

GUEST: FRANK DE LIMA: THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

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So when you say your parents were strict, they set up rules, and then they enforced them. Were they consistent?

Consistent; all the time. Mama , Wait 'til your father comes home. Okay. And she never did chase us around with the belt.

Did you ever try to make a deal with her? Don't tell Daddy?

Oh, well, at one point when I was getting older, I remember her coming after me, and so I ran into the bathroom. And I yelled out the bathroom window, Don't kill me, don't kill me! [CHUCKLE]

So that Mr. Yoneshige would hear that?

He would hear, or anybody in the neighborhood. And my mom said, Stop it! You know.

Even at a young age, this comedian was playing to an audience. At that time, the audience was a Pauoa neighborhood, Mr. and Mrs. Yoneshige, Mrs. Makaiwa, and Mrs. Lee, all making up the rich cultural pie that influenced Frank Wilcox Napuakekaulike De Lima, Jr.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha; I'm Leslie Wilcox. Growing up, all of us knew of a class clown, the girl who always had a new joke, or the boy who would turn a missed step into an entire Dick Van Dyke routine. For these comedians of our lives, it always seemed to come so easy, like they were born to be funny, to be entertaining. For Frank De Lima, the DNA of comedy appeared at an early age, but at first, his upbringing and his faith led him in other directions.

When did you ... know you were funny? How old were you?

Well, sometimes you don't realize you're funny.

But what age were you, when you knew people were saying, Eh, Frank is so funny?

Well, that was when I was in high school, I guess.

Not earlier? Not when you were a sixth grade rascal?

No, no. No. I wasn't a rascal, that's why, because I was shy. And also, the nuns were very strict, so you behaved. So my shyness and the strictness.

What about your family?

Family? Oh, yeah, we used to have good fun, clown around. But it was all of us. And so, I didn't stand out. And I didn't even know, I wasn't even aware of the fact that I was funny. But I jumped in, and we just had a great time. After dinner, we would wash dishes, and then we all go in the living room, and get the washboard with metal spoons. And one would play that, one would play the washboard, one would play the pot covers, one would hit the pot, my daddy would play *ukulele*, and my mom would play piano. And we'd just do songs. And then I would clown around. I would go do my Japanese impersonation of Radio KOHO, and they'd laugh. And so it all developed like that.

Tell me about your upbringing. Who were your parents? What were they like?

Where were you living?

Okay. Well, I was born at eleven-oh-five at night, at St. Francis Hospital.

Sounds like the beginning of a story.

Yeah. [CHUCKLE] And I was baptized at Blessed Sacrament Church in Pauoa Valley. I was raised in Pauoa Valley. I went to kindergarten at Pauoa Elementary School. And my first babysitter, I was three years old, was Mrs. Lee. And I remember going to her house every day, and her aunt used to go and visit her, and they'd start talking in this dialect. At that time, I didn't even know what dialect was. I was just a little kid. But I started imitating it.

So you started early with that ear, didn't you?

Yeah.

What were your parents like? Were they funny?

My mom was more the animated type of funny. My dad was more the subtle humor.

Oh, he'd have the zingers?

The zingers. His face was like, pan-faced, and then he'd say something that was hilarious.

Now, your dad was Portuguese?

My dad was half Portuguese. He was Hawaiian, Chinese, English from Grandma, and then his father was full-blood Portuguese.

And your mom?

My mom is half Portuguese. And her father was Irish, Scotch, English, and Spanish, Portuguese from the mom.

So you grew up with lots of ethnic mix.

Oh, yeah.

But everybody says, Frank's Portuguese.

Portuguese. And it's because of going to the Punchbowl Holy Ghost, and just growing up in that whole—and my mom pulled the Portuguese side.

What does that mean?

Well, she did everything Portuguese.

Like? Like doilies on the back of the—

Doilies.

—car seats and—

Not on the car seats, but—

—couches.

—in the house, we had doilies. And she cleaned once a week, where everything had to get out of the house, and then we had to shampoo, and whatever it was, and rinse down the furniture. So she had that same style of once a week—

Did she put plastic runners on the carpet?

No; she didn't go that far. [CHUCKLE] And she took the plastic off the furniture too. But it was once a week general housecleaning, and everybody had to be home.

Your dad too?

Everybody. We all helped.

Everybody cleaned.

Everybody cleaned. Screens, windows.

Every week?

Walls, every week.

Do you still do that?

No. [CHUCKLE] I live in a—

Free at last.

I live in a studio apartment, see, and so I pick up, and sweep or whatever. Not much to clean. And once a week, I do, like do a general around the place. But only me, yeah, so it's fine. Any rate, so Mom, *malasadas*, sweet bread.

On Fat Tuesday? Is that when she made her *malasadas*?

Yeah.

Or was it year 'round?

Every so often. Like Halloween, she would make for the kids, for trick-or-treaters. So they would go in line, and they' pick up their *malasadas* and hot chocolate, and then they'd go on. So that's what she did then. And sweet bread, and Easter Sunday, but throughout the year, but specifically, we looked forward to Easter Sunday when she makes *vingadosh*, pork and scrambled eggs.

But *vingadosh*, you don't just make on Sunday, right? First, you have to marinate it, and you get vinegar throughout the house.

That part, I didn't know. I don't remember too much about the preparation of *vingadosh*. But, it did happen where it was fried, and we had that. That, and blood sausage, but we all went, Ooh, blood sausage. So we didn't want to eat that. But my mom made it. The Punchbowl Holy Ghost would deliver the meat and the wine, and the bread early in the morning. I remember the truck coming by on Easter morning.

This exposure to faith in Frank De Lima's childhood had a profound effect on him. The structure and celebration of the Catholic religion in the De Lima household gave Frank a direction to follow in life. And yet, there was still a part of Frank De Lima, a little bit *kolohe*, a little bit entertainer, that brought joy to Frank whenever he stood up in front of an audience, even if that audience was only his siblings.

I had four others. And they're still alive, yeah. The oldest one is seventy-two, I think. She lives in Oakland. My second sister right under her is Sandy; she lives in Minnesota. Married, has three girls, and then has grandchildren. And my other sister, Piilani, has two children, and she lives in Las Vegas, and she's a flight attendant for United.

So three girls so far, all living elsewhere, and—

Then I came along. And then after me was my brother, Mark. And Mark is in Ohio.

So you're the only De Lima child who remained.

Remained here in Hawaii. After the seminary, I came back and that was it. I started my career, and the career kept me here.

Were they surprised to see what you did for a living? I mean, very few kids grow up and say, I'm gonna be a comedian, and do it.

[CHUCKLE] I didn't say that.

And you didn't say it anyway.

But they knew I was crazy. My sisters, whenever I go visit them, they always say, Oh, I don't forget how you used to imitate Mrs. Makaiwa, or used to imitate the comedian Johnny Rey on TV. And I said, Oh, really? So they said, Oh, yeah, we had a great time. And then I start recalling that there were times that I can remember, some stand out more than others, imitating Chinese. I don't remember at that time. But Mrs. Lee is still alive.

She remembers.

And one visit, she remembers me imitating the Chinese, and they just thought it was the cutest thing.

Did you get in trouble for any of your humor back then?

Because I was shy, because the strictness, and when and when not to, that my parents and the nuns, brought us up with, I never did. I never got scolding.

Was your humor always gentle humor?

It was imitation. A little three-year-old starting to speak Chinese and it doesn't make sense, but it sounds close.

But you could do mean-spirited imitations, couldn't you? I mean, you apparently didn't.

I don't know. I don't remember. I remember imitating the Japanese singer. Mrs. and Mrs. Yoneshige had this radio they used to play every day—I mean, the station they used to put on the every day, Japanese.

And they were babysitting you; right?

KOHO Radio. No, next door.

Next door.

I mean, they were old and deaf, yeah, so they'd blast the thing. So, I think when I was in my mother's womb, I heard Radio KOHO. And so eventually, I started to imitate the jingle. [SINGS] K-O-H-O, barrum-ba, K-O-H-O. K-O-H-O, KOHO, KOHO in Honolulu. And then they would have this guy sing, Watashi [GROWLS]. And one after another, they would sing, and I don't know what was going on, but after a while, I started imitating it. And their grandson Grant was my friend, right? So we'd be climbing the plumeria tree, and the two of us would start singing. Watashi [GROWLS].

[CHUCKLE]

And then, it came on TV, when TV came out. Oh, and I remember—this is maybe a sidetrack, but this is fun, but I got punished for it. Okay. I got punished a couple times for doing things, like every kid. But it wasn't anything to do with humor, but the TV had just come out, and some of the kids in the neighborhood didn't have one yet. And so, they only had the waterfall on Channel 13, I think it was. I forget what channel. And it would have just the waterfall.

That's all day, just had a waterfall?

All day; the waterfall. Just starting out, I think, or whatever. That's all I remember. So I used to tell the kids, Oh, you want to come see the waterfall on TV? TV? Yeah! You have to bring cuttlefish, or you have to bring one candy, whatever candy I liked. I think it was Tootsie Rolls; I liked Tootsie Rolls.

Ooh, combining? Did you combine cuttlefish and Tootsie Rolls same time?

Well, yeah, why not. [CHUCKLE]

Sounds good.

And so, they would come, and they'd present their gift. Oh, at the time, you know, my mom found out, she was furious. She said, You give all that back! [CHUCKLE] She found out right away, of course.

What was the other time? You said two times you got in trouble.

I can't remember the other—oh; I didn't listen to her, and I wanted to go get guppies down at Pauoa Stream. And I asked my mom. Because Dennis used to go here and there together, go fishing down the harbor. And so, Dennis had gotten a big mayonnaise jar, and so he had guppies from the Pauoa Stream.

So I told my mom and dad. I said, I want to go, go get. And she said, No, you're gonna slip on the rock, your foot is going in the water, and there's gonna be a sharp object, because people don't care and they throw anything into the stream, and it comes down and it gets stuck in the gravel, by the rock, whatever, and you're gonna get cut your foot, cut your foot. And I'm thinking to myself ... How does she know the step-by-step what's gonna happen? You know how kids are; they don't ...

What does my mother know.

What does she know. I mean, how can anybody predict step on a rock, the rock get moss, your foot going slip, and you going get cut? So ... I snuck away, and I went.

And you got cut, didn't you? Oh, you did?

The first rock I stepped on, I slipped, my foot went in the water, and there was a sharp piece of, you know the kind roof, corrugated iron? It was stuck in there and it cut the back of my heel. I still have the scar. Any rate, Mom was already on her way, now. So I'm climbing up the bank—

She was on the way to find you?

From the house; yeah. 'Cause we lived only close. So she was on her way down—

She was onto you, you mean?

Onto me already. And so, she came down, I said, Oh, I cut my foot. And she goes, See? I told you!

[CHUCKLE]

I don't know what she had, wrap or whatever. And then she wrapped it, and then she took me to the doctor, and the doctor gave a shot.

She said, I told you so.

Yeah. And then, that night my father comes home. And he says, So, I heard we had a very exciting day. I forget what words, but in that. So he said, Well, you know what's gonna happen now. And I said, Yes. So he got his belt, and he gave me only two whacks on the *okole*. First whack was for not listening, and the second whack was for the doctor bill. [CHUCKLE] I remember that very well. [CHUCKLE]

What did you learn about relationships from your mom and dad?

You know, as far as dealing with—

Just, you know, any life lessons of seeing them interact as partners.

Oh; oh, yeah. They were always supportive of each other, did things together. Whatever Mom was thinking that day, it would happen in the evening. Like for example, she'd say, Okay, so today, if you folks finish your homework, it's a Friday, we're going picnic down the park. I think it was called Queen's Surf, or something, at the time. And oh, that would just be so exciting. And Dad come home, tired like he usually is every day. He worked for Hawaiian Electric.

What did he do for Hawaiian Electric?

He started as a young man, and he would be in the construction area, where they put up the poles. Dig the holes, put up the poles. And then he became the wireman where they put the wires up. And then from there, he worked to supervisor, and then he ended up superintendent. He was, just a very hard worker, but he still had the energy to go bowling. And he would take me bowling with him, or take us to picnic, or stuff like that, and be home right after, and Mom would have cookies or whatever, and everybody would have a snack before we went to sleep. So, we did singing together in the parlor. Dad played *ukulele*, and Mom would play piano. And mass, Dad belonged to the Holy Name Society, Mom belonged to the Sacred Hearts Society. I was Junior Holy Name, and my sisters were Sodality. And Mom and Dad also participated with the Hawaiian Club and helped the Filipino Catholic Club. So, we had all of that at Blessed Sacrament Church. And the core of our upbringing was the fact that Blessed Sacrament was our central thing.

Did you ever question spirituality or religion? Did you ever say, You know—

When I was a kid?

Yeah. Why should I be a Catholic? You know, did you ever—

Oh, no. It was an automatic thing, and I loved it. And we went to church a lot. Like during Lent, we'd go every Friday for the Stations of the Cross.

And you liked going?

I liked to go.

You didn't have to be told, You gotta go?

No, no, no. And then, I became altar boy, and so, it was like the whole thing. Well, Station of the Cross was exciting, and it's sad, but at the time, it was exciting for me, 'cause I got to be altar boy, and I got to carry the cross. And those kinda things that kids love to do, they want to be in on it or whatever it is.

How many of us at an early age are absolutely certain on how the rest of our life will play out? Growing up, Frank De Lima wanted to become a priest, knowing full well that the life of a priest would be one of sacrifice, devotion, and more sacrifice. But for a young Catholic growing up in a family guided by faith, there could be no higher calling, and Frank De Lima answered the call.

Not everybody can be a priest. In fact, very few people can. Many are called if you are chosen. And then in seventh grade, I kinda was thinking about it, and a priest came in eighth grade and said, Okay, we would like to give you this test for the boys who want to take it. And so, I took it. But only thirty beds at the seminary, and statewide, there were like over a hundred boys that took the test. So, of course, the A students gonna get it. So I didn't make it. I was only a C

average student. See, part of my gift was daydreaming. When you're talented like this and your imagination—

Imagination.

You don't know how to control it when you're a kid. And so, first grade, I was a straight A student. But then, things kinda happened after that, and so my grades went down little bit, but still all right. And then, in eighth grade, I had brought it up a little bit, but not enough to make it to the seminary, and so I went to Damien. And Brother said, I heard you tried for the seminary. Well, live a normal high school life, and we'll give you extra work, and then in senior year, you'll be college material, I guarantee it. And then you can take the test again for the seminary if you still feel like doing that. And so, yeah, I got up to a B average. My SAT math was seven hundred, I think, or something like that.

Which is very good.

Yeah. But English was a little bit down. [CHUCKLE]. But any rate ... so, everything worked out, and I went. And I was in the seminary eight years.

That's close to finishing, right?

Almost there.

Did your parents think it would be a wonderful achievement to become a priest?

Oh, yeah. They were very proud when I went to seminary, and they just thought it was the best thing in the world. In those days in the Catholic community, that was—

Every family wanted to have a priest, right?

Yeah, and/or nun.

So the question is, did you find it fulfilling?

It was fulfilling, it was fun. But see, we weren't celibate yet. Okay. But it was learning how, and that's why along the way, people can drop out, and you know, get married, or whatever. But I went through that step of becoming a deacon, and I shouldn't have, but I thought at that point I still could.

Why did you ...

Because when you take the vow of celibacy, then it's like a vow with God. Nothing to do with the Catholic Church, or nothing to do with the bishops or the pope, or anything. But still, it's a promise to God that you're gonna for the rest of your life. But the church says, Well, if you get laicized, you can get married. But that didn't come until—

Laicized means laity, which means civilians, right?

Married, you can get married.

Non-clerical.

You have no answers to anybody. You're not part of the church, the hierarchy or in the priesthood, or anything. You are just a regular person, a Christian, in the audience, okay.

So you did make the vow to God?

I did make the vow to God, and then after that, I lived life as a deacon.

What is a deacon? Like a beginning priest?

Deacon is, for example, when you go to become a doctor; the internship.

M-hm; okay. Gotcha.

So you could do something, but not a whole bunch. You can give communion, and you can baptize. That's about it. Yeah. But they kept you real busy. So much baptisms, and every Sunday, you have to work in communion. But I was also involved with CYO, which was a whole different type of Catholic. That's more the fun part of life, and my ukulele, and singing, and all that. And so, I slowly went into that direction. And so, I used to, on the way home from teaching at ... I forget where I used to teach religion. I forget. But anyway, on the home ... Ranch House was by Holy Trinity Church down in Kuliouou. And so, I would stop by, and go in, and Kaala would be playing music, and they'd call me up, and I'd do a few things. Some of the parishioners would get upset that they find out that I was in there instead of ... how come he's going to the Ranch House?

To the nightclub.

Yeah. But it was only a restaurant, for crying out loud. But at the time, open-minded already; the church was already swinging to the other extreme, yeah? So, it wasn't a problem until I started to think about the fact that I really am enjoying this, and the strictness of the diaconate. And so, about a month before, I said, I don't want to fool myself, I think I better take a break, get into it, and see what happens. And so, I took a break. I told them I would like to leave for now.

Were you torn the whole time? Is this what I really should be doing?

It kind of just kind of ... I was never torn. I actually was looking forward to the final step. But then, towards the end, realized. It was that last year that I realized, I gotta make this decision. All this fun that I'm having, and going to the Ranch House and joining Kaala, and singing on stage. After CYO mass at Fort DeRussy, we'd all go over there, and they would ask me to come up, and then, that's when it started to get a little bit difficult. And so I said, I need a break. I gotta take a break, 'cause I do not want to commit the rest of my life if it's not fully there. You know. Me, I'm one that commits, and when I commit, that's it, in whatever I do in my life.

Did you pray about it?

Oh, yeah. I did. And it just kind of went in the direction of leaving for a while, but eventually with Lucille, my big hit Lucille, and all that stuff that happened so early in my career, I knew that that's where I want to go.

[SINGING] But I never like chance 'em, 'cause those words was still fresh on my mind. Together! What? Lucille, you going leave me now? The kids never eat

yet. Everybody! Mango season not *pau*. I know my car stay smokin', and the stereo stay broken, but wow, *lau lau*. Very good! What? Lucille, you going leave me now? You picked a fine time to leave me Lucille. [APPLAUSE/CHEERS]

And so, what would have been Father De Lima was back to being just good old Frank De Lima, a comedian who drew on his childhood in Pauoa to create comedy that reflects and celebrates the cultural diversity of Hawaii. On the next Long Story Short, we'll see how Frank's career blossomed, and how he uses his talents to teach children about life. On behalf of PBS Hawaii, and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.

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

'Cause me, I'm scared of my own shadow. My imagination is so unbelievable and plus, the upbringing of the Portuguese culture. Don't whistle in the dark, the devil going come, you better go sleep by eight o'clock, or the *fatzetta* [PHONETIC] going take over your body, and no trim your fingernails after the sun go down, don't sweep the rubbish out the door after the sun goes down, and they put the broom behind the door to frighten you to death. Okay; so that's when you're a kid. That, and my imagination, everything else, so a lot of things frighten me. So it's a balance. It makes money for me, and I get to help people to laugh, but it also frightens me, this imagination.