

GUEST: JOY ABBOTT

LSS 703 (LENGTH: 27:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 8/13/13

And in all those twenty-five years, I was working, working, trying to make my shops a success, my fashion show productions, they were musical and in demand. And so, that's when George proposed after twenty-five years, and he said, you know, It's time. [CHUCKLE]

From World War II era Wahiawa to the bright lights and big personalities of Broadway, Joy Abbott has lived a glamorous life far from her roots in Hawaii. But she's remained true to the values she grew up with, and close to family and friends back home. Her dramatic journey is 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. In this edition of Long Story Short, the Shirley Temple of Hawaii; that's what people called the former Joy Valderrama when she was a talented kid growing up in Wahiawa in the 1930s. Little did she suspect that one day, she'd be friends with some of Broadway's biggest stars, and married to an iconic Broadway producer, writer, and director who created scores of American stage classics, a vital man who lived to the age of one hundred seven. Joy Abbott's parents had a lasting influence on her life. They armed her with three important gifts: an excellent education, training to develop her talents, and values to guide her.**

My father said that when I was born, I didn't cry, I smiled; so he called me Joy. [CHUCKLE] True story. Wahiawa, you know, it was just a wonderful life; food wise, for instance, organic, healthy food. My mother would actually kill the chicken herself, and she would grow vegetables and everything. So, food wise, it made a healthy childhood. A very happy childhood too, because we were always laughing.

What did your parents do for a living?

My father was a barber.

Where in Wahiawa?

In Schofield Barracks, actually. He went to University of the Philippines, and he studied accounting. He became an accountant, but he wanted to see the, quote, unquote, new world, so he came to Hawaii. My mother was a

schoolteacher, but she was a traveling schoolteacher. I remember telling about her riding sidesaddle through all the *barrios* to teach teachers. And so, when they came here, well, she was a housewife, and my father opened one barber shop, then another, and then another. And he would be the ones to cut the general's hair, the major, all the officers. And my uncles joined, and they managed the other barber shops.

And he got an audience with some of the top decision makers at Schofield.

Oh, my gosh; yes. He went to the general's house to cut their hair, or to the major's and captain's, so he learned a lot of things from that way of living.

And your siblings?

I have three. I have Ruth, who went to Julliard; she's the older, went to Punahou, Class of '44. And Grace, she's in real estate in California now. And May Ann is a tennis coach, and she had the winning Mililani team. She was married to Keola Beamer.

Not the Keola Beamer --

No; Uncle Keola.

Uncle Keola.

Uncle Keola.

So, Winona Beamer's brother?

Yes.

And Keola Beamer, the composer's and slack key artist's uncle.

Exactly; that's Nona's son. Yeah.

So, you lived in Wahiawa, which in those days was much farther away from town than it is now, because of the lack of freeways. And you went to Punahou School, which is all the way in town.

Yes.

How'd you manage that? How'd you get there and back?

By bus. I remember getting up very early in the morning, and my father would wake me up and he'd take my hand and ... put his whiskers. He says, Time to get up now. [CHUCKLE]

That would get you up; right? [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE] And then he'd take us to the bus, my sister and I would ride the bus into town.

When you left the post school, left home in Wahiawa every day to go to Punahou, at the time, I imagine most of the students at Punahou were not only White, but they were wealthy and they were from the town area.

Absolutely; yes.

So, you were the country non-White.

Yes; we were ten percent, in those days, called Orientals, today Asians. And it was just a handful of Asians. But I never felt that, 'cause my parents said, You know, you're gonna make yourself in life what you want to be, as long as you work hard, achieve.

It's up to you.

Yes; yes. We're giving you the tools, but it's up to you.

When your dad was a barber, and you know, he had at least an acquaintance or business relationship with generals at Schofield Barracks. And he was concerned about you getting ahead, wasn't he?

Absolutely. Yes; my parents were all for achieving, accomplishments, and they thought that versatility would open doors. So, my father taught me tennis.

How did he know tennis?

Well, he played in the Philippines, and he coached tennis, as well as boxing and baseball. So, it was a sports family. And my mother always loved singing, dancing, and the arts. And neither could carry a tune. My father would sing Happy Birthday in five different keys to us. # And my mother loved to dance, but she just didn't have it, so she gave us all the lessons.

So, you were in Wahiawa; where did you go to lessons?

Oh, in Schofield Barracks. Because we had this wonderful Black fellow who was a tap dance teacher, and I learned all these wonderful steps and riffs, and everything when I was just six years old. There was uh, a revue called the Jackie Suiter's Revue [PHONETIC]. This is way, way, way before your time. And it was at King Theater, and they would have me, because they dubbed me as the Shirley Temple of Hawaii. [CHUCKLE]

Oh, is that right?

Yeah. [CHUCKLE] So, I sang these songs as part of this revue. And that was my early debut into showbiz.

And at the same time, your dad was making an athlete of you?

Oh, yes; yes. So, we'd get up early in the morning on weekends, because naturally, school, we'd go. And he would teach me and drill me, and drill me with basic strokes. And then, I'd play with my uncles afterwards to hit with them. But it opened doors, 'cause I won the Hawaiian Junior Championship before I left for the mainland.

Were you competitive?

Oh, absolutely competitive. I think it was instinctive. When I was in a tournament, it was, Kill! No prisoners! [CHUCKLE]

And in every sport you played, you had to win?

Oh, absolutely. It was just the thing to do. That was the goal; win, win. But I was a good loser. Because my father said, You must learn to lose as a sports person, and be a sport when you lose, and you can learn from your losses, because you know what you did wrong, and then you can improve on that. For instance, in tennis. Yeah, I -- I played field hockey, I was a gymnast, and I was on the swimming team at Punahou.

Do you think tennis opened doors for you?

Very much so. When I went to the mainland, I had won the Hawaiian Junior Championship. My brother-in-law, the one that was going to the Curtis, Felix, would take me out to the public parks and play. And there was this one fellow

who was playing with his daughter, and grooming her for a tournament, and he was watching me. He said, Would you like to play in the National Junior Grass Court Tournament at Philadelphia Cricket Club? I said, Fine. He said, Well, we've been watching you play. Well, that opened doors.

And you didn't think of saying, Oh, not me, you don't understand.

I said, I'm from Hawaii. And he said, Well, did you win things? I said, Well, I had the Hawaiian Junior title before. He said, That's enough. And that got me into the eighteen and under national, so I played with the likes of Maureen Connolly. I was only sixteen when I came to the mainland.

You graduated young from Punahou.

From Punahou; yes. And came right to Philadelphia, where my sister and brother-in-law lived.

To attend Temple University.

To attend Temple.

When you were at Temple, you were playing tennis. Didn't you have an incredible tennis record at Temple University?

Yes; I'm in the Sports Hall of Fame for tennis, being undefeated the four years. Singles.

Did you think sports might be a possible career for you?

No; I was never strong enough, and I knew my limitations. 'Cause when I played tournaments on the mainland, I'd get to quarter finals, semi finals, and things. But I've got a lot of trophies.

And at that point, what did you want to do with your life?

Actually, I thought I would be a teacher. I was in health and physical education, and I thought I would come back and teach here. But then, that changed my life when I decided to help my parents to put my other siblings through school. So, I went to this place called the Hawaiian Cottage, and I said, I can sing and dance if you need someone here. And so, they hired me. And so, I got this job at the Hawaiian Cottage, and I had my own trio after a while. And then, I was put on the main stage and learned *Haole* songs. [CHUCKLE] You know, the pop standards and Broadway. So, I did double duty. I did my Hawaiian show, and then I did the other. So, that was an influence.

So, you were essentially a businesswoman, and an entertainer at a young age.

Yes.

Making enough money to help put your siblings through college.

Yes; m-hm.

You know, your father, who had to switch jobs, he moved to a new country and found he needed to change occupations. He showed a lot of resilience and versatility, and I guess a lot of hope too.

Yes. And all that hope was put into us, the daughters. Because what they couldn't do, they thought they'd give us the opportunity to do. And it came to fruition; yes.

It sounds like you always were trying to get better at what you did.

Yes; that's because of my parents. You achieve and you try to get better. And they taught me not to envy or be jealous. And that helped later on when I met George Abbott, 'cause we had the same principles. And my mother and father said, Don't envy someone, because if you accomplish and achieve the goals that you set out for and you're successful, then you need not envy or be jealous of anyone. You can admire, and you can learn, but you know, that was a good lesson.

Joy Abbott stayed in Philadelphia after college, performing fulltime to help pay her sisters' tuitions. And one of her sisters, perhaps unintentionally, paid her back with an introduction to the man who would be the love of her life, the legendary Broadway producer, director and playwright, George Abbott. He was the creative genius behind classic musicals such as The Pajama Game and Damn Yankees, and winner of multiple Tony Awards, a Pulitzer Prize, and later the Kennedy Center Lifetime Achievement Award.

He invited me to dinner. I was invited at seven o'clock. So, I came, and I rang the bell. And whoo, he opened the door himself, and I saw this tall man with silver hair, and these steel blue eyes. I'm like, Whoo. I saw him, and I said, Wow! He was six-three, tall, handsome like Gary Cooper, Randolph Scott handsome combination, and his steel blue eyes, and this beautiful smile. And I said, I'm Joy Valderrama. And he said, Good, you're on time. That was it. 'Cause he was a stickler for time. And so, from then on, we just hit off, and we dated for twenty-five years before we got married.

You didn't really want to rush things.

[CHUCKLE]

How old was he when you met; in his seventies?

Seventy-two.

And how old were you?

I was twenty-nine.

Did that not make you a little leery? Like, why would I want to date somebody so much older than me?

No; 'cause I didn't think of dating at the time. I liked him right from the start, because he was handsome, and kind. And so, he would ask me on my day off to come up and so, we dated for twenty-five years.

I hope I'm not overstepping or on territory that makes you uncomfortable. But I read George's bio in various places. And, you know, it talks about how for ten years he had a relationship with Maureen Stapleton.

Yes. It was a friendship. It was nothing untoward. And in her biography, if you read one of the paragraphs, it says, And then he met Joy Valderrama and married her, and lived happily ever after, like an old MGM movie.

[CHUCKLE]

That's in her biography.

Does it bother you that in his bios that you read all over the place, there's so much attention given to his relationship with this, you know, stunning movie actress?

Oh, not at all. Oh, my gosh. I knew he liked me, and I liked him, but I didn't know how much he loved me until later.

So, you were okay with him dating other people?

Oh, gosh; yes. Because he would be very frank with me. He would tell me that there was nothing but ... you know, and it was part of their publicity for shows.

Joy Abbott recalls that in those days, there were no parts on Broadway for Asians, and no nontraditional casting as we have today. So, she continued her performing career at the Hawaiian Cottage until George Abbott encouraged her to develop a new talent, as an entrepreneur.

He said, It's time you stopped singing and dancing, and open your own business, and I'll back you. So, he backed me in a dress shop. Then I opened another one; then I opened another one. You can't just pull them in with a hook, so you have to have something to attract them. So, I started musical fashion shows, and they became so popular, I was doing two hundred a year. And I had all these professional models, gorgeous girls, modeling the clothes from my store. Well, we had some designer clothes, but a lot of ready to wear. And so, it was quite a successful business.

So, very consuming life, and very beautiful life.

Yeah.

Did you think about children and marriage at that point?

No.

'Cause in those days, that was the drill; right?

Yes. But then, I was going with George; he was seventy-two, and I was twenty-nine when I first met. And in all those twenty-five years, I was working, working, trying to make my shops a success, my fashion show productions, they were musical and in demand. And so, that's when George proposed after twenty-five years, and he said, It's time. And you know how he proposed?

How?

[CHUCKLE] After twenty-five years, we were up in his country home up in the Catskills. Beautiful place up there, so serene. And he says, Joy, I have something to tell you. So, he said, Come sit beside me. And I remember it was a Sunday morning, and the pines; it was so beautiful up there. He says, I have something to tell you. My lawyer tells me I have enough money for two to live on; it's time we got married. [CHUCKLE] I said, Oh. I said, Oh, I have to call my mother. [CHUCKLE]

You said one of the things about you and George was that despite the age difference and your different backgrounds, you had very similar values.

Yes.

What were those?

A lot of the principles, again, of envy and jealousy. I was surprised to learn that. Taking life in moderation; that's why he lived so long. He had a glass of wine for dinner. That was it; he didn't drink, he didn't smoke.

Did he exercise, or golf? Dancing?

Oh; exercise. Exercise and work; that's what made him live so long. Work and accomplishments, and achievements.

And that's what you're all about too; right?

Yes. And he had a wonderful sense of humor; just wonderful. It was a wonderful, wonderful marriage.

When Joy Valderrama married George Abbott in 1983, she sold her fashion business and moved to his main home in Florida. She took up golf and became immersed in the country club culture there, as well as the theater circuit in New York.

I was living in Florida and being part of the country club that George belonged to, Indian Creek Country Club. And it's a wonderful social place, and for golf. Pretty exclusive, too.

You were all right giving up your business and living this life of relative leisure with George.

Leisure and social, and Broadway. When I would be going to some of the opening night parties, I said, Oh, there's so-and-so, oh, there's Julie Andrews, oh, there's Carol Burnett. 'Cause we went to their Carnegie Hall debut thing, and they had a big party afterwards. And we would be dancing, and I'd be stumbling, and everything. And I'm a pretty good dancer, but George was very serious about dancing. And so, later on when we were married, and we were at the country club, and there's a dance and I'm dancing and I'm stumbling. I said, Oh, Cynthia, what time is our tee time? Oh, are we playing tennis on Wednesday? And I'd be stumbling. So, the next morning [CHUCKLE] George said, You know, Dear, there are three types of women who make lousy ballroom dancers. He said, Professional singers and dancers, athletes ... oh, and rich women. And he said, And you are all three. [CHUCKLE]

So, you met him when he was seventy-two, and then twenty-five years later you married him.

Yeah.

So, he's dancing at an advanced age.

Oh, absolutely. He loved to dance all the time. As a matter of fact, Kitty Carlisle received after a dancing date a book on how to dance, because she was such a lousy dancer. [CHUCKLE]

So, he was a very vital man.

Very vital. He was playing golf at ninety-six or teaching me. He didn't give it up until a hundred two, and he in the Croquet Hall of Fame.

How old was he when he passed away?

Hundred seven.

And how healthy was he shortly before that? Did he maintain his health?

Yes. He had no diabetes, no cancer, no Parkinson's, nothing debilitating. And it was just that he died of old age, but his mind was so sharp. As a matter of fact, he was dictating a scene from the second act of Pajama Game that was to be a London production two weeks before he died.

It sounds like a magical life. Do you have any regrets?

Absolutely none. We never argued, except my driving. I drove too slowly for him. [CHUCKLE] Here's a story. When he was a hundred six, I asked him what he wanted for his birthday. And he said, Oh, I think I would like to have a swimming pool in the back yard, because I'm tired of walking two blocks to Shirley's house to do my twenty laps. And so, I contracted a swimming pool person. Well, it took so long; took instead of six weeks, six months. So, we came back from the Catskills, and there was this pool that you know, finally, finally, he was able to go in. So, the first day, he dove in, he sank to the bottom because he was all skin and bones. You don't have flesh, and buoyancy at a hundred six. So, he comes blubbering up, and he says, Joy, get your money back, it doesn't work. [CHUCKLE] But the reason I tell that story is, I think he wanted me to exercise. And so, he built that pool so that I would, in our house.

And do you? Do you use the pool?

Oh, yes; yes, I do.

But you didn't settle down to a life of ease and relative seclusion as a widow. You're on the jazz circuit.

Oh, yes. I did concerts perpetuate the name of George Abbott. I have a singing partner named Davis Gaines.

He's known for Phantom of the Opera on Broadway.

Yes; yes, he is. And so, we would do a compilation of songs from George's shows, and then we would do things from Phantom, Showboat, you know, other shows. And it would raise a lot of money too for people. Just not to give concerts, but we would do it for AIDS benefits, benefit for the theater community. And so, I've been singing since, and enjoying that life, because I don't have to make it as a living.

What do you like about jazz? Why jazz?

Oh; because I sang with the best musicians in Philadelphia. There was Al Governor and the Candoli Brothers, and Richie Kamoku, who was part-Filipino, part-Jewish. [CHUCKLE] And he was a saxophone player from Philadelphia, and he played with Zoot Sims and all these wonderful players. And I would be privy to all that music.

What did you learn from them?

I learned phrasing, I learned pitch, and also a certain style, where I wouldn't do vocal acrobatics, I would let the musicians underneath do that. And I would sing the songs straight, but with phrasing.

What's your favorite song, favorite jazz song?

I don't really have a favorite, because there are so many that are so good.

There's none of that you hope you're gonna be requested to do for that encore?

Oh; oh, well, gosh ... Our Love Is Here to Stay is one of my favorites, and The Way We Were. Betty and I just did that for a private party, and it brings tears to your - ooh, tears to your eyes. [CHUCKLE]

You won a Hoku. And in fact, your co-winner was ...

Betty Loo Taylor.

Is she about the same age?

Yes; we were both septuagenarians at the time.

Doing jazz.

Oh, yes.

On a Hoku album.

Yes; it was our first album. And how it happened was, I would come home, and Betty would have her trio at the Kahala. And she says, Come, come up and sing with us. So, I would sing. But by the way, Betty Loo and I used to do carnivals at Punahou. And so, we'd been long, long, longtime friends. When I would come back, she would say, Oh, come up and sing, or wherever she would be. And so I said, Betty, why don't we make an album together? We've known each other's style for so long. So, she said, Okay. So, I flew her up to New York, and in one week, we did this album.

Did your competitive nature ever ebb?

No.

You still are very competitive?

Oh, absolutely. [CHUCKLE] I took up golf, as I said, when I was fifty-three. And after the first year and a half, I won the First Flight at our club, and I won it six times after.

And you still play golf, and you still are competitive with friends?

Oh, yes; yes. Between operations. [CHUCKLE] 'Cause I've had two hip replacements, a knee replacement, a shoulder replacement, and cervical and lumbar. And each time, it improved my game [CHUCKLE] actually. But no more tennis, unfortunately, after my hip replacements.

You've had a very unusual life, starting in the country of Wahiawa, with immigrant parents who opened doors for you, and you pushed on those doors.

Yeah. And now, I'm able to give back, I'm happy to say. Because Templeton University is the recipient of my legacy with the royalties that I'm giving them and my annual contribution, and so they've opened the Joy and George Abbott School of Musical Theater.

Joy Abbott says she's living her second life now in her early eighties at the time of this conversation in the summer of 2013. This longtime performer, businesswoman, and patron of the theater arts devotes much of her time to

honoring and furthering the legacy of her famous husband. Joy Abbott divides her time between Florida, Philadelphia, and Honolulu. She keeps a condo here, and loves her Punahou School reunions. And she still enjoys Broadway, sitting in a perfect seat in the theater and going backstage. For Long Story Short, and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. *A hui hou kakou.*

For audio and written transcripts of all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit PBSHawaii.org. To download free podcasts of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, go to the Apple iTunes Store or visit PBSHawaii.org.

And you've remained lifelong friends with your Punahou classmates with whom you were close before.

Yes. But when I tell them I'm coming in May, so-and-so, they tell everybody, Oh, Joy is coming, we better put our acts together, 'cause we're gonna be busy. Things like that. Now, we had just our sixty-fifth Punahou reunion, Class of '48, and we're the closest class at Punahou.