

**GUEST: VICTORIA CUBA**

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So, my family and I are currently in the situation where we are considered homeless. We do not have a home.

Cuba and her family have been considered homeless since May of 2013. For a while, they were staying at a beach in Ewa in their car.

It was a little cramped, of course, and couldn't stand it because of my brother's snoring. But we made do with what we had.

I thought, you know, this is my last year in high school; I want to make some kind of difference, some kind of impact. And also, I shouldn't be ashamed of my story, 'cause I shared it with my friends, and their reaction was so opposite from what I thought. They were more positive. They told me, Why didn't you tell us? We wanted to help you. And, you know, the people I'm surrounded with and the people I care about, they encouraged me to share my story. So, that's really what pushed me.

**Seventeen-year-old Victoria Cuba had no idea how her decision to speak openly about being homeless on PBS Hawaii's Hiki No student news, later picked up on Hawaii News Now, would turn out. With her family's blessing, and the support of her friends, the high school senior took a chance. Victoria Cuba, next on Long Story Short.**

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television produced and broadcast in high definition.

**Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Victoria Cuba and her family first became homeless on Oahu when Victoria was in elementary school. They got through it with help from friends, and above all, their positive attitude. But the problems did not end. Instead, new difficulties arose as time went on.**

**What happened so that you ended up homeless in elementary school?**

I lived with my mom and my brother, and we lived in regular houses, you know, always renting. Finally, we stayed in an apartment called the Weed and Seed. It's a government-funded building.

**M-hm.**

So, we stayed there, and it was about ten years, so, it was really nice. But being that she was the only one working and taking care of me and my brother, it was hard for her to keep up with the rent. So, because we didn't pay it on time, we got evicted. And when we became homeless, she always told us, You know, don't worry, we'll get out of this. You know, at least we have each other. And that was the one thing I always remembered. And she worked us out of that situation.

**First, when you're approaching eviction and you know you're gonna be turned into the street, how do you decide where to go?**

The first time, and this time that we're homeless, we actually had family friends that helped us. You know, You can stay here. The first time we were homeless, we stayed in a Matson container. They're really long shipping containers, and that was our home. I remember, like, my mom would tell me that, Oh, we should put a second one on top, and make a two-story house.

**[CHUCKLE] Was that on somebody's private property?**

Yeah. It was at the junkyard in Pearl City. So, we stayed there for ... let's see ... over half a year. And then, we had to move, because the river near the junkyard flooded, and we lost everything. And it wasn't a good place to stay, because mildew and, you know, health-wise, it wasn't well. So, we ended up staying with an auntie at our old building.

**In her house?**

M-hm. And we stayed with her. And eventually, my mom got enough money to find our own place. So, we stayed in Aniani, which is like right across the street from where we were living. And we stayed there for four years.

**It was nice to have a house, a roof over your head.**

Yes; yes. When we moved into Aniani, it made me appreciate that we had a house, 'cause of what we'd been through. And in school, I used to get really touchy about people talking about, Oh, look at that hobo on the streets. Like, you don't know their story; you can't say stuff like that. You can't say something

until you've been in their shoes. So, you know, just to be more grateful, more appreciative of what you have.

**That ended, though. What happened, then?**

This time around, my mom's health started declining. She kinda stopped going to work, 'cause she would always go to the hospital or to the doctor's, and she got terminated. She got laid off at her job. So, we found ourselves without income. We found ourselves getting eviction notices from the landlord constantly coming. If she came, we tried to keep as quiet as possible, 'cause we didn't want her coming. And we got kicked out.

**So, what's it like? You're packing your stuff, and you're heading to the sidewalk again.**

Well, the first time, it wasn't too bad, 'cause I always thought, you know, my family's here. The place we actually stayed at, I had a lot of fun. I could climb trees, and you know, we built a swing out of fire hose, so that was nice. But the second time around, I was mad at my mom. I said, How could you? In my mind, it was, How could you let your children go through this again? And I know it's not her fault. But, you know, I was going through my rebellious stage of being a teenager, probably still am. But ... I was just disappointed. Like, why do we have to go through this again a second time? We've already been through it.

**There's a lot of pressure on your mother. How does she keep this confidence and positive attitude going? Or does she?**

The first time, I remember she did. She always reminded us constantly; you know, be grateful, be grateful. This time around, I guess it's 'cause of her health or stress, but I kind of felt like she gave up this time. You know, she's currently unemployed. I asked, Are you gonna get a job? But then again, her health is, you know, wearing on her. And then, I don't know; it's just ... I remember talking to her one night. It was when I was still mad at her. I said, You know, how come you're not doing anything? It's like you gave up on yourself. And then says, Yeah, I did. And I remember crying, and I said, you know, How can you give up on yourself? You still have me and Nicholas to take care of. If you give up on yourself, you're giving up on us. So, I remember she was just quiet, and ... you know, I just want to help her. She's helped us already, and ... like, I just want to pay her back.

**How's your brother doing? And how old is he?**

He is fifteen. He's still in high school. He's in JROTC, and that really helped him. Like, he knows what he wants to go; he wants to go into the military, he wants to help my mom and our family. And by going into the military, he can do that. And he has some kinda purpose. I remember when he was in intermediate, he wasn't doing too well grade-wise, but because he has JROTC, he has a more positive outlook, and it keeps him steady and focused.

### **How did the family plan the next step?**

Again, a family friend helped us out. They said that we could stay in front of their house. The neighbors were really kind enough to let us stay in their stalls, so where we're parked at.

### **Is it a van that you parked?**

M-hm. There's a van that we have. All of our stuff is in there, my mom's car. And the neighbor who's right next to where we live, he has a truck that's like, parked right next to the van. And he said, You know, it looks a little cramped in where you guys staying, why don't you use the truck as well. So, we threw a tarp over it, and then laid down carpet on the bed of the truck, and that became my room.

### **And what's it like to have a bedroom in the back of a truck?**

Um, pretty interesting. It's messy because I made it messy. But ... it's neat to think that ... you can have some kind of hideout.

### **Privacy.**

Yeah. So, for me, I like to think about the positive. So, when I was living in the junkyard, it was like, we will have all these adventures I can go on. And this time it's like, I have my own room, and ... think about how many people who can have a outside room in a truck. So, that was my thinking.

**The homelessness of teenager Victoria Cuba presented her with challenges that made her grow up faster than most of her friends. She worked hard to create and maintain normalcy. Still, while she was able to fit in at school, her life was very different from that of her classmates when she wasn't at school.**

**Everyday simple things are so much harder when you don't have a place to live with running water, and privacy. So, what is the routine? You know, when you wake up, where do you brush your teeth, and how do you get clean? What's the routine? And you don't have a refrigerator.**

No.

**Of any kind. Do you have an ice chest?**

We do, and we buy ice when we can. So, daily-wise, the school was kind enough to let us shower at the gym. So, we could shower there. But the thing is, we have to wake up really early.

**And the janitor lets you in early?**

M-hm.

**Is that what happens?**

So, we wrote to the office and the principal or the vice principal would come and take us, and they'd let us in. There's like two separate showers, so that's nice. Actually, the neighbor also lent us a sink, like an outside sink, so we hooked it up to a hose, and we use that to wash up, you know, stay clean. We use a hose to shower, but it gets really cold, so we have to shower during the day. But it's nice now, because it's really hot. Food-wise, I'm so glad we have food stamps, 'cause you know, we can buy food on a daily basis. We don't have to worry about that. And the first time we were homeless, we always had to worry about food. We would only have food either for that day, or would last it for the week. So, it was kinda hard.

**Because you didn't have food stamps then?**

Yeah; we didn't have. So, we were relying on my mom's income. So then again, it made it hard for us to find a place. But this time, we have food stamps, and it's just a lot easier now.

**Yeah; and I know you're limited in what you can buy.**

M-hm.

**But you can eat healthy foods, enough healthy food from the food stamps?**

I guess, if we prepare it. [CHUCKLE] Like, as long as we cook it, and as long as it keeps out of the sun. But me and my brother ...

**How do you cook it? Where do you cook it?**

We have a propane stove. So, another thing we have to buy is propane, which is ... I guess you would say it's inexpensive, but it's kind of expensive if you have to buy it every week. But for me, I'm kinda easy to feed. Like, I can live off of saimin and Vienna sausage. Yeah. Vienna sausage is my favorite food, and I actually got leis for graduation made of Vienna sausage.

[CHUCKLE]

So, that was nice. [CHUCKLE]

### **What about school lunch?**

We have free school lunch. And actually, I worked in the cafeteria during my junior and senior year, so you know, I'd go for breakfast and for lunch. And then, I remember one of the workers gave us food sometimes if we couldn't afford to cook. We got paid nine dollars an hour, but then again, we only worked a couple hours a week. I mean, but it paid; it did pay.

### **When you've told people, what's the reaction?**

The first people I told was my friends. And they didn't know. They said, you know, You didn't look like it. That's because every day, when I came to school, my mentality changed. I'm not focusing at home; it's I'm focusing on school and what's going on. And it's good to have friends that accept you, because even after I told them, nothing changed. 'Cause I'm still the same person, just with different circumstances. So, you know, they said, You're always smiling, you know, always laughing, always focused. And then, I said, Yeah, 'cause that's what you come to school for, not to bring your problems there. I'm not sure if a lot of schools do this, but Waipahu High School has so many resources, and they really did help me and my family. And I'm sure they're helping so much more students, 'cause there is other students that are in the same situation.

### **Is it hard to not know what's gonna come next? You know, you don't know where your family will be living, you don't know if your mom will have a job.**

It's not hard. I just want to share this. I remember going to this program, and we had this debate: Is life hard? And we finally figured out it's not hard, 'cause life isn't hard. Hard is, you know, physically hard. It's not hard; it's difficult. And life is only difficult if you make it. So, it's not difficult for me and my family. I mean, I do wonder if we are gonna get a house or not, or if we'll get some kind of shelter. But it's better to think on a day-to-day basis instead of thinking about, I need to do this, I need to that. You just worry yourself, and you know, you probably make your life a lot shorter by worrying about stuff like that.

**Yeah; take it day-by-day.**

M-hm.

**You just said that you changed when you got to school. You were confident and focused. So, what does that mean home is like? You dropped the go-for-it attitude?**

It's not necessarily that I changed attitudes. It's more like I focused on what was in front of me. So, I mean, I still had that kinda attitude, you know, like one day we'll get out of this. That was more my thinking and mentality when I'm at home. You know, we'll get out of it. We got out of it once, we can get out of it again.

**Waipahu High School has so many different kinds of students. And you can kind of see people from the vantage point of somebody who's kind of an outlier. You know, you don't have a lot of the things that some of the other students take for granted. Do you find yourself reflecting on that?**

I do; every day. And I sometimes remind my classmates. Like, when I did the interview for Hiki No, my friends were there. And in the interview, I said, You know, some students worry about ... Oh, my phone is dying, or my clothes don't match, and stuff like that. But there are other worries you have to worry about. And whenever I see that, you know, I hope I kindly tell them; I tell them that, you know, there's things in life that you have to worry about more than just these small things.

**At seventeen, Victoria Cuba has had more challenging life experiences than most people her age, and probably even people twice her age. Being the positive person that she is, she's taking it all in and wants to do something useful with the knowledge she's gained.**

**You want to be a storyteller, and you're already noticing stories all around you. And you've told your own. So, that gives you a sense of what it's like when you go public with something that has previously been on the QT. As a result of telling your story on the Hiki No program, and then also Hawaii News Now with Jim Mendoza picked up the story, you did get a lot of public reaction. What was that like? And what was it? What did people say to you? Strangers, I mean.**

First of all, I checked on Facebook, you know, multimedia, and there was a lot of positive feedback, so I was really surprised. I was like, wow, you know, people think that? I thought it would have been more negative, like, Oh, send her back

to wherever she came from, or something like that. The night I watched it, the next day, I was worrying, like, What is everybody else gonna think? What is gonna happen tomorrow? So, I went to school, and you know, everybody was like, Hey, you know, congratulations on our story, and you know, you're really inspiring. A lot of teachers, a lot of students did that. And then, there were some students who, like, you know, just stared. And I got that feeling, like, Ooh, please don't stare at me. What was running through my mind all day was that, just because of this story doesn't mean I changed. I'm still the same person. So, you know, don't look at me differently. [CHUCKLE] There were some strangers; like I'd be going to media events, winding up the wires, and they'd be like, Are you the girl on TV? And I'm like, Yeah. And then, they would say, you know, Can I give you a hug? 'Cause, you know, you're very inspirational. Even though they say I'm inspirational, just hearing that they heard my story and, you know, they want to make a difference because of it, that's inspirational for me.

### **Has anyone ever given you attitude?**

The first time, no. 'Cause then again, nobody knew. This time, there were some people who are like, You don't belong here, you need to get out. But then again, we're not on their property, and the neighbors always say, You can't tell them get out, they're on our property, so you can butt out of it. Virally, like on Facebook, there has been some negative comments.

### **As a result of your sharing your story?**

Yes. So, the first time, it wasn't about my situation. It was more like the things I had. You know, I was dressed in a dress for my interview with Jim Mendoza. And they said, If she's homeless, how come she has nice clothes? And it's, you know, that's stereotype that gets to them. And I wanted to say something, but my mom said, you know, it's better not to.

### **Not to respond?**

M-hm.

### **I mean, do they want you to be in rags?**

I know. Right? So, I mean, just because you're homeless doesn't give you no excuse to not dress nicely. And the people who don't dress nicely, it's maybe they can't afford to, or people aren't helping them. So, people came to my rescue. They said, You know, just because she's in that situation doesn't mean this. And the people who actually gave me the clothes, they said, You know, I'm glad my clothes fit you. So, it's like, that's where my clothes came from.



Like, just clearing the air about it. And ... I don't know; there were just some negative people. Not a lot; barely. Which I was so surprised about. But they were ... you know, that ignorance that they don't know about what it is to be homeless, or that stereotype they have in their mind.

**Did people offer you money or a home, or your mom a job? Anything like that?**

There's been a lot of requests like that. I have classmates' parents telling me that, you know, if my mom wants a job, then to contact them. People have been sending money to the school to donate, you know, for me to go to college. And my reaction to that one was that ... at first, I didn't want the money, because I felt like I hadn't earned it. Just because I told my story doesn't mean I earned their money. So, I told my principal that, and he said, You know, you have to look at it differently. It's not just about you, even though it may seem right now. It'll actually help others, and it'll grow from that. And he said that there were other people who were willing to donate to the school itself for future students who are in the same situation. So, because of that, I felt a lot better. You know, I don't want them to just help me; I want them to help others as well.

**Did you go to prom?**

Yes, I did. Actually, an anonymous donor at my school paid for my prom. 'Cause for me, I had money, and I saved up from my checks that I got from school. And for me, it was choosing between paying for my AP test, or going to prom. And my main concern was my AP test, 'cause it's graded, and it's going to college. But our student coordinator called me and she said, You know, somebody's willing to pay for your prom; are you okay with that? And I said, Uh ... you know, I do want to go to prom, but ... I have to pay for my AP test too. So, I said, You know, I feel bad. But she said, You know, don't feel bad, they want to help you. So, I accepted it, and they paid for my prom. But dress-wise, I actually went to Ross to go buy my dress. I mean, it was a more inexpensive way of going to prom.

**Did you have fun?**

Yes; I had a lot of fun. [CHUCKLE] Like, I didn't want the night to end.

**And you are going to be able to use money from a scholarship fund established by the school to go to the University of Hawaii at Manoa.**

Yes. But really, if I don't have to use it, then I won't use it. 'Cause I still signed up for more scholarships outside of school, and if get word from them, then I won't

use the money. 'Cause I really don't feel like I've earned that money. I feel like I shouldn't use it. It doesn't feel right.

**I think people meant it for you in the best possible way.**

I know, but—[CHUCKLE].

**Is it hard for you to accept a gift?**

Kinda. I mean, I've been brought up by my mom, and she's really old school fashioned. So, you know, if someone gives something to you, you have to give back. Or, you know, you shouldn't accept too easily, because you know, there's people who worked hard for it, and I really don't feel like I deserve the ... I guess, the gifts that people have been giving.

**And so, you're on your way to college.**

M-hm; m-hm. But, you know, when I was applying for colleges, my counselor asked, Are you gonna worry about your family? And I said, Of course, 'cause they're my family. But she said, you know, If you want to help them, you need to focus on you and school first. And I'm a little worried about that. Like, if I'm gonna be able to focus on school if I'm worrying about my family as well. But, you know, I just have to keep thinking, the only way I'm gonna help them is if I focus on school. And, you know, I do wish I could bring my family, but it's not possible. And my mom understands.

**What got you so interested in storytelling?**

When I was in this community program, one of our mentors, we called her Auntie, she got me into journal writing. I was going through a hard time with my family, and I remember I kept everything in. 'Cause you know, when I was growing up, I always learned that your business is nobody else's business, so you shouldn't let it known. But one time, I just came to the program and I broke down crying, because you know, it was just everything building up. And she said, You know, you shouldn't do that, so why don't you put it words and write it down. So, I did that, you know, kept journals, wrote down random stuff. And I noticed that when I look back in it, like days, months later, it's like, Wow, I've really been through that? It's amazing just to see the change in yourself. I still have journals that show that. But you know, if I could see that change in myself, why can't I do it for other people? So, that was really what got me into storytelling and hearing other people's stories.

**A lot of it is finding out how other people tick.**

M-hm; m-hm. And, you know, when somebody tells you their story, they give themselves to you; a piece of themselves. So, every time a friend tells me something they've never told anything else, I am so grateful, and I tell them that. I tell them, you know, Thank you for sharing this with me. I know it's hard, but you know, being that you shared it with me means you trust me.

**You were one of the lead media team members on a Hiki No story about someone in your school, I believe, a blind person who had perfect pitch.**

M-hm. So, his name is Rocky. Actually, his real name is Ricklong Jack; and he was in my grade. And this kid is talented, really amazing.

**Did you like the process of figuring out what you were gonna ask people, how you were gonna shoot them?**

What I love about Hiki No is that students are allowed the freedom to choose what they want to tell, and they have the freedom to decide how they're gonna tell it. So, that's what I liked about it. And, you know, it's actually going into the production and doing things that real newscasters do. So, you know, being able to experience that kind of job ethic.

**What makes the most compelling story for you to cover?**

A story that nobody has told before, or something that somebody's never said before. So, you know, those untold stories are what people want to hear.

**At the time of our conversation in the summer of 2014, Victoria Cuba was starting classes at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, preparing to move into a dormitory and study journalism. Best wishes to teenager Victoria Cuba from Waipahu, for being such an inspiration. 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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[MUSIC]

My name is Ricklong Jack, and I'm eighteen years old. I'm in twelfth grade at Waipahu High School.

Rick Longjack, aka Rocky, is like many students, with aspirations of becoming a singer and music producer.

[MUSIC]

Rocky has a bright future ahead of him. The challenges he faces, however, may dim his path. Rocky is visually impaired. These difficulties, however, do not discourage Rocky from seeing beyond his disabilities. Through his experiences, Rocky wants to share one message.

Don't let your limitations stop you.

This is Victoria Cuba reporting from Waipahu High School, for Hiki No.