LONGstorySHORT
with LESLIE WILCOX

PBS Hawaii

GUEST: CHRISTINE CAMP
LSS 413 (LENGTH: 27:46)
FIRST AIR DATE: 1/11/11

I love this country. I love this country only in a way an immigrant can say it. I'm a first generation American, I came to America, I've seen what it's like on the other side. And America is a beautiful country, and I love it for all that it stands.

Patriotism for the United States is sometimes intensified when your country of origin is a foreign land. Our next Long Story Short guest began life in South Korea, immigrated to Hawaii as a young girl, and grew up to become a successful real estate developer. The contrast between her life before, and after her move to Hawaii, is enough to make anyone believe in the American dream. Meet Christine Camp, 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. At the age of thirty-two, Christine Camp launched Avalon, a real estate development company in Honolulu. Now, that may sound young, but by then, Christine Camp had experienced a lifetime's worth of lessons. Her school of hard knocks education began at birth.**

Tell me a little bit about your very early life in South Korea.
We had very little. We came from the poorer side of, I guess everybody was poor in those days in Korea, because we were a nascent nation in the sense that we'd just come out of the war. I was born in 1966, so it was a few years after the war, but still, there was very little resources.
How big was your family?
I have four siblings. There were five of us, and my mother and my father. And they were searching for a better opportunity for us. And they left the five children in Korea, and came to Hawaii for two years when I was I was only eight years old. From between the time, eight to right before I turned ten, my sisters raised us, and we lived with various relatives while they were setting up a home for us here.
Did you feel adrift at that point, with your parents away?
Well, it was very confusing, because I was fairly young, and no one really explained. My sisters are eight and six years older than I am; so older. And they were in their teens, and they really took care of us. Both of them

dropped out of school to take care of the younger kids and studied from home. So we were home schooled, while we were waiting for my mother and father to bring us to Hawaii.

Now, when you say you were poor, what does poor mean?

Very little resources. I think my mom sent some money to help take care of us. But we didn't have much meat. We ate mostly vegetables. We didn't have running water. [CHUCKLE] And we lived in one room and the five kids stayed in one room in apartment house. It was part of a section of a house of our relatives. And there winters when we had to go to the pump house to pump water, because our well wouldn't work. And we'd walk five blocks and down the hill on the mountainside to get water from the common pump well. That's how poor we were.

Did you worry that your parents wouldn't be seen again? Or were you looking forward to joining them?

No, we just didn't think that it would take that long to get the immigration done. I think everyone thought that it would be just a matter of a few months, and it ended up being a couple of years. When I think back, I think of how resilient all of us were. Because I think for us, were hoping for a better life, and so we didn't know what we didn't have. Because the people around us kind of had the same means. And so we enjoyed our times, but without parents were a little difficult.

I can see a big culture shock coming, because your—

M-hm.

—parents did send the money for you to—did you all come over together?

We did. Five of us came here. And boy, was I sick on the airplane the whole time. [CHUCKLE] But we came here, and I remember smelling the air.

And you're nine years old.

I'm nine years old, and smelling the air, thinking, my goodness, this is what Hawaii—I didn't differentiate Hawaii as an island. I thought this was America, this is the big country. And I thought, wow, where are the buildings? I mean, this is not America. Korea is much more developed with high rises and everything, which I saw very little. But all the lush tropical jungle-like places. Because we came from concrete, not a lot of landscaping. And for me to see all these trees and flowers; oh, my gosh. It was amazing.

Could you speak English?

My name is. [CHUCKLE] My name is Hyun Hee Camp. Hyun Hee was my Korean name. And, I am hungry. I am hungry. [CHUCKLE] I am hungry. [CHUCKLE] And those were the only things that I could say. And I could say the ABCs.

When Christine Camp started classes at a public grade school in Kaimuki, she recalls that students threw rocks at her, and called her an FOB, or fresh off the boat. Picking up more of the language, and moving to a different public school in the same district gave her a chance for a fresh start.

And we moved to Wilson Elementary right before we ended the fifth grade year. And so I had an opportunity to recreate who I am, not be so foreign, and meet friends. And I made some really good friends, and I was able to blossom in there, and did very well in school. I had some really amazing teachers. In that school, I remember Mr. Kosasa, who basically spent extra time with me, letting me know what my assignments were. And that was my fifth grade homeroom teacher. My sixth grade homeroom teacher was Mrs. Hasegawa. And everyone didn't like her, because she was really tough. And I was afraid of her; she had a reputation. But she was the one that made me feel so accepted, that I was smart. We had to write some poems for an English class. And I wrote about *maile lei*, and it was about *maile lei*, it's long, it's beautiful, and you can see the leaves, green leaf after green leaf. I don't remember just precisely what I wrote. I think I must have had a lot of spelling errors. But she picked it out, and she said, This is one of the best poems I've read, and I'm going to read it out to the class. And she read it out. And it made me feel so special. It made me want to do more.

What were your parents telling you about how to behave in this new world?

Well, by then, my father was very ill, and wasn't really cognizant of what's going—he was dying of cancer. And my mom was busy working. So it was really up to us to kind of find our own way.

How were finances in the new land, after finances had been so rough in Korea?

When we first came here, we lived in what I thought was a mansion. It was a beautiful spot. It was a two-bedroom walkup. When I look back and I still see the building on Waialae Avenue, I think, Wow, we all squeezed in, five of us in a little room. And then my mom saved up enough. She felt that she had four girls, so she wanted us to live in a community where there would be no other Koreans, where we would be speaking English, and that we would have the best public education possible. So she found this house on Ainakoa. I mean, talk about every house was white. This one was brown from no paint. [CHUCKLE] On the hillside, dilapidated, with termites, but it was the only one she could afford; leasehold house. And we went there, we fixed it up, we spent all of our free days and nights working on this house.

That's quite an accomplishment.

Yeah.

She was a—

It was.

—waitress, and worked different waitressing and minimum wage jobs with tips.

Koreans, they kinda help each other out. And I think Vietnamese, they're the same. And Japanese, when they're here, it's the same. Koreans call it *kei*; I think Japanese, they call it *tanomoshi*. They put into a pool, they bid for the money, and they can have access to a pool of money. Ten, twenty thousand dollars, and there are twenty, forty people putting into this pool. And my mom was in one of those. And she was able to secure the down payment needed to

buy the house, and she bought it on an agreement of sale. I'm not even sure if they have agreements of sale anymore.
And had to make the payments every month.
Right. And so, we were expected to help out. I worked from the time I was twelve years old. I worked as a babysitter. God, in those days you could babysit four kids, and people thought nothing of it. I was babysitting six, seven-year-olds when I was twelve years old. Can you believe that? [CHUCKLE]
I remember that. There were even certificates for twelve-year-old—
Yeah.
—babysitters.
Yeah. I remember my first new clothes was for my father's funeral. We didn't have anything black, and someone said that we had to wear black. And someone gave us twenty dollars each and said, You guys go to JC Penney's and buy clothes. And we didn't even know how to shop at JC Penney's, what to do, because we've never been in these stores for us. And so it was exciting, and sad at the same time.
Terribly sad.
It was so unfortunate that it was that time in which we had a chance to actually go to Kahala Mall. 'Cause we'd been to Kahala Mall, and we went to McDonald's, once every three months or something and had a hamburger. But to go into JC Penney's to buy something; that never happened.

Christine Camp later excelled at intermediate and high school, held down several jobs, and became a cheerleader. But Christine's mother, ever the disciplinarian, prohibited her daughter from taking part in extracurricular activities that would take her away from household chores. So, at age fifteen, Christine decided to run away from home.

And I thought, as long as I had all straight A's, she should have nothing to complain about. But she did. And she was so tough, and my sisters were so tough on me. I was getting spankings all the time. And I felt that I could do better, I was making my own money. So I packed up my bags in a little pillowcase.
Pillowcase?
Yeah. [CHUCKLE] I said, I'm done with you. I ran away from home.
How could you make your own way at age fifteen?
Isn't that amazing? I did. And I can't … my rent was hundred and seventy dollars a month.
Where did you live?
On Harding Avenue, in one of these old Chinese schools that became an apartment house. Little sections of classrooms were apartment house, and I had a little apartment house next to the sewer line where the cockroaches gathered at night. [CHUCKLE]
And what about your neighbors; what were they like?

Six families. I have to say, I saw what I felt was to not have hope, to feel a loss in what our life would be. There was a welfare mom who dropped out of high school, had several children, and still within high school age. There was a woman who had two kids, and she was a prostitute. There were—it was just kind of like that. An alcoholic woman, another woman who couldn't afford to eat regular food, and she was sharing her cat food, what I found out, and I would try to give her what I could. And the only bright light in that whole place were two college students who were a couple, and they were happy people. They were clean, and they were smart, and they had a hope of future. I mean, they had hope for their future. But I internalized this when a traumatic accident happened with me. I couldn't afford electricity, so I didn't have power, but I had a little gas oven. And these kids were running around without adult supervision, and I felt like I was the den mother. Whenever I had free time, I would have them come over to my place. And it was a child's three-year-old birthday, and her mom was out. So I decided, I'm going to bake her a cake. And I'd never used the oven. Turned the oven on; nothing. It was a gas oven. And I realized, Oh, it's a gas oven, I have to turn the match on. Turned on the match, and the whole thing blew up on my face. I had no hair on my face. Anyway, the emergency medics came, and they called the emergency and everything. And at that moment, while I was cooling off, they had ice on me, I'm sitting there, and I had an Aha Moment. All these images came to me of the people that were living around me, and the little kids. And the only bright spot that I saw were these students who had a future. And I felt that education was my future, I didn't want to be there, and that I wanted to have hope. I didn't want to lose hope like these people. And they're wonderful people, but they lost hope for their future, and they weren't taking responsibility for themselves. So I packed up my ego, packed up my things; I went home that day, the next day.

What was that reception like for you?

What was amazing is, my mom never asked me a question. I had called my sister and said, I'm coming home. And she didn't go to work. She went to work seven days a week; she didn't go to work. She was there folding laundry, she acted like nothing happened.

Through all of this, Christine Camp managed to graduate early from Kalani High School, and enrolled at Kapiolani Community College.

You're going to community college, and working your way through school. Where did the idea of developer emerge?

The developer image; it comes from my first job, my first real job, my first fulltime job. All right. I think people say that, you have to have luck. And I've been very lucky so many times. And my luck comes in having my first job with a gentleman named Rex Kuwasaki. He has a development company, Arcade Development. And I went to work for him as his Girl Friday. And when he realized I can take on

more, he gave me increasingly more and more opportunities to do different things, and he taught me so much. And that's where I realized what an impact I could have in the community, and how meaningful it would be to be a developer, to create communities, from an idea on a piece of paper, to see buildings, to put people in homes. I just loved that idea. So I wanted to have my own company, and I wanted to be that, what he was doing.

So you worked for RK—

M-hm.

—Development?

RK.

RK.

Rex Kuwasaki Development; yeah.

And picked up some very good basic—

M-hm.

—skills. And then, what?

Well, five years there. And Castle and Cooke was hiring, they had just gotten their zoning for Mililani Mauka. And they were hiring a brand new team, so I went to work for them. I started as a project coordinator in their planning engineering department. And did a lot of permit processing and planning with engineers and architects for homes. And I became such a budget cruncher, and I had such a love for affordable housing that I did a lot of affordable housing there, and had a lot of fun. So I did that for five years, and ended up being a senior project coordinator for the project department, and—

Okay; I'm noticing two five-year stints. Was that on purpose?

Yeah. I like five-year goals. I always believe that people need to see short-term goals, but you need to look out five years ahead. So that it gives you kind of a guiding light as to where one should go. So I had a five-year goal. I worked five years, and I thought okay, five years is enough. Went to work for Castle and Cooke, worked five years, and so it was to the month of five years, I went to work for A and B, Alexander and Baldwin as their project manager, and then ended up as VP of their development. And almost five years, but I found some opportunities where it made me want to leave a little earlier. So I think it was four years and ten months, or something like that.

What were the opportunities?

I found a couple of projects that I wanted to work on, that I thought I could do. Ended up becoming not a project, but it did give me the courage to move on to being my own developer, my own company, having my own company.

And how did you decide to focus your company?

I wanted to be my own developer, but I realized it was a lot harder in raising money than just doing projects. I had to not only do the planning and engineering, and design of the projects, the marketing of the projects, but I actually had to raise the money. And the capital was what was my obstacle in being my own developer. So I decided that I would have an advisory services company in leveraging my expertise. And that was a very profitable business.

And then moved onto doing the projects. And I realized it was such a successful advisory services and doing brokerage, I wasn't spending any time looking for my own projects. So I had to make sure I had a five-year goal to guide me again to say, okay, five years, I'm going to have my own projects. Right now, the mix was eighty/twenty; twenty percent of my projects, eighty percent other projects, other people's projects. And I'm going to change that ratio in five years. And in five years, I was able to do that. I had my own development projects. And so I said, Okay, well, that's good. Now what, for the next five years? And so I put some monetary goals. Like, if I could only make a million a year. If I could only do ten million, if I could only raise twenty million dollars. So those were kind of the goals that I put into place for five-year goals. And we finished our five-year goals. It's been eleven years, and so we're now looking at what we're going to do. We, because our company has grown beyond just myself, and we are looking at our next five years.

Now, it's very hard to do a five-year goal when a recession comes along, and just knocks the bottom out of budget.

M-hm.

Do you add two years there, three years?

Of course. I mean, the goals are just that; they're goals. They're not set in stone, and you don't get depressed over it. You just adjust to the changing times. But there's a guiding principle that carries you from one end to the other. As long as you have a goal in mind, I think it makes it easier for one to make a decision. 'Cause isn't it what it is; it's always a series of decisions, how do you decide.

Do you have trouble deciding the decisions?

Never. I sleep well at nights. [CHUCKLE] Of course.

Because they provide the security of knowing, okay, here's where I'm headed

Knowing where I'm headed, it makes it easier. But the last few years have been difficult decisions. I mean, to walk away from millions of dollars invested in a piece of property … difficult. To lay off half your staff … difficult. 'Cause I felt that, the way I justified it to myself is, I had to cut off one arm to keep the rest of the body alive. And a lot of people say that. But cutting that arm off was so painful. Walking away from the millions of dollars was easier than laying people off. It was that difficult. Because I knew it was their livelihood. I knew they had a mortgage to pay, and family to support. And so it was really, really hard.

So you chose to name your company Avalon.

M-hm.

Why?

My love of books. I love reading books, and I love two genres. I have a hard time with nonfiction, but mystery novels and mystical fairytales. And fairytales, King Arthur stories fascinates me.

Now, Avalon was where King Arthur pulled Excalibur out of the stone, isn't it?

Well, no; it was the Isle of Avalon where all the power came. And remember when he died, he went back.

Oh, and he recovered there.
And Isle of Avalon, they took his power back, they took the sword back. So the way I saw Avalon, aside from the fact that it starts with an A, so it will be the top of the alphabet [CHUCKLE]—
That's a good one.
But we live on an island, as Avalon. But really, what it was, it was about king makers and the source of power; source within. And I liked that. And the recent books, the recent renditions of this fairytale, there's a mist of Avalon where all power comes from the priestesses, which is the women. So even more so, I thought, very apropos. And that's why I named the company Avalon.

During election years, some developers try to cover their bets. They give equally to all political candidates in order to be in the good graces of the eventual winners, whoever they may be. Christine Camp has other ideas. For example, she openly and enthusiastically supported Mufi Hannemann, when he ran unsuccessfully for governor in 2010.

You've had some leadership positions in government. You were—
M-hm.
You were heading the Police Commission, you—
I was.
You've been active in different political campaigns. Must be a little tricky, when you're looking for approvals as a developer.
M-hm.
And you are also wishing to participate in government. I mean—
M-hm.
—those are tricky currents you have to navigate.
Absolutely. A lot of people said, Are you nuts? You're a developer, and you're supporting a certain candidate. And I always believed an election is just that. You have to make a choice. You vote. And if you really believe in something or someone, then you need to stand behind it. And people who are elected need to understand that it was just an election. Now that they're there, we as the constituents will stand behind them because they are our elected leaders. But during the election period, I don't believe in kind of walking the middle line all the time. That's not America. America is about making choices, to protect your freedom, and protecting your views.
Any issue coming up that you're scratching your head about how to solve?
One thing that really affects me is the homelessness. I'm a developer, and yet, it's so difficult to develop homeless housing first; I believe in that. I was homeless for a few days. I actually slept in a park when I ran away from home. And I've been poor, and I was that close to being homeless. And when I opened my own business, and when I didn't have enough cash flow to pay the payroll, I thought about being homeless. We're that close to being homeless, a lot of us.

And there are so many people in such vulnerable positions, we've gotta do something. We've gotta do something.

But why doesn't it ever get beyond, we've gotta do something? I mean, it just never seems to materialize into something that sticks.

'Cause people don't—can I just say. I cannot understand why people say this is a state problem, but yet, they want the funding to come from the people who are buying homes, or the funding to come from the developers. They don't believe that this is a state problem. If this was a state problem, it should come from our tax base, not from people who are buying homes to stay away from being homeless. It's adding to the cost of buying homes, to sheltering these people. By taking it from the developers when they're doing affordable housing, or just adding more housing stock so that it becomes affordable, it just adds to that burden. It ultimately has to be paid for by everyone else. Why do we think it's so expensive? So people are scratching their head thinking, we've gotta do something, and yet, there's no funding from the general fund. Of course we're not going to solve that problem.

What's your current five-year plan?

My current five-year plan is actually looking at—I created a company, a holding company, Avalon Group. And we're expanding in our development services business, but we're also buying other companies, and really believing in Hawaii, and growing other businesses. So the next five years is really diversifying, and creating the next layer of managers. That it's not about me, but it's about having managers manage the projects and companies.

What does your mom say? I mean, I know your mom hasn't been a big talker. She's a doer.

She's a doer.

But now, she's seen you make this wonderful transition to American life, and be extraordinarily successful as a professional, and a mom. And what does she say?

She still treats me like I'm thirteen years old. [CHUCKLE] She wants to comb my hair, and [CHUCKLE] make sure that I'm wearing the right color. No, she's extremely proud of me. She's very thankful. She took care of me, so now I take care of her. And she helps me raise my son. And it's come full circle.

What happened to that leasehold, termite-ridden house in Ainakoa?

She sold it. But I remember the Aha Moment of when I thought, I've finally made it, is she was buying the leasehold into fee, and she didn't have enough income to qualify for a mortgage. And I remember co-signing her mortgage, and thinking, Wow, I really made it, I'm co-signing a mortgage for my mom. And so that was …

That's worth more than money.

Yeah. I remember how proud she … I'm choked up now, 'cause I remember seeing her, and I'm feeling, wow, I did it. I really did it. And she was so proud of me.

Christine Camp's mother has reason to be very proud. Her daughter is active in community organizations, and has received awards for achievements in her adopted country. At the time of this conversation in 2010, Christine is busy with a new accomplishment. The business owner says she's keeping a work-family balance as the single parent of a two-year-old son. No more marathon weekdays, and no more long weekends at the office, she says. Family life does not keep her from continuing to set those business goals, though, five years at a time. *Mahalo*, Christine Camp, for sharing your story. And thank you for listening, on Long Story Short. For 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 live in the present. A very insightful friend told me, Christine, if I look at a life's matrix for you and how you look at the world, your past like this, your future like this, and the present is like this. And I think I live in the moment, and it makes me happy, and doing what I believe is the right thing to do, making decisions that allows me to go to the future. As long as I have a peg, and I can see it, that's my five-year goals, I know where to go.