

GUEST: CELEBRATING MOMS

LSS 522 (LENGTH: 27:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 5/8/12

Aloha mai kakou, I'm Leslie Wilcox. In this special edition of *Long Story Short*, we celebrate moms – mothers whose children went on to sing, lead, teach and ultimately pass on the lessons they learned from their mothers. We'll look back on conversations with entertainers Emma Veary, Mihana Souza and Keola Beamer; business leaders Cha Thompson and Christine Camp; and educator Candy Suiso. Stories of mothers – next on *Long Story Short*.

We begin with a story from an elegant singer who was nicknamed "Hawaii's Golden Voice" and graced Waikiki's stages in the '70s. Today, Emma Veary remains a treasure of Hawaiian music. Emma's strongest influence was her late mother, Nana Veary. Nana loved everyone, from the rich and famous, to the homeless and downtrodden. She dedicated her life to a spiritual journey, one that took her from her traditional Hawaiian upbringing, to Christian Pentecostalism and Zen Buddhism. Along the way, Nana's children, including Emma, were there by her side.

We know Nana Veary as this renowned spiritualist whom people came from far and wide to consult and see, and spend time with.

Yes. Right.

What was she like as a mom, starting out when you were a little baby?

I mean, she was just our mom; that was it. And interestingly enough, when we grew old enough, we chose to go on her spiritual path with her. And that's what made life most interesting. Because whatever she was studying, we were studying. And we were chanting in Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan or whatever she was doing; we were doing it. So we were living her life, her book, with her; which I still do.

For all of her life, she was in tuned spiritually, and went on these journeys for truth.

Yes. Right.

How did you and your brother and sister fit in?

Well, again, we all joined emotionally, spiritually with her in her journey, and she'd come home and tell us what was happening with her. And we'd all exchange whatever was happening with us. And we enjoyed learning about the other parts of the world, and what their belief system was. And whenever she went anywhere, she always came back with all these wonderful tales to tell us.

Now, so you're a grown up yourself, and your mom's on this spiritual odyssey.
Right.

You didn't think, H-m, how come only my mom is out there—

[CHUCKLE]

—in India searching for truth?

We were sharing our mother since we were kids. And we enjoyed sharing her with people. We felt so blessed to have her that we thought, Oh, let's share her with everyone. You know? And that was our attitude about it, share her with whatever. And I know she was lecturing at one point at UCLA. And this young student got up in the auditorium and he said, Excuse me, Mrs. Veary—trying to be smart like all students are he said, I understand the Hawaiian are a dying race. And she says, Let me come back to that after I finish my lecture. Okay. After the lecture, she said, All right, young man, I'll answer your question now. I prefer to think that the Hawaiians are not a dying race; they are very busy creating an international race. Take my little granddaughter here; come here, Debbie. She says, This little girl is French, English, Spanish, Hawaiian, Japanese. She says, How more international can you get? She had a standing ovation. [CHUCKLE] But, that's how she thought.

And did she bring to you her aha moments, her epiphanies?

Yes. We used to sit and have these discussions about what was happening in her life, and what was happening in ours, and how we were growing. And we didn't we didn't go out an awful lot; we didn't enjoy doing that. We liked to stay at home with the family. We did a lot of things together.

And she said that she just learned that there's just not a big place in one's life for negativity.

Yes.

So she tried never to say—

No.

—anything bad. Did she succeed at home? I mean ...

Well, we had our—

As far—

—spankings and everything. I mean, if you want to call that negative. But—

But could she be positive about so many things?

Yes; yes. She taught us to see only the good. And I have trouble with one child who only sees good, and she will not see the other. I said, There is also something that is not good here, and you have to find a balance there. You just can't see only good, good, good, good, good; because not everyone is made up of the two.

Do you think your mother saw the negative, but chose not to acknowledge, really?

Yes; yes. That is non-acknowledgement of it, and nullifies it.

Are you that way too?

Yeah.

Emma Veary says that through her daily actions, she feels she's continuing where her mother left off in her spiritual journey. Now another treasured local singer and musician, Mihana Souza. Mihana, who sings and plays the upright bass for Puamana, her family's Hawaiian music group, talks about how she ended up as the bass player ... and other lessons from her mother—the late great entertainer/composer Irmgard Aluli.

How did you come to be the one who played the bass?

You know, being a young mother, and trying to find a way to help with income, I started to make head *leis* and flower bouquets for friends who were getting married. And I remember I would strap my daughter onto my back, and we would go up, and we would pick all the *lauae* in the mountains. Well, one time, it got too hard, and I went to my mother and I said, What do I have to do to sing? And she said, Well, go get yourself a bass. So I called my cousin Kekua, and he happened to have two basses; so he said, Come, I'm gonna give you this bass.

Did you know how to play a bass?

I didn't know how to play the bass.

[chuckle]

And I took the bass back to my mother that night. She taught me how to play that night, in forty-five minutes. And that next weekend, we started to sing; it was me, my older sister Neau, and my mother. And we haven't had a free weekend since. [chuckle] So, yay!

Now, I know Puamana has always sung harmoniously. Have things always been harmonious within the group?

Always. Always. Number one, we have the example of my mother.

Was she always right?

Always. [chuckle] And I'll tell you why she was right; because she always came from a place of humble kindness. She was always very thoughtful of who she was with. She was always very, very gracious. And she was always very kind.

Boy, that's a hard act to live up to, isn't it?

Yeah; it was really hard, except when you see it in action. Because when you see it in action, you realize that that is truly a wonderful way to live your life, to live a life of kindness. I mean, I always wanted it quickly, I wanted it now; until I saw the way my mother did it. She was just so nice. [chuckle] And she was never confrontational. But she was very gracious, and you could tell that she loved her homeland, and she loved the people here. She loved what she was doing. And she was a historian in her own way. Because her music would be an account of what was going on in her time.

And what an amazing thing happened when you recorded a song she wrote in the 40s.

[chuckle] Just to tell you a little bit about that story. My mother has written over three hundred Hawaiian songs. And I remember as a young child growing up, there were always these parties. Boy, they really knew how to celebrate. They

would have these parties all the time, great parties. The women would always come up in *muumuus*, and they were those silky *muus* with the frills and they'd always have potluck. And always, I remember they would then gather in the back yard, and they would sing, and they would dance, and in the wee hours of the morning, then the men would come and sing. And my father always loved my mother's — he would call them her *Haole* songs, because they were songs that she would write in English. And she has about seven of them. And one of them was called Rust On the Moon. So always at the end of these parties, they would sing all of these old songs, and they were the *Haole* songs. And when I put out my first album with the help of my mother, I remember promising my father that if I ever put out any albums — that's really dating, 'cause I speak in terms of albums [chuckle] that I would bring to the public my mother's *Haole* songs, the ones that we loved so much. And one of them was Rust On the Moon. That was one of my favorites.

That favorite song her mom penned, “Rust on the Moon,” is featured on Mihana Souza’s debut solo album of the same name. In 2003, the album was named Na Hoku Hanohano Jazz Album of the Year. Our next *Long Story Short* guest was once recognized as Hawaii Mother of the Year. Cha Thompson, mother of 12, grew up in Kalihi public housing and is now a respected business leader. Along with her husband Jack, she owns and operates Tihati Productions, a family-run entertainment company. Here, Cha shares how she still gave her all as a mother to raise her children while living the life of an entertainer and entrepreneur. This often involved traveling abroad, so she had some help from her aunt, who she calls “one of [her] most favorite people in the whole wide world.”

My Puna Dear in Waimanalo helped raise my children. And it was a place where they were always clean and always well fed, and always happy. And I could rest assured that they weren't missing me the way uh, other children would miss their parents that would have to take trips a lot. Because we'd always be on the phone, and she was like, Don't worry, Mama be home, Mama be home soon, and whatever. And she was the stabling force, and the reason I could travel the way I did.

Somehow, I don't see you handing off most of your business and most of your childcare to other people. I just don't—

[chuckle]

—see that

I did; I took care of them. Even though I traveled, a lot of times they would travel with me. And I'm telling you; if I was—my youngest son was about six weeks when I went back on stage. And I had him in a little basket back of the stages in Chicago, or New York, or Washington, DC. I did; I took my children with me. I did.

You gave birth to five.

M-hm.

And then you ended up with seven more, somehow?

Yeah. It's a Polynesian custom. And when I say *hanai*, I raised them from three weeks old. I don't only take the ones that, you know.

Are almost ready to go. [chuckle]

Yeah; almost ready—no, no. That's why the line between my natural children and my *hanai* children pales, because they're all brothers and sisters. They never say, Oh, this is my *hanai* brother, or this is my *hanai* sister. They're brothers and sisters. And it was the best thing that ever happened to me. Because 'til today, everybody comes home for *toonai*. That's the Sunday afternoon meal, right after church. Everybody's there; and everybody's talking at the same time. And it's amazing; we all know what everybody's saying. Sundays are great for us ...we always say in our family—and we were honored by a high school for this; much is expected from whom much is given. And man, nobody in our clan, nobody would ever start to begin to think that maybe they were owed this, or maybe they're kind of special. We make fun of everything, and man, we'd take 'em down. That wouldn't happen in our family.

So everybody's expected to do housework. No breaks?

My son, who has a real thriving career on his own—he fronted for Fifty Cent.

Afatia.

Afatia; for Fitty Cents. And I mean, I remember him, he was June Jones' first running back, and won a ring, and all state, all star, and, excuse me. By Saturday morning, that kennel better be cleaned, 'cause we don't have a yardman that's gonna clean the kennel. And he used to do it, and he'd say, Ho, Mom, can't you get—you know, I gotta be at rehearsal, and I got—yeah, we can, but you know, twenty minutes or half an hour, do your stuff first. And that's the way it is; I expected that of them. And I'm really grateful that they're great kids.

Speaking of great kids, our next guest is always in their company. In addition to her husband and daughter, Candy Suiso, the respected Waianae High School educator of over 20 years, has a large family of students, colleagues and alumni. Thanks to the multimedia program she co-founded, Searider Productions, students are gaining the communication and team building skills needed to succeed. Candy's mother, Julia Smith, was also a respected teacher on the Waianae Coast; for three decades, she taught at Makaha Elementary. In this segment, Candy reveals what life was like for her mother and family – a life few people knew about.

...she—my mother, she literally raised four of us. My mother and father divorced when I was nine. my older sister was eleven; and I had a younger brother who was, I think, five; and then my other brother was three. And she just—her whole life was shattered. Um, moved us to Kauai, had my grandparents take care of us. I can't do this; she moved to Makaha and just literally really had to get her life back together. And a year later, we moved back, and she remarried. And

it was a—there was a lot of dysfunction. I don't know what the word to say, but there was—she married an alcoholic, and there was a lot of abuse. He didn't really work much, and she carried, she struggled. She would live paycheck to paycheck. And there was a lot of times I know it was hard. It was really hard. She couldn't provide, I think, the way that she would want to for us. But she'd always have a roof over our heads, we would always have clothes on our body, we'd always have—we had each other. And—

What about food?

We always had food on the table; always. My mother was the queen of Spam.

[chuckle]

She knew how to cook Spam, she knew how to cook corned beef hash. She knew how to make ends meet. We always knew at the end of the month when the times were hard, a little harder, we'd have the bean soup and we'd have the ham hocks. And we hated it, but actually, it's something that we really love eating now.

M-hm.

We cook it, and it's good memories. It used to be bad memories, but there was always food on the table, and clothes on our back, and a roof over our head. And she kept us together. She raised four of us, and living out in Waianae, it would have been easy for any of us to either go the other way. But we all turned out really ...

It must have been hard for her. She was the authority at the school—

M-hm.

—and somebody who was seen as having her life all together.

M-hm.

But then to go home and really have to—

M-hm.

—scrounge and work and scheme to keep things together for your family.

I don't know how she did it. When I look back now, I think, I don't know how you did it. And you know, my sister and I talk about this all the time. It's—she—to get away from what was going on at home. A lot of times it was pretty—it was nasty; it was pretty bad a lot of times. And she would just block it out and work. I think that was a lot of how she would run away from what was happening at home her home life, with her husband. And she would just work. She would just involve herself with work, and keep busy. And my sister and I talk about this all the time. We have so much of her in us.

Because you work all the time.

Because we work all the time, or we keep busy when we want to avoid something or we want to—we just work. And so many times, we think things that used to bother us, the things that she would say, or maybe some of the things that she would do, it would just drive us nuts. And now, I hear myself say things that she would say, and I find myself doing things that she would do, and I think, Oh, my gosh, I have become my mother. And it used to bother me, but now, it's a good thing. It's a really good thing.

You were lucky that your mom lived long enough to see what you've accomplished on the Waianae Coast. What did she say to you?

[SIGH]

She was always proud of me. She was just always proud of me. She was—she didn't say much, but I always knew. I think she was most proud, because she saw that part of her lived through me and continues. But she was always—I mean, she just always would tell me how proud she was of what I'm doing and the work that I chose. And that sometimes teaching is not a very prestige job, and you will not make a lot of money. It will not make you very rich with things and with money, but it will make you very rich with people. And she was right.

Candy Suiso's mother was right. Because of Candy's dedication to and connection with her students, many of them, past and present, see her as a mother figure. The Hawaiian music community lost a mother figure and cultural treasure, with the passing of Aunty Nona Beamer in 2008. Six months later, in this next *Long Story Short* segment, her son, slack key guitarist and composer Keola Beamer, was ready to talk about his mother and his grief.

I didn't know that that was possible to love somebody so much, and then they're gone. But the grief sort of reminds me a little bit of when I was a young man, surfing, and you'd sit out there on your surfboard, and everything would be okay, and then this set would come in these big, towering waves. And grief is like that; you're doing pretty good, and then the grief comes in, in waves, and you do your best and you deal with it. And then another set comes, and this continues for a while, you know. Because my mom was a revered Hawaiian cultural treasure, she touched many lives. And we as Beamers have to have the compassion for other people's grief too; not just our own.

Hard to take care of them, when you've gotta take care of yourself too.

Yeah. That's difficult. But we can do it. We have done it. My mom led a life that made a difference in the world; she made the world a better place. She touched thousands of lives and helped many, many students, and she left with dignity. How great, you know. I'd be so happy if that happened in my own life. I want to share a story with you that means quite a lot to me. The morning of her passage, Moana, my wife and I were in San Francisco. And I had this very powerful dream, and it was young woman, a beautiful young woman, vibrant, beautiful black hair. Just this unbelievable energy. And you also had the feeling with this woman in my dream, that she was a person to be reckoned with. You know. And I almost didn't recognize her, but it was my mom. And she had just come to say goodbye.

Did you recognize that at the time, that she was saying goodbye, or did you figure it out later?

Figured it out a little bit later. I almost didn't recognize her, because I was used to taking care of my *kupuna* mom, right, with the thin arms and the graying hair. But this woman was my mom, before my brother and I were born. And she was

beautiful and vibrant; and the word that comes to mind is, joy. She was joyous. She had transcended the cocoon of old age.

Our next guest is familiar with difficult times. Now a successful developer and business leader, Christine Camp and her family fled from poverty and political unrest in South Korea when she was only nine years old. In this segment, Christine talks about a different kind of escape. In high school, Christine excelled in her classes, held down several jobs and became a cheerleader. However, her strict mother prohibited Christine from taking part in extracurricular activities that prevented her from taking care of household chores. So at age fifteen, Christine decided to run away from home. Little did she know that by running away from her mother, she would realize what she needed to run toward.

... I felt that I could do better, I was making my own money. So I packed up my bags in a little pillowcase.

Pillowcase?

Yeah. [CHUCKLE] I said, I'm done with you. I ran away from home.

How could you make your own way at age fifteen?

Isn't that amazing? I did. And I can't ... my rent was hundred and seventy dollars a month.

Where did you live?

On Harding Avenue, in one of these old Chinese schools that became an apartment house. Little sections of classrooms were apartment house, and I had a little apartment house next to the sewer line where the cockroaches gathered at night. [CHUCKLE]

And what about your neighbors; what were they like?

Six families. I have to say, I saw what I felt was to not have hope, to feel a loss in what our life would be. There was a welfare mom who dropped out of high school, had several children, and still within high school age. There was a woman who had two kids, and she was a prostitute. There were—it was just kind of like that. An alcoholic woman, another woman who couldn't afford to eat regular food, and she was sharing her cat food, what I found out, and I would try to give her what I could. And the only bright light in that whole place were two college students who were a couple, and they were happy people. They were clean, and they were smart, and they had a hope of future. I mean, they had hope for their future. But I internalized this when a traumatic accident happened with me. I couldn't afford electricity, so I didn't have power, but I had a little gas oven. And these kids were running around without adult supervision, and I felt like I was the den mother. Whenever I had free time, I would have them come over to my place. And it was a child's three-year-old birthday, and her mom was out. So I decided, I'm going to bake her a cake. And I'd never used the oven. Turned the oven on; nothing. It was a gas oven. And I realized, Oh, it's a gas oven, I have to turn the match on. Turned on the

match, and the whole thing blew up on my face. I had no hair on my face. Anyway, the emergency medics came, and they called the emergency and everything. And at that moment, while I was cooling off, they had ice on me, I'm sitting there, and I had an Aha Moment. All these images came to me of the people that were living around me, and the little kids. And the only bright spot that I saw were these students who had a future. And I felt that education was my future, I didn't want to be there, and that I wanted to have hope. I didn't want to lose hope like these people. And they're wonderful people, but they lost hope for their future, and they weren't taking responsibility for themselves. So I packed up my ego, packed up my things; I went home that day, the next day.

What was that reception like for you?

What was amazing is, my mom never asked me a question. I had called my sister and said, I'm coming home. And she didn't go to work. She went to work seven days a week; she didn't go to work. She was there folding laundry, she acted like nothing happened.

But now, she's seen you make this wonderful transition to American life, and be extraordinarily successful as a professional, and a mom. And what does she say?

She still treats me like I'm thirteen years old. [CHUCKLE] She wants to comb my hair, and [CHUCKLE] make sure that I'm wearing the right color. No, she's extremely proud of me. She's very thankful. She took care of me, so now I take care of her. And she helps me raise my son. And it's come full circle.

Thank you to Christine Camp, Keola Beamer, Candy Suiso, Cha Thompson, Mihana Souza and Emma Veary for sharing personal stories about their mothers and motherhood. And to all devoted moms, *mahalo nui* for your patience, wisdom and love. On behalf of PBS Hawaii and *Long Story Short*, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

What did you spend your free time doing? You went to school, you tried to earn money.

You know, we babysat; I mean, one another. I took care, helped with the younger ones. I remember helping my mother's kid sister take care of her children. I was all of eleven years old, and you already helped; you helped—that's why I love children so much, and if you did anything else, you cleaned the house. My mother made sure of that. And my daughters now; I mean, they all have their college degrees. But they would say, Mama would say, if you have any worth—if you're worth your salt, you had to learn how to clean the toilet, you had to know how to fight. And you had to have a college degree.