

**GUEST: WARREN NISHIMOTO**

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This is the first time I'm actually saying a lot of this stuff. And when you asked me to come on this show, my first reaction was, Why do you want to talk to me for?

**And that's what the people you asked for their oral histories say to you; right?**

Exactly; that's right. Now I know how they feel. Sometimes in the middle of a taping, they'd say, Do you really want to know all this stuff? [CHUCKLE]

**And do you find it interesting?**

Of course; definitely. Everyone has a story to tell.

**On this edition of Long Story Short, Warren Nishimoto has been recording other people's stories for more than thirty years, but he never told his own story until now.**

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. In this edition of Long Story Short, I turn the tables on one of Hawaii's most prolific interviewers. He's the director of Hawaii's Center for Oral History, established by the State Legislature in 1976, and based at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Warren Nishimoto may not be a household name, but you're likely to recognize parts of his own family story, from World War II Hawaii to a beloved island retail institution, to the tensions between generations and cultures. Nishimoto has spent his professional life preserving the stories of ordinary people, but it's taken most of his career to recognize that his own history may be just as interesting as that of the folks he interviews.**

My father was Tsuyoshi Nishimoto, who was from a small plantation town called Honohina. His father was a Buddhist minister.

**Where was Honohina?**

Honohina is near Ninole, Hakalau, on the Hamakua Coast. So eventually, they moved to Hilo, and my father went to Hilo High School, graduated in 1928. And he wanted to go to University of Hawaii. Just when he was about to go, his father passed away suddenly in 1928, so he couldn't go, 'cause the family didn't have the money to send him. He came to Honolulu anyway, and he

always said he wanted to find his fame and fortune and come to Honolulu. So he came here, and he worked various jobs here.

**And now, your mother was related to who?**

The lida family. So my mother's maiden name is lida. Her grandfather, Matsukichi, started the lida Store. Those of you who remember lida Store. It started out in 1900 in Chinatown, just off Maunakea Street, I think, and then, it was destroyed in the Great Chinatown Fire of 1900. So, eventually in the 20s, they moved to the corner of Beretania and Nuuanu Avenue, and they started the store called S.M. lida.

**And so, the store sold lacquer ware, and incense, and ...**

Anything from Japan, they sold. We had a heavy Japanese population here coming to work on the plantations, so it wasn't too far from the train station in Iwilei area. So people would come from the plantations, get on the train, come over, get off at this train station, walk over to the lida's and buy lacquer ware, rice bowls, chopsticks, Buddhist altars, incense, scrolls.

**So your father ended up working there as well.**

Right. Well, my father became the manager. After marrying my mother in 1938, the war started in 1941. My grandfather, who was a leader in the Japanese community, was interned, incarcerated on the mainland. Places like Missoula, Montana, Santa Fe, New Mexico. So he was there for the duration of the war. My mother's mother, Koichi lida's wife, was ill with cancer. And so, my grandfather tried to get back here. So we have some records of all the letters that he wrote. People wrote letters on his behalf so that he could be allowed to come back here. Unfortunately, he couldn't make it back. She died. So my mother, being the oldest daughter of seven children, became the matriarch of the family.

**That's a game changer for the family, isn't it? Did your father marry your mother, knowing she was committed to raising all these kids?**

I think so. I think it was more like, in the old days, sort of an arranged kind of marriage. Because I think my grandfather sort of knew that something was going to happen during the war. Because he was, again, one of the pillars of the Japanese community. He knew, I think, if hostilities broke out between America and Japan.

**And he wanted to see her married.**

Right. That, plus, he didn't want to lose the business. Because an alien, if you were an alien and you had a business, it would have been taken over by the federal government. So he passed on the business to my father.

**So she ended up raising her siblings, younger siblings, and her children as well.**

Right.

**Were you in the house at the same time, or was it all different times?**

Well, we were pretty much in the house at the same time. Yeah.

**How many siblings do you have?**

I have one older brother, one older sister.

**So what was life like in Pauoa?**

It was more life in that house, 'cause I had a lot of aunties and uncles in the house. It was right on the corner of Pauoa Road and Nuuanu Avenue, right across the street from Kawananakoa Middle School today. So we had fairly large property, so there was a lot of space to run around. And then, Nuuanu Stream was right in the back, so we spent a lot of time down in the stream, catching crayfish, little mosquito fish with nets.

**I think your family was a privileged family. You owned a large property, you had this successful business. So, where do you go to school?**

I went to University Lab School.

**Which is a public school, but it's like a private school.**

Right. It's a laboratory school. It was part of the College of Education at the University of Hawaii. It was to train student teachers, so all of our teachers were young and energetic. And the other function was to test out curriculum. So it was important that that school sort of replicated the public school population.

**Your dad didn't have the opportunity to go to college, and he assumed tremendous family responsibilities. Did that play a role in your wanting so much to go to college and have advanced education?**

I guess so, but, again, we're from that era where it was pretty much a given that you're gonna go to school beyond high school. And University Lab was a college prep kind of a curriculum, so even more so.

**So it was just what you were gonna do, that's what you do. But of course, it wasn't an expectation that you get a PhD, which you did.**

No; right, right. But it was more like a continuation. Okay; to me, college was the thirteenth grade. [CHUCKLE] That's all it was. I had no aspirations to get a PhD or anything like that. It was just something that I needed to do, after twelfth grade.

**What about the family business? You weren't geared to go into the family business?**

I was encouraged to go, and I was working there part-time throughout, ever since I was old enough to go in there. I don't know if you remember it.

**I remember. I remember the buckets, I mean, just fun stuff.**

It was a three-story building. It was the old section of Honolulu. Lot of tenement homes around there, Beretania Follies was down the street. So it was just this old building, cement floor. You had to wear slippers, 'cause if you went barefoot, your feet would be black. And just exploring all of these things, and all the excelsior from the goods. The goods that came from Japan was all over the store. Great place to explore.

**What about outside the store; did you go exploring Downtown?**

Of course. Yeah; that was my playground, actually. When you asked me earlier what was it like in Pauoa, I can't really tell you much about Pauoa except going to Kawananakoa School to play baseball with the neighborhood kids once in a while. But really, my playground was that store, which was about a mile away from where we lived.

**But you didn't come out of high school saying, Oh, I'm gonna go get business training and then come back and take lida to new levels?**

No.

**No interest?**

I had no interest.

**And was it a source of frustration on the part of your family that, Oh, Warren doesn't want to do that?**

Well, number one, I wasn't the oldest son. So that gave me a break.

**Was the oldest son interested?**

No.

**Uh-oh.**

[CHUCKLE]

**Your poor father. [CHUCKLE]**

Yeah. My father tried, and he was pretty traditional, and he liked to do it the old way.

**Why do you think none of the kids in your family was interested?**

I think as far as I'm concerned I think it was around it so much, and I could see how hard my father worked. And it was so tradition-bound, and I was trying to be not Japanese, I was trying to be American. And so, it was like I was living two lives. I had the life at home, where people were speaking Japanese and talking about this aspect of culture, or something that's happening at the store and, so forth. And then, I would go to school and be perfectly happy, be American, play sports. And so, I saw the difference. And so, I guess there came a time when I had to choose one or the other. And if I chose doing the store, I would have had to go in that direction. And if I chose not doing the store, and doing something else, like pursuing a career that I earn, by going to school, that would be the other path. So eventually, I chose that path.

**Did you try to say, Oh, I could really get into this part of it? No?**

Yeah, so I guess when I went to UH, after I graduated from high school in 1967 ... I think I did say I was gonna major in business. And then, I looked at the courses that I had to take, and I see pre-calculus. I said, Forget it.

[CHUCKLE]

I'm not the math guy. [CHUCKLE]

**After two years at UH, Warren Nishimoto wanted to sample life outside Hawaii, so he went to the University of Illinois and wound up majoring in history. The course of study was mostly what he called book history, memorizing names and dates, and learning about famous people.**

At that time, I selected history because that's the one field that I had the most credits in. And now, remember, this is the late 60s, now, this is Vietnam. And so, we needed to stay in school if we wanted to not get drafted.

**What about that whole time of rebellion and revolt, and dissatisfaction with the way things were?**

That was right at that time.

**And did that affect you? How did that affect you?**

Definitely.

**Were you wearing your headband and your beads?**

Yeah, yeah; my hair was about this long. I was part of that, I was part of the Asian American Student Alliance. Demonstrations, protests, we sat in at the [INDISTINCT] Union which was a union all because they were bringing in ROTC recruiters. So we sort of sat there, and then the cops would come with the bullhorn and say, If you don't get up, if you don't leave in five minutes, you're going to get arrested.

**Did you think the war in Vietnam was inherently wrong?**

Yes. I did.

**Warren Nishimoto graduated from the University of Illinois in 1972. Then he returned home to Honolulu, and worked at various jobs that did not require a college degree, like driving a truck for Duty Free Shoppers and unloading Matson containers for the Honolulu Sake Brewery.**

**Were you trying to earn tuition money for your—**

Yeah.

**—next venture?**

To eventually go to University of Washington. But not in history, though. I wanted to go to Washington to get a degree in communications, so that I could be a sports announcer. How do you like that? So I went to University of Washington and enrolled in the School of Communications, master's program. Well, I didn't get a master's to be a sports broadcaster.

**[CHUCKLE]**

I don't know. See, I just didn't know what I was doing. I didn't like it. It was much too theoretical for me, and I didn't need all of this theory. I just wanted to learn how to talk good.

**[CHUCKLE]**

So I dropped out of that, and I ended up going back into history. So I ended up in Asian history.

**You were a good student, I bet.**

No. I wasn't a good student. I was a average student.

**But you liked going to school.**

Yeah. I guess I was competent. I wasn't a good test taker, I was an okay writer. But I think it was the idealism of the 60s that sort of fueled me into continuing in the humanities, rather than going into business or something else.

**So, then you get your master's degree, and then what?**

So I came back to Hawaii in 1977. And guess where I worked? Iida's.

[CHUCKLE]

**[CHUCKLE]**

I started working at Iida's, and I was doing a lot more than just doing what I was doing when I was a kid. I wasn't in the back anymore. I was out there, and you know, I liked dealing with customers, I liked to tell them about the background of a certain item, vase. I started to learn a lot about that. That was interesting. So from '77 throughout the 80s, even when I started at the Center for Oral History, I was working at the store at night. That was something to do, but yet, at the same time, I knew it wasn't something I was gonna do for the rest of my life.

**But now, you say you did get a job at the Center for Oral History. How did that happen?**

That happened in 1979. There was an ad for a researcher/interviewer for the Center for Oral History. It was called the Ethnic Studies Oral History Project back then. It's part of the Ethnic Studies Program at UH Manoa. When you're a history major, and you see a job with the word history in it, you jump at it. Okay; it just leaped out at me, and it says, Ethnic Studies Oral History Project. I ignored the oral part.

**[CHUCKLE]**

I'll go apply. And so, when they explained to me what it was, it was conducting life history interviews with ordinary people about their life experiences. And you put those histories together—that's what they were doing, putting it together, and that would be another source for future researchers to go to, to understand Hawaii's history. So in other words, instead of reading a book by a historian about pineapple cannery work, you talk to the pineapple cannery worker. Right? What a revelation to me. I mean like, wow, that's history. And so, this divide that I had between classroom history and my own history, started to come closer and closer together. Because now, I'm talking to people like my parents, like my father, about pineapple cannery work, pineapple field work, sugar plantation work, fishing, farming, longshoring, homemaking ... all that kinda stuff. And so, that's what the Ethnic Studies Program was. Their slogan was, Our History, Our Way. And when you think about that slogan, it's very true. It's not history written by an outside historian who comes to Hawaii and writes the history of Hawaii. It's talking story with the people who actually lived history. And I thought that was the greatest thing.

**And you'd only been into book history before this.**

That's right.

**Right?**

That's right. When I came to apply for the job, it was a fulltime researcher job. And I'm sitting there waiting to be interviewed, and then a woman walks in and sits down next to me, and I introduce myself, she introduces herself. And she says, Oh, I'm applying for this job. And I said, Oh, yeah? So am I. Okay; so, well, nice to meet you, and so forth, good luck. So we both interviewed, and it turned out that the director, Chad Taniguchi, liked both of us. Well, she's my

wife now. [CHUCKLE] He couldn't decide, so he split the job in half, and he gave me half the job, and gave her the other half.

**And it became a part-time gig now, right?**

Right; part-time gig, and so we both constituted one fulltime person. So that's how we got together.

**So that became your life's work. You're still there after all these years, and obviously, she's been your wife of all these years.**

Right.

**And you finally got a fulltime position, and so did she; right?**

Yes. Right. Right; right, right, right. Yeah.

**But you're both still there.**

We're both still there.

**So, who becomes the boss?**

Well, depends on how you define boss. But as far as the hierarchy is concerned in terms of the UH and so forth and so on, I'm the director, and she is the research associate.

**How did that get settled?**

It hasn't. [CHUCKLE] No, it's okay. Sometimes some people say, How can you work with your spouse? Yeah? A I just say, Well, you just go with it, and hopefully you agree on things without having it being said, and you move in the same direction. That's essentially what it is.

**And that's what happened?**

Yeah.

**What's the most amazing oral history you've ever taken?**

I can't really name one. I can talk about my very first. This was back in the 70s when I first got hired, and my assignment was to go to Wahiawa and find a fieldworker, pineapple fieldworker. So, I contacted a woman, her name was Motoe Nihei. I still remember her name. And I went to her home in Whitmore Village. And I was nervous. She's sitting there, and she's never been interviewed before. In fact, she told me, Why do you want to interview me for? I just worked out in the fields for fifty years. Why don't you go interview Spark Matsunaga or Dan Inouye? That's the real history, right? I said, No, no, we want to talk to people like you, who worked out in the fields. So, okay. So she's sitting there, and I could see she was sort of kinda nervous. But here I am, kinda shaking as I'm pressing the button. And she says, Let me help you.

[CHUCKLE]

And she's, I think it's this red button over here. So she goes, tchk. Okay; you can start.

[CHUCKLE]

I'm the one that's supposed to be the cool composed person. But she taught me a lot that day.

**That would be just the first of countless interviews Warren Nishimoto has conducted over the course of his career. His colleague and wife, Michi Kodama Nishimoto, also goes out and gathers these precious accounts.**

**Tell us how your family developed. You got married a couple years after you worked together at the Center?**

Yeah; we started in 1979, and we got married in 1984.

**Oh, what was the delay?**

Well, we needed to know each other. [CHUCKLE]

**But you were seeing each other all the time. [CHUCKLE]**

That's true. When we say that we celebrated our twenty-something anniversary not too long ago. And we would tell people, Well, it's actually our fiftieth, because we spend, twenty-four hours a day with each other, as opposed to most couples that spend maybe half that. Right?

**Do you have any advice for people who, twenty-four hours with your spouse, and a solid marriage. How do you do that?**

Hm. [CHUCKLE] Maybe we gotta bring her along.

**[CHUCKLE]**

I guess, talk. Find common interests, and keep those common interests. Keep making them relevant to your life. And when our two boys came, we kept that going. We coached them in sports.

**Both of you?**

Well, yes and no. I was more the coach, she was more like the team mom kind of person, but we were—

**But you did it together.**

—always active. Yeah. We've tried to be a part of our sons' lives as much as possible. We didn't want to let work get in the way. We did our work, but we spent a lot of time as a family.

**Did you talk together about what you wanted your family life to be like? Did you have a certain vision of it? Which was perhaps very different from your own family.**

That's right. Yeah. And that sort of drove me too, because my father was always pretty busy, my mother as well. So I didn't consciously think it, but, it was on my mind that I wanted to make sure that I enjoyed raising children, and I'd be a part of their lives, their upbringing.

**Hands-on dad?**

Hands-on dad. Not a helicopter dad, but a hands-on dad. Yeah.

**Neither of your sons went into business either.**

No.

**Did you have a hand in that?**

No; I never told them what to do.

**But they're attracted to humanities as well.**



Yeah. Ben was a politics major at Occidental College, and Scott was an English major at UH Manoa. Both totally useless majors, just like their dad's.

**[CHUCKLE] And they're both interested in nonprofit work.**

I guess so. I guess so. They're both socially conscious, socially aware. They have concerns about ... maybe sometimes the direction that Hawaii is going. They have one eye toward the underdog as much as possible. So their world views and their ways of thinking reflects that concern.

**You went through Lab School, K through 12. I believe your sons did too.**

Right; both of them.

**And of course, your career and your wife's career have been at the UH Manoa. I'm surprised you don't live near the campus.**

[CHUCKLE] Isn't that weird?

**You've stuck to this area of Manoa for a long time.**

Yeah. We can't afford it. Yeah, it's funny, because all these years, we were getting in the car and commuting, fighting traffic, dropping them off at the Lab School, and then we'd go to work. And then at the end of the day, same thing. The opposite. To someone who doesn't do that, it must sound pretty weird, huh? [CHUCKLE]

**You've lived in Aiea for a long time. What's your favorite thing about your neighborhood?**

I like the fact that it's people like us. It's people in the same socioeconomic situation, people that we could relate to. Because when we go out into the community, it's because we're walking our dogs, and most of the people we see out there are people walking their dogs. So it's that security that you have something in common with someone else, with your neighbor or someone who lives down the street, and you can talk about it. And you can say, Well, how's your dog doing? Well, my dog just came back from the vet's, bla-bla-bla. It's a comforting feeling, and I think everyone has that.

**So you've actually stayed with what you pick early. Aiea long time, your career long time.**

Yeah. I'm a pretty stable guy, I guess. [CHUCKLE]

**[CHUCKLE] And then you laugh. [CHUCKLE]**

Yeah. Well, yeah, I guess I'm, mm, stable guy, and I sought that for my family. You know, I think stability is a good thing.

**What do you see in your future?**

I'm gonna be retiring sooner, rather than later. I think it's a young person's job. In other words, when I started, I was in my thirties, and interviewing someone in their eighties about daily life, for example, was just a total education for me. Once my interviewees start to get to be my age, it's time to turn it over to the next generation.

**Even after he retires from the Center for Oral History, Warren Nishimoto would like to continue teaching, and grooming the next generation of oral historians. The many hundreds of interviews he's conducted paint a rich and vivid picture of life**

**in these islands from an era that's already virtually unrecognizable to new generations. Together, these recorded interviews create a legacy that will inform Hawaii far into our future. The stories are shared with the public in the form of books, articles, exhibits, lectures, and even plays. And Warren Nishimoto has come to see his own ordinary family story as part of the island's extraordinary history. For Long Story Short, and 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](http://pbshawaii.org).

**I love reading your transcripts, because as the transcripts unfold, I find you asking exactly what I would want to know. And it's just a gentle nudge. It's not leading in any way. It's just to kind of open it up a little bit, or remind that you know, we want to find out more about this. But it's very unobtrusive. Is that what you're aiming for?**

Exactly. You're actually a facilitator and a listener. That's what makes a good interviewer. I'm not saying I'm the best interviewer, but I've learned over the years that the best interviewers are the best listeners.