

GUEST: RALPH GOTO

LSS 601 (LENGTH: 27:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 7/10/12

Lifeguards then, I think, were viewed as beach boys, surfers. That's a real job, and you get paid to do this. So we addressed that, and we looked at what do we need to do to raise the level of training, what do we need to do to raise the level of funding, and try to stay within reality, and eventually worked our way—what's this, thirty years now, to an operation I think that's pretty well respected. And I think, given the resources that we get, I think we do a pretty good job.

For more than thirty years, one man has been at the helm of Oahu's Division of Ocean Safety, and in that time, he's helped bring professional standing and respect to the men and women who guard our beaches. Join us, as we meet Ralph Goto, here, 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. In this edition of Long Story Short, we'll get to know Ralph Goto, the administrator of the Ocean Safety and Lifeguard Services Division of the City and County of Honolulu. In his career at the City, he's taken strategic steps to bring lifesaving into the modern era. In May of 2012, he was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame for his contributions to the field of water safety. And that's not the first time Ralph Goto has received recognition.**

You've won the prestigious Paragon Award from the International Swimming Hall of Fame, but you didn't need to do anything other than be born in order to have a claim to fame.

[CHUCKLE] Thanks, Leslie.

[CHUCKLE]

Yeah, my claim to fame, what I tell people is that in 1946, I was born in Japan, in Sapporo. My dad was sent over there right after the war with the Intelligence Forces and the occupation troops, and so my claim to fame is that I was the first American baby born in Occupied Japan. And I've lived with that ever since.

[CHUCKLE] So your parents were from Hawaii?

They were originally from Hawaii; yeah.

And your father was sent as an interpreter, translator?

Military intelligence. He was an interpreter during the war, because he was bilingual. He didn't speak about it very much. You know how those second generation Nisei were. But he did a lot of military intelligence, and that's why he went to Japan right after the war.

Where did you grow up?

First ten years of my life, in Japan.

So you speak fluent Japanese?

I used to. And I speak survival Japanese, which I can catch the train and I can order some food.

Go to the bathroom.

Right; go the bathroom. But the Japanese influence is very strong. We have some of those values that were passed on by our folks, and we try to live through those.

Ten years in Japan, then where?

Ten years in Japan, then one year at Palolo Elementary School. Wonderful place. Sixth grade, and then went back to Japan for my junior high school years. And then, my dad was transferred to Baltimore, Maryland in the early 60s, and we went to Baltimore. We were the first Asians that they had seen in this neighborhood. And in the early 60s, Baltimore County was still segregated, so they had the White school, and then they had the Black school.

And where did you fit in?

Well, [CHUCKLE] there was a little debate, and I believe the officials decided that my brother and I could go to the White school. So we went to the White school, and my mother was told that, It's because you guys are so clean and you're nice, and so we're gonna let you try there. We did fine. Brother and I played sports, and I think that's why we were accepted. We did great.

Did you think about what your life would be like if you didn't play sports and have that affinity with the other players?

I tried to relate that to my sons when they that age, and tried to tell them about my experiences in going to different places. And the sports really helped us, assimilate and get along with folks, and I think that was a really important part of our lives.

Because if you didn't have that, you don't know what you would have done?

Right. It's just like, okay, who are you guys and, where did you come from, and what do you guys do? So I think just being able to shoot a basket or hit a ball, you establish some common ground.

Did you experience racism?

A little bit, but not really that much. I think we were more of kind of a novelty. Like, Oh, you guys are from Hawaii, do you still dance the hula, do live in a house or a shack. So, there was definitely racism, because it was segregated, but I don't think that we experienced it seriously.

So at that time, your parents were the ones with the real experience in Hawaii.

You had a year at Palolo School.

Right. [CHUCKLE]

But you did come back, and that was your first real in-depth experience in Hawaii.

Right. And it was not until after I graduated from high school. 'Cause we went back to Japan, I graduated there, and then came to Hawaii in '64. And I've been here since.

Did you come back with your parents after graduation?

I came back to go to the University of Hawaii in 1964.

And what was your major?

Well, I played basketball for the freshman team, and decided that I was going to be an English major, then decided I was gonna be a philosophy major. So the first bachelor's degree was in philosophy.

The first bachelor's? And what was the second?

The second was in PE, in secondary education.

Did you know how you were going to use that?

Philosophy was, why is there air? You know, that's Bill Cosby's line. And then, PE telling you that there's air to blow up basketballs. So, that was the extent of my experience at the University.

Well, what happened when the UH turned you loose with your BA? Or BAs.

Where did we go? I worked at the YMCA for eight years in Kailua and ran the aquatics program there. And they're the ones that sent me back to school to get my PE credentials. That kind of prepared me for the real world, and I applied for the job in the City in 1981, and have been there since.

So there wasn't a driving urge to keep Oahu's beaches safe that drove you?

No.

No?

No.

Okay.

I think that developed along the way.

Were you looking for a civil service job?

Yeah. You know, you want to get a job with the City.

And you aimed high, 'cause that was a head of a department; right?

That was the head of a division.

Division; right.

Yeah.

And you already had experience in management in—

Through the Y.

—saving.

And we taught lifesaving, and we taught the instructors for the Red Cross, and things like that. So, it was a fit, and I used to go to the beach a lot. I used to go to Makapuu a lot, and I knew the guards there, and there was familiarity with them.

A lot has changed in life guarding in three decades. What was once perceived as an easy job for surf bums has become more professional and disciplined, with

some recruits even taking college degrees to the beach. Ralph Goto has done quite a bit to elevate professional standards and the image of a lifeguard.

What's the profile? I don't know if there is a typical lifeguard. I mean, you've had some people who are award-winning watermen there, and there are people we don't know. What's the typical lifeguard like?

The old guy or the new guy? [CHUCKLE]

Okay; is there a difference?

I think so. I mean, some of the veterans. Brian Keaulana, retired, Buffalo Keaulana, his father, was a lifeguard, Mark Cunningham, who's a retired lifeguard. Those guys, in addition to being legends in the ocean, were also excellent lifeguards. They did it on their skill, they did it on their knowledge of the environment, and fortunately, they passed a lot of that on to the newer people. The new guys, I'd say, they're quicker, they stronger, they're faster. We have young people that come into recruit training with college degrees. We have people that are trained as paramedics. We have all kinds of people that come through our recruit training. I don't know what it is that really attracts them. I get a hundred emails a day; I want to be a lifeguard in Hawaii; what do I have to do to be a lifeguard on the North Shore. They all have to do the same thing; they have to have the certifications and they have to take the swim test, and then they have to go through our training. But I think we're getting now a more qualified, more motivated young person that comes into the Department. And there's constant turnover, there's people retiring, it's the graying of the workforce, as in any kind of organization.

Have most lifeguards stayed in for the career? I would imagine people would get out earlier than that.

We've lost some to the Fire Department. We've had really good lifeguards go to the Fire Department because it's a better schedule, it's better pay, it's better benefits. And you really can't blame these guys for going. But we've also had people that have said, Hey, I don't want to be a fireman, I don't want to be a policeman, I want to be a lifeguard. And they can retire after twenty-five years, so they stay.

But you know, it is stressful.

Yes.

And there's not a lot of upward mobility; right?

Right.

And there's the threat of skin cancer.

There's threat of skin cancer.

And injury during rescues.

Yeah.

And aggravation from people who won't listen.

We have had employees that have resigned to go get real jobs. My wife wants me to get a real job. Most of them come back. We've had people go down and work as stevedores on the docks for that great schedule and the great pay.

We've had people go into other Public Safety agencies and come back and say, Hey, I'm a lifeguard, this is what I do and this is what I love to do. It's interesting, Leslie, because the pay isn't that great. We do it because we love to do it.

How much does an experienced lifeguard make in the City and County of Honolulu?

An experienced lifeguard.

And this is 2012, as we speak.

It's based definitely on years of service. About four or five thousand a month. You know, the majority of the working lifeguards, not the supervisors, are probably about forty-eight thousand a year. It's not that great. I think one of the common elements of why people are attracted to it, well, they love the outdoors or they love the ocean. They surf, they swim, they dive. But there's also this common thread, I think, of helping people. You get some satisfaction out of helping people. And saving a life is probably the heaviest thing you can do, I mean, in terms of, how you feel about things in the grand scheme of things. I mean, saving a life is a pretty significant event.

But when Ralph Goto first started as an administrator back in 1981, things were different. The Division didn't get the respect or the resources of other City emergency services. It became Ralph Goto's mission to bring recognized standards to the City's life guarding operation.

You could have taken another approach and gone to the beaches and said, Hey, you guys, you gotta shape up, I need you to do this, this, this, and that. But you said you opted for just investing in training.

Listening to what was going on, seeing what was needed, talking to the guards, and then beginning to implement some of those.

You did some really smart strategy, because it's all people. It's people on one side, and it's resources on the other, and you figured out a way to bring one to the other.

It took a while, Leslie. Believe me, it took a while.

Did you have any experience? Essentially, this is politics. I mean, you're working your way through a dense bureaucracy with lots of competing needs. And you're working on perceptions, too, that are grounded in old stuff.

Yes. No management courses that taught you how to run a lifeguard service. We went around and looked at different places. I was told, If you want to learn about life guarding, you have to go to Australia, and you have to go to Los Angeles, and see the two best lifeguard operations in the world. We did that, and looked, and we said, Yeah, this is great, and we learned from places that we went to. We learned from what they did, we learned how they did certain things. But Hawaii is unique. The culture is unique, the environment's unique, and understanding that, you have to pick and choose which things are gonna work. And we did that.

Were there some big disputes over, shall we do this or that, this approach, that approach?

Life guarding in some areas of the country is pretty military. It's paramilitary, if you will. And it's not to say that we don't do that here. We have a chain of command, we have captains, we have lieutenants, we have senior lifeguards. But some places run it pretty formally. And I just didn't think that that was gonna work here.

So you gave discretion and latitude?

There is discretion, yes, there is latitude. Because who knows more about a beach than the person that works there all week? He's may not be an engineer, he may not be an architect, he may not be an oceanographer, but you know, in a real sense, they're all of that, and they're the guys who know what's going on at the beach.

What have you done to professionalize life guarding? I mean, these are fulltime jobs, a lot of people, like you said, think it's a lark. It's certainly not. What have you done to raise the standing?

I think probably the most important thing that we've done—and I'm just Ralph Goto, it's been everyone in the Department, is to understand the job that our lifeguards do. They're not just out there sitting on a tower waiting for something to happen. Educated, lot of guys have degrees, college degrees. A lot of them are certified at the EMT level, so their medical training is comparable to a person that's riding in the ambulance. It's raising that level of professionalism and getting the employees to understand the importance of it. It's projecting image. Wearing a uniform, being at work on time, those simple things that I think have really helped develop our division to where it is now.

What kinds of training have you given, or has the Division given the lifeguards to make them more effective?

It's pretty extensive training, I think when people actually realize what's going on. We're running a recruit class right now, and those kids will be in recruit training for a month. They just finished their emergency medical training, and then they'll be exposed to our environments. They'll take them around the island and put them in the Moy Hole, and put them at Sandy's, and put them on the North Shore. So that training is at least a month, unpaid, and after that, they do on-the-job training if they make it through there. The other thing we do, I have to throw this in. The physical performance standards are pretty stringent. You have to do a thousand run, thousand swim, a board paddle and a run-swim-run every year. I think we're the only agency that does that. And if you don't pass the swim test, you don't work on the beach. I mean, we give you time to train and be able to do that, but I don't know of any other agency, at least here, that makes their employees do that.

Tell me some of the dances you had to do to get to where you arrived.

The dances. I don't know how to jitterbug.

[CHUCKLE]

The first City Council meeting I went to, in my exuberance and being naïve, I was asked, Well, do you need anything else? And I said, Sure, we needed some more money, we need some more equipment. And I was told that, No, you don't go to the City Council and say you need that. You tow the party line and you say we're doing well with what we have. That's one of the dances you have to do, the political dance, if you will. The other dance is working within the system, you know, and it takes a while to learn that, as you know.

And the characters change.

Sure; every four years.

Yes, with every election.

Every four years; right. And you just learn. I think you learn from experience, you learn from your mistakes, which there were a lot of those. And you just learn how to deal with people. That's what I think it's about, it's the importance of relating to people.

And you're known for your light touch with people.

Well ... depends who you speak with. [CHUCKLE]

Okay; who would say otherwise?

Well, let's see. Probably my two sons.

Oh. [CHUCKLE]

Thanks, boys. But that's what I've tried to do, is listen. There's always two sides of the story, and then somewhere in between there's what's really going on. And I've tried to believe in that and use that outlook on things as problems have come up.

There are a lot of parents who would say that a calm, measured approach to training goes out the window when you apply it to your own children. For Ralph Goto, running a City division populated with rugged individuals might not have taxed him as much as the challenge of raising two boys.

You said that your kids might not agree that you have a light touch. Why is that?

[CHUCKLE] My two sons who live on the mainland ... the older one, Clark, went to Punahou, went to the University of San Francisco, has a degree in computer science, and works on the mainland for a medical software company. The younger son, Scott, went to Kalaheo High School, and went to Portland, Oregon to live the dream. He plays in a punk band, and he makes sushi in a sushi restaurant, and he's living the dream. I coached both of them when they were younger in basketball, and ended up running the PAL league in Kailua for a while. And I don't know if uh, that was a great idea.

To coach your kids?

To coach my kids and then, have those expectations of them. And as a father and a coach, you tend to push them. And they don't play ball now.

[CHUCKLE]

Have you talked about it with them?

I've talked to Clark about it, and he said, Yeah, he said, you're a pretty hard act to follow, Dad. And that kinda shed some light on what goes on. But they're both great, they're doing very well.

What do you think your sons took away from you, that helps them most in their lives?

[CHUCKLE] Interesting. I don't know. I think you'd have to interview them. Like, my older son told me a few years back that comment about you're a hard act to follow. I mean, that had some impact on me, because I think any child or any offspring wants to do so much, with their life, and I'm sure that you look at your parents, how much your parents have accomplished in life, and you're gonna either do that, or strive to attain that level. And I don't know about Scotty, my young punk rocker, but I know that Clark's more serious about it. And I know he's thought about it, but hopefully, and what we tried to do while they were growing up, or what I tried to do is, at some point in life, your children are gonna be gone, they're not gonna live in your house anymore. They're gonna be on their own, and they're gonna have to make some decisions on their own. And hopefully, they're gonna be able to make good decisions. And I think that's all you can really expect.

Have you ever seen your grown sons doing something that they reacted badly against when they were kids, but now they do that too, because, that's what you taught them.

[CHUCKLE] Yeah, I think so. Young Scott called the other day about his taxes. And it's like, Okay, Dad, I went to get my taxes done, and I owe money. And I'm like, Well, Son, you gotta file these things. He goes, Yeah, I know, that. And I think that they both are beginning to realize there's certain things that you have to do in life. And you know, hopefully, some of that carries on from their father and, you know, their parents.

And right there beside him at every step of the journey has been Ralph Goto's wife, Roberta, a registered nurse with a long career at the State Hospital in Kaneohe. She has provided him with a safe haven away from the stress of work. He says that what attracted him was how different she was from this guarded, quiet, third generation Japanese American.

Roberta's just the opposite. Blond hair, blue eyes, very outgoing, very opinionated, very open, and because she's a psychiatric mental health worker, keeps me straight. And I think that had a lot to do with the attraction.

Because she's a mental health worker, she keeps you straight?

Yeah; right. [CHUCKLE]

What's that mean? [CHUCKLE]

Keeps me grounded. How's that?

Yeah. 'Cause she's very stable? Is that what you're saying?

She's very creative. What we say, and what people say is, because we're so opposite, that's why we were attracted to each other.

As life goes along, you start to think about retirement, and what do I do after this. Have you thought about that?

Oh, yes.

What's next?

Oh, yes. Thinking about retirement, it's interesting, because when you start your career, that's the last thing you're thinking about. But after thirty years, then you seriously begin to think about, okay, how much money am I gonna have, what am I gonna be able to do, and how much is left on the mortgage. And believe me, both Roberta and I have talked about it because we're close, and it's, okay, what are you gonna do. You're not gonna sit at home and just look at each other. You're gonna have a plan. Someone just told me, a former retired City official who has come back to work for the City told me a couple weeks ago, You better have a plan. If you're gonna retire, you better have a plan. So some people travel some people volunteer at the church. And I would like to do more of that creative stuff that is an outlet for me now, and I'd like to do it a little more. So that turning wood, cutting wood, stapling it together appeals to me.

Yeah; a lot of people have too much time on their hands, and it doesn't work for them.

Yeah.

So you have to have a passion that you pursue that is, you know, productive and feels good to you.

Right. And working with wood, I've always liked to do that. I kinda had a hand in building the two houses that we've lived in, and it's an outlet, it's a creative outlet.

And then, do you sell those bowls?

Not yet.

But that's the plan?

You know, you give 'em to Mom, and you give 'em to friends for Christmas, and things like that.

But would you be *pau* working for money?

No, 'cause I think we're gonna need to have on top of the retirement income to do the things you want to do. I think that that's important to plan out, what is it that you want to do.

It's a good exercise, isn't it?

Yeah; it's great.

Who are you now, as opposed to when you made other big decisions.

You know, and it really has kinda changed my—not changed, but matured my outlook on my work. It's like, Well, you can't do this because, you gotta think about this now. And now, if it feels like the right thing to do, we're gonna do it. And it's nice to be able to do that.

While the man who has devoted his life to bettering the working conditions and professionalism of Oahu's lifeguards is nearing the end of his career, he won't go

quietly. In 2012, Ralph Goto continues to fight for better pay and benefits for the men and women on the beach, those first responders when we run into trouble in the waters of paradise. 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.

And you were working with some of the legends of Hawaii, Buffalo Keaulana, et cetera. How did you manage?

I went around and met everyone. And you're right; Buffalo Keaulana, what are you gonna say to Buffalo about life guarding or about the ocean, or anything. And I learned a lot from him, and tried to figure out what it was that the operation needed, and what we could do to help bolster that up. Met a lot of really good people in my career, ocean guys that, you know, I consider friends, as well as colleagues and subordinates.