

GUEST: JAMES SCOTT  
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And it's not just managing him, or our relationship with him, but just the notoriety of the school. We've just had more people ... I get calls all the time, people just wanting me to comment on issues, because this is Obama's school.

**The fact that the nation elected a graduate of Punahou School as its President has thrust the centuries-old Hawaii institution into the national spotlight. But the school's president takes it all in stride. Meet Waimanalo-born Dr. James Scott—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. Well-known achievers who've attended Punahou School include U.S. President Barack Obama, professional golfer Michele Wie, entrepreneur Steve Case, and eBay founder Pierre Omidyar—to name a few. But for the president of one of the nation's largest independent schools, Punahou has never been about graduating future celebrities. For Dr. James Kapae'alii Scott, Punahou is a family tradition. Dr. Scott grew up in Kaneohe and East Oahu, raised by parents with a deep appreciation for education—in particular, a Punahou education.**

**Was your family always ... was everyone college educated, and aiming for the next PhD?**

Well, my father had gone to Stanford on a football scholarship. He's the class of 1943 at Punahou School, and then he felt that World War II was passing him by, so he enlisted in the Marine Corps, and fought in the war in the Pacific. And he came back in 1945 on the GI Bill, and that's how he finished school. So he was able to finish Stanford. My mother started at the University of Hawaii. She's a 1946 graduate of Roosevelt High School. And she was the Pineapple Bowl Queen in 1947 for the University. But she had to go back to work to support her family, her younger siblings. So my dad is a college graduate. My mom didn't have a chance to.

**And did they talk about education in the household? Was that important?**

Yeah, I think when they were married, and I came along, I think my dad was unemployed, or underemployed. He was fishing in Waimanalo, I think. And so his dream was for his kids to go to Punahou.

**Why Punahou?**

As he did. I think he had graduated from there, and was—was there from, like, seventh grade to twelfth grade, and he decided that's the goal in life. So I think that ... just wanted to give his kids the best chance he could, and have a chance to go to the school that he did. He met the Cooke family, Charles Cooke family, who gave him an opportunity to go there. So I think he was on scholarship at Iolani, and I think he had a Cooke scholarship to go to Punahou School, and was able to stay there for five years.

**And he caught the eye of the Cooke family somehow?**

I think somebody introduced them to him. And that's how. So whenever we at Punahou School last year, or the year before, we celebrated the hundredth anniversary of Cooke Hall. And as I was talking to the Cooke family, I said, You know, your relatives helped my father finish. And because he did, I had a chance to go there as well.

**Did they know that?**

Yes.

**They were aware—**

Yeah.

**—but you folks had never talked about it before?**

No, we hadn't talked about it.

**Do you feel a debt that way, because of them helping your dad?**

To the Cooke family?

**M-hm.**

I think he did. He was very proud of the fact that he was on a Cooke scholarship. But I think that because they made it they were able to help him get through, I think he felt this debt to help others.

**M-hm.**

Including his own sons.

**So he knew when you were born that he was going to try to get you into Punahou and—**

Yeah.

**—go all the way with it.**

Right. At least, that's the story he tells. So he went to work for Hawaiian Telephone selling Yellow Page ads, and worked himself up. So he was in sales and marketing, and his last few years there when he was the executive, he was marketing director.

**And he kept his word. His dream came true.**

He did. Because I was able to get into kindergarten, so was my brother three years later. And my mom, they met when my mom was a teller at the old Bishop Bank. She went to work for Hawaiian Telephone. Started out as an operator, became a service representative, and then ended up in training. So I like to say

that Hawaiian Telephone supported the tuitions of my brother and me as we went through school.

**Did that require sacrifices? I'm sure it did.**

Oh, yeah.

**Were you aware of it?**

Um ... I was. Because there were some of my classmates whose mothers didn't have to work. And I thought they got to go home right after school, and—

**They could call in sick, and their moms would—**

They could call in sick.

**—pick them up immediately.**

And my parents would always pick us up after school right around five o'clock, five-thirty. I remember one time when I was in middle school, I asked my mom, So how come you can't stay home like the rest of my classmates' mothers? And she—

**What'd she say?**

And she said, Well, to support your tuition at Punahou School.

**But being in the Punahou crowd, with parents who were working parents struggling to support your tuition, you probably didn't have the freedoms and abilities to spend money and do things that—**

Right.

**—a lot of your classmates did. Did you feel ...**

That's true. We didn't take many vacations as a family. We lived simply, we didn't go out to dinner a lot, except for special occasions. I mean, we were comfortable, but we were frugal. I remember my brother asking my mother them, Mom, are we rich? And she'd say, No, we're comfortable. So they had a chance to own their own home, they had a chance to send their two kids to middleclass—working parents to send their kids to Punahou. But we lived frugally. And there's no doubt that when we got to high school my brother and I both got jobs.

**Well, was that a point that you had to deal with, where you thought, Well my classmates are coming in, their parents gave them cars, they have the whole keeping up with the Joneses thing.**

There was some of that. I think that because we got a little of financial aid at Punahou, that allowed us to stay there. So it supplemented my parents' income. I never forgot that. But also, you had a chance to work part-time at Punahou for the kids at that time who were on financial aid. So my part-time job during the year was working in the cafeteria. I loved it. I mean we worked for our meals. So we'd get there, eat really quickly, and then be cleaning dishes.

**You didn't mind being the worker—**

No.

**—drone?**

Because I had a group of schoolmates who were also on financial aid, and I thought, you know, it wasn't an issue with the other kids.

**What do you think would have happened if you went to public school, Kalani, instead of Punahou? Would your life have changed?**

Well, in my senior year in 1970, I was playing baseball for Punahou, and we couldn't beat Kalani. [CHUCKLE] We played them three different times, and lost to them in the State championships. So there's a part of me that wishes, Ah, maybe I could have played on a championship team. But no, I think my parents, even if I hadn't finished at a private school, I think they would have wanted me to go college. I mean, that was always in the back of their minds. It wasn't just going to Punahou, but they wanted to give me the best leg up they could in order to have a college experience.

**Did they give you speeches about it, or was it just something you knew?**

It was something that my dad would talk about all the time. And actually, I think there were some teachers along the way at Punahou who also encouraged me as well. So the great thing about Punahou is that they—or almost any private school is that the curriculum is set up so that the assumption is that you're gonna go to college. For some people, it's not their cup of tea, and they end up not finishing or go in a different direction. So it gives you at least the option or the choice to go. So I think I had key teachers along the way, certainly good friends who just helped me along to make that assumption. But my parents both valued that college experience and wanted both my brother and I to have it.

**And you didn't just go to college; you went to Stanford.**

M-m.

**Another big money school for your parents. Did they pay for it?**

They paid for most of it. But I had some financial aid help there, and I also started at Stanford on an ROTC scholarship and had that for two years before I dropped my ROTC scholarship and stayed there. So at that point, they had to pay more money, but also had some financial aid from Stanford, but also was working part-time.

**As a Punahou junior-school student, James Scott didn't give much thought to college—let alone Stanford University. That is, until one of his mentors—the late Dave Eldredge—planted the seed.**

In seventh grade, I had a science teacher named David Eldredge. And he had gone to Stanford. [CHUCKLE] And he was the class of '49 at Punahou. And so one day, he was handing back science quizzes. And I had gotten my C or C minus, plus, or whatever it was, and he was a big, huge, bellowing—and he said, Scott ... I want to see you after class. All my friends were like, Ooh, you're in trouble now. [INDISTINCT] And he looked at me, he says, Where do you want to go to college? And I said ... I was scared. I said, Stanford? [CHUCKLE] I figured he went there, my dad went there, anyone could get in. So the next day, he took me to Cooke Library, went to the college counseling section, got me a book about colleges, looked up Stanford and says, They don't accept

everybody; it's pretty hard to get into, you have to have good test scores, you have to have good grades, you have to be well rounded. And I think starting around middle school, I'd set my goals, not necessarily on Stanford, but certainly on college. And so that's when it became something other than my father's idea.

**And did you maintain your connection and your tie with Dave Eldredge?**

Right. He was my baseball coach.

**That's the thing I'm really surprised at in looking back at your history, your personal history. I didn't expect to find that you were a jock. And you were; you were always looking at the next sports season.**

Sports was a vital part of why I loved Punahou. I mean, I liked school, and I played football, basketball, and baseball, and by my junior year was focusing on baseball.

**Which is a cerebral sport.**

[CHUCKLE]

**Don't you think?**

Yeah.

**But you played more than that.**

Right.

**Did you define yourself in those days, were you the jock, or did you not consider yourself such?**

I considered myself a jock. My best friends were the athletes. But I also liked school. I was pretty good at school. Had to work hard in math and science, but that had become a value I wanted to do well. And also, Punahou, for the most part is filled with kids who want to do well in all those things as well. So it's not like you become a jock, or—

**M-hm.**

—an academic or—

**It's part of rounding yourself—**

—theater person. I think you end up valuing all those things.

**For Punahou School President Dr. James Scott, the teacher-student relationship is a powerful dynamic. A teacher's influence can play a major role in a student's adult life—sometimes with global consequences.**

Because you never know as a teacher what moment is gonna be memorable, for your students. And in fact, you may not see that while they're still a student. When Barack Obama was running for office, somebody asked him—in fact, it was, CNN interviews. Or the—no, CNN debates. Someone asked him who his most inspiring teacher was, and why. And he said, Mabel Hefty, Punahou School, fifth grade. And it's because she had those moments, even though he was an underachiever, self-admitted. And so she had those moments where she encouraged him, and he never forgot them. So yes, those are key moments

with teachers. Just think you're about to make another decision or go a different direction, that moment with an adult in your life can be critical.

**Did you ever play a role like that as an educator yourself? Are you aware of any moments that changed students' lives?**

Yeah. I was a college counselor for a number of years, worked in admissions both at Stanford and Harvard, and I was able to watch students make the transition from high school to college, and then college to careers. Certainly, those students who have a rough go at Punahou, financially or academically, or discipline wise, those moments where you can give them a second chance or a bit of encouragement, you never know how much was an impact, but you felt positive and confident that something was clicking. And so often when students are older, more mature, have more perspective, they'll come back and say thanks. [CHUCKLE]

**And that's happened to you?**

Yeah.

**They just show up at your office, or write you a letter, give you a call?**

Often. Both. Just ran into a former student today. Had his two-year-old baby. He's living in Connecticut now and is here on spring break. He's teaching, and he said he is teaching because of the power of the teachers in his life at Punahou School. And he said, You turned to the senior class in my senior year before we graduated and said, I hope some of you will consider teaching, it's a noble calling. Just wanted to tell you that I'm doing it.

**Well, I'm sure, obviously, nobody really can aim and have any confidence that they will be the head of Punahou School, because I think there's only been—you're the third president since World War II, so somebody could really languish waiting. But I don't think people were surprised that if any one of you was going to be the head of the school, it would be you, right?**

I don't know; you'd have to ask the others about that.

**[CHUCKLE] You're already a leader.**

Well, I had been away on the mainland. I had done my undergraduate on the West Coast, and then had taught a school in California and did my graduate work in the East Coast. So when Rod McFee announced his retirement around 1992, 93, I was in my fifth or sixth year as the headmaster of a school in Portland, Oregon. And so there were a few of my classmates, and teachers, who contacted me, had stayed in touch with me, said, You should think about putting your hat in the ring. So that's where it wasn't surprising to some people that I had stayed in education, and that I was of the right age to come back. So that's where it wasn't surprising. But it wasn't a job you could apply for. They came looking for you, and I think the trustees, they hired a search consultant that spent about a year scouring the world and the countryside, and I'm not sure who else was a finalist, but I felt they had done their homework on me way before I became a finalist and came back.

**Now, until then, you were ensconced on the mainland, doing well.**

M-hm.

**Had you decided this is where you would make your life, you would be that kind of Big Island person, you'd be living in the West Coast?**

[SIGH] Yeah, I think so. I think home was where my parents were. It wasn't necessarily my home anymore. So before coming home here, it had been twenty-four years between 1970 and 1994. So probably by year fifteen or so, I just assumed that especially if I wanted to stay in independent schools, that there'd be more choices on the mainland, and that those schools would become available more often if I wanted to become a head. So when the Punahou job came open, as you just mentioned, it comes up about once a generation.

**M-hm.**

Although there's a lot to do at my former school, it was an opportunity. I mean, I just owed it to myself to take a closer look. And I was glad I did. Although the decision wasn't necessarily to come to Punahou when I was offered the job. The decision was whether or not I should stay at my former school for another ten years in order to take that school to the next level.

**What was it about the job here that did the trick?**

On the mainland, there are a lot of great independent schools. They tend to be a little tiny, and therefore, a little precious. [CHUCKLE] And so the school that I came from before I came to Punahou had a senior class of sixty. The school that I started at, private school, had a senior class of a hundred. Both were relatively new schools. So I think for me, the longevity of Punahou and also the scale of Punahou and its history makes it rare. And there are very few private schools in America where a school can have the potential of having an impact on a city, like Punahou's had.

**As a product of Punahou, you know the system very well, you know the people, you know the stakeholders, which is a great advantage. But at some times, do you feel it's a disadvantage, because there are obligations that have built up, and there are people you know and have dealings with? Wouldn't it be easier sometimes to be an outsider there?**

I think by virtue of my twenty-four years on the mainland after graduating from Punahou, and then coming back, I had the advantage of being an outsider.

**M-m.**

In that I had been at two other schools, I had a national and global perspective of how independent schools work. I had been at two other healthy schools. I felt I was coming home, but I felt I was coming back with an outside perspective. In many ways, I could be Punahou's window to the outside in ways that I couldn't have been if I had just grown up here, and been on the faculty, and assumed the presidency in that way.

**Well, you're in a position, I think, unlike many, I mean, more so than many. People are always trying to influence you and get things from you, and move you, and there are so many types of favors and ...**

Yeah.

**I mean, how do you deal with that? People are always trying to move you, and get something. Because you do control—**

If that's happening, I don't feel that pressure on a continuous basis. Sure, it happens occasionally.

**What about somebody saying, Jim, you've gotta get my kid into—**

Right.

**—your school, you've got to.**

And I say, There's one way into the school, and it's not through the president's office. [CHUCKLE] It's gotta be through the admissions office. So I think one of the things that I've had to grow into coming back is that Hawaii is about relationships.

**M-hm.**

And there have been sometimes, especially when you're asking for money, or when people know you from small kid time, those relationships are important. At the same time, I think people, hopefully respect and honor the institution's integrity, that it's gonna make, in the end, a good decision. Often, it's not the friends and schoolmates and relatives who are trying to get in. It's once they're there, they're trying to change the school [CHUCKLE] in ways that—be it athletics, or be it, academics, or be it something the school should be doing. It's a place that's always questioning, it's always trying to become better. And that's the pressure. But it's also one of the virtues of the place. It's never sort of standing still, it's always looking in the mirror, it's always in the process of becoming. So that's probably one of my toughest challenges, just managing strong characters who always know how the school can be improved.

**How do you manage that? What's the management style for that?**

I think my biggest challenge is getting people to see the whole, the one big system, not just their area. And sometimes it's a matter of timing, sometimes it's a matter of resources that are still scarce even for a place like Punahou that has enormous resources in some ways. So it's looking at the needs of the whole, rather than the needs of the individual that's getting people to understand that. They're not always fit always.

**Obviously, you hear a lot of good ideas, and you have a lot of good ideas. But you don't have the resources or the time to make all of those good ideas happen. So how do you vet those ideas? Which kind of filter do you use?**

Great question. In my younger part of my career, I was coaching baseball. And I grew up as a better pitcher than I was a hitter. So I was a starting pitcher in high school and at Stanford and everything. So when I coached, I needed to know more about hitting. So I picked up a book on hitting by Ted Williams, one of the best hitters of all time. And in this book, someone asked him, What's the secret of hitting? And he says, Knowing which pitches to let go. Which pitches not to swing at. [CHUCKLE] Which is not helpful when you're a coach, 'cause you—

**[CHUCKLE]**



That's a talent and so on. But I got to thinking about the Ted Williams School of Management, and wondering which pitches not to swing at, which good ideas, do you not go for. Every third person that walks into my office has a great idea about something.

**And if you're not gonna do it, you're gonna have to get back to them.**

Right. So I think that from where I sit in my office, I'm looking for synergy, congruence. I'm kind of a broker of ideas, and when I see patterns and recurring themes, they become good. And that's why an idea sometimes takes time to bake to form.

**Punahou School President James Scott has had the opportunity to watch thousands of children form into adults, developing traits and talents. To quote Dr. Scott: "...we believe a person who is self-confident, creative and compassionate possesses the capacity to live a productive and fulfilled life that can improve the world." For *Long Story Short* and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.**

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Video clip with production credits:

**You seem so well suited for Punahou, even to the point of marrying a fellow alum.**

[CHUCKLE]

**[CHUCKLE] How perfect is that?**

Yeah. Well, Maureen and I dated in my senior year in high school, and actually, she said it took me twenty-five years to propose. But—

**[CHUCKLE]**

So she was a year behind me, class of '71.

**And you dated, and then at graduation, everybody went their different ways?**

Right. We stayed in touch, but we went our different ways.

**And then, you came back to take the helm of the school, and ...**

Well, my mother was living on Maui at the time, and so was Maureen. And we were both available. [CHUCKLE] And we rekindled the relationship, and were married shortly after that.