GUEST: OLIN LAGON
LSS 705 (LENGTH: 26:46)
FIRST AIR DATE: 9/10/13

The last tsunami scare we had, it was interesting 'cause I went to pick up my mom, and she lives in Waimanalo near the beach, and so went driving there, and, you know, I saw all these lines at stores, and it's so orderly. People are buying water, and they're like, "Oh, you can take the last one" and stuff. I went to put gas in, and they'd run out of the cheap gas, and so they put the sign saying, "All gas same price, at the lowest price." And so even the owners could have gouged, but they didn't; they actually dropped the price. And everyone's waiting very patiently. And then I saw a video of the last scare in L.A., where people are fighting and duking it out for water and stuff, and it really made me reinforce that there's still a mass amount of compassion in our state, that people do care.

Olin Lagon believes that compassion is the secret of life. He's a successful software developer and entrepreneur, yet his passions are community and sustainability. Olin Lagon's lifestyle and work reflect his deep beliefs in simplicity and family, values instilled in him at a young age by his mother. Olin Lagon 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 am Leslie Wilcox. Olin Lagon developed his first computer program when he was a boy. Since then he's had a successful career creating tech companies and selling his designs to companies worldwide. Now, he has Kanu Hawaii, an organization dedicated to creating a sustainable future. Olin Lagon grew up in Honolulu, but there's very little about his childhood that prepared him to become both a successful businessman and a leader in the non-profit world. His family had to overcome many obstacles, and it was his mother's faith and love for her son that got them through.**

When I was six and my dad died, my mom only went to the sixth grade or so, and so she had a really hard time in finding a job. We lived in public housing, and so she's trying to raise her three kids and -- actually four kids with myself, and not being able to find a job. McDonald's or fast food, she wasn't able to get employment. So it took a long time before she'd get a job, and it affected

everything about what we could do, what we could buy, what we could eat, where we could go, and so that was really hard period for us.

You remember thinking about when am I gonna eat next? What am I gonna eat?

No, but I had this memory where I remember we were eating flour and water, and we had this -- and I remember it being good, like wow, and I think some sugar in it and stuff like that, and she created some kind of stew with flour. And so I tried to recreate that when I was in college, and I it just tasted awful. [laughter]. So, I know that I probably ate a lot of food that wasn't healthy or wasn't, -- was what we could get. So, I remember getting blocks of cheese from the government. I'm not trying to like say everything was really bad, but there were long periods of time where we didn't have a lot of food to eat.

And did you think of yourself as a poor kid?

Absolutely. And so the thing with living in public housing is that you live in some of the poorest communities in the country, in one of the wealthiest countries. So, the disparity is huge, and kids are not blind to that. I've been to 20-some-odd countries, and I've seen poverty first-hand, but what makes my childhood different is that we were sort of trapped in this bubble where everyone around us is rich, except for us. And so, we couldn't get clothes for school, we couldn't do a lot of things that we thought other kids could do. And I remember this one episode where I wanted to buy baggy pants, 'cause everybody was popping, and I thought I wanted to be a dancer, and so I stole five dollars from my mom's wallet, and I opened it up, and she had, I think, six bucks in it. So, I took the five, and I hid it in a book. And then she came up to me after -- I think she knew I took it -- and she said, "You know, I'm missing five dollars, and we really need it." So, I remember pretending to look for it, and then -- I think I was about eight at the time. And then one night, sort of pretended to find it.   I didn't find it. When she went away, I took it out, and I put it back in her purse. Never stole again. That's how I -- I guess even as a kid, I knew that even five dollars meant a lot to my family.

Did that reduce the size of your dreams?

I think it reduced the size of my social circle, because I felt embarrassed being in the situations, where we grew up in public housing. I felt like I couldn't bring friends over. I couldn't … I didn't relate to a lot of different people because we didn't have a lot of the things that the culture said we should have. And so, from that perspective, I think it did reduce my social circle. And I'm sure it had an impact on myself, as well, my self-worth and esteem.

What about your mom?

She lived a very spartan and simple life, and I rejected that, and I hated that, and I thought I would want nothing to do with that growing up. And I've come full circle, and so it's that, to me, is a really amazing lesson that I'm still trying to learn; it's just this full-circle aspect of simplicity and sustainability.

Your mom sounds like she had a lot of faith.

She never felt embarrassed that we lived in the housing. I'm sure she wasn't happy about it, but it wasn't something that she hid. She lived as she lived, and it is what it is, and where she worked was where she worked. I was embarrassed that she worked at Zippy's at one point, where she ended up getting a job, and now I love Zippy's 'cause they gave her a chance.

What was life like within your unit at Kuhio Park Terrace or Palolo Housing? How did you guys handle that?

This story might illustrate that. So, I was seven at the time, and I had some chalk, and I was drawing on the sidewalk, minding my own business, and then I felt this sting in the back of my head. And then I turned around and saw these neighbor kids laughing, and they ran into their unit. And as I was rubbing my head, it hurt like I've never felt before, and then it felt weird. So, I looked at my hand, and my entire hand was covered in blood. And so they had stabbed my head with a piece of metal that they found. And then so, of course, I went home. By the time I got home, this side is just all bloody. But what, I guess the surprise is not what … that happened, but what my mom did about that. So, I got home, my mom's freaking out. And she didn't call 911, she didn't call the ambulance, she called her pastor. Because I found out years later is that I needed to go to ER, and he took me to the ER, but she needed comfort because she felt how is it that I can't take care of my own kid and keep him safe within a few feet of our own home? And so from that context, that, I think, illustrates some of the pressures that went on, living in housing. That's why I went back for years once a month to volunteer with Parents and Children Together and other organizations, because there's still a lot of injustice in public housing. Shortly after that, I went to live with my sister. And my sister took me in, and she lived in Waipahu at the time.

And she was much older, yes?

Fourteen years older.

So, that was a safety precaution for you?

I think so. Yeah, I think so. It was just really difficult for me. And I'm a geek, and so, I don't know other geeks in the public housing at that time. And so, I was not only sort of this unusual kid, but I didn't have a lot of peers that I could relate with.

Explain how you were a geek in public housing.

My Mom, bless her heart, she didn't have a lot of money, but her pastor gave her a hundred dollar loan, which she used to buy a used computer back in the early '80s. It was a Texas Instrument TI-994A, had no monitor, had no disk drive, and then we went to Radio Shack and bought a tape player. And then I set it up as a computer, went to the library, and then I borrowed -- there were three books on computer programming. And that's in an entire library. So, I borrowed all three …

Which library was this?

This was the Waikiki library. And so, I borrowed the three. I read them, and then I learned how to program, wrote my first program. It was a funny program where I -- you put in your name, and it would tell you your future. And so when I put in my name, it had all these amazing things to say [laughter]. And my sister put in her name, and then it had some not so good things to say, but those are the kinds of things that I did as a kid. And so, -- and from there, I started doing design work and programming different things.
You taught yourself from a remnant of a computer?
It wasn't that difficult cause I had some books that I could read, yeah.
But nobody else was doing it, you were just self-motivated to check it out?
Right … that was my Mom. She had the foresight to do that.

When he was young, Olin Lagon's only ambition was to become a professional surfer. That didn't work out for him. But some of the people he met along the way had a profound impact on many of the choices he's made in his life.

Did you know you were smart?
I don't know if I can answer that now. I think that I'm okay …
So, at the time did you have a sense of your self-worth?
I didn't.
And you didn't know what was going to happen to you?
No. I just kind of went with the flow, thinking that I was going to be a surfer, and that I was gonna make money doing that and just have that career.
After your father died when you were six, was there another father figure in your life after that?
The father figure I had was someone from the Big Brothers Big Sisters, and so this guy, Dave, who was a volunteer. I remember it's one of the most joyous moments in my life. I was sitting at home at KPT, and then the phone rang. My mom picked it up, and she said, "It's for you." And I never got calls, right? So, I pick up the phone, and it's Dave. And he's like, "Olin, listen, listen!" And he's telling me, "Don't say anything." So, I'm straining to hear something. I don't hear anything. He's like "Come on, you can't hear it?' And I couldn't hear it. And he said, "It's hailing; it's hailing in Kaimuki." And he was just jumping for joy. And he thought it was the most amazing thing. And while I didn't know it hailed in Hawaii, but when I hung up the phone, I had chicken skin, and I still do, because this guy was so excited, and he called me. And I just felt so good about that.
One sharing adult makes a huge difference.
Yeah, and I've had a few. And there are really two parts to that equation, because I think in everyone's life, you're gonna have tons of opportunities where adults are giving you this advice, but it takes your growth to be willing to accept that. And so, I'm sure that throughout my life I had all these wonderful forces coming in, but I wasn't ready to accept it. I dropped out of high school

and was sort of a delinquent kid and all that. And so, but when I would join the military as a naval reservist, I had a guy in military school that was really, -- really pushed me to go to college. And no one had ever told me that before, and I was ready to receive that.

Nobody had told you that before?

Never. In fact, it was so bad that when I came back to Hawaii I dropped out of school, so I didn't take the SAT or anything like that. So, I went to Honolulu Community College, and I took the placement exams. So, it's just where you go for math and English. And then I went to the counselor, and I said, "I want to be an engineer." Then he looked at my scores, and he said, "No!" And I said, "What do you mean, 'no'?" It's like, "Well, your scores are not high enough, so let's look at the survey program. It's two years, and you can do this." And I said, "No, I want to be an engineer." And he refused to help me.

And so I was the keynote speaker at HCC one year, and I shared that story, because that's wrong; you don't do that to kids. But that's how strong it is, I think, in terms of, you have to overcome some these issues, people telling you things that you can't do.

Even before graduating from the University of Hawaii with a degree in business administration, Olin Lagon was already making money as an entrepreneur and software developer.

You were a pioneer in crowd funding and software development.

I've been lucky. Some of the designs that I've worked on have been adopted by companies worldwide: Olympics, Nike, Fed Ex, NTT. MIT even bought some of the software that I designed.

Do you hold patents?

I have nine, nine patents.

Do they pay you?

Well, the patents were sold in a previous company. So, there's no financial interest. Some friends and I invented independently this concept of chipping in, or now it's called crowd-funding. And so, we designed systems around that, and we got some patents for the work that we did.

You own … you founded and owned that company for a relatively short time, I think a little more than a year, but you did an amazing amount of work. Lots of money flowed through there, and then you sold it to a big, big enterprise.

I left that company to launch Kanu with some friends, but I was there for about two and a half years, and so we did roughly a hundred million dollars of crowd-funding through the system. We funded all kinds of projects worldwide. It was pretty amazing. And then my partners went on to sell the technology and the systems to a large national … international company.

You had a very, very strong career going in software development and creating new ideas and companies when you left to join Kanu, which was a fledgling

non-profit Hawaii-based enterprise. Why did you decide to do that? It's a non-profit.
Right, but it's actually part of my plan. So, my adult life, 50 percent has been given up to service or volunteering. So, I want to give away half my life, and I want that to remain constant for the rest of my life. And so, Kanu was an amazing oppor -- I feel privileged that I was able to be a part of the founding of the getting it off the ground and getting staff engaged. And so I see that as a privilege and an opportunity. So half my life is starting companies, tech companies, but I do that for three or four years, and then I go back and so some cause-related work and then sort of oscillate between the two.
And you don't have trouble making that move?
It's the same work. You do good work, you find great ideas, you think big a little bit, then you push the boundaries here and there and try to change the world the best way you can.
Did you become wealthy through your ideas in tech?
I feel wealthy, and so I've never done anything in my life for money, and I never will. And so, I've been very fortunate, and I'm happy with what I've got. I've been given a lot, and I've been very generous.
So, that wasn't your motivation, but you did make money on your expertise?
Made some and enough.
That's interesting, "enough," and how people define "enough."
Right.
In your case, how do you define it, as far as quality of life?
Enough is that you can spend time with your family. So, at 4:00 every day my goal is to just spend some time with my two boys. And so we try to go walking or do whatever we can for that short period of time. We have dinner every night together. And then if I have to work, I'll work again at night. But then enough means that you can have someplace safe, you can enjoy some of the beauty of Hawaii, which most of it is free, right? -- the beach, and hiking, and stuff like that if you've got a safe place to call home. And you've got good food that you can eat, hopefully a lot of it locally grown. And I think that's more than enough.
You live off the grid, so to speak as well.
We have a zero energy home. We produce more energy than we need. And we now have an electric car, and it's still a zero energy home. And we've been very fortunate, but I think the *kuleana* is, if you have the opportunity to live in a zero energy home, then you have to help support other initiatives, 'cause not everyone has that opportunity. If you are renting, you can't switch out your appliances or put solar. And so, where you have this deep *kuleana*, to really be fair, to help others as well.
You also met your wife at an early age, too?
I did, yeah. When I came back from military training, I was 17, actually -- no, 18. I was 18. And then one of my friends, my surfer friends, wanted to get a job, and

he couldn't go to the interview by himself. That's how, I guess, we were. So, I went with him to this job interview at the Mexican restaurant Chi-Chi's. And so while I'm interviewing with him, maybe -- I don't know what they were thinking, but we're in this interview together, they said, "Why don't you come and work, too?" And then I thought, oh, no, I'm not here for the job, I'm here to support my friend. So, I ended up taking the job, and I worked as a busboy. It was the first job I ever had, and I met her there. She was studying to be a doctor, and she was this really smart girl. She was at UH. And I was so intimidated. Like I'm this kind of rough kid. And I'm trying to find my way through life. And she blew me away with sustainability. We went and had dinner, and she was a vegetarian at the time. And I thought, why are you a vegetarian? Like, that is weird. Are you a hippie? I didn't know what that meant. This was back in 1990. And then she gave me a few books to read, which I did, and then I started my sustainability journey from her. So, we have cloth napkins that we use daily from that time period. Yeah, she has these Down To Earth plastic bottles that are so old the people at Down To Earth don't recognize them, but she's been refilling them for 30 years. She's never bought, like, another plastic bottle for shampoo, 'cause she just goes back and refills them. And just like these really small things that she does quietly that have just impressed me immensely about sustainability.

Did she become a doctor?

No, she became a teacher. Her brother was in special-ed at the time, and she wasn't happy with the services that he was getting. And she decided that she couldn't just say that she didn't like it, but she had to do something about it. So, she switched her major into teaching and ended up spending ten years on the Waianae Coast teaching in public education. And then we joined the Peace Corps together. And then she came back and taught in Kalihi for a couple of years. And then when my first son was born, she's been at home ever since.

Kanu Hawaii was launched in 2008 by a group of like-minded individuals who felt that the islands could be the model to the world in compassion and sustainability. They started a non-profit organization based on individual commitments to practice sustainability and compassion. Olin Lagon joined this movement early on and today is Kanu Hawaii's executive director.

When Kanu first started, I remember talking to some of the early guys when they organized their 40 folks, and I loved the simplicity of it. So, here's a group of 40 that want to change fundamentally Hawaii for the next 30 years.

And how did these 40 get together?

They're just friends that were about the same age and hung around together. And but what they did was fascinating: They said, we're not rich, we're not famous, we don't have a lot of money, we can't do a lot of things, but what we can do is make our lives consistent with the vision that we see. And so they had

this "I will" movement where they said, "First, I will do this in my life, and then collectively we can work together, but not until we actually get our own lives in order." And I thought that was really empowering, and so, I --when they wanted to get it off the ground, I said, "I would love to." So, James Koshiba, Andrew Oki, and myself were the first co-directors of it; we got it off the ground. And it's blossomed in many ways that we didn't anticipate since then.

And you have 20,000 supporters throughout the state?

About that, yeah, in every zip code across the state. And we've done a lot of national work, too that we haven't really broadcast, like, CNN did a cover story on our group last year, on the elections work that we did. We knocked on about 3,000 doors. We got 25,000 people election information for -- that are unbiased and for some of the elections that didn't have much information, like the local House races and City Council. We did work with 500 families last year on energy efficiency. These were families that were disadvantaged that maybe couldn't install solar and stuff like that. And so, national groups have picked it up. And so, like ted.com, we built their community-based system for them. It's a pretty large group. The Points of Light Institute, did the same. The 911 Commission adopted our model for their tenth anniversary of the 911 commission. So, it was really neat to see Kanu's humble model being used nationally and even internationally, too.

What is the change that Kanu wants to see in Hawaii?

It's really simple. In the next 30 years we want to fundamentally change sustainability and compassion. So, food, energy, waste, civic engagement, we want us to be more locally self-sufficient and rely less on external sources for energy, to not lose this compassion that we have that's really different here.

Do you think the compassion reservoir or reserves are dwindling here? I've heard people say, you know, the "*Aloha*" isn't quite the same anymore.

Yeah, it has changed. In some communities, no; in some communities, yes. And part of it is, there were peoples that lived in Hawaii for many years that had these tenets of *aloha* at its core, and the demographic profile of Hawaii has shifted, so there's more people that are not from Hawaii that live here than are from here. So, that has changed the culture in some ways good and in some ways, not so good, and so, the compassion piece has shifted quite a bit, unfortunately, I think.

That's so interesting that your organization is interested in preserving and growing compassion.

Compassion is the secret of life, I think. If you can't be vulnerable and compassionate, then it's hard to be connected with other people. And so, that cannot go away. You can't do good work and do it without coming from a place of compassion.

I've heard one of your members talk really passionately and movingly about how you can't judge people by where they're from because it's the heart that counts.

Absolutely.
And that we can't demonize each other, or we've really hurt ourselves.
The truth is, when you -- when we mix cultures, then something changes and something shifts. And so, Kanu really wants to make sure that we don't lose that compassion piece, that we hold sustainability true to our hearts, and the work we do and the lives we live are consistent with that, and we don't forget to take care of one another. For example, we have this day of action where we've set up 20 or so projects statewide that our members can chose whether they want to count turtles, or go plant plants at KPT, or help feed people who don't have food. And we provide these opportunities for just hundreds of people to just get out and experience different parts of the community. On the compassion side, I remember this one volunteer; she went to a shelter in Manoa that we organized a clean-up effort for for women and children that were battered. It's a really terrible thing that happened, but it's a great shelter. And so she was so moved that she showed up the next Sunday and helped and the next Sunday and helped. She was a sophomore in high school. She ended up going every single Sunday until she went to college. And to me, I think that's compassion, because she has fundamentally changed the lives of everyone in that shelter, and her family, and her friends and created this mass amounts of compassion.
And, so, part of what Kanu did was exposed her, introduced her, made it a personal matter for her.
Right. Or even some of the things we do may not be that effective, but we try to register homeless communities to vote. And I don't know how many people we got registered, but it was just really difficult, but in doing that work, we found all these challenges. We went to this shelter, and they get their mail in another community, so where do they vote? And if they show up, then what do they use? We just got to learn about some of these challenges first-hand.
That's right. And so, you learned that you -- when you try to come up with a solution, if you don't have all the information, it is not a solution, right?
No, no.
So, has it been harder than you thought to solve some of the -- or at least begin working on some of these societal issues?
Not because we're not -- we got a long way to go, and so, we're not rushing it; we're just going as fast as we can. We're trying to affect food, energy and waste issues. We have an "Eat Local" challenge, where we've got thousands of people eating more local. It's not solving everything, but it's a step in the right direction. So, I feel like the pace we're going is good.
What do you see Hawaii in 20 years with Kanu's work to improve things step by step?
I see Hawaii in 20 years as leading the world in models of sustainability. We're gonna need it. We're shifting away from major different resources going off of oil into renewables, and finding ways to live together compassionately. And so, we have this opportunity to excel at that and show the world that it can be

done in a very isolated place. And so, I have faith that we'll find amazing technical solutions, cultural solutions to become one of the most sustainable places on earth.

And what stands in the way of us reaching that goal?

Our culture, in some ways, being stuck in the past. We have to -- we can't talk about sustainability but drive an SUV with one passenger, and not recycle, and not try to eat local. It's hard because my wife still buys strawberries, and it's $10 a basket for the Kula strawberries. And I said, "We can't afford it," but I still cringe, but I know that's what we need to do. But I cringe because I'm still connected with that feeling. So, we have to really go all in and support our local agriculture. We don't support it as much as we should. We need to support local businesses. We don't support it as much as we should. And that requires a big cultural shift.

So, our salvation is our culture, and our nemesis is our culture.

I think so, right. But there's hope in that.

As you watch your boys grow up, is there any mistake you've seen other parents make that you're gonna try not to make?

I think the over-scheduling is -- I see that kids are doing too much. At least, I think it's too much, and they're not allowed to just sit and be. And so, that's one thing that I want to do differently. And so, I mean, I feel bad, I go to parties, and this kid is doing soccer, and then baseball, and basketball, and trombone, and piano and stuff, and I'm thinking, am I robbing my kid of these experiences? And then I keep going back to, no. I think this is the path that works. And they will find their own ways.

And at 4:00 p.m., you're there with your sons, talking with them.

Right.

Well, Olin Lagon found his way and is helping to blaze the path toward a future Hawaii that is built on self-sufficiency, sustainability, and above all, compassion. His life so far has been a remarkable journey shaped by a caring mother, mentors who were there when he was ready to listen, and his own unending quest for knowledge and justice. *Mahalo* to Olin Lagon for sharing his story of inspiration and hope, and *Mahalo* to you for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. *A hui hou*.

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I'm very ... very fortunate that I was born in Hawaii. I've seen so many difrerent places, many different countries, and lived in different communities, and this is such a blessing to have come from here. Just even what I went through as a kid, I think there's so much the world can learn, that we're from diff cultures and

diff backgrounds and in some ways it's working really well and I think theres a lot of beauty there and I'm very grateful for that.