

**GUEST: KŪ KAHAKALAU**

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Our *kupuna* had a totally different way of looking at learning. It was an exciting thing, it was a fun thing, it was just totally absorbing kind of activity. And so, we strongly feel that you can have fun, and that you can learn at the same time.

**Our next Long Story Short guest has used this traditional Hawaiian approach to learning as the foundation for an innovative Charter School on Hawaii Island. But it has been the balance between her two cultural backgrounds, Hawaiian and German, that has shaped her life and her life's work. Meet educator, Kū Kahakalau, next.**

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. Her sister, Hoku Award winning singer, Robi Kahakalau, may be better known to the public, but in the world of Charter School education, Kū Kahakalau is a star. A resident of Waimea on Hawaii Island, she is the founder of the Kanu O Ka Aina Learning Ohana, a community, family, and cultural program for native Hawaiians of all ages, and a public Charter School of the same name. Because of Kū's strong passion to promote and strengthen Hawaiian education, you might think she grew up in the islands.**

**So you were born in Hawaii.**

Yes.

**But you have a German accent. How did that happen?**

That happens mostly when I try to speak proper English, because I learned proper English in Europe. And so when I was young, my father is a Hawaiian jazz musician, and he just preferred to just strictly play music. But in Hawaii, most musicians have to play music, and have another job. And so in the early 60s, he decided to move us to Europe, because at that time, jazz was just starting in Europe, and American jazz musicians were, like, regarded as mini gods, and they—

**And—**

And so—

**And you were a little kid then, right?**

Yeah; yes. And so, we spent several years in Europe, and my father really liked it there. He liked the part that they took good care of the environment there. He liked the part that a handshake and a promise really meant something. And he liked the part that when they did things, they did it the right way, or they did it at a level of sophistication and rigor, that our Hawaiian *kupuna* also did things. And so, he saw many things that were very similar, the way people acted in Europe, compared to how his Hawaiian *kupuna* taught him.

**You went to Germany as a young kid who spoke Pidgin?**

Yeah. Well, yeah.

**Or standard English.**

Yeah. Well, we were multilingual from the beginning. My mom is pure German, so we've always had the German part in there. My dad spoke relatively good English, even though he didn't have any education beyond fourth grade, but he was self-taught; he loved to read. So we had multiple languages in our household. My grandfather spoke fluent Hawaiian, he was a native speaker. And we had lots of Hawaiian through our music as well. And then, in Europe, there's the French people, and you learn how to speak French, and at least understand. And then, as you get a little older and become a teenager, if you really want to speak to this Italian boy, let's say for an example, you'll pick up Italian really quick, if you have to.

**What language do you think in?**

It depends on what I do. Hawaiian, when I do poetry, and when I try to go into deeper more aesthetical kind of language, I think then I would say Hawaiian. If it's things that have to do with day-to-day things, most times in English.

**You have so much cultural perspective. How do you see the differences in culture shaping who you've become?**

That's a very tough one, because the cultures are so sometimes diagonally opposed. The very [CLEARS THROAT] carefree part of the Hawaiian culture, versus a very rigid, and everything only being a certain way in the German culture. Sometimes we'd spin what we call *hukihuki*, spinning and pulling back and forth. But I think I've always tried to find what works best for me. And sometimes, I can just go with the flow, and just take it easy, and then other times, I can just really buckle down and just be one-minded, single-minded in terms of getting something done, and just pushing, pushing, until I get it there. So it's not always easy. And especially, I think when we were growing up, trying to figure out what side to play when it came to your parents. Should you just kind of go the safe route with your German mother, or the totally unsafe route with your Hawaiian father?

**How was that unsafe?**

[CLEARS THROAT] Well, in a way that you never knew what could happen. You could go anywhere, and it would be fine, or not, but you never knew.

**But your mother, you knew what would happen?**

We knew exactly what to expect, and how to behave. Whereas, with my dad, I think with him, between being Hawaiian, but also between being a jazz

musician and really growing up during an era when they experimented with everything, and anything that, came across their path, it was one of those things that you just never really knew where things were gonna end up.

**You know, as it just occurs to me that you must have been around people who didn't realize you're Native Hawaiian.**

Definitely. That would be something that not everybody figures out right away. [CHUCKLE] And that's perfectly fine. Because I know who I am, and the way we grew up, I mean, people never really knew who we were in the first place. And I think people just have to—I always felt people have to accept you for who you are, no matter what nationality or what ethnic background, or what your IQ is. And so, I haven't had a big problem with that, actually. I'm proud of my German heritage, I still practice some of those pieces or at least don't deny that, or don't want to have anything to do with it. But my world has been a Hawaiian world since 1978, since I first came back. I have personally, all my interests, as far as learning things, and doing things, have centered around Hawaiian language, culture, tradition, Hawaiian causes. I've been very involved in many, many Hawaiian causes over the years. And so, it doesn't matter to me what I look like. I would like to be more beautiful; that would be just as fine as me looking more Hawaiian. It's just how the cookie crumbles. *Mahalo i ka mea loa*, be thankful for what you have, is the fourth of our behavior expectations.

**Although always comfortable in her own skin, Kū Kahakalau didn't feel completely at home in Europe. She made it a goal to return to her Hawaiian roots.**

We tried to adapt as good as we could, but I know for myself, I never really fit in. And also, there were, at that time still, all kinds of discrimination and just treatment that maybe today wouldn't be as much anymore, because you have so many more nationalities and ethnicities living in Germany, for example, that you didn't have at that time. But my dad was the only brown person in town when we first got there, and it was not easy even though we physically would fit in. But when your last name is Kahakalau, no matter what, you can't hide that.

**And that was the reason you didn't fit in; it was the name and the brown father?**

It was the color of it, but then, also my father's very unconventional lifestyle certainly didn't help either. When all the other fathers worked every day from whatever it was, eight 'til five, kind of a thing, and my father had never had a regular work schedule in his entire life. So I think those things certainly didn't help, either. And so we just always felt a little bit odd. And then, as we got older, we met so many military people that were stationed in Germany, and I worked for the military for one year after high school to make money to come home. And the more we sang the songs, and the more we tried to eat the food, and the more it became like, What am I doing here?

**So when you hit high school graduation, at that point, you were making money to get home?**

Yes.

**No question?**

No question. That was a single—[CHUCKLE] one of those single-minded decisions. And without any real concrete plans as to where to go from there, there was no doubt in my mind. As soon as I had enough money for an airplane ticket and a couple more thousand dollars that could hold me over for a little while, I was gonna come home, and I did.

**Once back in the islands, Kū Kuhakalau entered Kapiolani Community College at Diamond Head, then transferred to the University of Hawaii at Manoa. She earned a bachelor's degree in education and Hawaiian language, and a master's in European language and literature. Then, a teaching job led her to Hawaii Island.**

**So you were a public schoolteacher, but then you founded a school. How did that happen?**

So I started as a Hawaiian language teacher, and I would have my students for one hour every day, and you would probably almost have to re-teach, and re-teach, and re-teach, and really within the first ten years, for sure, it became clear that this one period per day wasn't gonna teach them how to speak a language. Especially not the way I had been learning language, which was immersed in the environment, and being around people where you could speak it and use it, rather than just trying to do a grammatical approach. And so I tried really hard to try a new approach with Hawaiian language, and that worked very well. But my students were failing in all the other subjects, except for Hawaiian. And so I knew that these students could learn, but that the way that we were teaching them wasn't working. And so, in 1997, we started a school within a school. At that time, I had just begun my PhD in indigenous education, and I used the school within a school as my research project. And so, thanks to the Charter School movement, we were able to establish a school that is Hawaiian focused, that believes in the things that we believe in and from the way that—how we teach, what we teach, where we teach, when we teach, all of those things are determined by our Hawaiian way of looking at education, rather than some Western construct that hasn't worked for our kids.

**At the time you started the school, how many Charter Schools were there in Hawaii?**

Actually, we were the first of four Charter Schools to open up, and we were the only Hawaiian-focused charter school at that time.

**And the curriculum was driven by Hawaiian sensibilities?**

Yes. Basically, we felt very strong. For myself, it was [CLEARS THROAT] always a long-term goal to create this. But when my children were born, it became a very personal goal also. And so when my youngest daughter started

kindergarten, we started the school, and it was basically to allow our children to walk successfully in multiple worlds. So they would learn everything that they needed to function as Hawaiians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but they would also be able to function as 21<sup>st</sup> century citizens, and go anywhere in the world, and be able to participate in the global conversation, and be able to take care of the world, the way that we're all supposed to be taking care of the world.

**That sounds like an awfully tall order. How do you do that?**

That is definitely a tall order, in that we have to teach double what everybody else is teaching. But the thing is, first of all, you have very strong relations between your teaching staff or all of the adults and the children. That is a really important piece. And in our school, everybody is Uncle and Auntie, so nobody calls me Dr. Kahakalau, just Auntie K . And we really treat each other as *ohana*. So I know your maddah, I know your grandmaddah, I know all about your *ohana*. That kind of a relationship is really, really important, that the kids know that we care about them. And then, what we provide is curriculum that is relevant. Everything starts in Hawaii, and then goes out in concentric circles. So then, when education makes sense to the kids, then they want to learn.

**In the year 2000, Kū Kahakalau founded the Kanu O Ka Aina New Century Public Charter School in Waimea, on Hawaii Island. Kahakalau says the school's main building, Halau Hoolako, is Hawaii Island's first green educational facility. Studies also take place in remote Waipio Valley.**

**So Waipio Valley; the valley of kings.**

Yes. It's a very, very special, and very beautiful place, and we really are honored that we have the opportunity to be there. And I feel so blessed that, as I said, my children and my students are able to experience the valley, not just go there one day kinda thing, check it out, but actually reside in that valley for long periods of time. They go down from Monday to Thursday every other week. So half of their educational experience, from middle school all the way through high school, is pretty much being in the valley.

**And what do they do in the valley?**

They have several major projects. We're a project-based school, so it's an entire project that goes down there. And one of the big projects is a stream restoration project. When the sugarcane companies needed water, they diverted, as you know, everywhere else in Hawaii, lots—millions and millions of gallons out of the valley. When the sugar company closed down, a taro farmer in Waipio demanded that that water would come back into the valley. So this is the first time that a hundred percent of a stream has been restored in a native environment. So for the last seven years, my students have been—and my husband is the lead teacher there, they have been studying the impact of that hundred percent stream restoration on the native fauna and flora. So they work with Bishop Museum scientists, they work with DLNR people, and with international scientists, actually, to look at the life of the stream and the health

of the stream. So that's a major part of the scientific research. And then, they grow taro, and they grow vegetables, and they learn about the history, they learn about the culture of the valley. They learn the songs and the chants, and all of the things that are part of survival in the valley, and part of practicing our traditions and our cultures.

**I once heard your architect, or one of your architects, Francis Oda—**

Yes; oh, yes.

**—talking about designing the building.**

Uh-huh.

**The first building you did. And he said it was a problem-solving effort, in the sense that, for example, it needed to be open and inclusive, and yet, there needed to be security too.**

Yes.

**How did you work that out?**

Well, one thing in Waimea is beyond security, it also needs to keep the wind and the cold out. When I get to work, in the morning, it can be as cold as forty-something. So while we would have loved to have just an open building, with no doors and everything, because of the weather in Waimea, we needed to also take care of that. So we have a very much indoor/outdoor atmosphere in that we have lots of glass. And right outside the glass are the plants that our students take care of. They're the ones who are deciding what is planted there, why is it planted there, and they will take care of those things, and they will harvest that. And we use those plants, actually, as part of our living in this *kauhale* that we're creating.

**When you say *kauhale*, what does that mean?**

In traditional Hawaii, at *kauhale* was a group of—a cluster of houses that were inhabited by an extended family. And we don't look at ourselves as a school; we look at ourselves as a family of learners, or a learning *ohana*. Um [COUGH], our nonprofit is actually called the Kanu O Ka Aina Learning Ohana, but we as a group, everybody that's part of the various programs—we have a preschool program, we have a K-12, we have an indigenous center for higher learning, and we have lots of community education programs going on. We are all part of this extended *ohana*, and we are creating the first community-based Hawaiian learning destination on these thirty acres of Hawaiian homes that we have in Waimea. So the first building is up so far. It's called Halau Hoolako. And the second and third building, hopefully, we're breaking ground very soon to continue the expansion, so that right now, our elementary school is still on another campus, so that we can bring everybody together.

**Critics of Hawaiian charter schools talk about performance on standardized tests. How are you doing in that area?**

Considering where we started, we are off the charts. We are dealing with a population that has underperformed on all educational performance indicators. And yet, within a very short time, less than ten years, we are at least where the rest of Hawaii is, if not in some cases, higher. So our test scores have risen

steadily from year, to year, to year. And we are definitely at least equal with the rest of Hawaii, with the hope in the next ten years, to even outperform other ethnic groups in Hawaii. We just got a six-year accreditation, so definitely, our curriculum, even though it has room for improvement, everything always does, is a very strong, academically focused, rigorous curriculum.

**It's hard for me to get my head around that, because in the Hawaiian culture, there's so much group and team achievement. It's not a matter of, I know the answer, me-me-me, whereas Western is a solo achievement model.**

Only the education model. Because if you go into the business world, it's not true. In the business world, you're looking for collaborators. You're looking for team people, yeah, that are used to working together.

**Especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.**

Especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. So what we have been very blessed to slide into is this concept of ancient is modern. Many things that our *kupuna* value, such as team spirit and team collaboration, and working together for the common good, taking care of the environment, all of these things, are very much also 21<sup>st</sup> century educational paradigms. And so, the more we do this, the more we're realizing that the traditional things are very much also contemporary ways of doing uh, business and surviving in Hawaii today.

**What about Kenneth Conklin, who's criticized the school, and in fact, Charter Schools—Hawaiian Charter Schools in particular, saying that in having the Hawaiian culture driving the school, you also have a politically driven agenda, leading all kids to Hawaiian sovereignty?**

That is something that we neither confirm, nor deny. No. I [CLEARS THROAT]—we feel we are Hawaiians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and as a native people, we have indigenous rights. And those rights are very clear, they're at the UN level, they're also within our state constitution. It's very clear, according to our state constitution, that not only have Hawaiians the right, but the State is supposed to provide a system of education that allows us to learn our culture, our language, and our traditions, and that is not only for Hawaiians, but that is for all students. Now, what I would say is, that the State has failed in that mandate, and that because they have failed, and as a result of it, Hawaiians now are the most underperforming ethnic population, and just in the recent race to the top application, they used Hawaiians to get the \$75 million. Now, we need to make sure that this Hawaiian question is answered. And if the State, after thirty years, has not been able to do that, then maybe they should look at us and other Hawaiian focused charter schools, because we have the answer to how to successfully change these students so that they can become productive citizens, so that they can succeed in life, so that they can feel like there's hope for them. And hope was taken away from us, and we feel we're bringing that hope back. And if people don't want us to have hope, if people don't want us to succeed, then you can keep everything the way it is.

**I think you're a born teacher. And I know your heart is in the teaching, but it seems as though the difference you can make most is exterior. Getting the**

**resources to run the school, and then reflecting the school to the statewide community, lobbying for things that matter.**

Well, I think what we're teaching there is that it's not always what you want to do, that gets things done. Sometimes you have to do things that, A, you may not even feel that qualified for, but, B, that it's not your first love kinda thing. And I do agree with you; my first love is teaching. And whenever I can, I'm in Waipio, teaching people whatever I can teach them. And that is really what—what fulfills me. But we've had to do, what we've had to do to move forward, and I try my best to do that as well. Even though I'm also help cultivating and growing others that can take over those pieces, because there's still, like for example, research and doing more Hawaiian language. This values based self instructional Hawaiian language model that we're developing; I'm so excited about it, just thinking that people that are, again, like me—I was in Germany, they're on the US continent, children that are there not because they want to be there, but because their parents had to move there, and now they're there. For them to be able to learn the language in a fun way, in an exciting way, and in a just very easy kind of a non-threatening way, and non-punitive way, is something that, if I could right now, I would just take three months off, and just do nothing but making sure that that program goes online as soon as possible.

**Educator Kū Kahakalau also serves on the Hawaii Island Burial Council, and the Board of the Center for World Indigenous Studies. She's involved in many native Hawaiian causes. As one who is always ready to stand up for her beliefs, it's no accident that she is known as Kū.**

**I was gonna ask you about Kū. That's based on your middle name.**

Yeah.

**And what is your middle name?**

Hinahinakuikahakai.

**Which means?**

It's ... *hinahina* is gray, and *kū* to stand, *ikahakai* at the beach. So it's gray standing at the beach, but it's the name of a flower. It's a little grayish flower that grows on the beach.

**But it's no coincidence that your nickname is—or your name is not Hinahina.**

Yes.

**The nickname of your long Hawaiian name. It's Kū, which means stand up.**

To stand up. Well, it's actually kind of a funny story. When I started to get into Hawaiian things, and we all kind of—in the 50s and 60s, people didn't use their Hawaiian names. It just started in the 70s with the Hawaiian renaissance, the 80s, more and more people had—we all had Hawaiian names, but nobody was using them, except maybe in the very small family circle kind of a thing. When more and more people started to use their Hawaiian names, we discussed this also. And the Hina, which is a beautiful female name, would have been a very good name. But when I lived on Molokai, we had this super old, mangy dog



who had, like, thousands of puppies, and the *nene*'s was sagging on the ground. And all I could picture of Hina was this old, mangy dog, and I just said, No, no; we're not going to Hina, no matter what happens. And so then, talked to Tutu, and then she said, Well, then how's about going with the K part of it? Because Hinahinakuikahakai is obviously way too long. And like so many things in my life, it's made a huge difference, going down the road. And in retrospect, obviously, it was meant to be. However, at that time, who would have known.

**Does the name reflect who you are, or do you live up to your name?**

I think it goes both ways. Many of my former students, particularly, always call me up when they're having their babies, asking me to help name their child. And I always tell them it's gonna be a two-way thing. You're gonna pick the name, and the child's gonna live up to that name. But at the same time, the other way around, that name is gonna shape that child. So it's always gonna be reciprocal. That's the wonderful thing about anything Hawaiian, is there is an *aku*, and there's a *mai*. It's always reciprocal, and things go both ways. And so I think in this case, for my name as well, it's been a blessing, and I have to be grateful for it, even though on the other side, sometimes I would just say, K , sit down, shut up, and don't say anything else, instead of standing up, again, and trying to make a difference.

**Continuing to fund and maintain the school is a challenge. But Kū Kahakalau and her staff always look to the future. At the time of this conversation, in 2010, they're constructing two more green buildings. The school has two hundred fifty students, eighty percent of whom are of Hawaiian ancestry. Mahalo, Kū Kahakalau, for sharing your life experiences of dual cultures, and for standing up for native Hawaiian education. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou; 'til next time, aloha.**

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We've always sung, and we've always performed. It's just been part of our life, sort of. My sister definitely decided to make that her life's work, and so when she moved home to Hawaii, she started playing music in the hotels, and the songs that we all grew up with, and then also recording. And that's when I said, Oh, I have something, if you're interested, check it out. So some of my songs have been recorded by my sister, some have been recorded by other people as well.