

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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My grandfather, you know, having Highway Inn and having the memories of going to this little store on Depot Road with the tall green chairs, it was a time period of people just sitting together as complete strangers and eating, and sharing their foods, you know. And he told my father when my father took over; he said to my dad, As long as you have this business, you can support your family.

Monica Toguchi is the third generation owner of Highway Inn, a longtime Hawaiian restaurant that serves up local favorites like lau lau, poi, and pipikaula. She didn't plan on taking over the business, but she did, and she needed to answer the question: How do you take a beloved but aging business from Waipahu, Oahu and keep it vibrant in the 21st century? Monica Toguchi, 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. A common dilemma with multigenerational family businesses in Hawaii is the question of who will carry on after one generation retires. We see how many multigenerational family businesses have not survived. Under Monica Toguchi, the third generation owner of Highway Inn, the family Hawaiian restaurant has not only survived, but has expanded into new neighborhoods. Monica's roots are firmly planted in the old plantation town of Waipahu, Oahu, with her grandfather, Seiichi Toguchi, who started Highway Inn in 1947 to feed his growing family.

My grandfather was born and raised in Hawaii. And you know, my grandfather loved Hawaiian food. He had a lot of Hawaiian friends who taught him how to make pipikaula. But he was picked up by the American government when Pearl Harbor was bombed. My grandmother did not know where he was for about two months. And then, when they did find out, he was in Durham, Arkansas. And so, she and the first three eldest children, my Auntie Barbara, my Auntie Jonette, my Auntie Shirley, they moved to Durham, Arkansas at the time. And then, he was transferred during the war to Tule Lake. And for people that are familiar with Japanese American history, Tule Lake was one of those places that you just didn't want to go to.

It had a reputation; that's where they sent the troublemakers.

Correct. Right; correct. So, from my understanding, or my limited understanding, the American government would classify different groups of Japanese Americans. You know, you're very pro-Japanese, or you're moderate. And Tule Lake was one of those internment camps that a lot of people that were assumed to be very pro-Japanese were placed. For reasons unknown to us—my grandfather was no one of prominence during that time, he didn't have the restaurant, he was just a working husband and father, he didn't have any power within the community, so it's huge mystery to us why they picked him up, but they did. And so, towards the end of the war in 1945, my father, who took over Highway Inn, was born in the internment camp. My grandparents left with three children, and came back with five. So, they were pretty busy in the internment camp. And one of the things the American government did was, they identified people's occupation within the internment camp. So, my grandfather listed cook. And so, what they did was, they put him in the mess hall along with other Japanese American cooks. And so, that's why Highway Inn has a history of having Hawaiian and American foods. That's where he learned how to cook hamburger steak and sirloin cutlets, was from being in a mess hall in an internment camp with other Japanese American cooks from around the country, and my grandfather really had to figure out how he was going to support now five children. And what ended up happening was, he decided to go back. He tried several things before he started Highway Inn. He tried to raise pigs, but the pigs got skinnier, not fatter.

Oh.

So, he realized, Okay, I'm not a pig farmer. And at that time, a lot of Okinawans were pig farmers.

That's right.

So, my grandfather started Highway Inn in 1947. He only had a second grade education.

There he is.

Yeah. So, that's my grandfather and my grandmother. They were very, very poor. But it went to my father in the late 70s. At the time that my grandfather was ready to retire, he was considering closing Highway Inn. But my father really felt that, you know, it's been around for thirty years, and it was something that he wanted to try to continue, even though restaurant and cooking was not his thing. So, I had another uncle who had worked alongside my grandfather, got a lot of his culinary training during Vietnam, and came back to work with him. But he would not pass the restaurant down to this particular uncle.

Is this the uncle?

That's my father's older uncle, my Uncle George. So, my father has two brothers, one older than him, and one younger than him. But the business got passed down to him, and he's the second boy, which is very atypical for, you know, Japanese American families. And he was the third youngest.

Did the other boys want the business?

I'm not too sure about that. At that time, my Uncle George was working for Oahu Sugar Mill. And I think my Uncle Gary, my dad's younger brother that worked alongside my grandfather, helped us to continue the cooking, you know, thirty years after my grandfather had exited the business. So, my Uncle Gary was very instrumental in being able to keep the family recipes consistent to the way that my grandfather had cooked it. And my father was also very disciplined, and I think my grandfather knew that. He typically would describe himself as being a karate man. So, I think my grandfather innately understood that my father had the kind of qualities that a restaurant would require.

Under the second generation ownership of Bobby Toguchi, Highway Inn continued to thrive in Waipahu, Oahu. Monica Toguchi grew up around the restaurant and nearby, in the newly-developed planned community of Mililani.

So, I was born at Kapiolani Hospital, and I was raised primarily in the Waipahu and Mililani areas. So, Waipahu because my father is from that community, and our business Highway Inn is from that community. My parents bought a house in Mililani, so for most of my upbringing, I went to Mililani Uka, I went to Wheeler Intermediate, and then, I went to Mililani High School thereafter. Every Sunday, my grandfather would cook Sunday meals for all my cousins and his children and their spouses, and we would all gather at his house in Waipahu. And so, we would go to Depot Road and my grandfather would typically either feed us tripe and rice or beef stew and rice.

And you loved it.

And I loved it. And when my father took over, we ate a lot of beef stew and rice at home. Because my mom at that point had four children, four girls to raise, my father was working long hours at the restaurant, and so he would bring over the leftovers, you know, home. And so, we would pretty much eat what they cooked almost every day.

What were your years like after high school? You know, young adulthood.

I'm not proud to say this, but it was definitely a time where there was a great deal of unsuccessful relationships and, you know, poor decision making. I had moved out of my parents' house probably when I was about seventeen, and I ended up getting

married at quite a young age, you know, around twenty-one. I had my daughter at twenty-two, I had my son before I was twenty-five, you know, so I was a very young mother. And as a consequence to some of, you know, the not-so-good decisions, I found myself in a very, you know, difficult situation in regards to how do I raise my children on my own. My twenties was really a difficult time, but during that process, the one thing that I stayed true to was my education. So, you know, I finished up my master's degree in counseling at the University of Hawaii. One of my first jobs was working at Waipahu Intermediate School. And on the first day that I was there, there was—and I think it's gotten a lot better today, but at the time that I was there, there was a gang-related fight. And so, I believe what they called it at the time was a Code Red, which was a really high level of security, and you know, the police get involved. And I was just thinking to myself, you know, I've been in this Waipahu community my whole entire life, so it wasn't that I was a stranger to some of, you know, the issues of our community, but also at the same time, you know, I was a bit nervous to, you know, try to figure out, well, you know, how much is the situation gonna escalate before it gets better. And that experience was one of the reasons why I ended up wanting to get my PhD. I really went into graduate school thinking that, you know, I would try to understand more about juvenile delinquency.

Monica Toguchi pursued her new dream of earning a PhD. As a single mom in her twenties, Monica packed up her two young children and moved to the University of Oregon to attend graduate school.

You know, a lot of people would ask me, How'd you do it? And I think when you're young, that's the beauty of being young. You know.

What did your family say?

I never really told them what I was doing until it was time to catch the plane. And the response really, was really quite an interesting one to me. It was one, actually, that I didn't appreciate. It was a very gender and cultural stereotypical response that, as a mother, I really should focus on my children. And in my mind, I felt that, you know, making these educational decisions was really for the benefit of my children.

While still working on her PhD at the University of Oregon, Monica Toguchi was abruptly summoned back home to her family in Hawaii.

My father never complained once of being overworked, and supported his family. And then, he then prematurely had to exit. Like so many business owners, you know, they suffer from high blood pressure. You know, the business is foremost, typically they neglect their health in the process until it catches up with them, and they have a life-changing moment. And so, for my father, it was a brain aneurism in the basal ganglia, which is very close to the brain stem, so it's one of those situations where if you suffer an

aneurism and it's close to the brain stem, there's nothing you can do. You just have to wait it out. Amazingly, he survived, but he also had to take it easier from that point on. And when my dad was recovering at, you know, Rehab of the Pacific, my sister Regina and I were in his bed, and my father was trying to get out of the bed. You know, he actually had an alarm. You know, when people, they try to get out of bed and they're not supposed to, an alarm goes off. So, he had one of those, because he was very stubborn and, you know, wanted to get back to work. But you know, he was in bed, and my sister and I were like, Okay, so who's gonna take over the business? And she just immediately said, Well, I don't want to take over the family business, I really just don't want to have the lifestyle that Dad, you know, has, which is working constantly, seven days a week, hundred-hour work weeks. And my sister was smart enough to think through that and to recognize that that's not the kind of lifestyle that she wanted.

What did you say?

You know, I was probably in my late twenties at the time, and I looked at her and I said, Great, I don't have to fight you for it, then. In many ways, I always felt that it perhaps was my responsibility, it was perhaps my kuleana, if you will. So, I thought perhaps at some point in life, I would need to address that, but what I didn't anticipate was, I didn't anticipate that it would come so soon. There was probably an idea in my head, probably mostly created on my own, that you know, it was my responsibility to make sure that if this business was gonna continue, that would be my responsibility to bear.

But you had been deferring that.

Well, A, I didn't want to count on it, because I did not know what my father's plans were. He never explicitly said, This is what I want to do.

M-hm.

I think he was quite pleased. So, you know, I think as most multigenerational family owners ... typically, I think it's safe to say that most parents don't force their children. They really want their children to come to that decision on their own. You know, because when people are able to come to those decisions on their own, it really becomes the best decision for that person and for the business itself. Because it doesn't feel like it was forced upon you.

But heavy is the crown.

Heavy is—right.

If you say no, what happens to the business?

Right; right.

Do you want to be the one who stepped out?

Right. And also too, you know, there's statistics out there that multigenerational businesses don't really ... there's not a lot of confidence in succession. So, you know, there's about thirty percent of businesses that will go from the first generation to the second generation, and then that percentage actually decreases to twelve percent from the second generation to the third generation. And typically, you know, they say that it's the third generation that screws it up.

Or that the third generation is soft.

Right. You know, we don't have the character, you know, traits, we kinda squander away all the hard work that was built.

How do you feel about that observation, or opinion?

You know, because the restaurant is such a difficult business, you know, my sister used to say this. You know, no matter twelve-hour or fifteen-hour days, failure is just simply not an option.

Monica Toguchi's father Bobby survived his stroke; however, he no longer ran the family business. Monica became the third generation owner of Highway Inn, and eventually gave up her pursuit of a doctoral degree to focus on running the business. And then, in 2011, hard times struck the family again.

I lost my son about five years ago. And you know, he died by suicide, and that was a really, really difficult thing. You know, every other day here in Hawaii, somebody dies from suicide, and there are so many people that are affected by it, but we don't talk about it. And the Kakaako store was named in his memory, so I named the business—the legal name of Kakaako is Hoola Mau. And ola is life, you know, mau is to move forward, to move life forward. And that was my thing. But my son really ... I think a lot of us, you know, when you're faced with those kinds of tragedies, you try to make sense, you ask a lot why questions. But really, at the same time, it's, you know, how do you take something that is so personal and so tragic, and not become paralyzed by it. And I had to just, you know, really keep it together. And Highway Inn and the business itself really, I think, helps me to do that. You know, at that time, we had about forty, forty-five employees, and I knew that if I was paralyzed or incapacitated mentally by my son's passing and having to address that, go through that emotional process of healing, you know, if that took me under, then the lives of my staff would be affected. And so, that really gave me the motivation to think beyond my own tragedy, and to think outside of myself. And sometimes, when I'm really like in the thick of it all, you

know, how I recognize that, you know, this is gonna pass, tomorrow will be a better day. And you know, when you go through something that tough, anything in comparison is really not that challenging.

Monica Toguchi persevered after the loss of her son and continued to channel her energy into rebuilding and creating. At the time of this conversation in 2016, Highway Inn has grown to seventy employees, in three locations. The business caters, as well.

How many outlets or how many businesses are part of Highway Inn now?

So, when I came onboard, we had Waipahu, and at that time, we probably had about thirty-five employees or so on the payroll. And then, the opportunity came to partner with Kamehameha Schools; we were approached by Kamehameha Schools. They came out to Waipahu, and they saw what we were doing, you know, and they felt that it would be a good fit for what was up and coming in Kakaako and what their vision was for their lands in Kakaako. So, one of the struggles for me personally was, how do you take an old business like Highway Inn that in the next year, we'll be celebrating our seventieth anniversary, and how do you then put that kind of business into a very urban, up-and-coming neighborhood like Kakaako? You know. The natural partnerships in an urban community like that would be to find an operation that was trendy, that was, you know, hip and cool. And here we are, coming into, you know, the coolest part of Honolulu, and we have this very old quaint place.

Isn't there a Hawaiian proverb that says, Look to the future by looking to the past?

M-hm; m-hm. Or, you know, you need to know where you've been to know where you're going. And so, that happened, and we opened our Kakaako location in October of 2013. And then, last year in September, we were also very fortunate. This process had started about a year before the partnership was solidified, but we had the opportunity to partner with Bishop Museum. You know, a lot of things did not come easy for me in my life. A lot of people may think that, you know, because we have Highway Inn and the brand that it has become today, you know, I think it's easy to assume that I was given a silver spoon, you know, and perhaps, you know, I might have been born in a life of privilege. But it certainly wasn't that way.

What do you think your grandfather would have made of a woman taking over Highway Inn—you?

I'm not really sure if he had a premonition of some sort. But my grandfather passed away in 1994. And I had said goodbye to my grandfather. He at the time was hospitalized for a couple months before that. And I went to the Waipahu house, he was in his wheelchair, and I said goodbye to my grandfather. And he cried. And my mother and I went back into our car, and my mother was like, You know, that was really

strange for him to cry. And it kind of stuck in my mind. And what had happened was, he then passed away about two months later, and I got a phone call in California, my parents telling me that my grandfather had passed away. So, that was really the last time that I saw him. But you know, I think my grandfather, if he were alive today, he would be about a hundred and one years old. He was a very humble man; I don't think he would believe what he started would have grown to what it is today. And I think some of my best moments is, you know, like when you feel like you've finally arrived. You have those moments where you feel like you've finally arrived, is when Senator Inouye came to visit us a couple months before he passed away. And out in Kakaako, Senator Akaka, you know, visiting us, and you know, Governor and former governors, and you know, we have so many movers and shakers.

Highway Inn on the map.

You know, yeah. And we have so many movers and shakers that we typically read about in the paper that make a difference in our communities, and I don't think my grandfather would have ever imagined that these are the people that his business would be feeding one day.

You know, speaking of the family business, the family is about to look different.

M-hm.

You're engaged, you're going to be married soon.

I am. So, I have been very fortunate. When I came back from Oregon, I was, you know, thinking about who I wanted to be with, what kind of person I would be with. And you know, when you gain these kinds of experiences outside of Hawaii, it really expands your understanding of the rest of the world. And in my mind, I thought, you know, I really want to date somebody that, you know, can appreciate what is here, and the culture that we have, but also understand, you know, parts of my life that I've been exposed to living on the mainland for five years. So, I met Russell, and he's actually British, and he was part of Aloha Airlines, and then he was part of Hawaiian Airlines, and he eventually became an investor into our Kakaako business. And so, about two years ago, he came onboard fulltime, and so, he's my chief financial officer, my chief commercial officer, he's a great visionary, great finance person. What it's allowed me to do is really focus my time on everything outside of the finance parts of the business. And so many decisions are made on understanding, you know, the data that you collect. You know, how many people come in, what the average check size is, you know, whether your traffic is going up, going down. You know, and you base your decisions on these things. And so, he's been a wonderful asset. And after nine years, it took us nine years, but after nine years, we decided we would get married.

We're speaking in 2016. As you approach the business' seventieth anniversary, is it still touch-and-go sometimes in business? I mean, do you assume there'll be a fourth and a fifth generation?

No. You know, so my father had four girls, you know, my grandfather had seven kids. So, there were options there; right? So, out of the four girls, the only, you know, fourth generation is my daughter, who's twenty-one, and she's studying in New York. And you know, I always describe my daughter; she's, you know, artsy-fartsy. It's not one of those things that, you know, as much as we have done pretty well for ourselves, I don't think it's a natural choice, even for my cousins or my cousins' children, that that's something that they want to participate in. Because I think they recognize it's a lot of hard work. I do hope that it continues. How specifically is a big question mark.

Third generation Highway Inn owner Monica Toguchi continues to look toward the future, while honoring the legacy of her family business. In a recent interview with Honolulu Magazine, she said, If you understand who you are and what values are truly important to you, evolving is not as difficult as it may appear to be. Mahalo to Monica Toguchi of Honolulu 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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I have not gotten sick of eating my own food. I try not to eat the lau lau, because the lau lau at Highway Inn is a very precious commodity right now. We just cannot keep up with the demand, so there are times when, you know, we run out of lau lau by the end of the day. And so, I try to not eat the lau lau, because I think if I eat a lau lau, then somebody is gonna come in and not be able to order this item.

[END]