LONGstorySHORT
with LESLIE WILCOX

PBS Hawaii

GUEST: PONO SHIM: THROUGH A CHILD'S EYES
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I became very idealistic in my early adulthood, but it wasn't until his final months that I reconciled and I said, Wow, maybe we are much more similar than we are different.

Pono Shim, leader of a nonprofit economic development organization, and son of labor attorney, Alvin Shim, 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 episode of Long Story Short, we'll talk with Pono Shim, President and CEO of Oahu's Economic Development Board, Enterprise Honolulu. Pono often helps Hawaii's top executives break out of silos and traditional thinking to find common ground and collaborate. And as you'll find out, he often uses stories as a tool. Pono is the son of political strategists and visionaries. His father, the late labor attorney Alvin Shim, tried to keep a low profile, but he had a reputation as a community power broker and mediator. He was involved in the 1954 Democratic revolution of Hawaii. Pono's mother, Marion Heen Shim, sister of retired judge and lawmaker Walter Heen, is from a long line of public servants. Growing up, Pono always seemed to be at his father's side. Alvin exposed his son to many conversations and stories that helped shape Pono's values; values he shares today with the local business community. But first, let's talk with Pono about his name, a Hawaiian value in and of itself.**

To be legally named Pono, meaning righteousness, that itself seems like it could be a burden.
Yeah. People ask me, What's your real name, what's your legal name? In our family, there are seven of us, and I'm the only one who has a given Hawaiian first name. And I'm second to the last. My mom was always very, very sensitive, and is still, to not devaluating anybody. That's something that I learned so much from my mom. I also learned that a mother's love is like no other love in this world. Her ability to forgive, to want to just maintain a relationship with her children is unbelievable, when we've messed up. [CHUCKLE] And a mother's forgiveness is something special. But, when people would ask me, I would tell

people, not in front of my siblings, that well, it's probably 'cause I was the only one who needed to be reminded he was Hawaiian. And I also was told how to behave, 'cause I probably wasn't too behaved.

But you were named that when you were born, right, before you had a chance to misbehave.

Yeah, my dad loved that name. Yeah. And I have a cousin who's named—and this was before Pono was popular as a name.

Yes.

Just simple. I don't want to make too much of it, because people often do. They do, and they say, Wow, you're your name. I don't know if that's fair to other people.

You were a public school kid, living in Manoa, and you had a very different experience than I'd say any kid in your *ahupuaa*. What was your childhood like?

Dad was real busy. Mom, at the time, got to stay home and take care of my kid brother and I, who were the youngest. So, 'cause we were the youngest, I grew up with Mom at home. And we didn't know, really, who our father was, I think. He was just Dad. And for me, what I was able to do was, spend a lot of time with him, even though he was as busy as he was. And I remember a friend recently told me that, Your father used to say he'd be out twenty-nine days out of a month in board meetings for dinners. And that's what it was. But for me, I didn't notice that, because I remember Dad coming home late, and the treat was, I got to take Dad's socks off. When he'd come home, he'd sit on the couch, he was tired, and I'd take off his socks. And we'd have dinner. He'd have dinner sometimes late, or just sit down and talk, read the paper. One of the things I remember the most enjoyable in my childhood was, everyone would go to bed, and he and I would be downstairs and we'd listen to music 'til maybe eleven, twelve, one o'clock. He'd just fall asleep in his chair. And I'd be down there with him, just listening to music. And that's very, very poignant times. Kind of like just moments of peace and solitude. We'd listen to Hawaiian music, we'd listen to jazz music. He loved music. So growing up, I spent a lot of time on the weekends, and late at night with my father. But, yeah, I had a different type of childhood, I think.

And your father, of course, was a visionary, a political strategist, a labor lawyer. He was active in the Democratic revolution of 1954. He gave advice to top leaders in the community.

He would say he didn't, but yeah, he did.

Did you see some of those meetings take place?

Many; because I was with him on weekends. And it wasn't like he needed to entertain me. I mean, I was eight years old, and I'd just go with Dad to the office. I'd be in lunches with he and Blackie Fujikawa, and Norma Moon, political leaders. I remember when my dad interviewed John Waihee to be a member of the firm. I remember it was a Sunday evening. I was eleven years old, I was sitting on the floor reading a National Geographic, and he was

interviewing John. And hired John that night.

Do you remember what was discussed?

No. I don't remember necessarily the content, but it was the context of the conversations. I remember the day after a prominent labor leader was murdered in Hawaii, and being at lunch with Norma Moon, and that conversation.

And who was Norma Moon?

Norma, I think, was with the Carpenters Union at that time. I think. But she was very heavy in the labor movement, and a good confidante of my dad's too.

And what happened with the labor leader was killed?

He was a real close friend of my dad's, and his son actually was one of my close friends at Stevenson Middle School. My recollection is that, okay, Mom gets a phone call, and she looks at me, and she said, Joe Lii was just murdered.

This is Josiah Lii of the—

Yes.

It was the Seamen's Union?

Yes; I think Seafarers.

Seafarers; okay.

And then a lot of tears, but a lot of fear and anger. What caused this to happen? And so, the next day, I remember going to lunch with my dad and Norma, and just talking about what had happened, and trying to calm things down. Because he has a big family, comes from Papakolea, there was a lot of hurt. And really, how do we stop anything else from happening. And so, I was there when those discussions were going on. Yeah.

Pono Shim absorbed and learned from the many discussions his father Alvin Shim had with union leaders and other Hawaii figures. As a child, Alvin also was an observer who became a doer. He served in the Merchant Marine, earned economics and law degrees at UH Manoa and George Washington University, and picked up nuances of labor and union issues at the Wage Stabilization Board. He returned to Honolulu in 1953 and began practicing law, and two decades later, started the law firm now know as Shim & Chang. His father's journey, which included a revealing lunch meeting between Alvin and a certain billionaire taught Pono lessons in determination, relationship building, and influence.

What did you learn from your dad?

Oh, gosh.

I take it he didn't sit down and tell you, Son, here's the way it is. This is stuff you just learned through osmosis?

What did I learn from Dad … so much. Guardianship … lot of guardianship. Here was a man who was born very, very poor, whose parents were divorced really young. And so, he would tell me that he really was raised like an orphan. And then he came to Kamehameha from Maui, and when he came, he was so

poor. I remember Uncle Bill Amona when my dad died, he was my dad's classmate. He said, Pono, when did your dad make his decisions that his life would be committed to making a difference for people, to serving people? You see, he never really talked about that. And Uncle Bill said, When we were at Kamehameha, all of the students were boarders. This was at Bishop Museum. And he said, I have these pictures of watching your dad almost like his hands are under his chin on the fence. Because all of us from Oahu would get visitors on weekends, and they'd come, and they'd sometimes take us home, but they'd always bring food and gifts. And he says, I can just see your dad kinda just watching us. Nobody ever came for him. And he had this smile on his face. He didn't hold it in a negative light, but he would just observe. And he said, Something keeps taking me back to those moments.

So, he went from being essentially a loner at the fence, kind of dreaming, with nobody coming to see him, to having friends from many walks of life, and a big family.

Yeah. Well, I wouldn't say he was a loner, 'cause my dad was *kolohe*. I mean, really, really *kolohe*. His oldest and best friend was Uncle David Peters. And Uncle David tells a story, and he'll still tell you the story of how the two of 'em got arrested at age five.

Five?

Yeah. He said, Officer Hanohano arrested these two boys who weren't in school. So vagrancy. And, they would blame each other. Yeah, your father got me arrested. And, I don't think anybody who knows Uncle David and my dad would say it was Uncle David. My dad was *kolohe*. But yes, he had a lot of friends. Very, very engaging, very well connected.

What was the secret to his forging so many tight relationships?

When I was in kindergarten, my first day of school, I came home and he said, How many friends did you make today? And I said, None. And he said, Weren't there other kids there? I said, Yeah. So he said, Let me teach you how to make a friend. And he stuck out his hand and he said, Hi, my name is Pono, what's your name? And so, he practiced with me. And probably the most significant thing ever taught to me in life was that, if there's one thing I look back at. The first day of school, came home, Dad said, How many friends did you make today? And so, I'd like to believe that's what he was doing, and he'd make friends. But then, how do you keep friends? That's the thing. And I think it's because he was able to really focus in on the relationship, and put a priority on the relationship.

Even though he had all kinds of other things going on?

All kinds of things.

How'd he do it?

Here's an example, a story of a friend. He used to sit across the table and just battle with Harry Weinberg. HRT, and my father was fighting for labor. And he would tell us that he would be fighting for a dime for the employees.

A dime per hour, or a dime per year?

Dime per hour.
Okay.
And, he was just fighting, and fighting. And my dad thought everything that I shouldn't mention on the air about Harry. [CHUCKLE] And including his ethnicity and the whole bit. Right? And it was six months before Harry dies, and my dad gets a call from him. And he said, Alvin, I'd like to take you to lunch. And so, they went to Halekulani, and my dad said they ate hotdogs.
[CHUCKLE]
And he said Harry asked him, Alvin, if you had my wealth, Jeanette is gone, you've been given six months to live, your son is gonna be taking care of, what would you do with it? So my dad started to describe how he would establish a trust. Take care of the poor people, establish programs, matching funds, do it all over the world, education, housing, food. And he just designed this entire structure of what he would do with Harry's wealth. And at the end of the conversation, Harry just listened, and then he looked at my dad and he said, I just wanted to make sure, because that's what I've done.
[GASP]
And my dad said he almost fell off his chair.
Because he saw Harry Weinberg as somebody who was a grasping money guy, not somebody who gave it away. And to that point, Mr. Weinberg had not.
Right. And so, my dad just was in shock, because he didn't realize that he had become a conscience for this man over the years and years of battling, that at the end, Harry needed my dad's approval.
Because Mr. Weinberg knew that your dad cared about the common person.
I guess.
Everyday worker.
I guess, because you look at what he's done, what Harry's done. And so, one of the things I see when I drive around town, and I see Harry and Jeanette Weinberg up on buildings, I see a name that other people don't see.
Your father's.
Because if not for that name, these buildings might not be here. And he would never want his name on a building.
You spent your childhood sort of at your dad's knee, just sort of immersed in what he was doing, or the tone of what he was doing.
Yeah.
And he was your friend, and your father.
M-hm; for most of my life. [CHUCKLE] We had our serious battles.
Over what?
I became very dogmatic.
About what?
Religion, politics, business, and I became very idealistic in my early adulthood. But it wasn't until his final months that I reconciled and I said, Wow, maybe we are much more similar than we are different. [CHUCKLE] And I think other people would recognize there is something to that.

And you started at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. You didn't finish.
No.
And that kind of surprises me.
[CHUCKLE] It was funny, because at one point, I said, Dad, can I go back to Japan? I just want to work. He says, No, you gotta finish school. And at the time, I was also dancing in *hula*, so I was dancing for Frank Kahala and the the Gentlemen of Maluikeao, and we were very competitive in the Merrie Monarch. And it was gonna be my second Merrie Monarch, I think this was 1985, and I just said, Dad, I'm gonna take a semester off from school, so I can finish up *hula*, and then I can go back to school, and I'll become a lawyer. And he said, Okay. So I took a semester off. And they haven't seen me for twenty-seven years. [CHUCKLE]

For much of that twenty-seven-year period, Pono Shim worked in the restaurant and marketing industries. Then, by a twist of fate, Pono met with a former State Senator from Maui, Nadao Yoshinaga, better known as Najo, who led Pono to his career as a CEO. Back then, Enterprise Honolulu was being led by a consummate economic development expert, Mike Fitzgerald.

When you were named to head Enterprise Honolulu, which represents some of the top companies in Hawaii, you were considered an unconventional choice. Now, why is that? Look at yourself and say, Now, why would I be an unconventional choice?
Honestly, I have no economic development background. I've tampered in business, but really, economic knowledge, background, traditional, no. I have no degree to stand on, no graduate degree or undergrad degree. So, I really was an outsider. The other thing is, I guess for the most part, even though I had all these relationships, I didn't play downtown. I wasn't at the Capitol. Knew a lot of people, but for some odd reason, for forty-five years, I've kind of just not been down there.
What have you been doing?
I was husband, being in business, dad, son.
What kind of business?
The last business I had was the concierge services at Ward, so I had a concierge service in the largest cinema in Hawaii, and a VIP system that we had developed, or I was in the restaurant industry for twenty years. I was just doing things. So when I showed up, it was different. And the only reason why I did show up was because I was starting to write a book, and I went to interview Najo Yoshinaga. And at the end of the interview, Najo asked me, Pono, do you know my predecessor? And I said, No. He says, He's a good guy, really cares about Hawaii, one of the top economists brought to Hawaii to help us diversify. But he's having a hard time. So, I went to meet Mike, and I said, Mike, tell me your story. And he shared with me how he had come to Hawaii, what he found, where he had been, the success that he had, the studies that they did, the third

party confirmations that proved what his strategies were would work. I felt like he was a pretty sincere guy. So I just asked him, when he was done, Mike, who are your storytellers? And when I asked him that question, it was a real shock to him, because that's not an economic question.

Yeah. And he was basically telling you that he felt stymied and boxed in, like he had the right idea, but he just couldn't make things happen.

Correct. And that's why I asked him, Who are your storytellers? And he thought about it, and he says, I guess I've been so busy since I got here, I didn't take time to find storytellers. M-hm. And then, he said, I don't think we've been telling the right story. In fact, we've done a very poor job telling the story. And I said, I know. And I made a statement, Mike, if you have a vision as big as you have, you have to find those individuals who can tell the story so large, everyone fits. And today, most people have no idea how to do that anymore. They can tell it from their sectors, they can tell it from their silos, but they don't know how to tell the story so large that everyone fits. And he looked at me, really intrigued. And so, I shared with him five stories. And at the end of the fifth story—and these were stories that when things were fractured, I would tell a story and things would just shift. And it's not an argument, it was just a reflection, almost like a parable. And at the end of the fifth story, he looked at me and he said, Pono, I don't think I'm supposed to be running this company, I think you are. I said, I didn't come here to take your company. So, Najo just asked me to help you, and I'm gonna help you however I can. And, started to just donate my time, and started to work with the organization. And then, right before the end of the year—this was in 2008, right at the heat, the beginning of the crash. And it was the week before the end of the year, and Mike came to me and said, Pono, we're gonna put you on staff. And I said, Okay, what are you gonna hire me as? He says, We're gonna hire you as our organizational *kahu*. And I said, You know what you're doing? And he said, Yeah. You realize that you're probably the only economic development board or organization in the country hiring somebody to be their guardian? He said, Yeah. Okay; just as long as you know what you're doing. So, I was hired as the *kahu* for Enterprise Honolulu. And then a few weeks later, the board had a meeting and I was appointed vice president and *kahu*. And then, within five months, Mike had left Hawaii, and I was asked to become the CEO.

And so, you're the executive director of this organization that has titans of industry supporting it, and you don't have the same kind of business experience as they do. Does it matter?

At first, I think it mattered. I don't think it matters anymore. And it's a lot of that foundational stuff that I grew up with. Part of that childhood that you had referred to, there were things imparted on me throughout my life, through my childhood, that I wouldn't realize were so profound and important that they would be needed at this time. For example, Auntie Pilahi Paki, who was known as the keeper of the secrets of Hawaii. Auntie Pilahi was someone who

introduced the world to the concept that *aloha* was the answer in 1970. She gave that prophecy.

And she wasn't a Pollyanna, Mary Poppins kind of person. She was real.

Auntie Pilahi was real. She was a Maui girl, born in Lahaina. And she was given a gift from this man, Luahine. Before he passed, he breathed his ha into her. And he called for her. She flew to the Big Island, and he passed this knowledge, this wisdom, these values on to her. And now, she became the keeper of the secrets. And so imagine it's 1970, and the Governor has called a Governor's conference. Where are we gonna be in the 21st century, in thirty years? And it's a difficult time. There's the Vietnam War, there's the Hawaiian Renaissance going on, there's civil rights, women's rights, what was happening at Kent State, Cal Berkeley.

A lot of ragged edges, everywhere.

I mean, it was kinda like now. Deaths on our college campuses. Well, they're not shooting, they're just praying now. But there were a lot of strife. And out of the side, this *kupuna* starts walking up on stage, amongst all of the strife. And she's wearing a red and white *muu*, and she walks up on stage and grabs the microphone. And a friend of mine, Colbert Matsumoto, was sixteen years old, a student delegate from Lanai in there. And he said, We thought that this lady was a crackpot, because she wasn't on the agenda, but she's walking up to the microphone. Imagine these arguments going on, and she's walking up. And, out of your corner of your eye, I would imagine most people stopped arguing, because they're watching this lady heading for the microphone. And she introduced Hawaii to the deeper meanings of aloha, as an acronym.

Like his father Alvin, Pono Shim has won kudos behind the scenes as a mediator, helping resolve tough problems in inclusive, respectful ways. He demonstrates how in today's world our roots in the form of stories and traditional values can break barriers and inspire innovation. We've seen how being at his father's side influenced Pono a great deal. He also credits his mother Marion's wisdom. And there are other elders, including Auntie Pilahi Paki and Nana Veary, who would also have an impact on Pono. We'll find out how these, and other cultural icons influenced Pono Shim in an upcoming episode of 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'm actually in the process of re-enrolling into school.

In your forties?

Because I'm on the advisory council for University of Hawaii West Oahu. I'm so fortunate Jean Awakuni asked me to join their advisory council, and I think I'm the only one in there without a degree. And maybe if I go back to school, maybe that'll inspire some kids on the West side and the North side. Here Uncle

Pono's going back to school, he's in Manoa, he's coming out to the Ewa side, he's a CEO; maybe we should go.