

GUEST: AMY AGBAYANI

LSS 410 (LENGTH: 26:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 11/30/10

I think people who don't know me are really quite surprised when they do meet me, because I'm not frothing at the mouth. Because some of my statements might be outrageous, but on a personal level, I'm kind of mild, I think. But I do take strong positions on these issues.

Have you taken a position, where you really put yourself out there on the very edge?

Oh, yeah.

Amy Agbayani came to Hawaii in the turbulent 1960s to get a graduate education, and she stayed to shake things up with her activist approach and sense of social justice. She has spent the past forty-plus years, on campus and in the community, chipping away at the barriers holding back immigrants, women, gays, and other underrepresented groups. Her story is 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. In this edition of Long Story Short, we'll get to know Amy Agbayani, a Hawaii civil right pioneer who's built a career and a reputation fighting for the underdog. Her activist roots date back to the anti-Vietnam War protests in the 60s at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Instead of returning to her native Philippines after graduate school, Dr. Agbayani found her calling in working to improve the lives of Filipino immigrants here in Hawaii. Over the years, she expanded her efforts to include other minorities and almost anyone on the fringes of society. Known as a tireless advocate, Amy Agbayani picks her battles, and never gives up the fight.**

I've always known you as Amy. But now, I learned that that's not your legal name; it's a nickname. What's your real first name?

My father made it up, and it's Amefil. And it stands for America, Philippines. I was born during the war. Some people say, Which war?

[CHUCKLE]

But I was born during World War II, in Manila. And so the Philippines and America were working together. And so that's how I got my name.

Now, I believe your dad was a diplomat; wasn't he?

Right. My father actually was a journalist, first, and a faculty member, actually. And he was with the Philippine group right after the Philippines got independence, to represent the Philippines as a diplomat. So he was the first crop of Filipinos to represent a new nation. And my father was assigned—his first assignment was to Sydney. And usually, diplomats are allowed to stay a few years, and then are asked to move on. But my father liked it, and we liked it, and it was good for our education, I guess, and so we stayed there for nine years. So when I was growing up and if you had talked to me on the telephone, I spoke like an Australian child.

And what did you speak at home?

We spoke English in our home, but because my mother and father speak two different Philippine languages.

One is Tagalog?

Right.

And what's the other one?

Ilocano, which is eighty percent of the Filipinos here in Hawaii speak in Ilocano.

And you're still proficient in both languages?

Oh, no; I'm not. Yeah. I left the Philippines when I was five, and so, English is really the language that I'm most comfortable with.

And no more Australian accent?

No, I dropped that in about two minutes, when I went back to the Philippines, 'cause everyone, would laugh at me.

[CHUCKLE] And you lived other places too, right?

Yes. Actually, I graduated high school from Bangkok; Bangkok International School. It was a small, international school, and I think there were only ten of us as seniors. And then, I went to the University of the Philippines.

When you were growing up, and living in some different countries, and traveling too, was it hard to figure out who you were sometimes, because there weren't other people like you right there?

I guess I didn't notice it. I thought I was Australian for a long time.

[CHUCKLE]

But then, because of my parents, and they had to represent our country, it was clear that I was Filipino. And so I wasn't confused about that, and I found it interesting, though, that with the exception of two or three friends, I really did grow up with non-Filipino classmates.

Amy Agbayani says she didn't experience racial discrimination, thanks to her family's diplomatic and educational status. And as the third child, her parents did not put undue pressure on her to excel.

Did your mother convey anything to you about people who get left out of the best of society?

She was always kind, and inclusive. So I think that's what I got from both of them, is that there's such a variety of people, and that there's so much talent out there. And so she made friends with everybody, so I just sort of copied her. She was sort of into United Nations all the time. She would dress me up in my Filipino uniform, and I'd be selling United Nations buttons downtown. So I sort of had that international and multicultural sort of idea as a five-year-old.

The Philippines is known as a country of Haves and Have-nots. So you're obviously a Have.

My parents were Haves, but through education rather than land or property. So my father and mother were very well educated.

And wanted you to be, as well?

It was just assumed [CHUCKLE] that we would be educated.

Did you get any direct advice from them on that?

Yes; I was supposed to be a doctor. I didn't enjoy that. My first ambition was to be a tennis professional, tennis star. 'Cause I grew up in Australia, and tennis was the important sport there. But I learned early on that I wasn't going to survive or get hired as a tennis player. I was the alternate to the alternate on the tennis team, so I wasn't really one of the best tennis players. And so I think because of that, I sort of understood that I'd better pay attention to school. The next profession was to be a lawyer. And so that's where I got a degree in political science, and planned to go to the University of the Philippines Law School, which is excellent. But really, there was a very long line for registration, so I decided to go across the street, which is the graduate school. And I was starting a master's in political science, and that's when I met a professor from the University of Hawaii visiting the Philippines, Bob Stouffer. And that's where I heard about the University of Hawaii, and the East West Center, and that's how I got to Hawaii, as a East West Center scholar.

What was said to you, to get you so interested in giving up your plans, and moving to another country?

Well, the scholarship, to the East West Center and the University of Hawaii. I had no intention of staying in Hawaii. I was supposed to be an international foreign student, and actually required to go back to the Philippines for two years. But I got married, and stayed here, and those plans went out the door. But I had fully intended to go back to the Philippines and hopefully get a job at the University of the Philippines.

And then in Hawaii, you would become associated with a program that was for, expressly, Filipinos.

Yeah. I think it was interesting, because I came to Hawaii in a way, laterally, and it never occurred to me that Filipinos would be in such a disadvantaged position here. And so it was quite a shock when I learned about Hawaii's history, and the situation of many Filipinos in Hawaii that it didn't seem right or fair. And so it was an easy transition for me to work in the community.

So you're at the East West Center, and you do complete not only your master's, but you get a PhD. Where did that take you?

Well, I was twenty-six when I got my PhD, and my first job was to work in Kalihi-Palama on a model cities program. And then, the 1965 immigration law was passed, and that brought along a lot of new immigrant Filipinos trickling into Hawaii. And so people like myself noticed that Filipino immigrants were really, really being picked on in the public schools, there was no bilingual education for them, they couldn't be understood, and there were big fights. And so a group of us started Operation Manong. But I think the reason we were able to do that is because most of us were highly educated. All of us, Sheila Forman, Melinda Kerkvliet, we were PhD candidates, and we had *haole* last names, and with faculty husbands. And so I think we had a lot of self-confidence to just try anything out. And so, we did start that, and it was really simple. We asked Filipino students, Will you help tutor in the public schools, 'cause the Filipino children need your help. And the day that week that we got there, we noticed there were Koreans, and there were Chinese, and others. And so we expanded Operation Manong from just Filipino to every immigrant community.

And this was a private nonprofit you started?

Well, we didn't even have any organization at the time. It was sort of just a group. And then, later on, we got some church money, and then we were able to get a very large federal grant to hire our tutors to work in the public schools. I'm extremely proud of the students that we got. The first two included Robin Campaniano, and Emme Tomimbang. Both of them represent the kind of student that we wanted, who was good at getting through college, but at the same time, getting into a profession, and being community oriented.

I recall meeting you at that time. It was in the early 70s. And the immigrant Filipinos were being picked on by, who, but established Filipino kids.

Right. They wanted to distance themselves, and not be considered the bottom of the totem pole. So they did fight with each other. And so that was one of the things that we had to work on, is to change the paradigm.

How long did it take for things to shift?

Well, we're still working on it. So every new generation, every new kid has to learn that. But at least, we've won the argument, I think, that the schools must—and also, the laws. And that's one of the reasons why I think I entered or participate in politics, is to change the laws. And civil rights laws are better now, than they were then.

If you're interested in civil rights, it's pretty hard not to be politically minded, if you want to get things done.

Right.

So you did enter politics.

And I helped lobby for the Hawaii Civil Rights Commission, and I was the first chair of the Civil Rights Commission.

Amy Agbayani's involvement in academic and activist circles led her to become acquainted with some of Hawaii's future Democratic powerbrokers, relationships that continue to this day.

So many times, when I see you covered by the press, or I see an announcement of some kind, you are the only Filipino person there. And during primary election night, on live television, the wife of the candidate Neil Abercrombie, was introducing you, and she said ... she described you as, This little Filipino woman.

Well, she sees me as a mentor. Because I did introduce her to her husband, and actually, got her to uh, finish her college degree when she was a nontraditional student. And you're right that there are very few Filipinos in a lot of places, and that's one of the reasons why I am active in politics. It's because I think that that is a venue for Filipinos to improve their status in the State of Hawaii. And, like, Neil Abercrombie and I do go back a long way, and he is a strong friend of Ben Cayetano also. And so I used to ask Neil Abercrombie to help us on Filipino immigrant issues. So he would.

And so, how did it come to be that you introduced Nancy Caraway to Neil Abercrombie, and they've been married for decades?

Well, she was a nontraditional student. She didn't have a BA. I, at the time, had already gotten a PhD. And she attended a workshop for women returning to college, and I suggested that she interview Neil Abercrombie for her term paper. And they got to meet each other, and that's history. And as I always tell everyone, I also helped them get their first apartment, which is even harder.

[CHUCKLE] And did you see that happening? Did you see sparks, or did you think that would happen?

No, I didn't. I didn't know Nancy that well, either. She was one of the women that I was getting to know. And of course, we have become good friends since then, but at the time, I didn't know her that well.

In 2010, Amy Agbayani served as honorary co-chair for Neil Abercrombie's successful campaign for Governor of Hawaii. He's one of the politicians she has identified with, and supported, in campaign after campaign.

Sometimes it's hard for me to picture you working in politics, just because there are so many aspects of it that you get your feet dirty sometimes, right? I mean, it's not a pleasant business some of the time, because of the devil in the details, and the stuff that you have to navigate.

Well, that's why I'm in politics, and not in a—I pick which things I will participate in. Some people think I should run for office. The only thing I do is run races, 10K or the marathon, but I didn't personally want to run for office, because then, you have to do that a hundred percent. Whereas, I pick and choose, and so you know, I support this candidate, or that candidate, or I'm interested in this issue, or that or another issue, but it's not a hundred percent. By the way, I have not won every battle, and I have supported people who have been beaten up and lost. For example, everyone thinks of Patsy Mink only of the successes she's had, but I've helped Patsy Mink when she lost three to one, think, against Sparky

Matsunaga. So I've been on the losing side on a number of issues. But I keep coming back to the Legislature.

So when people read a position you've taken, it comes across strong, and wow. And then, when they meet you, you're mild mannered.

Well, I think I actually play the special role in Hawaii politics. And that is that I'm on the streets demonstrating on some issue, but at the same time, I have developed access to insiders in the Legislature, and even in corporate business, to try and make sure that we have access to those resources, too. We're knocking at the door oftentimes, and so I do try to have friends on the other side, or people who are decision making. 'Cause most of the groups that I am supporting are not at the table.

So you need to know people who have power, to partner with those who—

And some of the young students, they call me Manang Amy. They think that I've always had access. I said, Hey, no. I couldn't even get to talk to the Superintendent of Public Schools before, when I was working in Operation Manong. He wouldn't answer my phone calls. So we actually—one of the things we did was, we'd have press conferences, and he would say, Who is that? I said, I wouldn't have had this press conference if you had answered my phone call.

You are still, in a sense, the head of OM, which used to stand for Operation Manong. But now, it stands for the Office of Multicultural—

Student Services. And that's just one of many programs that I have at the University of Hawaii. I made up the office name; it's called SEED, Student Equity, Excellence, and Diversity. And I sort of say, you can't have one without of the other. You can't have excellence, unless you also pay attention, or you should pay attention to diversity, and inclusiveness, and equity.

At the time of this conversation in 2010, Amy Agbayani oversees more than twenty programs addressing the needs of students from underrepresented groups, in terms of age, academic ability, ethnicity, disability, economic class, culture, gender, race, religion, and sexual orientation.

This group is just like any other support services I have for Hawaiians or Filipinos. We try to make sure that they get through college, that they know how to navigate the University system, that they feel comfortable, and that they are encouraged to fully participate in student government, or make presentations about their issues. So we have one program like that, and we're one of the few in the country that has a tenured faculty member assisting gay and lesbian students. My whole program, by the way, used to be threatened all the time. For example, when there would be a one percent budget cut at the University, my program would be identified for a hundred percent cut. Me, Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies; they would line us out. I said, Excuse me. But now at least, we're on par with Physics and Math, and Geography, and so forth. And so that when they do come to deciding or allocating budgets, we hold our own.

Because we can point to the strategic plan; it's included in the strategic plan. But we just have to make sure that we keep advocating, and that the leadership understands it really is to the self-interest of the University of Hawaii to have diversity.

So are you the go-to person on campus, and maybe well outside campus, when there's an issue involving somebody's rights being marginalized or disrespected?

Often times. I think the newest civil rights battle is the same gender and civil unions battle for equality. And I'm very active in that. And some people wonder why I'm so active in it. And actually, for me, it's just a no-brainer. I mean, I didn't even think about, Oh, should I do this, or should I participate in that? I said, it's so clear, and it's like breathing, that you would see that as unequal and unfair.

Are you not getting married, out of a wish to support civil unions? If they don't get that, then I'm gonna—you know, the Brad Pitt line?

Well, I was married before to my professor, Bob Cahill. Some people may know him. He's very progressive, liberal and he got me involved in my first campaign for Tom Gill, who ran for lieutenant governor. I have a partner; his name is Gus Gustavson. He's *haole*. Swedish American, I think, from Boston. And he's retired from the Department of Health. And he likes to run also, and I guess the first week he retired, he got addicted to golf. I was married before, and I felt that a relationship should be—you should be there, if you want to be there.

Well, it's working.

Gus and I, we have been together now for over thirty-five years. We live in Kalihi Valley. It's a wonderful place. We live in a small plantation home. I think it's about six hundred and fifty square feet, but we have very large land, and we have bananas, and hundreds of heleconia.

Why did you pick Kalihi Valley?

Oh, well, we could afford it. But uh, um, and you know, it—lots of Filipinos there. Every house with a malunggay tree, we call that the Filipino flag. And I work in Kalihi a lot with the community, Kalihi, Waipahu. I also have programs for Native Hawaiians in Waianae and Nanakuli, so I'm not just in Kalihi. But it's a nice location, and as I pointed out, I graduated from Bangkok International School, and everyone assumes I graduated from Farrington High School. So I tell everyone I'm a Farrington High School wannabe, and I have purchased a Farrington High School alumni shirt—

[CHUCKLE]

I think that's a great school, and I have programs there, too. It's sixty percent Filipino in Farrington High School.

Amy Agbayani worries about what happens to those students after high school, because too many do not go on to college.

Filipinos are severely underrepresented at the University of Hawaii, and that's one of the areas I work on. We're twenty-three percent in the public schools, and we're only less than ten percent at Manoa, and we're less than two percent on the faculty. And so, we're also underrepresented in um ... corporate boards, and we're underrepresented in many areas. So we're trying to change that. And we're well represented, by the way, politically. For example, in the City Council, three out of nine of the council members are of Filipino ancestry. And we have the first Filipino American governor in the United States with Ben Cayetano, and we are actually well represented in politics. So I see education, politics, media, the culture and the arts; we have to make a dent in each of these areas. We're doing well, by the way, I think, with the unions. We have good leadership, Filipino leadership in the unions. We are majority in the Hotel Workers' Union, Local 5. I did get arrested just a couple of months ago, by the way. I joined the protest for Local 5, in Waikiki. We actually prepared to get arrested so that we would know how to handle ourselves. And it was actually just civil disobedience, to make a point, that workers should be given a fair contract. One of my criticism of the previous mayor was in his first term, there were no Filipinos on the Cabinet. That's just totally unacceptable. My criticism of Governor Lingle, which was in the newspaper recently, was she has one woman on the Board of Regents, out of fifteen. And then, her nominees previously from the Bar to the judgeship, there were no women. In this day and age, you sort of say, Duh. It's sort of a non-brainer, and you don't have to convince people, just because it's fair, but it's because you actually get better decisions that way, if you utilize more the talents out there.

Did I hear you say a while back that innovation and excellence—

Excellence.

Those come together?

Yeah; and diversity. The person who's going to solve cancer for Hawaii might be this little child in Molokai. Well, we have to make sure that the children on Molokai get educated, have access to higher education, and become our scientists, and our leaders. So to me, it's sort of self-serving, and to everyone's self interest, to really reach out and try and include people. Because that's the reality. Diversity is the reality. What we have to do is, include that diversity.

What kind of a shift in public opinion in Hawaii have you seen since the 70s?

A lot; and I'm an eternal optimist. And it's gonna—the best is yet to come.

What is it about you that allows that optimism to flow, even when you've been defeated multiple times.

Yeah. I've figured out that as I said, you don't have to be very brainy oftentimes. You have to be there. So persistence is much more important, I think, than intelligence or being articulate. Like, you don't want me, but I'll be here tomorrow.

Amy Agbayani intends to be a voice for fairness and justice in Hawaii's academic, legislative, and political arenas, not only tomorrow, but the day after

that, and in the weeks and years to come. Even after she retires from her job at the UH, Dr. Agbayani has no plans to abandon her life's working, plugging away for the people and causes she cares about. *Mahalo* to Amy Agbayani for sharing her Long Story Short, and *mahalo* to you for tuning in. I'm Leslie Wilcox. *A hui hou kakou; until next time, aloha.*

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit pbshawaii.org.

I think it takes sort of a fire to continue to do what you do. What keeps it burning?

Actually, I make no boundaries, in a sense, between my work, and my community work, or my professional career, or whatever. So it's just an interest to me, and I identify with those things. And I guess, I get rewarded for doing these things, so it's not really hard for me to do this.