LONGstorySHORT with LESLIE WILCOX

PBS Hawaii

GUEST: MAENETTE AH NEE-BENHAM
LSS 521 (LENGTH: 26:46)
FIRST AIR DATE: 5/1/12

We've been going through what I call this period of survivance, relearning how to be powerful, relearning how to be strong, how tell our stories, and all we really needed to do was to go back and listen to our *kupuna*, and make that connection for ourselves in this contemporary world.

Maenette Ah Nee-Benham, the first dean of Hawaiinuiakea, the University of Hawaii at Manoa's School of Hawaiian Knowledge; next, on Long Story Short.

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

***Aloha mai kakou*. I'm Leslie Wilcox. The gift of story passed on from one generation to the next has been the guiding force behind Dr. Maenette Ah Nee-Benham's journey of self discovery. Stories as shared by her beloved parents and grandparents, and other *kupuna* have informed her core values as a *kanaka maole*, a native Hawaiian. As a leader in the field of education, Maenette Ah Nee-Benham heads Hawaiinuiakea School of Hawaiian Knowledge at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Her journey began in Monterey, California where she was born, and it continued in Germany where her father, Albert "Sonny" Henry Ah Nee, was stationed in the military. His service took the family away from the islands for the first five years of Maenette's life. The family included her mother, Emmaline Padeken, and two younger brothers.**

I grew up with the *mele*, the *hula* that my parents surrounded themselves with. We had luaus in Germany. I don't know exactly what we ate, but I see pictures of us having *luaus*, and people dancing, and stuff like that. So everywhere we went, my parents, parents were deeply grounded.
Was it ever a negative to be Hawaiian where you lived?
I never felt that way. I'm sure, I'm sure that I was shielded by a lot of that. I think it wasn't until I got older. I think being Hawaiian, and not appreciating who you are actually started, sorry to say, when I moved back home. When I started growing up and started going to school, and started hearing from people that it wasn't really good.

How old were you then?
I think I started to feel that when I was more like in third or fourth grade. I've always felt proud to be Hawaiian, my entire life. And I would get very upset when people would put me down, or my family down. And I remember hearing all these really rotten stories, stereotypical stories people would tell about us, so to say.
What were the things you heard?
You know, that we were very lazy, we were not smart. People would tell me, Oh, you know, you're just gonna grow up, you know, and get pregnant and, you know, if you really want to do well, what you're gonna do is, you're gonna either have to marry a Japanese person or a Haole person.
Amazing.
Right?
That's what you were told.
That's what we were told. I remember thinking to myself, Well, this can't be true, 'cause my grandparents were just, like, the salt of the earth. They were the smartest people I knew. They weren't lazy. None of the people that I knew were lazy. Well, maybe my brother was. No, I'm kidding. [CHUCKLE] But, no, people worked really hard, everybody I knew. And so, all the stereotypes flew in the face of everything that I knew. But I constantly heard that; constantly heard that.
What were the values you grew up with?
My grandmother, who was a fisherwoman, would teach us many things growing up. But there are certain things that I have sort of kept with me. My Grandmother Ah Nee always taught us to always take what you need, and never more. My Grandma Padeken taught me some really important lessons about how to be a person. And she could make anything out of nothing. Like, you would have like two dozen people sitting around the table, around a bowl of *poi*. She had two cans of canned corned beef, man, and you'd have a feast. Right? I mean, she was very, very entrepreneurial, she was very innovative and creative. One of the things my grandmother taught me is not only how to make something out of nothing, and how to appreciate that. But at her table, I remember people dropping in and feeling welcome and at home, and having conversations just about anything. And I remember just sitting there and listening to these big people talk, and laugh, and tell stories, and how much I loved that feeling of engagement.
Everybody was welcome, even though they were planned for, and everyone felt comfortable.
That's right. And everybody sat around the bowl of *poi* and ate, and everybody was well nourished. That in itself is a life lesson of how to be, of how to live. And so when people say, What does it mean to be Hawaiian?, I tell that story.

Maenette Ah Nee-Benham excelled at Hawaii's public schools, but at young age, felt strongly that Kamehameha Schools could offer better educational and leadership opportunities. On her own initiative, she recalls, she completed the application process and was accepted for her freshman year of high school. Later, she found a means to finance her college education, capping off her senior year by winning the title of Hawaii's Junior Miss of 1974. With a full college scholarship in hand, she left for California to earn her bachelor and master's degrees in theater and communications from San Francisco State University. Her first post-college work experiences were as a curriculum specialist and administrator at schools in California and in Texas.

Both my Grandma Ah Nee and my Grandma Padeken explained to me when I was very young about my name, Kapeʻahiokalani. And it is a name of one of my great-great-aunts, who was a chanter in King Kalakaua's court. And basically, what they said to me was that because I held this name, I had the responsibility of remembering the *moolelo* of our family, and I had the responsibility of contributing to the health and wellbeing of my family. That was it. That's what they told me. I said, Okay. Because that's what you do. Your *kupuna* tell you that, and you say, Okay, so what do I need to do?

And there are all kinds of ways to accomplish that too.

Yeah, there's all kinds of ways to do that. And I just found this to be my journey, you know, in educational leadership. I just found that to be what really gets me excited, what really inspires me. And it all started because in fifth grade at Koko Head Elementary School, Mrs. Kwon made me do flannel board stories for the kindergartners. And I loved it. I loved just telling stories, creating stories and telling them to young kids, and watching the light bulbs go off. So my first job was as a kindergarten teacher. What a great job, you know, where you get unconditional love every single day. And teachers are leaders; and good leaders are great teachers. I have worked with some very tough people. I have worked with some very tough situations. I'm not a Pollyanna, I've been through a lot. When I was an administrator in Texas—I won't tell you where, because when I was an administrator in Texas, I was put into a principal position in an elementary school that was gonna be closed down because the students were primarily migrants, primarily Spanish-speaking, and it was failing school. And this was during a time when you could only teach English only in the schools, to a population whose first language was Spanish. And they're taking a test in English. Hello; they're not gonna pass anything. Of course, they're gonna have, you know, tremendous problems. So I walked into that situation. At the same time, teacher testing was introduced into the Texas schools. And so, if you as a teacher did not pass a particular test, you were out. Didn't matter how many years you were there, you were just out.

And you got to tell them that.

Thank you. So I was twenty-seven years old. So of course, you're twenty-seven years old, right, you know everything, right? I had just come from California, we were doing bilingual ed, and so we did it. Now, that was a very tough situation for me, because the law said I couldn't do it. And I did everything, you know, to ensure the success of the students in that school. And in the first year, we did teach bilingually, 'cause all the teachers knew how to do it, and they were very successful. The testing was good. I brought in some friends from Trinity University to come in and help the teachers, so that all the teachers passed the test except for two of them. Eventually, one of the two did pass, and one retired. So the first year, we did everything bilingual. I caught, and I got a talking to, you know.

By?

By the superintendent. That it was against the law, that I could be thrown in jail, bla-bla-bla-bla. And I argued that the kids could speak bilingually, we just needed to teach them that way, and they would be stronger for it. So the second year, what I did is, I instituted a coding system. We still taught bilingually, but every time somebody from the district came, the codes went out and everybody switched. Okay. And so, we did okay until some parents were very upset, because they wanted their kids to speak English only, and they didn't want bilingual, so they reported me. Right. Now, listen. I am sitting in rooms with the superintendent and other school principals, and I'm being railed at. But there are lessons that I learned about integrity, about standing for what you believe in, and about doing things for the kids, because that was what was really important, was the kids learning. Not my job, 'cause I could get another job. But I would never be able to look at myself in the mirror if I didn't stand up for what I believed was right. I learned what I was made of. I really did. My last meeting that I had, the superintendent was, you know, through clenched teeth saying how much he appreciated the work I did. I'm like, yeah, right. And whatnot, and that he had a gift for me. And I said, Oh, wow, a gift; oh, my gosh. And so, he gave me this little box, a little red box, you know, and I thought, Oh wow. He said, Well, open it, open it. So I opened it, and it was two silver stress balls, you know, the Chinese stress balls. And I was like, Oh, this is interesting. So I opened up the envelope, and in the envelope it said, Now that you have the balls, maybe you can do the job. I didn't say a thing. I didn't even say thank you. I just looked at it, I put it back in the box, and I just sat there, waited for the meeting to be done, and I was out of there. I was out of there. I was so full of rage ... so full of rage, and there were so many things that I wanted to say. But one of the things I remembered is that you never want to put anything out there that you can't be proud of saying. And I remember saying to myself, If what I have to say in this room could make a difference, then maybe I'll say it. But I didn't feel at the time that it would make any difference in the world. I've learned how to really understand my rage, and through that, learn how to talk with people about how we can come together to do good things

together, how I can do that, even though I might be angry, even though I might disagree with what you have to say, but how I can do that through love. That was the beginning of my learning of how to work with people.

How do you do it? How do you it, when people are constantly throwing out personal slurs instead of just sticking to what needs to get done?

Well, one of the things is that you have to understand where that intent is coming from, where that hurt is, and you know, that the person is doing that because there is hurt there. There's fear, there's hurt, there's history there that they still need to work through. And so, oftentimes, I just allow that to be there. I was asked to do a genius speech, and I talked about the genius of leadership is living into grace. And it's that idea of creating a space where people can feel really safe, even though you say the worst things. I want you to feel safe here, I just want you to feel safe. And no matter what you have to say, no matter how angry you are, go ahead, go and do that. And when you're pau, let's get to work. And in the end, everybody will know that there will be a direction we're gonna go.

Maenette Ah Nee-Benham taught at Kamehameha Schools, Chaminade University, and Kaiser High School while working toward her doctorate in educational administration from the University of Hawaii in 1992. In 1993, Dr. Ah Nee-Benham began a sixteen-year association with Michigan State University as a faculty member with the College of Education. Her work with indigenous educational institutions brought her in close touch with the American Indian Tribal colleges and universities, and led to a greater appreciation for the life lessons imparted by the stories of native peoples.

When I started working in Indian country, I'm not Native American. I'm not native to the Americas. And I walked into my very first meeting with another elder, and I sat there in a circle. And Lionel Bordeaux, who is a large man, you know, sits in his chair, and he has this cane like this, and he stomps the floor with his cane. And he goes, What right do you have to come and tell our stories? And I was near tears. And I thought to myself, Well, what do you say to that? And all I could say to that was, My name is Maenette Kapeʻahiokalani Padeken Ah Nee-Benham; let me tell you about my grandmothers. And so, I talked about my Grandma Padeken, and my Grandpa George, and our life in Kaaawa. I talked about my grandma, how she raised me in the ocean. So I talked about the way that I had been raised, and the stories my grandmother would tell me. And my point was that, I have my native stories, you have your native stories, and together, we can learn about each other, and together we'll tell the stories. But, when I was doing work on the reservations, the elders would sit down, and they would tell stories. And it just captured you, just took you to another place, and I began to make connections. I was having a hard time, they were talking about finding medicine here, and how it helped them. And it

helped me. And pretty soon, I began to remember the stories my grandmothers used to tell me, and appreciating that more. And that just made me feel so much a part of my skin, and so much a part of the islands. It takes time to retell the stories. And I think that's what we as *kanaka maoli* have been going through too, is that we've been going through what I call this period of survivance, relearning how to be powerful, relearning how to be strong, how tell our stories, and all we really needed to do was to go back and listen to our *kupuna* and make that connection for ourselves in this contemporary world. If we go back and listen to our *kaleo* tapes, if we go and take a look at our newspapers, if you go back to that rich resource of knowledge, and experience, and stories, you've got all that. We have a strong history of being a self-governed nation, of being witty and wise, and prosperous. We have that. We just have to go back and relearn it. Because my mother died when I was very young, when I was six years old—and she was a very accomplished woman. Beautiful dancer, she danced at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, she had a master's degree in education back in the 1950s. She was just so very talented, and she died in her early 30s, so at a very young age. Because my grandmothers and my mother's friends loved her so much, there are many stories they would tell me about her. And of course, you want to live up to those things. And I have to admit, at times I was like, Oh, please. You know, Really? Just really, do I really have to do this?, kind of a thing. But I think that the really deep sense of *kuleana*, of deep responsibility to live a life that she would be proud of, I think ... because I lost her at such a young age, that was just so important to me. And maybe, thinking about it, maybe that's why I never thought less of myself. I'm Native Hawaiian … I'm a woman … I can be pretty dipsy at times, and I can be smart at times. But I never really felt down on myself, because I always had that memory of her, and the stories of her.

What is your memory of your mother? Your own, you know, direct memory.

My own memory. My own memory of my mother is that she was very driven. I remember her working, I remember her singing, I remember her dancing. I remember her teaching; she taught at two different schools.

This is all looking very familiar when I look at your life.

Yes; isn't it? [CHUCKLE]

In 2008, Maenette Ah Nee-Benham was offered the opportunity to come home. She was named dean of Hawaiinuiakea School of Hawaiian Knowledge, located at the Manoa campus of the University of Hawaii. It's the first new school or college established on the Manoa campus in twenty-five years, and it's one of the largest schools of indigenous knowledge in the United States.

What does Hawaiinuiakea mean?

This is the name of our place. Of the islands, and the area around it. It is our home. And it embraces everybody. I think that's one of the things I really tried

to make clear to my colleague deans, and to my colleagues in other faculties who are non-Hawaiian, is that one of the values is *ohana*, and *ohana* does not always mean that we are of the same blood. *Ohana* means that we can agree on a set of principles and a mission for the work that we're doing, and we're gonna be innovative and entrepreneurial, and we're gonna work together really hard to get there. That's *ohana*. So when I came home … I am very committed to the promise of just that, of being the University of Hawaii at Manoa, a research run institution that is a land, sea, and sky grant, that is indigenous or *kanaka maoli* grounded. One of the things we're working on right now is a lot of really nice signage that not only will tell the story of UH Manoa, but also of this *pai aina* that we're sitting on. What used to be here before, you know, Cook arrived in the islands. Story of the land, our stories, the *moolelo* of this place. So when people come here, they know, Oh, Manoa. Oh, here's the story of Kane and Kanewai. Oh, here's the story of the winds. Oh, that's why—you know, knowing the place. Knowing this place. Connecting yourself to this land will connect yourself to the University of Hawaii Manoa. Many Native Hawaiians, when they look at the University, that's not our story. I mean, this institution is not our story. You know, it's somebody else's story. But it is a venue where we can learn the skills of the 21st century global world, to live into the stories of our time, you know, still holding on to our stories of lineage. And so, what Native Hawaiians, at least my community, needs to learn to do is, we need to learn to re-story this story, the academic story. And I think I've done a pretty good job of it for myself that I can live in this universe, I can be successful in this university, and I haven't given up any of my *kanaka maoli* values.

Well, what is your idea for yourself of being a Hawaiian who's true to her beliefs and her culture in the 21st century Hawaii?

One of the joys of my work right now is actually working in community with youth. And so, I'm working a lot with Mao Farms, which you're familiar with, with Kukui and Gary Maunakea-Forth and their youth leadership training program. And I have relations with these young people who are learning their value as people, they're learning the *moolelo* of Waianae, and they're learning to craft something that is going to sustain their community. And they're going to LCC, and they're graduating, and then they're coming to Manoa in a variety of different fields; in agriculture, in engineering, in medicine. And the reason why they're doing that, because when they get those skills, they're gonna go right back home and make it a better place. I have a big project with the Kellogg Foundation; it's called Engaging Communities in Education. We're bringing together youth leadership groups, several from Hawaii, some from across the continent, and we're converging on Youth Radio, which is located in Oakland, California. And for people who know digital media, Youth Radio is like right at the top of their game.

Right; one of the first and best.

That's right. And we're going there to learn about media, but social messaging,

advocacy, creating those kinds of plans, how do young people do that. How are you really smart about that, but at the same time, how do you remain around it in your lineage. How do you tell that? So that's what it means to be a 21st century Native Hawaiian. We are rebuilding our story as a nation every day. And we've had to go through a lot of growing. I mean, come on, we were decimated; we were decimated when Cook landed and everything that happened. We've gone through a history of two hundred years of battling for our survival of ensuring that our stories were kept alive in remote places somewhere. We've battled hard, and we're coming out of it now and we're making clear strides forward, and we're educating a whole new generation of Native Hawaiian leaders whose *olelo* was strong, whose *moolelo* is deeply rooted, and who love this land ... and can have civic discourse, not only among Hawaiians, but everyone, who are learning how to speak in that way. So I think we're ready. I'm glad I came home. [CHUCKLE]

Dr. Maenette Ah Nee-Benham says that the experience of learning and teaching moves her spirit, and connects her to the *kupuna* on whose shoulders she stands, and the generations of people yet to come. *Mahalo piha*, Maenette Ah-Nee-Benham, for sharing your long story short. And thank you for watching and supporting 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.

And, I went through that phase, where I thought I was the smartest whip in town. And I said some things that I know were very hurtful. And the intentionality of my words were hurtful, and that's not a good thing. And my grandmother would constantly tell me, you know, once you put something out there, once you write it down, it doesn't belong to you anymore. So what you want to make sure you do is that you say things that people can embrace, that can make them happy and healthy. Period. No wagging her finger at me or anything. Just matter of factly.