been challenged more than I ever dreamed as a business owner. And introducing myself through my genealogy, when I think of myself in those terms as a *kanaka maoli*, it helps me remember that I am not just me, that I am part of a long line of strong, intelligent people, through all of my ethnicities, whether Hawaiian or Chinese, or Caucasian, and that part of Hawaiian cultural beliefs are—is that literally, your ancestors, your *kupuna* are literally standing ready to assist you. And so how can I be anything but ready to go forward when I think of who is standing behind me saying, *Go, imua*, go forward.

Who's standing behind you right now?

Oh wow. I can't talk about that without crying. Sorry. [SNIFF]

Besides my most immediate ancestors, my father who's passed on my mom is—still blessed that she's with us, um, their parents. That's who I know... but when I think about my Hawaiian background, I see these images of um, kind of these outline of people linked hand-in-hand. And for me personally, that's their energy, their *mana*, their soul.

I am linked through to them through my genealogy and they are there for me as a point of nurturing for me, to give me the strength to go forward. Modern day Hawaiians are plagued by so many ills, physically, spiritually, mentally, the land and our food, and all of that. And I wish there was a way for us as a people to come together and harness that energy that I feel. Because there's lots of reasons for Hawaiians to complain, be divisive.

Because of all the losses of—

Because of all the—

—of history.

Because of all the losses and the current state of our people, and to want to point fingers, and blame, and et cetera. And you can spend a lot of energy doing that, and maybe that's part of the process of healing, people feel that they need to go through that. But I feel it's time to move on past that, as a people, not just Hawaiian people, but until we move

past what dis-unifies us into what unifies us, we will never have the resolution of our ills that we are looking for. And whether your chosen cause is land rights, or sovereignty, or control over *kalo*. As long as those issues are divisive, our move forward will be stunted.

And you feel that your reliance on ancestors helps you—

I think so. Because—

—go forward?

How could this people, quote, unquote, technologically illiterate people get on a boat, and sail thousands of miles to a place they'd never been before, right? This little speck in the ocean, and then sail back, and come back again. How could they build a civilization here in these islands.

The most isolated islands in the world.

Exactly; the most isolated islands in the world, by some estimates in the millions, healthy, strong...

Sustainable.

Totally sustainable; there's one. That's a strength that to me, we have yet to duplicate now. We're not sustainable. We rely on imported foods, and our quality of life and all those things, that how could you not look back at your ancestors and say, they offer something to me today to make a positive difference in our life. It would be dishonorable for me to not use that as a strength, because they came a heck of a long way, metaphorically and physically. So they, must have had something right.

Let's talk a little bit about your college years.

M-m.

Had you decided what you were gonna do with your life?

Oh, no. I wish I was one of those people who...I meet people who knew, they had this passion from when they were little that they were gonna be a teacher, or be a nurse, or write, or they knew how they were gonna contribute to the world. I was clueless, made lots of kind of fits and starts. But, when I was in college, I had been in college for a year, my freshman year on the mainland, because that's what you were supposed to do after high school, right? You're supposed to go to a good college. But it was not really where I wanted to be. So I took a year off, and did a volunteer year at an international school in Vancouver, Canada. Met some incredible people from all over the world, one of the best life experiences I've had. Came home, I'd said I would take two classes that I would never want to take. So I took an accounting class.

Why would you do that?

Because I wanted to challenge myself. So I took an accounting class, which I was totally right about, was not gonna be an accountant. That one, I had right on. Didn't want to be an accountant. And then I took a political philosophy class. And I fell in love with philosophy. Ended up getting my undergraduate degree in political science. Had a wonderful time.

Could you tell how you were gonna use that? Did you see a profession—
No.

—emerging?

Not at all. And that was another thing, to the consternation of my mother. What are you gonna do with that? You know, my mom, get a good job, make sure her daughter's secure. But fell in love with the whole idea. And what I learned about political science and again, breaking down a preconceived notion, is that it's not about going into politics. Political science at its heart is about how do we govern each other with justice and fairness, and how do we create a framework and a structure called society that helps humanity move forward and become a better race of people. And that was fascinating to me, because I thought, that's why we're here.

After pursuing her passion for political science, and receiving a bachelor's degree from the U.H. Manoa, Layla Dedrick earned a teaching certificate to work with special-needs children. She continually calls upon her teaching experience as a business owner and operator.

Was that your answer to your mom, who said, How are you gonna make a living with this?

[chuckle]

And you got a special ed certificate? Or were you—

That again, was why did I do that. I needed a job, really. I mean, you graduate with a political science degree, I knew I wasn't gonna go into politics, I wasn't gonna get a law degree, which is kind of the next common thing to do. I wasn't gonna run for office, that's not me. I had previously done education classes, 'cause for a while, I thought maybe that's what I was gonna do. Which actually ended up being an excellent place, because then going back and getting my special ed certification kinda helped me tie together a lot of the different things I had learned in my exploration. The things that I learned in that special ed program, it's a lot about classroom management. Besides the particulars of learning about disabilities and ADA law, and all of that, it's about classroom management and how do you manage such disparate abilities and needs. I use those management skills every day at work, because some of the things I learned as a classroom teacher are not just what special ed students needs, is what people need. People want clear expectations, they want to know what you want. You're the boss, what does my boss expect of me. They want clear guidelines on how to get there.

As Layla Dedrick and her husband, Andrew, established and grew their natural stone business, she met company challenges with a distinctively

Hawaiian view of the world. She instilled the native values and responsibilities of *kuleana*, *malama*, and *kupono* in the workplace.

You said that you wanted to do more than sell your—

M-m.

—product. But why did you choose, one, to start a business, and two, to sell stone?

Yeah. M-m. To start a business; that's interesting. My parents were small business owners; maybe just that experience. My husband and I have been together since I was eighteen years old; that's when we met. And this year, I will have been married eighteen years. And from when we were very young, always kind of knew that we wanted to be entrepreneurial someday. And so why stone? I wish I had some really deep answer that was very meaningful. [chuckle]

Or family background in masonry?

No. I wish, but I don't. When we were both in college, we both needed jobs to support ourselves, and my husband went to work as a sales guy, just took a sales job in a company that did lots of different products from plumbing products to Jacuzzis, to metal strapping. And one little, tiny division that was just kind of a—they were dabbling in stone. Some little twelve-by-twelve marble polished tiles, like five colors or something. And he took that product and that became a major part of that company, grew that division. And so he had the particular knowledge of that product, and then with my management background, organizational background, decided that that is what we would do. That was in 2001.

Was that before 9/11?

One month before 9/11, we opened our doors. And so that was a scary time.

How did you do it? You just hunkered down and held on?

[SIGH]

How did you handle it?

Very interesting, and I have no statistics, but 9/11, other than the initial kind of constriction, nobody doing anything for the first few weeks, I think within three months after that for Hawaii in particular, I think turned out to be a great opportunity.

People were cocooning weren't they?

People were cocooning, and at that time in the economy, a major part of our business was high end luxury. When we first started out, that was a big part of our market. And because after 9/11 the foreign investment was now very scary, people with disposable income were now wanting their luxury home, their vacation getaway in Hawaii, instead of a villa in France or a villa in a bungalow in Bali or—

Right; the safety [INDISTINCT].

Safe. It was still the United States, but it was exotic, and it was beautiful and the weather was fantastic. So 9/11 for us, the bleeding was short. It was fast, but short. And now, I mean, us like everyone else, long term difficulty, and I think, knock on wood, slow but steady recovery.

How do you strike a balance? I mean, because there's always something more you could be doing in—

Yes.

—any one phase of your life. When do you decide to push yourself away from the table, or whatever else you're doing?

Yeah. Continual struggle.

Always balancing?

Always. And what today's balance looks like may not look like what tomorrow's balance is. So today's balance maybe requires that I'm physically at the office for eight, ten, twelve hours sometimes. Tomorrow's balance might be I'm on a field trip with my kids, and I'm not at the office. Very fortunate that my husband and I are able to trade off duties, et cetera, with the business and with kids and made a conscious effort when we had kids that we would try to err on the side of them and family. Not just them, but us as a family unit, and he and I as a unit.

Even though when you own your own business, that may be tougher than ever.

It is.

Especially now, in this, as we speak, there's a deep economic downturn.

Yes; the decisions I make and how attentive I am to the health of my business direct impact on the people that come to work for me every day. And that's a huge responsibility, and that more than anything else is, what'll keep me up at night. If I have, twenty-five plus employees that choose to come here every day, and that is humbling to me. I'm like, wow, they choose to come and spend most of their waking hours with me? Well, my husband has to do that. [chuckle] But nobody else has to do that. My kids have to do that, nobody else has to do that. 'Cause it has to be more than about stone. I have to have a reason for coming to work every day beyond the particular widget. And that's something that I kind of shared and bounced ideas off with other people in the business community is beyond what particular service you provide, what are you doing?

It's not just what, it's how.

Exactly. It's how, and then you have such a wider impact in the community when you think of it that way. Our product, it's not gonna change the world, it's not like I'm an ER doctor saving lives. I'm not a kindergarten teacher that is setting a stage for a child's development through their educational experience. I sell a product that you could take it or leave it. I mean, to be really honest.

And it's high end, so it's not necessary.

It's not a necessary. It's not a discretionary product, right? So then for me, my business, besides wanting to provide a quality product with good customer service, there has to be a purpose to Bella Pietra and why it exists, beyond are you gonna use this stone in your kitchen or this one. It's really about the guiding principles focus on how Bella Pietra fits in the community, and some of the wording from those guiding principles is about a standard of excellence in our interaction with all of our stakeholders at Bella Pietra. And our stakeholders include the obvious ones, our customers, our employees, our vendors, what business is next door to us down the street, because how we conduct ourselves in our business, affects our neighborhood. So that's our hood over there at Pier 21. So a standard of excellence...our values are three Hawaiian words *kupono*, *malama*, and *kuleana*. So *malama*, how we take care of each other, how we take care of our clients, and how each individual in the company takes care of the company. *Kuleana*, doing your job every day to the best of your ability, and realizing how your *kuleana* and whether you do it or not affects somebody else's *kuleana*. And then *kupono*, doing the right thing, in the right place, at the right time for the right reason.

Layla Dedrick is a part Hawaiian Maili girl who grew up to become a business owner and operator. She uses Hawaiian cultural values and her background as a special-education teacher, setting clear expectations, to run her natural stone company, Bella Pietra. In 2009, she was named outstanding "Young Business Leader of the Year" in Hawaii. Thank you, Layla Dedrick, for sharing with us here at PBS Hawaii. And thank "you" for joining us on Long Story Short. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

Video clip with production credits:

In high school, I wasn't in the popular group. I wasn't a cheerleader. I wasn't exceptionally outspoken. I wasn't in student government, wasn't a song leader at Kamehameha, all of the kinda high profile places. I was kind of a little bit of the sports, little bit geeky, little bit kinda fringe person. So I don't think that they were expecting anything this high profile.