LONGstorySHORT
with LESLIE WILCOX

PBS Hawaii

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LSS 325 (LENGTH: 27:46)
FIRST AIR DATE: 6/22/10

But I was sitting on the lawn right between two buildings at the end of the day. And I don't know why; I guess I wasn't playing sports then. I was reading or something. And I was just thinking, and I just said, I'm done with this, I'm done trying to be this for this group of people, or be this for that group of people, I'm just gonna … I'm gonna be me. And me is …
M-hm.
—this. And that was it.

A self-described underachiever in his school days, Kelvin Taketa grew up to become a top leader in Hawaii's non-profit community … with power to influence the direction of millions of charitable dollars from donors to the people, places and programs that need the money most. Who he is and how he got there—next on Long Story Short.

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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. In this edition of Long Story Short, I catch up with my classmate from Aina Haina Elementary School, Kelvin Taketa. Now, CEO of the Hawaii Community Foundation. Here's our sixth-grade class, back in the days when Hawaii kids could still go to school barefoot. This is me, still getting over the fact that girls were not allowed to be JPOs. I remember Kelvin as a *kolohe* kid who was often up to something. He was the seemingly innocent one, the inconspicuous ringleader of mischief. Kelvin says that family, teachers, mentors and just plain luck helped him find his way—and ultimately his position in Hawaii's non-profit world.**

I was lucky. I grew up, really, as a statehood baby. We became a state the year I started kindergarten. And so going to Aina Haina School for those six years, seven years, was a great experience. It was still a small town. You could still go out and catch fish. You knew everybody in the neighborhood. We all rode our bikes to school. And so I think it's a different world today, than it was for us. Don't you feel like we really did kinda grow up in a golden era? I tell people all the time that I feel like, so incredibly blessed to have grown up when

we did in Hawaii. It just seems like, it was an easier time, that life wasn't that complicated, the lessons you learned in life were so … it was just—you could get your hands around it. It wasn't as complex. So I always think that we were just really blessed to be born in that time.

And the future always seemed bright?

We lived in the era where Hawaii was growing, and the future was bright. And I remember when we were in elementary school, learning about the economy here, and I remember looking at the pie chart, and it was, agriculture was a huge part of the economy, and tourism was a smaller part of the economy. And now, it's the other way around. And the thing I know of the Hawaii of then that really worries me about now is that I felt that Hawaii was a community of the middle class. I don't remember the kind of poverty or wealth that we see now in East Honolulu or—

And being—

—in any part of it.

—middle class was more than enough.

Oh, yeah. I mean, that was the norm, right? And that was good enough for everybody. Nobody really thought about it any other way. But it just seems that that era of growing up in Hawaii was a period of a lot of middle class people with a lot of bright futures in front of them for their children.

Kelvin Taketa says his parents and grandparents taught him the connections between hard work and independence and taking risks. His mother's father immigrated from Japan and became an entrepreneur … starting a trucking business that grew into a highway construction company. The family also ran a cattle ranch in Maunawili Valley.

I grew up in a family business learning to drive vehicles before you could get your license, and chasing cows around. It was a really great experience for me. At the time, I didn't think so. I really wanted to be bumming around with my friends, doing whatever they were doing. But as you look back now—you learn some really great lessons. My grandfather was this person who, the one thing I learned from him was, the way that he treated people. I remember when we would finish a job, a big highway construction job, and we'd have a big *luau* to celebrate. And I always remember how wonderful it was that there would be, the governor or the mayor of the city would be at this thing, along with the guys who were driving the bulldozers and the trucks, and everything else. And I remember watching my grandfather, who treated everybody the same. And I just thought that that was the gift that he gave me, was the fact that in every person, there's this great story, and there are so many wonderful people that, for me, school was too limiting in a certain kind of way, because I was really anxious to get outside.

And you have that gift as an adult and as a leader. You seem to be able to get along with anybody. And I'm talking about people who have extremely *uber*

wealthy lifestyles. It's like they're your pals, and so is the guy on the corner selling papers.
Well, I got that from my grandfather. I mean, he's the one that taught me that. And I think it's not—it's really … it's sort of a function of just really believing in people, and the story that people have. It's what you've done in your life as a journalist. Everyone has a narrative about their journey. And they're all interesting to me ... that's the thing. It's not as if there's many boring stories out there.

While Kelvin Taketa learned by example from his grandfather, he also received some less subtle lessons from teachers and school administrators … who tried to steer him in the right direction starting as early as grade school.

Mrs. Nicholson told me in sixth grade; she said, You know, the way you're going, you'll either go to college, or you'll go to jail. [CHUCKLE]
I can see why she'd say that.
Yeah; she said that to me. And I thought, Wow, that's kind of interesting, I wonder where that's coming from. [CHUCKLE]
But she was a very emphatic woman.
Yeah, she was. She had—
Wow, that's—
—strong opinions.
That's pretty heavy to be told when you're in elementary school.
Yeah. Well, it was at the end of sixth grade, and I think that was her way of saying I had promise. Right? [CHUCKLE]
Yeah.
I guess.
Yeah; and you'll have to make the choice.
Yeah. Right.
'Cause you could—
It's kinda like the Robert—
You could be good at either one.
—Frost poem about the two roads. And I think that was kind of her way of sort of saying to me, two roads.
Yeah, use—
But—
Use your talent for good, and not evil.
Yeah. But I was lucky. I always found the teachers who saw the rascal side of it, and said, Okay, we're gonna help him, 'cause otherwise, he's gonna get in big trouble. And they kinda put me—okay, come to my study hall and sit right next to me, because if you don't, then you're not gonna pay attention.
And you recognized it in yourself, too, right?
Yeah.
You could tip.

Yeah. Definitely.

The first fork in the road came in seventh grade … and at that time Kelvin Taketa was not allowed to choose his path. While he wanted to follow his friends to public middle school, his parents sent him to Punahou School.

I didn't really understand the cachet of Punahou the way that I think people sort of look at it now, with Obama having gone there, and—
M-hm.
—other kinds of things. I just knew I was going to the rich private school, and I didn't know whether I fit.
Did you?
Here's the way I thought of it, Leslie, is I was lucky to go to school with people who were tremendous achievers all around me, right? Great musicians, great artists, great athletes, great … really, really brilliant people. And it was important to kinda know that there were a lot of people in the world that were smarter than me. I mean, I didn't see that as a problem, I saw that as really a great thing, to kinda understand that at the end of the day, you're gonna find your way to something, and it's not gonna be—in my case, it wasn't gonna be 'cause I was the smartest kid. It was gonna be because of something else. So, you know that it was a great education.
Did you see a role for yourself back then in pulling people together? Because that's what you do, in many ways now.
Yeah. That was me then, too. I mean, I was the guy that bounced from hanging out with really smart kids, where I was really the dumbest kid in the group. [CHUCKLE] And then hanging out with the guys who were really much better athletes than I was when we played sports together, or hanging around with the guys who were learning to play Bob Dylan songs behind the buildings and stuff like that, and I was the guy who sort of walked around all the groups.
And you still do that today.
That's my thing. [CHUCKLE] I think. I mean, I stop and think about it. Probably my strength is really …
Bridging?
Yeah. Understanding how to connect all those things. My epiphany, if you will, in high school was a day where—and I still remember the day, where I sort of took a hold of myself and said, Here are the things that I think … are sort of the DNA of me. [CHUCKLE] And that I knew then that I needed to be in environments that were gonna allow me to be that way. That I did not expect myself, or have enough confidence in myself that I was gonna change radically—
M-hm
So I gotta figure out how I'm gonna be in environments where I can be this person, and still succeed. Right? And it was a liberating thing too, because I decided back then, you're trying on a lot of clothes. You're trying to find your

identity, right, as a teenager. And I just—that was the day I threw all the clothes away and just—I said, this is it, I'm not gonna worry about it.
Right. It's not me that's gonna change; it's how I operate.
Right.
And where I operate.
Right. That was just a huge thing. It was a huge thing. I remember what the lighting was like, where I was sitting, everything when I decided that.
M-hm. And you were at Punahou School?
I was sitting on the lawn. So I chose a college that was a little bit different, because you took one class for a month and did a semester's work in a month. And you took nine months of nine classes that way. Because I knew that that was a better environment for me. And that was the kind of thing that I had to do.

After graduating from Colorado College, Kelvin Taketa went on to UC Hastings Law School. With law degree in hand, he faced an uncertain future … until an opportunity popped up that would lead him down an unexpected trail.

The idea of joining a private law firm where you practiced law, and after six years you might become a partner, and that was what everybody really kinda wanted to be, or you go and work for a government agency, and you become a deputy attorney general and things like that; they just didn't seem that exciting to me.
Why did you go to law school in the first place?
Kinda got out of college, and I sort of knew that I needed something more. I also knew that if I didn't go right away, I would never go back. I originally wanted to just be a teacher; that's really what I wanted to do. But again, I found that, being in a school situation was a little bit too conforming for me. So law school seemed like a good way of learning things, and an opportunity to maybe have a broader set of options when I got out. And so I got out, and I really didn't know what I was gonna do. And by luck, a college roommate of mine was working for The Nature Conservancy in Colorado. We were drinking margaritas on Cinco de Mayo in San Francisco in the Mission district, and he told me, Hey, we're gonna open an office in Hawaii, you should go check it out. And I did. And I got offered a job. And again, this is where I gotta really credit my family, I remember going back and talking to my family about it, and my mother said, Well, you're young, you're not married, you don't have a lot of debt, if you're ever gonna take a chance on something, go do it now. So I did.
Was it something you knew much about?
I knew nothing about it. I knew nothing about the non-profit sector, I knew nothing. I'd grown up outdoors, I had this great love for the outdoors, and especially outdoors in Hawaii. But here I was, working for an organization that was saying that Hawaii was the endangered species capitol of the world. We had more plants and birds on the verge of extinction than anywhere else on the

planet. I knew nothing of that. That's not what I learned at Aina Haina, it's not what I learned at Punahou. I didn't know a thing about it. So, the blessing for me was to not only go to an organization that, really celebrated the entrepreneurial spirit of the people that worked there, but I got to go to school. I got to go to school on some of the greatest scientists in the world that were working on these issues, and I got to ask all the questions I never got to ask, and I got my classroom where the rainforest of Haleakala instead of—looking at film strips in a classroom in high school or college. And so it was an incredible education for me. But it was never planned. I was just an extraordinarily lucky guy to kinda be at the right place, with the right organization, and that was a great, great thing for me.

And I think I recall you saying once that it was like a rocket ship that—

It was.

—you rode.

Yeah, it really was.

Because so many things happened.

It was a time not just in Hawaii, but I think nationally when a lot of the environmental movement was first getting traction. There had been some incredible environmentalists in the 60s and 70s, but it really was in the 80s that a lot of the growth happened to the Sierra Club, The Nature Conservancy, Natural Resources Defense Council, Green Peace. All of that really exploded in that era. It was the Baby Boomers coming of age who really cared about those kinds of issues. And so it really was a rocket ship, and I was just lucky to be a part of that. And I was surrounded by these incredible people who were very, very bright, risk-taking people who understood how to develop strategy and make these things work. And I really learned a lot.

You've said that you had—in your career, you've had a lot of help from colleagues and board members who assisted you, quote, more than you deserved.

Yeah. I'm not trying to be modest about this, but—

That's what I was wondering.

But—

Is that false modesty?

No. I think every person in their lives deserves somebody who helps them more than they deserve.

M-hm.

I think that, you see it in a teacher, coach, choir director, ballet teacher; it doesn't really matter. I was really lucky to have mentors. For example, board members when I started here in Hawaii with The Nature Conservancy, who—I was a twenty-six-year-old local kid, and these guys were the heads of the business community in Hawaii. Herb Cornuelle, Sam Cooke, Frank Manaut, were all these people. And they for whatever reason, they cared about the environment, but they also took a very personal interest in helping me be successful. And I never forgot that. And I try, in my career, to do the same

thing. But … I look back on the amount of time they gave me, and the kind of advice they gave me about a lot of things, not just about our organization at that time, The Nature Conservancy. It was really profound, and it had a lasting impact on the way I thought of the world, the way I raised my children.

Even when it came to raising a family, Kelvin Taketa took a less conventional path. He and his wife Janice adopted 2 children from 2 different countries.

My daughter, who's fourteen, we adopted from Cambodia when she was eighteen months old. Her life and she are in pretty good shape. My son, who's twenty-four, we adopted from Thailand. He was abandoned when he was an infant, and he knocked around different orphanages for three and a half years before we adopted him. He had a deck of cards by then that really have dictated a lot of things about his life, and a lot of the struggles that he's gone through. At the same time, he's one of the kindest, most—there are just qualities in him that are just really quite remarkable. So for us, it's just been a really great thing.

Yeah, you always wonder at what level children, even when they're adopted as babies, have a sense of somebody not wanting them, or feeling denied.

Yeah. When we first got Kanoa, and he came to Hawaii, so he was almost four at the time. So the first night that he came I had to leave Thailand before Kanoa was officially adopted, so he flew home with Janice on the plane, and came back to Hawaii. And when he got here, I will tell you, I was flipping out. Because I was really getting cold feet, frankly. It wasn't about whether I wanted to adopt; I just was having cold feet, I didn't know whether I could truly love him the way I would love my own genetic child. Right? That's the fear that was coursing through my veins and in my head when he came. We took him home, we spent the evening playing with him, and we brought him to bed with us. And that night, he was lying in bed with us, and he climbed up and he fell asleep on my chest. And by the morning when I woke up, it was gone. It was just gone. And it was like—

Your heart? [CHUCKLE]

Yeah; it was like he knew what to do. I didn't know what do; he knew what to do, right? But I never looked back from that moment forward. It was never was an issue again. I remember Herb Cornuelle being the person who told me that he thought, in his own career—and he was clearly one of the great business we've had in this community who mentored so many people. But I remember him telling me when I was adopting Kanoa, our first child, that he said, You think that you want to be there when they're young, but really, they'll take you any time they can get you when they're young; but you need to be there when they're teenagers, because you need to be there at the moment that they need you, 'cause the moment will be gone and you'll never get it back.

True words.

And that stuck in my brain, so that when Kanoa reached a certain age, I realized in my own career that I couldn't travel the amount I was traveling, because I really believed what Herb said was right.

You switched jobs … you decided you needed to be home with your family more, so you took the job as, the second in history, president and CEO of the Hawaii Community Foundation, a long established organization, which you proceeded to turn inside out.

Yup. It was really clear that the Foundation had gotten to a size where people were really looking to us for leadership. That it wasn't just sufficient enough for us to be a grant maker, but at that point, we were being looked to help people understand the dynamics around what was happening in the non-profit sector, its relationship to government, its relationship to the philanthropic world, and to also help people figure out how they can make a difference. The whole idea was to get very clear about the fact that what we were trying to do was to build an ecosystem of really outstanding organizations, and being completely sector agnostic, whether it was the environment, health or human services, culture and arts. All—we need all of those things. It's not a question of or, it's a question of and.

M-hm.

Right? But our money could do the biggest job, and make the biggest difference if we could focus on building those high performing organizations. So that was another part of the change in our strategy.

That is a big change, and I think it's brilliant. Did you come up with that?

Well, we did; we all did. I mean, the board did. We had really great staff involvement. I reached out to a bunch of nonprofit executives and foundation leaders that I had known in a previous life, and we invited them to help us think through what we were gonna do. And that's how we got there.

In 2008, the economy tanked, and we saw layoffs all over the place. But they say the economy is getting a little better; what's gonna happen in the nonprofit sector? Already, we've seen some nonprofits close; we've seen some decimated in terms of staffing.

I think we're gonna see a decade of disruption and innovation. We're in 2010, there's a glimmer of hope out there. But I think the saddest thing of all is if we sort of believe that what we can do is go back to 2007, before the recession, and assume that we can simply—it's about a recovery, right, in the non-profit sector, the way the economy is recovering. I think this is about a reinvention or a reset.

This philosophy on the recession and recovery fits with Kelvin Taketa's lifelong practice of looking at circumstances as opportunities.

The interesting part has been, just the zigs and zags of how it ends up. And being lucky enough to be offered opportunities, but being willing to take those opportunities when they came up.

And has failure played a part?
Oh, yeah. Yeah. [CHUCKLE] There have been things I've done in my career, not particularly a certain job let's say, but certain things I've done in which, were spectacular failures. They probably teach you more than the other things do.
Did they close doors, or open them?
I never felt like they closed doors; I felt like they opened them. I felt like those things were the things that teach you …
Where to zig, and zag.
Where to zig and zag. I kinda look at these things that have happened, you know, going from Aina Haina to Punahou, to college, law school, and then to The Nature Conservancy, and on to the Community Foundation. And I can't figure it out. There's no real narrative that sort of describes that in a deliberate sort of way. Right? It was all a journey. And it still is this journey, right? I talk to a lot of young people who, have a desire for a career like yours or mine, and I have so little guidance to give them, because none of this was deliberate.
But maybe that's the lesson; it's not a straight line to whatever you think you want to do in high school or college.
Yeah. I think it's keeping your eyes and ears open to the opportunity, and understanding yourself well enough to know the kind of place that will allow—that will allow you to be … to use your strengths. I think at the end of the day, the Hawaii Community Foundation's job is to really make a difference in people's lives in Hawaii, and to prove that philanthropy, that people who have really thoughtful ideas about how they're gonna give money away, to be a catalyst to make that stuff happens, that really can happen. I really believe that the thing that distinguishes us as a species is the fact that in every human's life, there's a desire for greater meaning. And that greater meaning is almost always about something beyond themselves.
M-hm.
It's expressed by family, it's expressed by community, it's expressed by … creative expression, and things like that, but there's something driving us for that. I think philanthropy is part of that solution. It's when you can take money that you've worked really hard to save, really hard to earn, and you can make a difference in someone's life. The biggest beneficiary of that is the person who gave. So that's our job. That's what we're here to do, is to really show people, unlock for people the benefit of that, the significance that comes with that.

Kelvin Taketa's winding road took him from rascal student at Aina Haina Elementary to CEO of a leading statewide charitable institution—the Hawaii Community Foundation, where his reach is wide and deep. His story offers inspiration for every kid who feels he doesn't fit the "most likely to succeed" mold, or who doesn't know what she wants to do with her life. Maybe more important—it offers motivation for all of the teachers and would-be mentors to see the potential in every young person and to nurture it. *Mahalo* to Kelvin

Taketa for sharing his "Long Story Short" … and *mahalo* to you … for joining us. I'm Leslie Wilcox. *A hui hou kakou*.

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Video clip with production credits:
Being parents [CHUCKLE] the great humbling experience of life, right? But I think being a parent made me more empathetic. I think being a parent made me, frankly, a better manager of people. Because you learn [CHUCKLE] that you just can't get your way all the time. It doesn't work that way.