LONGstorySHORT with LESLIE WILCOX

PBS Hawaii

GUEST: PATTI LYONS
LSS 412 (LENGTH: 27:46)
FIRST AIR DATE: 12/28/10

I mean, when it's your life's work and you want to leave the world a better place for kids, especially the most vulnerable kids, you really stick with it. You don't give up.

Patti Lyons brought her passion for protecting children to Hawaii in the 1960s, and she would make a lasting impact on countless Hawaii families, as well as the State's Child Welfare system. Lyons fought nonstop over nearly five decades to prevent abuse and neglect, and ensure that every child has a safe home. Her story's 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. It's hard to estimate how many lives have been touched by Patti Lyons, either directly through her casework, or indirectly through the policies she champions. In this edition of Long Story Short, we'll hear the inspirational and sometimes heartbreaking story of this social worker who's devoted her life to the wellbeing of children who had nowhere else to turn. Patti Lyons helped establish important safety net programs like Child Protective Services and Healthy Start. But they didn't come easily; her crusade has demanded decades of persistence as Lyons battled not only the evils of abuse, but a bureaucratic system resistant to change.

Almost all of your adult life, you've been protecting children, and advocating for children. What was your own childhood like?
Well, my own childhood was in a little town called Ellettsville in Indiana. And I grew up with my grandmother and my grandfather, until he died. It was a very good life, even though we were quite poor.
Now, where were your parents?
Well, my mother was quite young when I was born. She had eloped with my father, who was somewhat older. And it just didn't work out for them. It was unheard of, almost, to get a divorce in those times, but they did. My mother was just too immature at that time to take care of me.

So you lived in a very small town with your grandmother and grandfather, and you didn't have a lot, but was it a happy childhood?
It was happy. Because my grandmother—you've heard of unconditional love. Well, my grandmother gave me unconditional love, and so did my grandfather. I mean, they would have done anything for me.
What of them do you think you took with you, as you progressed in life?
Well, it was my grandmother who was the strong person. She was the one who said, Don't ever give up. I mean, that stayed with me all my life. The only time I'd ever gone out of Indiana was William Woods College, which is in Fulton, Missouri. It's was a girls' school then. And my grandmother had saved the money all those years, to send me there.
Did you have a plan when you went to college? Did your grandmother have advice for you about what she'd like to see you do, or did you have your own ideas about what you were gonna do?
She wanted me to be a teacher. So I took a job in Knightstown High School, teaching high school students for two years. And that made her happy. She was happy about that.

But Patti Lyons already knew she wanted to be a child welfare worker. The teaching job was short-lived, but pivotal, since one of Lyons' female students would fuel her passion for her future career. The girl was so traumatized, that she couldn't give an oral book report in class.

She came to me one day after school, and told me about the abuse she was having in her own family. And she said that she would hide under the bed when she knew her mother was very angry. And her mother would come with a broom handle, and her mother would go like this under the bed. And it would, of course, hurt Joan a lot. And she said, that could she just write her book report. So I asked the class. I said, Look, we've been through this two or three times now; could Joan just give the book report in writing? And they agreed. So that's how she passed the class. Then, I was directing a play, and she applied. She came in and said she wanted to apply for a role in the play. I gave her the lead. She did very well in the play, because she didn't play herself; she played a mother. Then, I was leaving that year. I was not gonna teach anymore. She begged me to stay. And I said, Joan, you'll be okay, because the teachers have seen what you can do now; you'll be all right. I found out from my neighbor, who was the head of a mental hospital, about two years later, she said, Oh, you taught in Knightstown High School, didn't you? She said, We had a girl commit suicide over the weekend. And I said, Who? What was her name? And she told me, Joan.
Joan.
And she said, She drank a quart of tequila and was on her medications, and they couldn't revive her. That made me feel so guilty. Because I thought she was gonna be okay. And I said, From now on, I'm gonna do what I want to do,

and that is to help abused children. And that has been my life since. That was in 19, let's see, I graduated with my master's in social work in '61.
That had been your bent before, but that solidified the goal?
That solidified it.
Now, you say you felt guilty. But do you think you could have prevented that?
Maybe not prevent it, but she asked me to pay attention to her. She asked me, Please, don't leave. Well, I had to leave, but I could have written her. She wrote me. I still have her letter someplace, that she wrote me. I have it at home someplace. And that's how much it's meant to me all these years.
I would think that that might also convince you that you were headed into a career where you would have many regrets, and a lot of guilt. Is that what happened?
Well, that's true. I feel like I've never been able to do enough for these kids, especially when they end up in a vegetative state, when they've just—or they've died. I just feel somehow responsible.
How can you live with that? I mean, you can't control everything, and as you worked in social services, there were never enough people, and there are probably fewer now to do the work. How do you live a personal life, knowing that there are all these risks out there in the form of children?
You finally do have to say, I can't do it all, there's no way I can do it all. I can't prevent every child from being hurt. You just keep on trying.

After earning her master's degree in social work from Indiana University, Patti Lyons worked for Indiana's State Department of Public Welfare. Then, in 1965, she followed her husband to Hawaii, and found a job with Child and Family Service. While the marriage did not last, the job did.

When I went in for the job interview, the director at that time said, Well, we'll give you this nice job out here in the back. We have new offices, and you'll be seeing middle income and upper income people, and a lot of them will be military officers and their wives. And I said, Well, do you have anything else? She said, Oh, there's this place way out here on the coast that they're saying that they give to Aloha United Way, and that they should get some of the services out there
Where was that place?
Waianae. And it did have the highest, child abuse rate at that time. I don't know what it is today. But she tried her best to talk me out of it. She said, Look, they have no transportation out there, they have no welfare office, they have no doctors, they have no dentists, it's the highest crime rate in the island, and they're mostly Hawaiians and they hate *Haoles*. I said, I'll take that job. [CHUCKLE] But she said, They're not gonna work with you. You've got this white skin, and you came from Indiana, and hey, it's not gonna work. Well, within three months, I had a long waiting list of mostly Hawaiian, part-Hawaiian

families. So I ran into many, many abused children. And I knew I couldn't live with myself unless I did something about it.

But Patti Lyons quickly discovered that by doing something, she would be butting heads with an entrenched bureaucracy. She began what would become a battle, when she requested a meeting with officials of the State Department of Human Services.

I presented all my cases that I had sent to them. When I was leaving, because I saw nothing was happening, they said something like, Well, your philosophy is just different from ours. And I said, How is that? They said, Well, we believe in keeping children with their own families.

Even if their own family is abusing them?

Yes. So as I was leaving, I turned around, and I said, Well, we're gonna go higher. And that was the way the conversation ended. When I got back to the Methodist Church, in the little kitchen where thirteen of us were on this first committee, I said, What does higher mean?

[CHUCKLE]

'Cause I had no idea what we were gonna do. But we went to the legislator out there, Francis Wong, at that time, a started working on developing a Child Protective Service Center.

What was in place, as far as the safety for children at that time, in the late 60s?

Well, I don't think there was anything. I'll tell you the crux of it for me was that a girl came in one day, crying, and saying that her stepfather was sexually molesting her, when her mother would deliver papers in the morning.

How old was this girl?

This girl was about twelve at that time. And she said, I don't want to go home, please don't make me go home. So that's the day that I called and said, You get out here to DHS, because this girl should not go home. She should go to a shelter of some sort, or a foster home, but not home. A male worker came out, the first time I had ever known to happen with all the cases I'd had, and the mother told him, Oh, it was a poltergeist that did it. And he said, The girl should go home.

What did you do, then?

I cried. [CHUCKLE] I mean, I just cried. Because I didn't know what else to do. She went home. Home. And she ran away, I don't know how many times. But she ended up in a foster home. And that case hit the newspapers. Francis Wong talked about that case often, and said, No, we have to establish—we have to have better laws, and we have to establish a center for these kids.

Persuading lawmakers and the news media to pay attention was a breakthrough for Patti Lyons. But some of her fellow social workers and higher ups at Child and Family Service were wary, even hostile to Lyons and her cause.

I was scared every day I was gonna be fired. Because as she told me, the boss at that time at Child and Family Service, she said, We didn't send you out there to make waves

Did you have a fallback plan; if they fire me, then this?

I didn't have a fallback plan. I just knew it had to happen. It had to happen. And the first hearing that we had at the Legislature, three hundred people came in, filled the room. In that year, '67, there were sixty-nine children statewide reported. And the next year, there were over a thousand. Because we kept it in the newspapers. Every day, it was in the newspapers.

And did all those children get some help? Did the government then respond?

Yes, because we established a Child Protective Service Center. It was there at the old Children's Hospital on Kuakini Street.

So you had to square off against your own coworkers, and the government who had a duty to protect children.

That's right. That's right. And that's hard. Because, hey, we all like to be loved, or at least liked.

And did you falter at that point? Did you think, Whoa, maybe I'm the one who's off base here?

No. 'Cause I had seen the kids. I had seen the burned kids. I had seen the battered kids. I'd seen the bruised kids. I'd seen them all. So, no, I wasn't about to give up.

And so you eventually rose to head the agency.

Yes.

Child and Family Service; and you saw the state government create a Child Protective Services Division.

Yes; yes.

But life didn't go on happily ever after. There were continuing challenges.

There were. And every time, we would go back, we would establish a committee if we needed to, you know, to get in there and fight some more.

All of this time that you were advocating for neglected and abused children, you were raising a couple of kids yourself.

I had two sons; yes.

And you were a single mom?

Yes; m-hm.

How did that go?

Well, that's hard, especially a mom with sons. And it was a rough time for me. I think it was a rough time for them. Because I didn't have that much to give. Between what I was doing with abused children, and had to work, had to support them, and I wanted to do this work anyway, and then taking care of them and it was not easy.

Make any mistakes as a parent that you'd care to share?

I think that I was overly committed to what I was doing for abused children. And I think I missed a lot of good times with my kids.

While Patti Lyons managed heart-wrenching abuse cases, the battle of bureaucracy, and struggle to raise her sons, she also faced down cancer four times.

The first cancer I had was that year that I moved here in '65. I had an operation in Indiana; it was thyroid cancer. And then 1986, I had a diagnosis of breast cancer. And I've had a lot of skin cancer all along; that's always been a given. And then in 2003, I had a diagnosis of bladder cancer. But, I always just did what I needed to do, and got over it, and it didn't linger or bother me like, Oh, it's gonna come back, or something like that. And so far, it hasn't.

After more than two decades at Child and Family Service, Patti Lyons was unexpectedly drawn to a new endeavor, one that would expand her efforts beyond Hawaii, and consume the rest of her career. It started with a work trip in 1987 to the Philippines. That's where Lyons learned about the plight of Filipino street children, who were starving, homeless, and were being sexually molested. Lyons returned to Hawaii with a mission to help. Her desperate fundraising appeals led her to a wealthy Kahala widow with ties to the Philippines, Mrs. Consuelo Zobel Alger.

So the next morning, she called and she said, Hello, dear. I thought, Oh, well, that sounds good. And she said, I have your first fifteen thousand dollar check. Now, how much is this shelter gonna cost per year, anyway? And I said, It's gonna cost fifty to fifty-five thousand US per year. And she said, Oh, I can manage that. That was the beginning. One day, she said, Dear, I've never had any children of my own, and now, I have forty children. I think I might like to do this forever, but I have no idea how much I'm worth. I own five percent of the oldest and largest company in the Philippines; it's my family's company. But I don't know, maybe I'm worth seven million, maybe ten. I might even be worth fifteen. When she left all of her shares in that company to the foundation that she then established, she was worth a hundred and fifty million.

Wow.

And she gave all that to us. Now, she had some jewelry, she had some property that was sold, and that went to nieces and nephews, and that kind of family. But all of the shares came to us.

I can tell that as soon as you embraced the Baguio children, you were on the move. But how did it end at CFS?

Well, at CFS I had always had a pile of paper almost up to my nose in front of me. And handling personnel problems, and 'cause every place has them. And I thought, Oh, I want to do something different.

You wanted to be closer to the people you were serving.

Yes. I wanted to look people in the eyes again, and I wanted to know what's going on with them. So I'd been thinking about it. But then here this is. Now, I call it a miracle. First, she said, I will pay half your salary at Child and Family

Service, and I will fund a program there if they will let you come and help me establish this foundation. So she did a program in Hawaii. In fact, she did one in Waianae; she funded it. The more I saw what could be done, what could be built, I thought, Oh, wow, I wonder if she wants me to help permanently. Well, then when she became ill, she said, I'm not gonna be able to follow through with this, so would you take the job fulltime? And I said, Yes. [CHUCKLE] It was so good to get back with the kids again, with the families, and do something in that country that nobody else was doing. These are kids who … they don't have any resources, and their parents don't have any resources. So they repackage cigarettes and things like that, to sell little *lei*s as the cars pull up at the stoplights.

The scavenge at a dump, a huge dump.

At a huge dumps. Smokey Mountain, it was called then. Yeah; anything that they can get to sell, to earn enough for a little bit to eat.

What did you do for them?

For the ones who really were being sexually molested by the pedophiles, we established shelters. If they can live with their parents, they're still in squatter areas. Meaning, the cardboard, the tin roofs. So we did some housing projects, small houses, but sewage. Because they always had raw sewage just running. And put in some sewage systems, some clean water. The fun part of the last twenty years has been the building; the building of that in the Philippines from north to south. We named it Consuelo, because her name in Spanish means, consolation or hope. And that's what we were trying to give to people. She said, I want to spend my Heaven doing good on Earth, and I want to let fall from Heaven a shower of roses. And what matters in life, is not great deeds, but great love. You pattern my life after that, and you give hope to those who have lost it.

And that's what you're doing.

I hope so. I hope so. And I think so.

But you'll never be done. The job is never finished. You'll never be able to stop all the abuse.

That's true. That's true. And that pains me, because I wish it could be eliminated. I wish there could be an adult for every child, that gave that child unconditional love. There won't be.

Have you come across somebody that you helped long ago, didn't know the story would turn out, and had the chance to see that person again many years later?

I did. I did. And it was a person, a family from Waianae. They lived in a junkyard. The mother had abandoned the five children. And the father was depressed, very depressed, and also, you know, angry. So when I walked into that yard, saying that I wanted to work with them, he pulled out a shotgun, and he said, Don't come any further. But he called me a little bit later, 'cause I had left a card out there at the edge of the road. [CHUCKLE] And he said, Okay, I've decided to work with you. So I worked with that family for a long time. But

this one girl was ten years old the time. I said, What would you like to be when you grow up? And she said, I'd like to be a nurse. And about fifteen years later, something like that, I walked into Straub to go to Dermatology, and I had my head down like this. I wasn't paying any attention, 'cause I had a headache, for one thing. And when I got into the room, in walks this beautiful young woman, and she said, Mrs. Lyons, do you remember me? And I said, How could I ever forget you. It's things like that, that keep you going, no matter what.

Although Patti Lyons is officially retired, she remains on the board of the Consuelo Foundation, and continues to advocate for the health and security of children here and abroad. In contrast to the criticism she endured early in her career, Lyons has been honored repeatedly for her lifetime of service to Hawaii's children and families. She hopes she'll be remembered for giving hope to those who had lost it, and her story reminds us all of the power of one person to advance change and save lives. For Long Story Short and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A *hui hou kakou*.

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

I used to stack up my dolls, my grandmother said, in a row like this, and I would have a chalkboard in front of them. And I would say, Now, you're going to have to be good and do without me, because I'm going to New York tomorrow. And my grandmother always wondered, Where did she get this New York thing? Well, now I serve on a board, it's called the Accreditation Council for Services to Children and Families, and I get to go three times a year.