LONGstorySHORT
with LESLIE WILCOX

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You know how bad things can be.

And I also know how good they can be. If we only focus on the things that have gone wrong, life gets to be pretty heavy and unhappy. And if you don't see the potential in things, it's just not right. I still get, when I'm out in the shopping center, I'll get a girl who will come and say, Judge Radius! And I'll say, Oh, how are you doing? What are you doing? And she'll say, Oh, I'm graduating from Windward Community College next week. And so, we show up and give her a lei. Because those kinds of stories keep you going.

Judge Karen Radius, a resident of Windward Oahu, has spent her career seeking the potential in people facing troubled situations. Family Court Judge and the founding judge of Girls Court, Karen Radius, 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. Family Court is often regarded as a place of pain and anger, filled with divorces, child custody battles, families in crisis. Judge Karen Radius has spent decades there. She retired, but returned to serve on a part-time basis. The judge is no softy; she's regarded as tough, but fair. In her juvenile cases, she tries to look past the pain, toward the potential good within the youth offenders who come before her. To help Hawaii's troubled young people, Judge Radius in 2004 was the driving force behind Girls Court, an innovative program designed specifically for at-risk girls on Oahu. The judge and others in the field say that juvenile court is framed around boys, who tend to commit different offenses than girls, for different reasons. Judge Karen Radius knows firsthand about life struggles, having grown up on the south side of Chicago.

My mom is the oldest of ten. By the time she graduated from eighth grade in 1932, there were seven kids; the seventh child had just been born a couple of months before. So, her mom said to her, We just don't have the money for you to go to high school, you need to find a job. My grandpa was a janitor, and finding a job, for him, depended on what manufacturing plants or what buildings were open, and what businesses could hire him. So, he was getting piecemeal work at about a dollar a day. So, my mother found a job being a maid and mother's helper for a lawyer's wife who

had one son. So, after being the oldest girl of seven kids, that was a walk in the park, quite frankly.

But she had to be away from her family.

Absolutely. So, she earned a dollar a week, and she had Sundays off, so she'd come home on Sundays, bring her dollar, and her mother would give her a dime.

Tough times.

Yeah, yeah; absolutely.

People had to really pull together and sacrifice themselves.

Right; right. And so, the theory was that her younger sisters would all take a year off of high school, but it didn't turn out that way. She stayed working at that job.

Never graduated from high school?

Nope; nope. She took a typing and a bookkeeping class at night school, but other than that, she didn't go to high school.

Did she talk about that, her regrets at that?

Not so much her regrets. That's the generation that doesn't focus on themselves. But my sister and myself, there was no question; we were gonna get every ounce of education we could.

She was gonna do for you what she couldn't do for herself.

That's right; that's right. My dad had been in the military, actually, here in Hawaii, and had gone back to Chicago and was a bus driver. And he saw her walk on his bus, and he said, That's the most lovely pair of hands I've ever seen somebody putting fare in my farebox.

He said that to her?

To her. And she fell for it.

And the rest is history. Yeah; yeah.

Wow. And he stopped being a bus driver after that?

Right. When I was about three, he became a life insurance salesman, and did that 'til he died.

So, he was a good salesman, charming?

Oh; yeah. He could tell a joke and a story. He was a schmoozer; yeah.

Judge Karen Radius became the first person in her family to graduate from high school. Her mother believed that Karen should receive the best education possible, even though money was scarce. She was accepted into George Washington University in Washington, D.C., and left the Midwest for the first time in her life.

I found George Washington. My mom said, Okay, we've got enough money for one semester. Go, see if you like it. We'll do what we can; you gotta work. I went to GW 'cause I thought I was interested in international affairs. I had read some books about Russia, and that was when the Cold War was big. And Russia seemed such a fascinating place. So, I went to study international affairs. But in my sophomore year, when you begin to think about what major you're gonna declare, and the counselors are talking to you, I told them that that's what I was interested in, and maybe the State Department or some kind of foreign job. And he says, Do you know what women do in the foreign service? I said, No, that's what I'm here to learn. And he said, They stamp passports. And I was silly enough to believe him. So, I switched to political science.

So, that wasn't true; he was just trying to … what was the point of that, of dissuading you?

I think that was probably true back then, so that would have been 1968; '67, '68.

So, he was trying to let you know that it may not be—

In reality, if I wasn't willing to stamp passports for the rest of my life, which is probably what women mostly did back then, but things, as in all fields, has moved quite a bit.

So, you could have done it and broken those barriers.

Maybe. But I didn't listen. I mean, I listened, but should have not listened. I kind of wonder what would have been, had it taken different turns. So, I went into political science. My junior and senior years, the Vietnam War booming, literally and figuratively. The protests were beginning. You know, being in campus only five blocks from the White House, there were tanks rolling down the street sometimes, and tear gas being thrown on the campus, which wasn't fun. So, I decided, okay, I'm gonna work on The Hill, because that's where change could come from, through senators and congressmen.

Who did you work for?

Senator Charles Mathias from Maryland; he was a progressive Republican at the time. People wrote to their senators and congressmen, and we'd get bags, and bags, and bags full of mail. And we had to respond to each piece. So, my job was, when there were over ten letters about a single topic, you'd write a form letter that sounded like you were talking directly to that person. And then, there was a machine that would … way pre-computers, but there was a machine that would match the address of the writer and the body of the letter. And then, it'd be signed, and you thought you got your own personal letter from the senator. Which he read the generalized …

M-hm.

So, he knew, and he knew how many. We kept count of X-number are in favor of this, and Y-number are against that. But it didn't feel like democracy like I had studied it as political science, and I didn't feel like we were making the kind of change that as a Baby Boomer, I thought we needed.

Oahu judge Karen Radius did not want to get channeled into a typing job, as were many women of the time. She wanted to be part of bringing change. So, she set her sights on a new career path.

One of the young male staffers who was an attorney said to me, Karen, just take the LSAT. Which is the law school admissions test. Don't tell anybody you're gonna take it, don't send the scores any place. If you totally bomb out, you've wasted a day, fifty dollars to sign up for it, and two Number 2 pencils. So what? If you do well, send the scores some place. And so, I followed his advice, and here I am.

You hadn't considered law school?

No. No.

That's really open. So, you went and took the test, and did well. It's a tough test.

Yup.

And what proportion of students in law schools were females then?

About three or four percent.

Is that right?

Yeah.

So, you were an oddity.

Right.

Did you feel like you had to prove yourself?

There were still professors who would do things like say, Can you please stand up as you give your answer, because I like to see the proportions of my opponent. And you walked in the library, and people closed the door as you entered. So, it wasn't blatant. You didn't get worse grades 'cause you were a woman. You didn't get worse classes.

It was a social atmosphere.

I had one young man say to me, You know, my friend didn't get in; you've got his seat. But generally, people were nice, and I just stayed, and as more women came in, life went on.

After her second year at George Washington University Law School, Judge Karen Radius joined her college roommate Judy Sobin on a trip to Hawaii for the summer. She didn't know it at the time, but Hawaii would become her permanent home.

I had come here to Hawaii between my second and third years of law school for a summer job, 'cause there was no UH Law School at the time, and my college roommate had come here with her husband, and he was going to UH master's in urban planning program. There was something about Hawaii. I just felt at home when I got off the plane.

What made you feel at home when you got off the plane? I mean, you hadn't seen it yet.

I don't know; I just did. I worked for Brook Hart's firm the summer between second and third years of law school. They were doing a lot of law reform cases, they were doing a lot of criminal cases, but doing them very well, and lots of interesting cases. So, the work seemed exciting. I was meeting a lot of younger lawyers. The racial and ethnic makeup and background of so many different kinds of people. And the mountains and the ocean. You know, it just felt good.

A year later, after graduating from law school, Judge Karen Radius returned to the islands to take the Bar Exam.

I came here to take the Bar, 'cause I had a federal job offer in North Carolina, and you could be licensed any place. So, I came here to take the Bar, hedging my bets that while I'm here studying for the Bar, I could still be looking for work here.

Because you didn't want to go to the safe federal job?

I might own that horse farm in North Carolina now if I'd done that safe job. I don't know. Oh; as opposed to my little plot.

But this was where you preferred to be.

Oh, yeah. I got offered a job two weeks before the Bar. Legal Aid called two weeks before.

How'd you feel about working for Legal Aid?

It was fine with me.

Yeah?

Yeah.

So, that means you served many of the poorest people in the area.

Absolutely.

Lots of family law.

No; actually, at that point, we were divided into divisions, and I was doing welfare law. So, I was doing your benefits were stopped, or the State wasn't complying with the Federal laws about welfare benefits, food stamp benefits, Medicaid. So, I was doing more the keep your life and soul together …

So, that means you met people and saw individual stories of things that had happened which required government assistance.

Absolutely; yeah.

So, in two jobs, then, with the defense law firm, Brook Hart's firm and with Legal Aid, you're basically on the other side of the State; right?

I'm meeting the real people; yeah.

Yeah; yes.

Absolutely.

Underdogs, is what I would call it. How'd you feel about that? And it's not big money jobs, either, necessarily.

Correct; right.

So, is that what you were looking for? You didn't care about the money, and you wanted to help people who needed the help, who didn't have much? Was that a goal, or just how that unfolded?

I didn't become a lawyer to make money. I became a lawyer because ... I didn't want to type. And because I believe that some of the most resilient people I've met are people who have been, quote, underdogs. And they had potential, and good things to add to the state. So, doing that kind of law was perfectly fine with me.

You saw a lot of misery.

Yes; yeah. But the people who are in the midst of their problems don't come in with, I'm in the midst of a lot of misery. They come in with, I've got this problem, and I gotta solve it because I'm getting evicted, because I can't feed my kids, 'cause ... they weren't drama queens. Let's put it that way. So, they had resiliency, despite the fact that they lived in situations that were really challenging. When I left Legal Aid, you knew when it was time to leave. Because I used to keep graham crackers in my desk, because the people would come and they'd always bring their kids, and their kids were always hungry. So, I gave the kids coloring stuff and graham crackers while we talked about the case. And you knew it was time to leave when you just got a little bit tired shopping for graham crackers.

After five years, Judge Karen Radius left Legal Aid for private law practice. Along the way, she married future court administrator, Russell Tellio.

So, I worked for about nine months for Harriet Bouslog, who was a legend in her own right. And then, Norman Lau and Susan Arnett and I, all three of us at Legal Aid, decided we were gonna open our own firm. So, we did that January 2, 1980. And the three of us worked together for a while, and then Susan decided she wanted to do criminal stuff, and Norman and I didn't. So, we became Radius and Lau, and stayed that way for thirteen years, until I got to be a judge.

Why did you become a judge?

This is gonna sound really silly. When my kids were born in 1985, I had twins. And Norman and I were doing a real varied civil law practice. So, you'd have to always be one step ahead of the clients, and learn a lot of different things all the time. So, having children, I knew that I needed to specialize in something, because trying to be such a generalist was ... I needed time at home with the kids.

And you had two at once.

Yes. Yeah; yeah, yeah. Yeah. You know, you have to sleep once in a while.

In 1993, Karen Radius was appointed as a judge to the First Circuit Family Court on Oahu. She presided over cases involving divorce, child custody, domestic abuse, and juvenile law. Much like her time at Legal Aid, she matter-of-factly looked for the up-side in people facing tough situations.

It's a place you could be a peacemaker. You may not be able to stop the divorce, but if you can focus the parents on the children and on preserving the assets they have for the children's best interest, and coming up with a visitation and custody plan that's in the kids' best interest, you can bring peace. Or if not total peace, at least ratchet things down. If you're doing an adoption, that's the fun part of family law. So, you leave the stress and the sweat in the waiting room and come into the courtroom, where there's balloons and happy people, and pictures and congratulations. The other thing about being a Family Court judge is, if the judge can portray some kind of calm and can manage the courtroom in a way that it's not just total havoc, the people can focus a little bit better about what they need to do, and what's next, and how to bring some kind of resolution to the problems that are there. And sometimes, you can't bring peaceful resolutions; you just make a decision when it happens, and they're unhappy with you, and they're unhappy with their life.

While working as a Family Court judge, Karen Radius began to notice an alarming trend within the juvenile cases. The number of girls who were arrested and brought to court was dramatically increasing. In 2004, she confronted the problem head-on by creating a new program called Girls Court.

In the days that I was a Legal Aid lawyer in Waianae in the 70s, there was hardly ever a girl brought to juvenile court. Girls weren't arrested. It was all boys. And over time, the programs and the method of dealing with things were built for boys, 'cause that's who the system was. But as time went on, more and more girls started to be arrested. And the programs weren't built for them, and juvenile court really wasn't helping the girls at all. So, in about 2003, I was sitting at detention home, where you go every morning for a week in a row, every four weeks. And all of a sudden, there's just so many girls appearing in front of me. And I'm thinking, Maybe it's just the luck of the draw, 'cause that's based on who got arrested. You gotta see a judge within forty-eight hours of getting arrested. And so, I went back to the courthouse and I'm saying, you know, Boy, out of thirteen kids, ten were girls. Is it just me? Am I somehow a girl magnet? What is this? And they said, No, no, no, we still have to do some research. And at that point, forty-two percent of the arrests in Honolulu were girls. Nationally, it was about between twenty and twenty-five percent, but Honolulu was forty-two percent.

I wonder why?

We arrest a lot for runaway, and we have a lot of runaway girls. And girls tend to act out not so much against other people, although there are some assaults on unrelated people, et cetera. But there's a lot of act out against the boyfriend, act out against the mother. And then, drugs are a problem. Act out against themselves, by taking or

possessing, or dealing drugs. So, I talked to Judge Wong, who was then the lead judge of Family Court, the senior judge, and she was doing some rearrangement of people's caseloads, and so, she wanted to move some of my cases. She says, I know you're gonna be mad. I said, No, I'm not gonna be mad if you let me do Girls Court. She said, What's that? And I said, I don't know, but we gotta do something. And she said, Okay.

So, you were convinced you couldn't fix it by transforming juvenile court.

Well, it's still a part of juvenile court. It's a transformation of—not every girl who gets arrested in Honolulu goes to Girls Court. Girls Court is the girls who aren't succeeding on regular probation. So anyway, we looked at what's going on in the girls' life, not just what she did. 'Cause often, a sentence or a disposition is based on, You did X-crime, X-thing, and therefore, you must do the following community service, you must do the following anger management, et cetera. But what else is there going on in her life that gets her in the situation that make it that she's acting out like this?

And she's a revolving door.

And she's a revolving door. You know, she's not going to school for long periods of time. The old days, you would put her in detention home for two weeks and say, Okay, write an essay on why education is important to you. She didn't know. And she'd write the essay, and she'd be scared for a while, and she'd go to school for maybe two, three weeks, and then the whole thing would start again. And the next run would happen or the next truancy would happen; back and forth. So, we weren't looking at the underlying causes. So, Girls Court is all about getting, you know, the whole family working on the relationships within the family. And the probation officers are still probation officers, but they're also not just, Did you comply with the court's order and what the court told you to do, but let's figure out your life and let's come up with a life's plan for you.

In 2010, Judge Karen Radius retired as a fulltime judge to help take care of her aging mother and her mother-in-law. At the time of our conversation in 2015, she'd returned to work as a per diem or part-time Family Court judge.

Let's say the top three things you've done in your life that you really feel proud of.

My kids, number one. And watching them grow and develop, and lead their lives, and make the choices they make, one way or the other. Girls Court … jeez.

Well, top two is good.

We narrowed it down to two.

I don't know.

I'm just thinking from a balance of power situation. You know, this is not the old model of husband and wife, where the wife is the judge. Was that hard to handle sometimes?

Not for me. No. We didn't bring our work home. And those times that I would say something that I wasn't happy about something, Russ would say, Slavery ended in the 1860s, if you don't like the job, find another one. So, okay, I'm not gonna complain at home.

And you have twins.

Right.

Tell us a little bit about them, about how they were influenced by two parents working in the law.

My son's a lawyer, although he has a sticker on his bike and it said, Born to fish, forced to work. So, in a perfect world, he might want to fish. But no; he's a lawyer, he's a good lawyer. My daughter, when she was probably about five or six, I said to her, You know, are you going to work when you get married and have children? Because being old school, I still felt a little bit of guilt about, I'm working. And she says, Of course, I'm gonna work. But I'm not gonna be a lawyer; that's boring. So, at six, she already decided it's boring. So, she's a scientist; she's a biomedical engineer, and smarter than me.

Did you think of your kids as you were in court, you know, passing judgments?

Yeah; I thought about my kids. Because of confidentiality of the cases, I couldn't talk about the cases to the kids. But I've said things sometimes to the kids, and my son when he was little, used to say, Mom, you always know that all, and you're all so worried about evil stuff. You know, you just don't know the real world.

And I said, Oh, Andrew, your father and I have worked so hard so that you don't know about the real world.

Founding Judge Karen Radius' concept of Girls Court has now spread to several states on the continent. At the time of our conversation in the summer of 2015, she continues to be an advocate for at-risk youth inside and outside the courtroom. Judge Radius volunteers for several nonprofits, and is the president of Surfrider Spirit Sessions, a nonprofit that uses the lessons of surfing to help transform the lives of at-risk youth. Mahalo to Judge Karen Radius of Kailua, Windward Oahu for sharing your story with us. And thank you, for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, hui hou.

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What did your mother say to you after she saw you become a judge?

She wished I'd been a beautician, 'cause I'd be home more.

Truly?

Yes; yeah, seriously. When I first went off to college, she said, Do this for you and for me. And I was, quite frankly, a little bit ... It's for me; what you do mean for you? But having a daughter now myself, I understand.

[END]