LONGstorySHORT with LESLIE WILCOX

PBS Hawaii

**GUEST: JOE RICE**
LSS 517 (LENGTH: 27:16)
FIRST AIR DATE: 3/6/12

Some days, we'd just eat the one meal a day, and make it last. My mom and I, we … always last to eat, make sure the others … in our family, it started off with my dad first, any of his friends second, then the babies, and then all the way up to my mom and I. And sometimes, there wasn't that much to go around.

**It's a story that you can identify with if you've been poor and abused, wondering when you'll have your next meal, or your next beating. For the down and out, bouncing from a car to a tent, and back again, this is your life, a hard scrabbled life. But surely, not the life of the leader of a distinguished private school in Honolulu. Indeed, that was Joe Rice's life. Join us, as we get to know Mid Pacific Institute's president and CEO, Joe Rice, here 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 meet an affable executive who laughs easily, travels in prominent circles in education, and is on first name basis with many influential people. You might guess that to achieve this level of success, he must have been born to comfort and attended Ivy League schools before eventually settling into his position as president and CEO of the Mid Pacific Institute in Manoa. Who would guess that he was dealt an incredibly tough start in life? It's a long way from the migrant farm camps of California and Washington State to a graceful Manoa home and the leadership of a well-known Hawaii college prep school. But that's the journey of Joe Rice.**

**You're a distinguished headmaster of a respected school, and you have this very comfortable demeanor and openness about you. And yet, you've had this very dark and troubled childhood.**
Yeah.
**How much does that childhood play with your life now?**
Almost every day. I've probably been spending too much time thinking about my past lately. I'm in the midst of writing a memoir about it. People have been encouraging me to, so I've been remembering a lot the past couple of years.
**Is it painful?**

Yeah. That's why it's taking so long to write the book.

**Have you come to new conclusions and had new epiphanies, thinking about this as an experienced adult?**

A lot of people ask me, yourself earlier, and others have asked me how did I end up getting where I'm at. And a lot of people think I was born with everything, and especially the nice house I live in and things. But, I reflect once in a while on how it is that I got into a position where I can help a lot of kids, and I can help a school. And I kind of trace it back to my beginnings and how I became appreciative of education and what it could do for you. And I'd have to give it all of the credit for getting me through to my position now. And I believe I'm a good example for kids who think there is no chance for them, that if they hear my story, they would say, Well, if he can do that, I can do it.

**So much of your life … I know you had a loving, hardworking mom.**

M-hm.

**But in many parts of your life, adults you should have been able to trust simply weren't there for you, or weren't telling you the truth, or hurting you. How do you get over that?**

Well, one, you come to those conclusions later. When you're living your life, you're pretty much focused on your brothers and sisters, and even though you fight and you do terrible things to each other all the time, they still care about each other, and they cared about me, and I cared about them. My mom was always somebody I could depend on that, if I needed an ally or somebody who would stand by me, she would be the one. And she took a lot of hurt for doing that, and she could have turned her back on me, and she didn't. And so I gained strength from all of that. But I would be the first to tell you, and I've done this a number of times talking to young kids at other schools and things about there are so many people willing to help you, and giving you the hand of friendship, are willing to lift you up, but you don't see them or you won't take it when it's offered. And at various times in my life, there had been people who have done that, whether it was a teacher, Salvation Army helping us out at Christmastime and bringing you a gift so that you could give your mom something. Or the local store where you go down, and you've been caught before for stealing food for your family, and this time, they just come in and say, What do you need?, and they give it to you. So, there have been those folks all along in my life, and I know they're there for other kids. And sometimes they don't see them, or they have too much pride to take it when it's offered. But for most kids, it is offered, and they just don't see. So I try to talk to them about that, because I certainly didn't get to being the president at Mid Pacific on my own.

**You've managed to navigate through very different worlds.**

I learned early about getting up at four-thirty in the morning, and going to work, and dragging yourself to the car, getting your brothers and sister bundled and throw 'em in the car, go. Either watch them while your parents work, or get out in the fields and work. Come back, work 'til noon, one o'clock when it gets too hot to work. Go to school in the tent, go home, help cook. Take care of

people, hope you don't get hurt, make it through the day. I learned those lessons young. So, when you're in college and you're living in your car, and you're eating the six burgers for a dollar at the Arctic Circle, and you drink Diet Coke or a cola, or whatever. I think it was Tab in those days, because I didn't want to get too fat. I forgot that lesson.
**[CHUCKLE]**
But, I did that day-in and day-out. It was all better than when I was growing up.

**If you worked your way through college, you have an idea of what it's like to hold down a job and still do the required studies. Surely, Joe Rice's rough upbringing in the fruit orchards gave him the work ethic to do whatever it was going to take to graduate from a university. But he needed to do more than work for a living and study for a degree. He needed to rise above the emotional scars, the terrible uncertainties created by lies and abuse. It's a legacy that haunts him to this day.**

**Tell me about your early life.**
Ah, well, let's see. [CHUCKLE] I was born to a mom who told me she was fourteen when she had me, but I found out later she was probably around sixteen. And I only found that out when I figured out what her birthday was, 'cause she kept that hidden. I've often told people I'm two years younger than I actually am, because that's what my mom told me, that she lied about my birth, among other lies that she had and gave to me to protect me, for some reason or another. But I'm the oldest of twelve. I can even name them, if you want.
**What are their names?**
And it's Joe, Jessie, Joyce, Judy, Jimmy, Bobby, Dale, Harold, Denise, and Homer. And the one that died about three days after birth was Haley. So we had a bunch of J's in a row, and then a bunch of H's, and then a few odd names, uh, in the mix, like a Denise or something.
**And you were the oldest, so I assume your responsibilities grew as the family grew.**
My parents, both of 'em, had an eighth grade education, so it was clear they weren't going to get good paying jobs unless they went back to school. And my stepfather, I learned that he was my stepfather. I thought he was my father in the beginning for many years, they became migrant workers. And so, the first time I went to a school steady, I was starting um, eighth grade. I went to half a year at one school, and then ninth grade, I finally went to Series Union High School in California. And I finished my four years there, living in a house. The rest of the time, we were migrants on the road. I went to school mostly in the tent out in the fields and they'd send a teacher out to us. We worked in the mornings, go to school in the afternoon.
**So you had spotty childhood education.**
No. Actually, not spotty, because you'd still go to school.

**But you said half a day, or …**
Half a day. But it would start like at one o'clock, and go to four, five o'clock. I actually started when I was three and four. My mom wouldn't have anywhere else to send me, so they let me to go and sit with the older kids in the schoolhouse, which was just a large—
**At three or four.**
Large tent. But all multi-aged, so they had an elementary school tent, and a high school/middle school tent. So I just sat in the back and listened, and actually learned how to read real early that way. Went to school. One year, we lived in Hood River. I actually went one year, fourth grade, in Hood River, Oregon. I remember that. Couple other times, we went about a half a year where we lived in one place, and got a rental. But the other parts, we were on the road and went from Lancaster, California up to Wenatchee, Washington, picking apples. So wintertime you're up North, and summertime you're down South. We did that for many, many years. I took care of the younger ones when I was younger. You're sitting out on the blanket under the tree, and then when they move from tree to tree, they pull along, and you sat there and stick the bottle in the kid's mouth, or something like that. Soon as I was able to work, I was picking fruit, and got pretty good at it too, to where it was better my mom start watching the younger ones than me, 'cause I'd do so well. That was pretty much my younger life. My dad was an alcoholic, very abusive person.
**To whom?**
To my mom particularly, and me second.
**Because you as the oldest, or you as the stepson—**
Me as the stepson, me who liked to read. Me, who … I just didn't go and do all the stuff that the other kids were doing. I'd stay at home, I'd take care, I'd clean the house, I'd help my brothers and sisters. I did those things, and I was about as different as he could have been.
**But that's a good thing, what you were doing. Right?**
Yeah.

**Every member of Joe Rice's large family suffered abuse at the hands of his stepfather. One night, in Joe's senior year of high school, his stepfather gave his mother a particularly bad beating. The oldest son decided it all had to stop; and the events of that night would change the course of his life.**

**You mentioned how you were going up and down, up from lower California, up to Canada in a car, and sleeping in a car and tents.**
Big station wagon. [CHUCKLE]
**You got yourself to college, working your way fulltime through college, but you used your car … you were still living in your car, but you were going to college and living in your car.**
Yeah.
**How did you get to college from the big station wagon with all the dysfunction?**

My dad did another horrible thing to my mother. And it was in my senior year. I was seventeen, and around November of my senior year. And he came home, and he beat her real bad. And left her bloody, and my other brothers and sisters were gathered around her, scared. And I was hiding in a closet. Just hiding. And I heard it. After he left, I went out and I got my mom, and I took her in the bedroom, and cleaned her up, and I told her that it won't happen anymore. And so, I uh, kept my mom with my sisters in their room, and I had them barricade the door. And then, I went and got a knife, and I went to my room, and I waited. And when he came back, he was yelling for me. And—

**He was going to beat you up?**

He had been looking for me after he beat my mom, and I was hiding in the closet. It was one of those closets, if you don't lift up the door, and if you turn it you can't get in. And so, he gave up, and he left, and I was just sitting there. So I waited. And he came home about four. And he came in, stood there in the doorway and took off his belt, and he started hitting me. And I got the knife, and I went after him. And they said I stabbed him probably like about twenty-some times, and my family came in and held him down and said, Go Joe, go. And I ran away and hid in a vineyard near our home we had in middle of California. And I stayed there for about three days, and they said he went around looking for me. I didn't hit anything, I just mangled him arm and his shoulder. And I turned myself in to a local grocery store, a little mom & pop, and I asked them to call somebody, and they called. And they put me in foster care for the rest of the year, and I finished high school, and nobody came. And then, I worked picking beans in the summer, and I bought a bus ticket for Washington. And I went there, and I went to the local welfare office and I asked for help. And they said, Why'd you come here? And I said, Because it's you guys who've helped us all along, and we've been on welfare most of our life. And I said, It was either you or the Salvation Army. [CHUCKLE] And so, they found me a place to stay in this … it was like a redone house that had been put into little apartments. And they had a bathroom that they rented out, and there was a bed. So you had your sink, your toilet, and the bed. So you needed to climb over all that stuff to get to the bed. And I did that. And they got me a job at … working for the City of Tacoma on a survey crew. So I did that for six months, and they worked out a deal that a certain percentage of my pay would go into a fund, and this group called Neighborhood Youth Corps would match it if I would go to college. And so, I did. And they started me in at Tacoma Community College. So, I got a job working at a garage, and I worked an eight-hour shift after school. I got up in the morning and I went and I cooked at the cafeteria, and they fed me in the morning. Then I'd go to classes. And you'd only take like three or four classes, so it's not like it is now where you got six or seven classes. And then, I'd go to work, live in the place. Did that for the first year. Second year, I went to work for Button Veterinarian Hospital, and they gave me a little room off of the vet hospital, and I cleaned pens and washed all the poop up, and all that junk. And they gave me a place to stay, and I did

that, and still continued—that was my nighttime work after I finished at the garage.

**And what kept you going as you were doing this? 'Cause that you must have been exhausted.**

Yeah. You get up in the morning, and you go to your job at the … cook breakfast before you go to school. Then you take PE for your first class, so you can take a shower and stuff, and then you go to class. It was all about I'd made up my mind that I wasn't going to be like my parents, and I was going to show my brothers and sisters that it didn't have to be that way for them. That even though I ran away and left them, I would show them that there was a way for them too.

**When you've been through so much, how do you put it behind you? For many, catharsis is found in writing. In 2012, nearing retirement age, Joe Rice has been writing to tell his story, and to purge himself of the demons of his past. It's been a challenging process. Sometimes, when you rip off the bandage, the wound reopens.**

**So, you're writing a memoir about your life. How do you put all of this in context, and process it all for your book?**

Well, it's going on three years, because I start writing, and you won't believe this, Leslie. But when I graduated from high school, troubled as I was, I was voted in the yearbook most likely to succeed as a writer. And because my mind was in the clouds, and I lived a fantasy life as you're living the bad news, you're dreaming of something different. And I wrote. I wrote lots of poetry.

**Did you keep it?**

Not too much. [CHUCKLE] I sent many things away to see if anybody wanted to publish. But I wrote a lot of things that told the truth too much, and people would read it and start getting worried about what's happening at your house. And so I did that, and I wrote short stories and things, so people thought I would one day be a writer. And of course, after that, you're working every day, and you're trying to go to school, and you write lots of assignments, but you never do writing uh, like this. So as an adult, people said, Joe, you should … I know you want to help people, maybe this would help. And so, I'd start writing, and I'd get all gung-ho. And then my very first chapter is about hiding in the closet to kill my dad. And then I can't write again. And the ending chapter of the book is when I actually do try to kill him. [CHUCKLE] And I fill in the middle with all the other stories. Some of 'em are humorous, and this and that. So, sometimes, I can go and write a couple chapters and keep going, and other days, I break down and I then I can't think. And I just get worried about things, and that maybe it's all going to turn for me.

**Even after all this time?**

That this is not really me.

**Yeah. You must have something very strong inside you, to have been able to handle all of what you did, and then all of what came later that was positive. I mean, not to minimize it, but you handled a life that was so negative, and now you're handling a positive life. It seems like two different skills at play there.**
I don't know how to answer that one. I'd just get up and do it. I just think that someday, I'll make a difference, I'll do something.
**Did you—**
I don't know what, but something.
**Well, you already have, haven't you?**
Well, um …
**Peace Corps, teaching, you know, molding minds.**
I know, but those are all just stuff. Those are just stuff. It's not like … excuse me. I … I don't know what it is I'm supposed to do.
**Do you feel like there's something else—**
Something.
**--you need to do?**
Something. I don't know what.

**While he gets up every day, goes to work, nurtures some fifteen hundred students at his school, minds his own children, and cares for his wife, Joe Rice still struggles with the legacy of a childhood filled with emotional and physical pain. Maybe that's why he reached out even farther to the Future Light Orphanage in Phnom Penh.**

**Well, you're supporting an orphan, right, in Cambodia?**
I have a boy in Cambodia that I started supporting maybe nineteen years ago or something. He's now out of the orphanage, and he graduated from high school, and he's in a university in Cambodia, and I'm helping him. And he's going to be in information technology. And so, that's good. And I'm a member of Family Programs Hawaii, and we deal with orphans, and foster children. And I think that's helped me a little bit.
**But you still feel self doubt. Right?**
I don't know what it is. But I don't feel like I've done … what it is.
**You know, you had a life of such unrelieved pain. How did you learn how to feel joy, and just find joy every day?**
The best times—[CHUCKLE], I don't know, when your children are born, and you see them, and you watch them grow up. That is a great joy. To wake up with your wife, and know that she loves you, and you've got something good going. That's a joy. It's hard to express. It's kind of like you feel like something not going to go well, or something's going to happen. And so, do good, and ward it off.
**What do you enjoy most about being the head of Mid Pacific?**
Well, believe it or not, my best times are when I go to the preschool. And you go over there 'cause if you're having a bad day, just go to the preschool or

kindergarten classes, and they … about three years ago, I must have come dressed in green, kinda like you are. And they called me Mr. Gecko.
**[CHUCKLE]**
And so now—these are three-year-olds. And so, they surround me and sing a Mr. Gecko song that they make up.
**[CHUCKLE]**
Now, these kids are like second grade, and they still call me Mr. Gecko.
**[CHUCKLE]**
And that makes you feel good.

**There were times in this conversation that I could hear student crew members sniffing, fighting back tears. There were times when Joe Rice and I shed tears. The abused child who watched out for his mother and siblings grew up to have many fulfilling moments and chapters in his long, successful educational career. Yet, he's not sure this is his ultimate calling in life.**

**To the head of Mid Pacific Institute in Honolulu, we say *mahalo* for all you've done for the young people in your care. We wish Joe Rice the best in his personal quest, and we'll be on the lookout for his memoir.**

**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.

A lot of people think I was born with everything, and especially the nice house I live in and things. But, I reflect once in a while on how it is that I got into a position where I can help a lot of kids, and I can help a school. And I kind of trace it back to my beginnings and how I became appreciative of education and what it could do for you. And I'd have to give it all of the credit for getting me through to my position now. And I believe I'm a good example for kids who think there is no chance for them, that if they hear my story, they would say, Well, if he can do that, I can do it.