

GUEST: LEONA ROCHA WILSON  
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This is from Khalil Gibran, the philosopher. And he said that we are a collection of broken mirrors; each piece reflects those we've met along the way.

**Leona Rocha Wilson has collected many shiny chapters in her life since she was born in a small Maui community that no longer exists. She invented a device well known to people who sew at home and she became a successful East Coast businesswoman. Today she advocates passionately for education, hosting a Maui-based cable show, *Go School, No Come Like Me*. Next on *LONG STORY SHORT*.**

**Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox** is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in High Definition.

***Aloha Mai Kakou*, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Leona Rocha Wilson is not coy about her age...72 when we spoke on *Long Story Short* in 2009. I'm mentioning this because she looks younger and when she talks about her generation, you'll need to know that it's a generation that grew up with sugar as king. Leona moved back to Maui after a successful career on the continent. Her first years were spent on a sugar plantation located between Paia and Haiku. Its name was Hamakuapoko Camp, but residents called it H-Poko. Leona's father was a truck driver and her mother cleaned houses and worked at the cannery. Her family was eventually able to buy a home in "Dream City," better known today as Kahului. Leona, the youngest of six children, attended Maui and Baldwin High Schools. In years to come Leona was influenced by mentors whom she credits with helping her achieve success as a businesswoman, as a national spokesperson for the home sewing industry and as an inventor of the "fashion ruler", a tool still in use today. Leona Wilson's self-determination was forged early on, inspired by the example of her grandmother from Portugal.**

My grandmother gave up her life, actually, to come to come to Hawaii. She and my grandfather came over with my mother, a nine-month-old child, to get on a ship to come to a place that she had never seen before, no one else had seen. They spent six months traveling. And my mother—my grandmother coming here never, ever to see her mother again. Never, ever to see her sisters and her brothers, and her aunties and her uncles. My thinking was, if my

grandmother gave up so much, I owe her, I really owe her, and I owe my grandfather to be the best person I could be.

**And how did you go about doing that?**

Ah, my mother. [chuckle] My mother, remarkable woman, fourth grade education, and my father, probably the brightest man I've ever met with a fourth grade education. My mother had more common sense than a hundred people. Her common sense was the very thing that helped the entire family.

**What kind of common sense? Give me an example.**

Well, give you an example. Being raised in the plantation, she realized that that was a very small part of the world. And so she said to all of us, Upon graduating from high school, go to the mainland, go see what else is happening there.

**Had she ever been to the mainland?**

No. No. Now, my father did, but not my mother.

**Go to sights unseen.**

Yes. Go try, to see. You don't want to end up with your life saying, I should have done that, and I should have done that. She said—here; so upon graduating from high school, she gave us—not me, but my sisters and my brothers, a roundtrip ticket to the mainland. Her feeling about that roundtrip ticket was that, if you went to the mainland and you found that you wanted to remain, you could cash in that ticket and use it to live on.

**M-m.**

And if you didn't, you always had that ticket to come back. She was so sensitive to everyone's needs that in her bedroom, she had three statues; [chuckle] the Blessed Mother, St. Joseph, and Christ. And under those three statues, she put five dollars, ten dollars, and twenty dollars. The entire family knew where that money was, and she told all of us, If you need money, you know where it is, under one rule. And the rule was, if you take it, you must eventually replace it. Her sense of dignity, if you will, we didn't have to ask for money. When we worked, we gave everything back to our parents, and they used it to support the family. So the family became very, very important, and to this day remains very important. My sisters and brothers, which is really one of the reasons I came home, to be with the family.

**Do you remember instances of sibling rivalry? How come he gets that, and I don't have that, kinda thing?**

Oh, no. You know what? No, not ever, but I can tell you this. My sisters were so attractive [chuckle] that one of the things I made up my mind was, which is why I became the student, was that my sisters were so pretty, and I couldn't match up to them. So I said, Okay, if I can't be what they are—that's where the only competition came in, was that I was gonna be the best student I could be. And so I studied really very hard, and tried to get the most out of education. Because that was what ... we knew in our family that the one thing that was going to propel us, if you will, or move us forward, was education. In high school, I was a fairly good student. Not the best. I was a song leader, so I spent more times being a song leader than I did ... uh, though I was okay in school. When I graduated, or before I graduated, my mother and I sat down. And she

said, What are we gonna do? I said, Well, Mom, I can go to University of Hawaii. And she said, Do you know how much Daddy makes? We can't afford it; there is no money. I said, What if I get a scholarship? Even then, I can't afford it. She said, I don't want you to work in the fields. I think we can do—I think you should do more. And so we sat down, and we tried to figure out the best way for me to get an education. Well, the one thing that came come—kept coming up was the military. You go on the GI Bill, you join the service. I had to join the service for three years. And the reason I did that was that she decided that I should be a dental technician. Where that came from, I can't tell you. She actually originally wanted me to be a hairdresser. [chuckle]

**But the military didn't pay you to go to college.**

[chuckle] There was none in the military, right?

**You know, I know a number of men of your generation who went to the military and got wonderful educations on the GI Bill. But you know, you're the first woman I've met—**

Really?

**—from Hawaii who's done that. How many were there in your group? When—**

Well, I think when we left, from Maui, I think we had something like four, maybe a little bit more. I'm not sure. But there were just a handful of us, just a handful. And I have to tell you, Leslie that was probably the hardest thing I've ever had to do in my entire life, was to leave my mother, leave my father, and my sisters and my brothers. To this day, feel that it was the very thing, though, that gave me the strength to continue to pursue the wonderful life that I have enjoyed.

**Leona Rocha Wilson grew up in small-town Maui, rich with ethnicities and mutual respect. Her military experience was a wakeup call to the realities of racial segregation on the mainland.**

The first thing they told us that first weekend in Anniston, Alabama, that we could not, us White—supposedly White folks—could not go with the other local girls to town, because the prejudice existing in those days. So I remember; they said I couldn't go with my friends, so I stayed home. I didn't go. I mean, I stayed in the barracks, didn't go. It was difficult, it was really difficult.

**What ethnicities were your friends?**

They were a mixture. They were Asian, they were Hawaiian, they were Filipino. They were a mixture—my friend, Yvonne Yamane was a mixture.

**And segregation was in full swing.**

Was in full swing. We had to use separate bathrooms, separate toilets. Not in the military, of course, but certainly in town. And I then went to Fort Sam Houston, Texas, where all the dental technician schools—school took place. What was interesting about that was that we were the first group of women to go into the dental technician school. And we started, I think, with probably about seven, eight, maybe ten women and thirty, or forty, or fifty men. And only four of us graduated.

**Why is that?**

All the other girls dropped out, it was so difficult. And two of the girls—one was a girl from Oahu, and one was myself, and the other two were mainland people. And so we were the first group of women to graduate. So it was dental technician. But then I ended up going to uh, Fort Belvoir, Virginia and they put me as a dental assistant. And that's where I got my training. And during the entire time I was in the military, and I have to tell you this 'cause I did bring those bonds. My mother again [chuckle] said, Well, Leona, you know what? You'll have the GI Bill when you come out of the service, but you're also gonna need money when you come out. Out of the money that I got every month from the military, I had to send home two US savings bonds. I ended up sending home the bonds. And I have them to this day.

**Oh, you never needed them?**

Well, actually, I did cash in a few. But the rest, I kept, because it reminds me that, again, how important parents can be and should be, and if not parents, grandparents and aunties, and uncles, in the development of a child's life. Uh, this is from Khalil Gibran, the philosopher. And he said that we are a collection of broken mirrors; each piece reflects those we've met along the way.

**After her military service Leona Rocha Wilson moved to Brooklyn with her husband, whom she married while in the service. She was ready for new things, including a new profession. She just didn't know what it was going to be.**

People ask me, Did you want to study fashion in high school? I mean, did you draw pictures and no. I had no idea.

**And you didn't want to continue on with your dental career?**

I worked at it for two years in New York, on Madison Avenue. I had a wonderful mentor there. He taught me how to speak English, he'd read the paper to me and I—

**What do you mean, he taught you how to speak English?**

Well, what he taught me was there is an educated way of saying something or an uneducated way.

**Well, how were you saying things?**

Give you an example. I used to say, Well, this is cheap. He'd say, Leona, this is inexpensive. [chuckle] So there are ways in which you can use more educated words, and he was trying to help me with those words.

**So, social graces in terms of language.**

Yes, and I'd serve tea. I was working for him and he was on Madison Avenue, so he taught me how to speak properly to people, how to serve tea, which we would probably see two or three patients a day, and so I had plenty of time. He taught me about the stock market. I listened to him during that time. So he was a wonderful mentor. I think to grow, you must listen. And there will be many, many people in your life that will share many wonderful areas of improvement for you. And I did listen, and I did work at it. And for him, I'm very grateful. So I worked for him for a while, then I went to 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and I worked for a woman called Eloise Curtis. She was a designer. I worked there as a secretary,

switchboard, whatever. I went to secretarial school too; that was something else I did. I worked for her in the garment industry, and she taught me how to dress. And it was interesting, because I had no idea, I had no idea what size I was. Coming from Hawaii and in the military, I had no idea what size I was. I mean, it was just—

**How did you dress?**

Well, not well, obviously. [chuckle] 'Cause Eloise said, We're gonna have to do this for you.

**She hired you, though.**

Yes, she did. She did. As a matter of fact, at one point, I helped out with her sample modeling, and I think I was a size one. That was long—Leslie, a long time ago. [chuckle] Many, many sizes ago. And so she did help me to dress, to understand, scale and proportion and color, and my figure in relationship to what would be appropriate for me. And after her, I went to work for the aviation industry as a secretary. And at that point, I was married, I got pregnant. And when I was pregnant, I realized that the maternity clothes were awful. They were so ugly that you ended up—I looked at it—and expensive. So then I said to myself, Hey, you know, why can't I sew my own? So at that point, I looked to see what other classes I could go to, and went to the Y or YW, and they had a class on sewing. And I decided to sew my maternity clothes, and it was at that point I decided that fashion was great. Here I was married, I was pregnant, I was working during the day. So that being said, I had to go to school at night. That was the only way, because we needed the money, I had to work. So that's when the GI Bill came into play. And I went, got the GI Bill, went to Fashion Institute of Technology. Now, not even knowing there what I wanted to study, I signed up for pattern making. This is why you gotta go out there and find out what you don't like, and then do something so that you know what you do like. And I didn't like pattern making.

**[chuckle]**

All those numbers, and math is not my strong suit. So I ended up saying, I don't want to be a pattern maker. So at FIT, then I went to see one of the teachers, and I said, Look, is there something else. He said, Yeah, why don't you study apparel design. And that's where you drape fabric, and you don't have to worry about math. [chuckle] And so I decided to do apparel design and it was at that point that eight years at night later, I finally got my degree in apparel design. Though, I must say, with the help of my husband, the father of my son, my mother-in-law. Because without them, going to school at night would not have been possible.

**You continued to work?**

I continued to work.

**And take care of your child, and go to school.**

M-hm; yeah. And on weekends, that's all I had time to do, was to do my work, my homework. And I did graduate with honors, which was an incredible task for me, and I'm very proud of it. My son came to my graduation at Carnegie Hall, interestingly enough. So people say, How do you do these things? I can only

say that my mother gave me this wonderful sense of positiveness. She was so positive; it's like, go do it. What's the worst thing can happen? You fail, so what? At least you know you don't want to do that or you're not good at that. **It's not a waste of time to find out you don't really want to do this.**

No.

**While sewing her own clothes Leona Rocha Wilson came up with the idea of creating a tool to assist the home sewer. With no clue of how to market her design she reconnected with her former mentor Joe Barta who became a trusted advisor. Manufacturing her new device led to the creation of her own company, Fashionetics.**

Home sewers had no idea how to change dress patterns. Dress patterns is made for a standard size, which is, I think, a ten. They might have changed it now, 'cause we're getting a little bit larger. But the average size was, I think, for size ten. And some of us were down here, and some of us were a little bit larger than the ten. So dress patterns—and some of us have sloping shoulders, and some of us have full breasts, and some of us have large hips and small hips. So the variance in figure types required that you take this pattern that you purchased and change the pattern to suit your figure.

**And until you invented the fashion ruler, people were just eyeballing it?**

Well, they would fold the pattern, or they would kind of do what the pattern companies told them to do, which is primarily work from inside the pattern. And so when I came up with the fashion ruler, we used that fashion ruler to do the same thing a professional would do. And that is, if you want to change an armhole, you take that part of the ruler and you put it on the armhole, and you lower it, you raise it. It was—it's simple. It makes—it was just—it simplified changing dress patterns to customize it for you personally. Now, how I got into [chuckle] a little bit more difficulty was this. I had the ruler, I had designed the ruler, and I went—

**Was it exactly the same as the ruler a professional uses, or was it—**

No, it was a—

**—different?**

—combination. The fashion ruler is about three or four professional rulers made into one.

**I see.**

So I just combined all the lines into one. It was just simple. But I'd not thought of it until my mentor, Joe Barta, said to me, Go ahead and try to do your own. And so when I created this ruler I needed to have a—it was plastic, I needed to have a mold made, which was very expensive. I needed packaging. I needed marketing. And you know, I designed the ruler, but I had no clue about these other areas. So I went back to Joe Barta and I said, Look, I have the ruler. He was the one that found the next person for me to be involved in, to make the fashion ruler. We then created the fashion ruler. We packaged it, and were ready to sell it and bring it to the retail stores. Now ... new ruler, no one ever saw

it before. So what that says is that nobody knew how to use it. [chuckle] So I had to go out to the stores to teach women how to use these rulers. And that's how I got started, talking with women, which I just love. I travel the country, I show them how to change dress patterns using the ruler, and that was the very thing that got me involved with television and set my company up. I did get a US patent, I created more rulers and more devices for the home sewing industry. So have I ever worked in the garment industry to create fashion? No. I started my own business called Fashionetics.

**An inventor.**

Yeah. It was fun.

**And were they big selling items?**

Oh, it's being sold today, as we speak

**Leona Rocha Wilson also authored the book *Discover Fit Fashion and You* and married her mentor, Joe Barta. After his death she sold her business *Fashionetics* and took on a new challenge as a national spokesperson for the home sewing industry.**

I got this call from Simplicity, and they said, Would you want to do television? And I said, Look, I've never done television, what do I know about TV? He said, Leona, you can talk. [chuckle] So based on that, they sent me to California. We did a shoot. They said, [INDISTINCT]. Carol Lawrence was the hostess at the time. She did the show. And she and I had the best time. Oh, we just loved each other. We had a great time, we laughed and had a good time. By the time I left the set, the producer asked me if I would take on the show for the following season, which I did, which was on Lifetime Cable, which is Lifetime today. And we did the sewing show. And that got me started on—I'd never done television. But I remembered my mother saying, What's the worst thing can happen? They send you home; what's the worst thing can happen?

**And it was a national cable show.**

M-hm.

**Wow.**

And from that, Simplicity needed a spokesperson. A lobbying firm in Washington came to Simplicity; they said, Leona, would you like to travel the country doing all their television show for—you remember the thing called, Made In USA, Crafted With Pride, Made In USA? Well, I was their spokesperson. They sent me throughout the nation to do all the television shows, AM Los Angeles, New York Today Show, you name it. And I did it for them in order to represent them on television, radio, and newspaper.

**Leona Rocha Wilson became the first woman president of the national organization, the American Home Sewing Association, comprised of fabric companies, sewing suppliers and sewing machine makers. Industry giant Vogue/Butterick would woo Leona away from the Simplicity Pattern Company to become its national spokesperson. And eventually Vogue/Butterick's owner**

**would woo Leona into marriage. At the time of this conversation in 2009, Bill and Leona Wilson had been married for more than two decades. Bill has been a strong supporter of Leona's continuing efforts to promote learning. Her show on Maui Community College's cable television channel showcases individuals whose lives have been transformed through family support for education.**

They wanted me to sort of have a little bit more educated title for the show. But I insisted that Go School, No Come Like Me took us back to the plantation days. It was when they would say, Go school, no come like me. You don't want to work in the fields, better yourself, become the best person you possibly can. Leslie, I'm sure you're aware that for every hundred students that enter our high schools here in Hawaii, twenty-two drop out of school. Nationally, we have a higher—thirty dropout nationally. The dropout rate really, really bothered me and my husband. So we came up with this program, Go School, No Come Like Me, and it's to bring attention to the dropout rate and to reach the parents, the grandparents, the aunties, and the uncles, this one small segment, to let them know and to listen to stories of people who have made it ... not necessarily always financially, but have lived fulfilled lives because they have had and they pursued an education. And so what we're trying to do is reach these parents, these families in their homes so that they know that it takes more than just raising a child. The input that they have, and the friends and families they have play an important role. So, Go School, No Come Like Me, we have wonderful people that we've interviewed, people who have taken three jobs. Harrison Miyahira today owns a company that has over four hundred people and has in forty different countries, came from Kuau, and today, went to school to Purdue, starved, and today owns this company, HM Electronics. These are the stories that just inspired me, anyway, by listening—chicken skin kind. We hope that through Go School, No Come Like Me, and Maui Community College, that people will be aware of the dropout rate, and will be aware that it takes a lot to make up or to influence a child to be the best he—or she can possibly be.

**I think of your life, you did devote yourself to school, but you also did a lot of learning informally through mentors.**

Oh, yeah. I continue to. I continue, continue to learn. I'm learning about building. We have a farm now. I have a farm; I'm a farmer. Look at my nails. [chuckle] I'm a farmer. We have three hundred koaia trees that we put in. I fertilize it. I have someone that helps me with it, but I'm out there pulling weeds. My sister Patsy and I; she's eighty-two, and the two of us, typical Portuguese people, right?

**[chuckle]**

I'm back to the soil again. I'm raising trees, and I'm learning about it. It is a most enlightening—it give me purposeful living when I am learning.

**An endowment scholarship for students attending Maui Community College has been established by Leona and Bill. The community college's cable channel 55 is the home of her show, *Go School, No Come Like Me*. Thank you, Leona Rocha**



**Wilson, for sharing your "Long Story Short," and thank YOU for joining us on PBS Hawaii. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A Hui Hou Kakou.**

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And once you find that passion, to make that commitment that you're going to do everything you can to accomplish that goal. And during that time, and even after that, you cannot lose sight of your own self respect. You don't lose sight of your word. All of that plays—that part, who you are, you don't lose it. You maintain it, and you manage to fulfill your dreams by pursuing and making that commitment to that passion.