

GUEST: FRANK DE LIMA: LAUGHING WITH YOU, NOT AT YOU

LSS 519 (LENGTH: 28:16)

FIRST AIR DATE: 4/3/12

When I saw that *naniwabushi* man singing on TV, I went home, couldn't wait to practice in front of the mirror 'til I got it right. Then I got my mom's quilt and put it over my shoulders.

[CHUCKLE]

Colorful quilt, tied it with a belt, got a headband, and I said, Okay, I'm ready.

[CHUCKLE]

So then, I packed my gear and I went next door to Mr. and Mrs. Yoneshige's. And they knew me from baby time. They knew that I'm happy-go-lucky, love to sing, love to imitate whatever. I was like ten. So I went in the bedroom, and I dressed, and I walked out. They busted out laughing at the outfit. I had clothespins to make 'em like the *kimono* sleeve. Had all the clothespins closing. They were screaming laughing, and then I started singing. And I still picture them today, hysterical.

What did you sing?

This old Japanese couple with accent, and all, talks in Japanese, busting out laughing. And then, I sang the imitation of the *naniwabushi*. *Watashi u-u-u*. No mean nothing, but it's just the way they sing, the old timers at that time, the popular type of music. And so, they gave me twenty-five cents. And back then, that's a lot of money.

Even at a young age, Frank De Lima was successful at making people comfortable with laughing at themselves. Next, on Long Story Short, one of Hawaii's iconic comedians. Whether you knew him as Imelda Marcos, the Radio KOHO announcer, or the guy who made the name Lucille famous in Hawaii, you had to laugh with Frank De Lima.

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. Growing up in a strict Catholic household in Pauoa, Frank De Lima dreamed of being one thing, a priest. And he almost made it, until he discovered a love for entertaining and poking fun at the rich cultural diversity we have in Hawai'i. But still, after years spent aiming at that honored standing in the Catholic church, the decision to choose comedy was not an easy one.**

What'd your mom say?

She was supportive. Mom was always supportive.

Really?

All the way through my life. Even as a career, she would come to the shows and be so proud. And then at the older part of her life, she would catch the bus and go to the Woolworth's and Sears, and put my albums in front of everybody else's.

[CHUCKLE] That's supportive, all right.

Oh, my mom was very supportive, all the way through. And she was supportive of the fact that I had made that decision. Well, she was worried what I'm gonna do. And I said, We'll see, let God just guide me. And before you know it, my brother-in-law he owned All Inclusive Tours. So he heard that I had quit. He knew how entertaining I was, so he hired me ... day after I left.

To do what?

He said, Form a trio to entertain my tourists. And Canadians were the ones who were coming in then. Oh, man; busloads of Canadians. So, his company was doing very well, and I was in charge of briefings and entertainment for briefings, and the *luau's*, and the beach parties. So I worked seven days a week, entertaining people.

Did you ever have trouble coming up with material?

No; it was all from when I was growing up. Radio KOHO. I did *Lovely Hula Hands*, the comic version. Get them laughing. And I'd sing Hawaiian songs too; I would sing falsetto, *Kalamaula*, and all those beautiful falsetto songs. I could do that back then. Now, I cannot. But back then, it was really beautiful, and the tourists just loved that part as well. So, entertainment.

Serious and funny entertainment.

Serious and funny. And so then, I needed extra money, so I got into a nightclub. My brother-in-law knew this bar owner, and so my first gig was the Club 400 on Sunday afternoons. And Sterling Mossman came in with Barney Isaacs, and their wives or girlfriends. And they came in on a Sunday, and they loved it, so every Sunday, they would bring their friends. And my CYO gang would come. So the place was packed on Sundays. So the manager of the bar gets all excited, so they give me Sunday, Monday, Tuesday. And the other band would do five nights. Then other band left, and so I got it. And then, I got into a car accident, and so that kind of shut down everything for a while. Then I had to recuperate from that. It took a long time, 'cause I broke my femur, and so they had to put a steel rod in, and it didn't take. So then the steel rod broke when I was doing isometrics and—you know, determination, so I pushed harder than normal people. And then, they put the next one in, and so about three years later.

Oh, that's a long departure.

Was sore, so sore. So any way, in the meantime, I was going with crutches and a cane to the Noodle Shop to see my friends that were playing at the Ranch House when I was a deacon.

The Noodle Shop, that intimate venue tucked away in a corner of Waikiki. I guess you could call it Frank De Lima's first big break, because it was there that he met Millie Fujinaga, his first real manager.

And the Noodle Shop had just ... at that time, I mean, I don't know at what point that was.

It was only music then; yeah.

Okay; but it was the place to go.

Oh, yes; yeah. Millie was very smart, the general manager who became my manager. And so, I would go in, and then I'd go do my KOHO.

They'd call you up?

Called me up, and I'd do KOHO, and she was in the audience, and she loved it. So I said, Oh, can I work here? You know. She said, Yeah, yeah, yeah, you know, you get better, you can still come work, yeah. And I said, So how much you going pay me? And she said, Oh, you can have the parking space in the front.

[CHUCKLE] Was she serious, or was she a comedian?

Serious.

[CHUCKLE]

See, 'cause she don't know if I going draw or what, so started with that, and then she started putting one dollar cover, and then she started just paying me. And the cover went up to two, and then three, and then five, and then before you know it, it all worked out. Because I went back to work at this tour company, you know, with the bad leg, but I could still sing and all that kind stuff. And the tourists started coming as well to my shows, and it was like, in a year, I was well established. And then, Lucille came out.

And that one song, Lucille, changed everything.

[SINGING] In one bar in Kalihi, I saw this one lady. She sat down and hemo her ring. I was all smelly, but I still was *niele*, so I asked her, Eh, chick, what's your name? She was all bust up, 'cause she started for cuss up. She said, I'm fed up to here. [LAUGHTER] My old man, he's lazy, he's stupid, he's crazy, and I think I going chug one more beer.

What happened was, Patrick, okay, the guy that helps me out with all my songs, went to go see Olomana at the Blaisdell Hotel. And they started singing Lucille.

And this is Jerry Santos and Robert Beaumont.

Right; yes. And so, he came up to me one time, and he said ... What, Lucille, you going leave me now? And I just busted out laughing. And so from there,

LONG STORY SHORT WITH LESLIE WILCOX (FRANK DE LIMA: LAUGHING WITH YOU, NOT AT YOU) 3

the song was developed. And so, I recorded it, and he also wrote *Don't Sneeze When You Eat Saimin*. And that was going to be the title of my third album, but Lucille kind of jumped and became the big hit, thanks to Aku Head Pupule. In the show, it was recorded live, and the audience used to go crazy over that. You know, [SINGS] In one bar in Kalihi, I saw this one lady. And it goes on, and on. What, Lucille, you going leave me now? And when it comes to that, it's just hilarious, you know, it's so funny. They just couldn't believe it.

So what did they laugh the most at when you did it live?

The, What, Lucille. The beginning part was still funny, 'cause the rhyming, yeah? But when you got to, What, Lucille, you going leave me now, you start off the skit with, [SINGS] You picked a fine time to leave me, Lucille; four hungry children and the crops in the field. I've had some bad times, I've been through some sad times, but this time the hurtin' won't heal. And so, it turns into, What, Lucille, you going leave me now? The kids never eat yet, mango season not *pau*. And so, they just thought that was hilarious, and it was, it was. And Aku Head loved it, Aku Head Pupule. We released it right after Thanksgiving in time for the holidays, Christmas shopping, and he played it like twice in his show every morning, five days a week.

Number one show.

And number one show. And then, other radio stations were getting requests, so they were playing it. And of course, KCCN at the time was also very popular, and they were supportive, so they of course started playing it right away. So it was my mega hit. And I never forget; University of Hawaii, the band, the band director asked me if I could do Lucille at one of the games during the break, the halftime. So I said, Sure, I'll go. And the band, I practiced with the band ahead of time. And that day I went, and little bit nervous, 'cause that place was packed, and it seats fifty thousand, right? So it was one of those games where it was just packed with people. And I started singing, [SINGS] In a bar in Kalihi across from—whatever. And then I come to ... And this is what she said. The whole place, WHAT, Lucille, you going leave me now? Oh, my god. My legs got real weak.

If there's one thing that Frank DeLima is known for, it's his ability to invite us to laugh at ourselves. Frank's comedy is inclusive in that none of us is safe, whether we're Portuguese, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino ...

Hawaiian.

Haole.

Korean.

We're all cast members in Frank De Lima's comedic life. But while he's laughing with us, not at us, there are those who don't always agree with Frank's humor.

Now, you're known and loved for your ethnic humor, among other types of humor. But you've also taken some shots for it.

Oh, yeah. When I was growing up, and through the seminary, and the fundraisers, and me having my trio and telling *Portagee* jokes, and telling my KOHO Radio, and the Chinese routines that I did, never got no flack from it. As the years go on, I've developed my jokes and everything else. Okay; the *Portagee* jokes came from the emcees at the *luau*'s that my family went to. Hawaiian Electric *luau*, Blessed Sacrament Church fundraiser, the St. Francis carnival, hospital carnival. They had a big carnival every year. And all these different places, the same guy used to do the emcee, and he was Portuguese. His name was Abel Fraga. And he looked funny when I was real little, but you don't catch jokes until you're about fifth grade or sixth grade. Then you start catching jokes. Because, the whole storyline and then the punch line is supposed to be completely what you don't expect; that's what makes it a joke. And he told 'em. And when I got to the certain age where I caught on, and the first joke I caught onto was, Mano and Joaquin driving to the airport, saw the sign said Airport Left, so they turned around and went home. And I thought that was hilarious. And I wrote it down on an index card, and then every time I heard a joke from Lucky Lucky, Sterling Mossman, K.K. Kaumanua, all those guys back then, *Portagee* jokes was very popular.

And you didn't take offense, being half Portuguese?

Oh, no. Nor did my family, nor did the people that went to the *luau*'s. Everybody was laughing.

And Abel Fraga, who by the way, I'm related to—

Oh, really?

Yeah. Also didn't take offense. He was definitely Portuguese as well.

Oh, full-blood, and he had the gap, and he had the accents, and he had the whole body language of a comedian. He was funny. And *bolo head*, with the *barriga* [PHONETIC]. And so, he was just a great emcee, and I just loved whenever we went and he was the emcee, and all the other comedians of the day. And so, I have index cards with all these jokes that I would put in a shoebox. And I collected them. And then I started to practice them and use them on families and gatherings, and so forth. And, like my family friends were Portuguese too, they were Chinese, they they all could come over for Thanksgiving or whatever it was. And I would do my thing, and everybody would just love it. In fact, Mr. Santos used to send me, call me up and tell me jokes about Mano, or Mary or whatever it is. Well, when I started in my career, the first group that took offense was the Portuguese. The clubs, when you have a club, and all the same interests, and everything else, and all it takes is for one person to start stirring up the fire. And it wasn't Punchbowl, it was another club. I forget which one it was. And then, it kinda spread a little bit, certain people. Most of the Portuguese in Hawaii have open minds, and they're very, very ... they enjoy local humor.

Well, what was the negative feedback you got, and how did you get it?

Well, they wanted me to stop or they're gonna close the show.

Because you're making fun of an ethnic group.

Fun of the Portuguese; yeah. But then, freedom of speech, and I'm well taken care of. Sent it to the lawyer, lawyer sent it back, don't have nothing to worry about, and you can go on with your show. And so, that kind of simmered, 'cause Mom came to my aid with all her Portuguese lady friends, and told them to stop it.

Were you equal opportunity ethnic humor?

Oh, my goodness; across the board.

Was there a group that isn't funny, so you didn't make fun?

No. Everybody has their own little idiosyncrasies. But of course, I did the major races, because I only knew them, and they all lived on my street.

But there came a time when a respected columnist in town ...

Oh. [CHUCKLE] I knew you were going bring her up. [CHUCKLE]

Lee Cataluna. She said, you know, Eh, enough with this reinforcing Hawaii's stereotypes. And you know, she talked about how she grew up loving your humor, but it was time to take a pass on that.

And that's her opinion. Yeah. I have no idea why she did that, but I didn't respond. And the reason why I didn't respond is that's her opinion. She's a comedian too. And I was surprised, because she told all kind of ethnic jokes as well. And so, I was surprised that she would take offense to that. And in the article, it says, you know, you shouldn't hire him, the schools should stop him from visiting the kids. That was all in the article, and I said, Wow. I said, you know, that's like pulling the rug from under me, and thank God that the community did not back it up.

One target, if you will, of Frank DeLima's humor was Imelda Marcos, wife of former Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos, who had moved to Hawaii in exile. Imelda became a familiar figure on local TV news.

Tell me about that. You were dressed up in your puffed sleeves as Imelda.

Right.

Marcos.

Because she was on TV every day ... the same dress, green dress, and the dark glasses with the gold trim. So I called Kathy James, who did all my costumes, and I said, Kathy, can you make me look like Imelda? And so, she did. She made the wig, and the bun. 'Cause it was the same, the pearl earrings from Woolworth's. And so on the first day, opening night, and I came out at the Noodle Shop dressed as Imelda, I could not believe the audience.

[SINGS] Imelda. I love Hawaii. I would love to live next to you. I am Imelda, I lived at Hickam, now I'm living in upper Makiki. I would love to move back to

the Philippines. I am Imelda, I'm Ilocano. [APPLAUSE/CHEERS] *Salamat; salamat ...*

Then Jim Nabors, liked my show, liked my style. And he brought Carol Burnett one time to the show, and she enjoyed it as well. And then one night, he brought in Imelda and Doris Duke, because they were buddies. Now, I didn't know that Imelda hung out with him, first of all. She hangs out with lot of entertainers. She was an entertainer at one time. And so she's used to this kinda stuff, okay, and maybe even Jim Nabors probably was making jokes about her shoes or whatever it may be. And so they came in and sat in the front row. And this was ... oh, man, I was a nervous wreck. What am I gonna do? Should I ... of course, I said, that's why she's here.

To see.

She wants to see. So I just went out like a true trooper, the show must go on, comedy is comedy, people come, they have to take whatever is given to them. And so I walked out, and she didn't laugh at first. The audience screamed, especially now that she's here. The audience, so that was a special night for the audience. Jim Nabors was on the floor, and uh, Doris Duke was—they were just right in the front. She had brought a bag of shoes to the show. But she didn't have the guts enough to go up and give it to me. But I didn't know that until after. But she was—

So she had a good feeling coming in.

She was looking, she was shocked. I could see a shocked look on her face, and it took about maybe one minute or two minute, and then she busted out laughing, and laughed throughout the whole show. Afterwards, she came up to me and said, Prank, that was a beautiful show, and I cannot believe you look so much like me.

If there is a legacy that Frank De Lima will leave, aside from his many characters, it will be his other passion, the Frank De Lima Student Enrichment Program. This outreach program, devoted to helping Hawaii's children understand the importance of reading, studying, laughing, and family, was born when Frank made a trip to Maui and he had some free time.

So, I was sitting there, and I told my cousin, I gotta do something. And then, I started thinking about all that eight years in the seminary, all that education, and the fact that I was working with the Catholic Youth Organization, and the summer fun program, and gathered all of this knowledge and fun songs, and skits that I learned from the counselor camps. Before the summer fun starts, we have this stuff to do for the kids and teach them things. And so, I said, You know, I have all this, I should do something with it. Do you have a school that I can go visit today? Let's start right away. Go call the school and see if we can go. And Charley said, Sure, I'll call um, Kahului Elementary. And the principal there was so excited. And I know that's why this whole school program began.

LONG STORY SHORT WITH LESLIE WILCOX (FRANK DE LIMA: LAUGHING WITH YOU, NOT AT YOU) 7

Because it was hard to get into a school. It's not easy, especially comedians, 'cause they don't really know where you're gonna go with that.

Right.

But he knew my background, and so he said, Oh, yeah, bring Frank, he's hilarious, local humor, and all that stuff. So when I went ... it was ten minutes later after Charley made the call. We just jumped in the car and we went. Eight hundred kids were already on the lawn. They must have had a fire drill to get them all out there. And the stage was already out there. It's a built stage out in the lawn area. And they had the PA system just about set up.

So, like this, in effect.

And then, I felt, what am I gonna do? I can't believe it, what am I gonna do now? All these kids waiting, the teachers. So I went up there, and I let God guide me, and ... half hour, nonstop. And I did the Peanut Butter and Jelly Song. [SINGS] Peanut, peanut butter; jelly. First you pick the guava, and you smash it, and you smash it, and you mix it, and you mix it. Then you pick the peanut, and you smash it, and you smash it, and you mix it, and you mix it. Peanut, peanut butter; jelly. Peanut, peanut butter; jelly. Then you take the bread, and you spread it, and you spread it, and you eat it, and you eat it. Mum-mum, mum-mum, mum-mum; mum-mum. And the kid just loved doing that. 'Til today, thirty years later, I still include that, along with the *Buta Hunt Song*, which is hunting for pig, or skit. And I include that, because the kids move up. They're only gonna get it twice. And the first time, they're kindergarteners. And so, I feel repetition is important at that point. Get to know me, because when they get to fourth grade, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth, they already know I'm funny, but they also know that I can do serious things. And so, I thought that would be a good way to prepare them for when they get older, and then my messages will ... but at least I'll have their attention when I walk in.

From the beginning, did you include values and ...

Yeah. That reading, study—well, it just came out. I just was talking to the kids. I did the Peanut Butter, I did the *Buta Hunt* after I introduced myself, and I'm from Oahu, I came long ways. And they go, Woo, like that. The old days, yeah? And then I said, Now, reading is so important. And I tell them my story about me having to read every night before going to sleep. My mom and dad were real great at doing that and supporting the nuns, yeah? But you read fun books, I told them. That's how you practice your reading. You gotta borrow books that look like it's going be fun. The cover has a fire engine or I make—these are little kids, yeah? And then, I talked about family spirit, and I talked about getting along, and the whole thing about ... you know, nowadays, it's bullying and cyber bullying, and teasing, and all that stuff. But back then, it was just getting along. I kind of called it family spirit, where you help out each other and so forth. That came from, you know, the CYO training.

Which is Catholic Youth Organization.

Yeah; m-hm. And then, also the fact that ... laughter. And that's when I did the Peanut Butter and Jelly, and I said, it's healthy to laugh, but you have to behave, you cannot be laughing any time you want. There's times to be funny, and times to laugh, and time to study and work hard, and not distract people. And so, I brought that up. So it slowly developed into the four magic words to success.

And what are these four magic words?

Reading, studying, laughing, and family. And then I broke it down into each category and what you do. And that still, 'til today, is the foundation.

Good, solid stuff, important to success in life. Many thousands of Hawaii youngsters over the years have had the benefit of this advice from comedian Frank De Lima at their schools. His comical presentation and pacing makes the serious message behind it all the more memorable. Mahalo piha, Frank De Lima, for sharing your Long Story Short. And thank you for watching and supporting PBS Hawaii. 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.

Beef Stew and Rice is about all my favorite foods. The local people love their food, and so I sing Beef Stew and Rice, beef stew and rice, beef and stew, spaghetti plate, burger deluxe, beef stew and rice, spaghetti plate, burger deluxe. One small *saimin*, one large *saimin*, one small *saimin*, one large *saimin*, one deluxe won ton min. Hamburger steak, hamburger steak, chili and rice, beef curry stew, short order fries, hamburger steak, chili and rice, beef curry stew, short order fries. Liver and onions, liver and onions, liver and onions, *shoyu* chicken, beef tomato, fried egg sandwich, tossed green salad, tuna sandwich, pork tofu. Corned beef and cabbage, oxtail soup, fruit cocktail cups, soup of the day, corned beef and cabbage, oxtail soup, fruit cocktail cup, soup of the day. Sweet sour spareribs, Jell-O cup, pie ala mode, Portuguese bean soup. Jumbo shrimp tempura, deep fried breaded *mahimahi* served on top of shredded cabbage, served with macaroni salad, tartar sauce with lemon wedges. Two scoops rice with plenty *shoyu*, saltine crackers, rolls and butter, ketchup, mustard, relish, pepper, Pepsi Cola, and more Coke. Steak teriyaki, teri pork, and teri chicken, teri burger, Terry Souza, terrycloth. The Thursday special of the day, chili and rice, chili and crackers, chili hotdog, chili pepper, chili, chili, chilly weather at the beach. *Obento* lunch, *obento* lunch, *obento* lunch. Hawaiian plate, Hawaiian plate, Hawaiian plate, Hawaiian plate. Beef stew and rice, beef stew and rice, beef stew and rice.

[CHUCKLE] Yay!