

**GUEST: RON EDMONDS**

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I've had some days where I got up, and practically every newspaper in the world ... had my picture on their front page. And that's pretty awesome.

**Do you recall the first time that happened?**

Well, probably the assassination attempt on President Reagan was probably the first of that many newspapers, and especially since I was the only one who actually captured the President being shot.

**Pulitzer-Prize-Winning photographer Ron Edmonds – 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 ka kou, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Welcome to this edition of Long Story Short. If you had to pick the perfect embodiment of the old saying *being in the right place at the right time*...photographer Ron Edmonds would be an excellent choice. His innate sense of being in the perfect position to capture history-making images served him well during his 28-year stint as a wire-service photographer, for the associated press, assigned to the plum but highly competitive white house beat. He covered all presidents from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush.***

**I've known Ron Edmonds since I was a cub reporter at the old Honolulu star-bulletin. Ron had started there in 1972 as a staff photographer and he became chief photographer by 1977. Little did I know that he would one day win the Pulitzer Prize for his photos of the failed assassination attempt on president Reagan—taken in 1981, on Ron's second day as white house photographer for the associated press global wire service.**

**I recently caught up with Ron and his wife grace, a former star-bulletin reporter, at their home in Annandale, Virginia. For someone who would eventually put down roots and stay in the same job for close to 30 years, Ron Edmonds lived somewhat of a nomadic life while growing up.**

I grew up in California. I was born in Richmond, California, but I spent most of my life in Sacramento, California, and around Northern California. My dad was a construction worker, truck driver, and actually, until I was a junior in high

school, I never went to the same school more than one year. It was kind of did a lot of moving around. My dad had to go ... where the work was.

**How many people in your family?**

Had a brother and sister, and my mom and dad.

**And up you go. Was at the beginning of the school year, or were you entering in between?**

No, it was usually—I think one year, we had to move in the middle of the year, but most of the time, it was at the end of the year during the summer. And that's usually the way construction work back in those days, where you—you were off, you got laid off for two or three months in the winter, and then you started up in the spring. So we would usually—my dad would find, you know, where he was he was gonna for his next job, and we'd move during the summer and start school there.

**Was there a lot of dread, will we have a job, where will we be?**

Well, , in the construction business, you know, it—it was tough. I mean, there were times my dad was on unemployment. We—we didn't have a lot of money when I was younger. So it was—, but they were great parents. I mean, I never had—you know, I never went without meal or anything like that, but, it was from paycheck to paycheck most of my early days.

**How were you at entering a new school, and not knowing anybody?**

That was probably the toughest thing. I think one of the—one of the things that I—I lost in all those years—I—, I'm jealous of—of friends of mine who have lifelong, friends that went—that they went to school with. Where I was making new friends every—every year.

**Did being a new guy lead to awkward moments? You know, who you're gonna sit with in the cafeteria, you know.**

Oh, of course. I mean, there were cliques and, you know, it was the in groups, and so you always—of course, in the younger years, it wasn't so bad. It wasn't until you got up in junior high school and high school where the cliques, you know, were really. So it's tough. You come in, you're always the new guy, you know, and nobody knows you. An—and you—so you just have to—you try an—and get on the baseball team, or—or the football team by being good at it so that these guys want you to play with them.

**Were you?**

I was pretty good at baseball, and, football.

**And did you develop a style of meeting and greeting?**

Not really. I guess it was survival style, just to, you know, figure out whi—which group of kids you were gonna have the most fun with at the time.

**I wonder if your experience of always being the new guy ... helped you develop an outsider's status, which actually is helpful when you're covering news.**

Well, you know, I'm—I'm somebody who li—kinda lo—likes to look at things from the outside, to be honest with you. I'm—that's one of the ways I've always kinda done my photography, when I could. Of course, all—

**Did that exist before... in high school? Do you know how that started?**

No, I think it's just—it just—it just came by—by how I grew up and stuff, and having you stand on the outside looking in, and then you pick what's the best—best situation for you to move into that—that area. So, it's very similar to what I do as a career. You—you arrive on someplace, and you—and you—some people like to rush—rush right into the thing an—and think they know, and I think you're better off standing back watching what people are doing, and then—then making your move.

**Which is exactly what you did when you were entering those schools, not knowing anybody?**

Exactly. Exactly.

**So—**

Surviving.

**At what point did the early glimmer of photography enter your life?**

I went to a movie called Blow Up. David Hemmings, I think, was the star of the movie back in the ... and I thought, You know, that's a pretty neat thing taking those pictures. And I'd—I'd been—I had—was working—I'd worked for the telephone company right out of high school. I'd gone to work for them, and I was working for them nights, and going to school in the daytime. And so, about a week later, we were choosing classes, and—and I had a spare moment, and I thought, I'm gonna take this photography course. And as it turned out, the guy—the professor had just started teaching, and his name was Dick Fleming, and he had been a Sacramento Bee photographer for ten years. And we went to lunch, just—just a fluke, went to lunch, and he told me what he did. And he told me he got to fly in a jet plane, and I always—fighter, and I always wanted to be a pilot, but knew I wasn't smart enough to be a pilot at the time. I went home, and I worked for about two more weeks, and I came in to school one day, and I said, Dick, I want to become a press photographer. And he said, Well, it's hard work. I said, No, I'm twenty-four, I have no responsibilities, I've saved up enough money I can probably—I was sharing a room with a friend of mine. And I said, I can probably go two years an—and survive. What do I have to do? And you know, he tried to talk me out. I said, No, I'm going to work tonight—

**And you'd taken pictures by then. You had some early—**

I had taken—

**—confirmation you had talent?**

I—I had ta—well, no, I—I had taken pictures, but mostly just family—family pictures, vacation pictures, you know, scenics and things like that. It just—it—it—it bit me, and I said, Dick, now, I want—I want you to tell me what I have to do. So, he worked with me. I went to work—work that night, gave 'em two weeks' notice, quit my job. Fortunately, Dick had two friends of his that were still at the Bee, and they had a small freelance business, and they hired me as a darkroom guy, and then I started freelancing. And of course, it was the height of the 60s, and the riots were happening, and when you're young and stupid, you go places that the veterans don't go. And so, United Press International started

buying some of my pictures, and they liked the stuff enough that they put me on a retainer for a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month. I would let them look at my pictures first. And so—and that's how I built my portfolio up.

**Well, what was that like, when you were putting yourself in harm's way and getting some great images?**

Yeah; exactly. An—and of course, when you're young and stupid, you know ... I thought it was adventurous. I mean, I came from a truck driver's family living their life, and all of a sudden, I'm in San Francisco, in Berkeley, and people are shooting teargas, and people are—are—are doing this.

**How fun. [CHUCKLE]**

Well, at the time, it was. I mean, I—I must admit, it was exciting, I went from an everyday mundane life to—to sirens, and people being arrested, an—and taking pictures. And then, putting a picture on the wire ... and having it show up in newspapers around the country.

**Ron Edmonds learned early on that a news photographer should always be prepared, and that meant researching your subject ... if you could.**

**When did you learn to be prepared? Was that also... was that a natural trait, or was that picked up in the course of what you had to do as a photographer?**

No, I think—I think—I think it's—it's gained in—, as I got better, you know, got more into the photography. Initially, you know, you—Okay, I got my camera, I got my—and not ... and after you have a few faux pas, you show up and you go shoot something, and you realize, gee, I was two rolls of film short, I forgot to buy fi—enough film. And then, you start building, you know, self checklists to make sure that you've—, you know, that you know what the story is, you know a little about the person. You can't just go photograph somebody and know nothing about him. You can go make some images of him, but if you really want to show—you have to kinda understand where they come from, what they're doing.

**So if you had time, you always looked up the—**

Oh, yeah.

**—subject or the issue?**

Yeah.

**Okay; what about when I was the roukiest of reporters, and you were a Star Bulletin staff photographer—you might have been the chief photographer by then, and we got assigned on a slow day to go take a picture of a twelve-pound mango in—**

Which I thought was—

**—Hawaii.**

—great.

**[CHUCKLE]**

Which wa—

**Did you look up mangoes? Did you see what the—**

No, you—

**—previous record was?**

You have to—you have to—you have to—no, I didn't. But you have to remember, we didn't have the Internet. It wasn't quite as easy back—

**That's true.**

—in those days. But—but no, I ... tha—that—that was one of the things I enjoyed about working in Hawaii. We got to go up—, I think it was in, ... was it Kalapana? No. I forget where it was at now. But we got to go up and meet a wonderful man. He was—he—I still remember him teaching us some little tricks about what you can do with papayas as well as mangoes. And—and you actually—I think you were the one kind of, we're going up to do this dumb story. And I—I had—oh, this is a good story.

**[CHUCKLE]**

And actually, you piped up and got smiling, and we—and we had a—and it turned out to be a fun story.

**That's right. I think I was in that mode of, They always make the young women go do, you know, the mango stories, the—**

Yeah, and I think I said, Well, wait a minute, I'm going on this story, what are you saying about me?

**[CHUCKLE] That's true.**

**[CHUCKLE]**

**Because for you, it wasn't an action story, it was a picture of a—**

It was a picture.

**—big mango. But you were looking for what you could learn from the—**

Right.

**It was just an interesting, odd thing.**

Right. And that's one of the—I've—I've met so many great people. I think what I learned in Hawaii is that the little guy on the street has as much to say about what's going on in the world as the guys in their big offices. And you learn that it's not always the President ... who ha—who has—is the good story. It's not always the President who comes up with the idea of helping this group in—in some far off part of the land, it's one of his aides and people who come to him and say, We found this out, and this is—so it's trying to treat everybody with the same respect. An—and I—I think that gets you everywhere in life, from George Bush treating the gardener at the White House the same way he treated a head of state. No difference, same amount of respect. And I've always tried to be that way with people. And Hawaii is a—is a great place to learn that.

**For Ron Edmonds, Hawaii also turned out to be a great place to find new love—and his future wife.**

...I was fortunate one day to walk into the city room of the—of the Star Bulletin, and I looked across the newsroom, and here was this beautiful young lady sitting there. And I asked the assignment editor, I said, Who's that? He said, That's the

new reporter. And he sa—so he said, Why, do you want to meet her? And I said, Yeah. So we went on a story, and I remember the story to this day. It was the Winners of the Fire Prevention Poster Week.

**[CHUCKLE] A big news day.**

A big news day. So we went, and I made these images of all the posters, and the winning kids, and all this. And next day, the paper came out ... story by Grace Feliciano. Star Bulletin photo ... no credit. She hadn't given me credit on my picture, so I had to—I had to explain to her that, You're the person who writes the caption. I didn't know. [CHUCKLE] So we became good friends, fell madly in love, and ... and close to forty years now, we've been together. We've got a wonderful daughter...

**After my conversation with Ron Edmonds, I asked his wife Grace Feliciano Edmonds if she could corroborate his story.**

**Do you recall that first meeting?**

[GRACE FELICIANO] I remember that exact day, 'cause ... being a clothes lover, I remember what I was wearing, what my hair was. I'd just come from New York City, and I was wearing a China doll look [CHUCKLE] with the bangs and the thing. And I actually noticed him as well. So, there you go. [CHUCKLE]

**Now, obviously, he was away a lot. He says, yeah, two months, he'd take off. And even when he wasn't physically away for months, he had long hours, and he had dangerous days too. What was that like for you?**

Um, you take it in stride. You know, I—I try not to be a wor—worrywart, although, I have to admit, the day of the assassination, I knew that he was at the scene, and I was very worried. And there was no news coming out of it, just that the President had been shot at, and shots were fired at random and scattered, and I knew he was always physically close to wherever the President was. So that was a worry, and my—you know, my heart was, you know, thumping for a couple of hours 'til I did finally hear from him.

**That fateful event occurred during what otherwise was shaping up to be a humdrum day on the white house beat. Ron Edmonds knew the drill. The president would make: a speech, exit, and get back into the presidential limousine. Routine. Except Ron Edmonds had disciplined himself never to let his guard down and to prepare for the unexpected.**

**You were assigned to go to Washington Hilton in 1981, a speech, I don't know if it was a particularly important speech, but you were assigned to record images that day. Tell us about that day.**

Well, it was only my second day on the White House. But we went in, he spoke, I don't know, fifteen, twenty minutes maybe. And we came—we almost missed the whole event, because at the Hilton, we were downstairs, and they always ask people, Please stay in your seats 'til the President and his entourage leaves.

Well, as soon as the President walked out, everybody got up. There were two flights of escalators to get up to the ground floor where the car was at. Well, by the time we got to the back of the room to go out—'cause he goes out a secure entrance, and we go out a side entrance, the escalators were jammed with people, and we were having to say, Excuse us, excuse us, because he won't wait. As soon as he gets in the car ... the motorcades' gone, and you're calling for a taxicab, try and get you back to the White House. So we're all trying to rush up. Some of the people didn't make it out the door by the time he—he had walked out. And so, you know, I—, we got up there, and again, it was a—it was another departure. And he came, he waved, and I made one image and the bangs went off.

**And when you heard the bangs did you duck, did you look to see where they were coming from? What did you do?**

Well, I knew they were a hail of gunfire [being facetious] and I just kept—no, I'm not going to lie to you. They sounded like firecrackers. It was over so quick, you did not have time to really realize what went on.

**So, you would have a reason not to snap anything, right? Because it didn't sound like much.**

No, but it sounded—I saw him react. When the first—when it popped, it went, pop-pop-pop-pop-pop. He shot six shots in something like one-point-seven seconds, from the first to the last shot it's only one-point-seven seconds. I saw him grimace. So I knew that—I mean, this—even if it hadn't been shooting, this was going to be maybe a humorous—what you call a humorous picture of the President of the United States reacting to this—to this bang. 'Cause I saw him, he squeezed his eyes an—and kinda ... grimaced like that. And it wasn't—I didn't even know they were shots until the limo—limo pulled away, and you could see the people laying—laying on the ground. Because they were out of my viewfinder, all I could see was the two agents through the viewfinder. And again, I thought—even when they pushed him in the car, which is normally what they would do if someone set off firecrackers that close to the President, 'cause they don't have time to ... decide it's either a firecracker or not. And so, it wasn't 'til the car pulled away, and that's when I went, Oh, my gosh, because you know, here was Brady laying on the ground, and—and McCarthy the agent, laying there. And of course, then, I knew this was—this is when the adrenalin started pumping. And again, this is one of the situations where I had worked with this crew of agents for many months. And for a while, they allowed me—one of my favorite pictures is of the scene that's got—that tells kind of the whole story is it's got all three of the people wounded laying on the ground, and them wrestling with Hinckley in the background. Well, most of the other photographers, even the ones that had come out late, didn't get that, because they got pushed back off to the side by the agents. And I was fortunate enough that I was off to the far side, and for quite a while, the agents who knew me left me out there. The first agent grabbed me and went, Oh! Just moved me aside, realized who I—well, he was moving people out of the way. So I was

able to make those images before they kind of once they get organized and they start making press areas where you have to stand and all that. So those are the little things that help, in doing that. And of course, you know, I can't tell you what all I—you know, that—that your whole mind gets into the mode of, of what you have to do. Do I get—have I got—I thought I was in trouble. All the way back to the White House, I was sure I was gonna be in big trouble, because I knew that I had never seen Hinckley's face. I knew that I had—had pictures of them wrestling with him, but they had initially pulled his jacket over his head, which is one of the ways you incapacitates someone, pull their jacket off. But the good thing was, I got back to the White House—, I had—actually, I got a ride from—'cause the biggest thing that happened to me that day, on my luck side, is that when they pushed the President in the car, the motorcade took off and didn't stop for us. Because if the motorcade had stopped, I would have had to get in that van. That's my job to stay with the President. I'd have had none of the aftermath, none of the arresting of Hinckley. And I—I—I know to this day, I—I always tell people, thank God that van didn't stop, because I would have had to make that split second decision. You know, my job is to stay with the President, you never leave the President.

**How much physical risk did you turn out to have been during the shooting?**

Well, I didn't know this 'til later. Jerry Parr was the lead agent on the thing, and we're pretty good friends, and he showed me some of the diagrams. And fortunately for myself and the UPI photographer who was standing right next to me, the one bullet that didn't either hit the car or hit—hit anybody out there went across the street, and went about two feet over my head across the street. It was an intense few moments.

**At some point, obviously, President Reagan recovered, and you must have had some conversation about what happened, and being there together.**

When I won the Pulitzer ... the President invited me into the Oval Office, and , so we had , a little ten or fifteen-minute meeting, just the two of us, an—and—and aides. And he was funny. We used to call him Governor, an—and—and people would say, Governor, look this way, Governor, look this way. And he said, You know, Ron, he says, I think next time, I'm gonna have a stand-in for this scene. [CHUCKLE] So—then he proceeded to tell me a Cecil B. DeMille joke. But he was a—it—it was very, very nice of the President that he invited me in and talked about it.

**And then that was just the beginning of your tenure at the White House. You spent years more covering—the President.**

Twenty-eight years—

**Tell me the numbers, how many presidents?**

Well, I've ... I've made pictures of every president since Nixon. Nixon, Carter, Ford. And then, I covered—at the White House, I covered—cov—I did some photography of—of Carter in his last month, and then I did Reagan, Bush, Clinton, Bush ... and that's it.

**Who was your favorite to cover?**



George Bush, Sr.

**Because of his personal—**

Personal.

**—manner.**

He—he—he loved everybody, and, he was just—he was fun to cover. There's a work and there's a politics, and we don't always get along politicking wise, and—, but I—I just—he was a very, very, very good person with everybody around him.

**While the first President Bush is Ron Edmonds' pick as his favorite president to cover, Mr. Reagan is the one to whom he will forever be linked because of the Pulitzer-winning photo sequence. And the Reagan assassination attempt was not the first, or the last time Ron Edmonds found himself in the line of fire.**

**Do you think having these near-death experiences, or brushes with a—**

Oh, I think you're—

**Okay.**

You're—you're making 'em a little more than—I mean, I—I've been shot at, an—

**Do you think it changed how you look at things?**

No, not really. Part of when you get into this, you're a little gutsy. I mean, I've always enjoyed doing things that are a little—gotta le—we all—most good photographers have a certain amount of adrenalin rush that they get from what they do. And —

**You got that wild gene.**

From surfing to—I've raced cars, an—and all kinds of things like that, and so I—I don't want to—I don't want to say that it change me. The first time I was ever in gunfire was during the riots in the—in the early 60s in Berkeley in People's Park. And the first time you're around someone shooting and you realize that you can get hit with it, a lot of times you're around those situations, but you kinda stand off, and we all kinda have that feeling, it's not us. That we're kind of—

**Right; it's a denial.**

—an observer, we're around it. I was , actually fairly easy with people firing guns, even though a gun can—can kill you. It wasn't until in ir—I was in Iran for—for a short stint, and it wasn't 'til we were coming on artillery fire. And that changed the whole world, as wha—what you think about being a bang-bang photographer for me. I mean, a bullet, you kinda think, Well, that's something that—it's gotta hit me. Artillery coming in is so indiscriminate, and there's nothing you can do. I mean, there's literally nothing you can do. If it's coming in, it's either gonna hit you, or it's not gonna hit you. And if it hits near you, you're gone.

**Whether on the battlefield of a war-torn country or in the politically-charged environment of the power centers of Washington D.C., Ron Edmonds made sure he knew what to look for.**

People think, Well, gee, you just take pictures, it must be nice just to show up and take pictures. Most people don't realize if you're gonna do it well, the night before, I'm looking at pictures that, before the Internet, we would have picture books and stuff that we'd take along, so you know who the people were when you're meeting with foreign leaders. You read the wire before you left in the morning to see if, well, is this Senator, or is—is this head of state, is there something we should be looking for, or—

**You're looking for reaction shots, aren't you?**

Reaction, and things that—

**Who should I go to?**

Sometimes, it's like going in the Oval Office. I always tell people, the hardest time for me career wise is that split second when they open the door to the Oval Office on a huge story. Because in that split second, you have to—you open your eyes, and the AP, fortunately the AP was always the—'cause they're the largest wire services, first one through the door. And you ha—sometimes there's thirty or forty people that have to go in the Oval Office, which is not very big. That includes camera crews, still photographers. And, when that door opens up, in an instant, you have to eyeball who's in there. Because many times, it's not the person sitting and talking to the President that's the story. It might be during political season. For instance one of the big events, Karl Rove, who was George Bush's, image guy, was in trouble. I can't remember what it was, but he wa—controversy, and he's standing back over by the window. We hadn't seen him in three days. I spotted him going in the door and made a pretty decent picture. Got a lot of play. It wasn't huge, but it got a lot of play, where the other two guys that were with me didn't notice that [SNAPS FINGERS] the ... we're only in there for, on average, not more than thirty seconds is all you're in, unless he speaks.

**Always on the cutting edge, Ron Edmonds would help lead the white house press corps' transition to digital photography. But because of what the new technology could do, the pressure to capture and deliver images as quickly as possible would increase dramatically.**

**Do you have a deadline? What is—to beat your competition, what has AP said is the time you must get it in?**

Well, we'd like to have an image on the wire in under ten minutes. Preferably five. From the time the even stopped—started. Not stopped, started. So sometimes, when you're going to an event, you're traveling—traveling with the President, say, in town or even out of town, and you go to—maybe he's speaking to the 4-H Club of America. If we know we're on critical deadlines, we

know that, okay, as soon as I have something I think's usable, and will illustrate what the President was doing, as soon as I've got that, I take the disc out, I've got a laptop on my backpack, I grab it out, and hope you can get a Wi Fi signal, and you move the picture. So—and while you're doing that, you're sitting there watching the President to make sure nothing happens.

**By the time Ron Edmonds retired in 2009, he had earned the title of senior white house photographer for the associated press. Looking back, he realizes what an amazing career he's had.**

I've covered volcanoes on Mount St. Helens, I've covered the war, I've covered the Olympics, I've covered Summer Olympics, the Winter Olympics. I've been to almost all—every—I've covered almost every convention since 1980, and I've got to see things that most people will never see in their lives. You know, traveling down the Nile River with—with the President of the United States chatting with you, or getting a call one morning from President George Bush, Sr. One morning at eight o'clock in the morning, the phone rings, and Grace answers the phone and ... she wakes me up and says, It's the White House calling. I said, What? The White House? She says, the guy on the other end says it's the White House. So I answered, and it was his aide saying, What are you doing today? I said, Nothing. He said, The President would like you to come over and play horseshoes. So I went and spent—you know, spent the Sunday, it was like going to your grandmother's house, you know. We barbecued, we played horseshoes. You know, how many people get to do that? I mean, from the son of a poor truck driver, and here I am sitting and having a drink with the President of the United States. That's a pretty—pretty good , a pretty good career.

**Ron Edmonds now spends his days bass fishing and hunting, and after being away on assignment so much from his wife Grace and daughter Ashley, he spends a lot of time with family. He continues to capture perfect moments—now at *thirty* frames per second, with digital video! Thank you, former Honolulu resident Ron Edmonds, for sharing your story with us and for delivering your images of history-in-the-making to the world. Until our next *Long Story Short*, 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](http://pbshawaii.org).**

I kind of felt like I was always the eyes of people who couldn't get there. I've been—moments I was in—in Berlin with—with Ronald Reagan when he told Gorbachev to tear down the wall. And talk about things that occasionally you mi—miss. Fortunately, everybody else missed it, but we went over to a thing called Checkpoint Charley, if you remember that, and that was the dividing line

between the German—Germans and Russians and us. And he went and stood next to the line, and we were all shooting these pictures of him standing there with the guard tower in the back. And in a kind of an unscripted moment, he took his foot and real quickly stepped across the line, and stepped back before anybody—well, it happened so quick, none of us got it. Everybody was writing about it, and of course, we were getting rockets from our—our people on the other end. Do you have a picture of him stepping into—into Russian territory? Fortunately, nobody did. [CHUCKLE]