

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: KEVIN MATSUNAGA

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Our kids have to deal with a lot more nowadays. They can't make mistakes like we could. You know, with social media, if they make a mistake it's film that's put out there, and it's, you know, hard for them. But they're also the most tech-savvy people that we have. You know, the kids that are going to want to put in the work are gonna do it. I do see it's kind of a shift in where you don't have as many that maybe want to do the work. This whole millennial thing in which people are lazy and things like, that I mean, I see some of it. Luckily, the kids that I work with, you know, they want to be there, they're interested in this, and it's easy for me to kinda push them, because they want to be there. That makes a huge difference.

It isn't just by luck that Kevin Matsunaga has students in his digital media classes who want to be there, and who want to excel. His dedication, encouragement, and belief in his middle school students have a lot to do with why they win national student video competitions. Kauai public school teacher Kevin Matsunaga, 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. Kevin Matsunaga was a teacher's son who had no intention of becoming a teacher. But life happens. Trained on Oahu, he serves today as a teacher and technology coordinator at Chiefess Kamakahelei Middle School in Lihue. At the time of our conversation in December of 2016, he was well into his sixteenth year of teaching there, an award-winning digital media teacher, and he's a leader in the statewide teachers' steering committee which advises Hiki No, PBS Hawaii's groundbreaking student news network. When he was a boy, his father saw that he was good at organizing and taking care of his younger cousins at family gatherings. Yet, the idea of becoming a teacher never appealed to Matsunaga. In fact, there wasn't much about school that he found interesting.

We lived in Lihue. In fact, you know, we actually still live there now. Life was really easy and simple. My father was an educator, so he knew all of my teachers. So that made it a little bit hard for me, 'cause I was kinda more the kolohe one, tried to be, you know, class clown or whatever. But it was nice. You know, back then, I could get on my bike,

and that was my freedom. I could go anywhere I wanted to, and my parents didn't really seem to mind too much.

No cell phones.

No cell phones, no GPS tracker, no call in to Mom to let you know. And as long as I was home by six, it was fine. If I was late, then there would be a problem with my dad, 'cause he was the one that cooked.

So, he wanted you there for dinner.

He wanted me there for dinner. Yeah; 'cause my mom worked at the hospital in the evening shift, so she was gone from three to eleven. And so, my dad was the one that, you know, when we came home school, he was the one making sure we had our homework done, made sure we took a bath.

Your dad was of Japanese ancestry.

Yes.

Your mom was from Brooklyn, New York.

Yes.

Irish woman.

M-hm.

How did that work? How did those cultures mesh with you?

I guess I consider myself more Asian, I guess, in the sense that we lived in Hawai'i. My mom was considered like a Haole in the sense that, you know, she came from the mainland. But she really took to the local ways. She really saw the aloha spirit. And so, whenever we would go to family get-togethers, my mom would always be one to help out; she would never sit. Even if it wasn't at our house, she would always get up, and always help out and wash dishes, you know, put things away. And so, I think our family saw that, and you know, she really embraced that sense of 'ohana and aloha. I think she was wonderful as a mother.

You said later, you came to appreciate your dad more.

My dad, it was pretty, you know, black and white. You know, if we didn't do something, if a teacher called us for any reason, it was ... I don't care what you have to

say, if your teacher had to take the time to call me about something, you know, you're doing something wrong. And so, it was tough, and back then, I really didn't understand what they were doing. I just felt it as being real constrictive and overbearing. And you know, when I was in high school, I had a curfew. And I had a girlfriend who could stay out longer than I could. So, it's kind of embarrassing to have to tell the girlfriend, I gotta go home, 'cause I gotta meet my curfew. But only when I became an adult and had my own kids, then I kinda realized, you know, that what they were doing was a good thing. You know, kept me from trouble, and made me responsible.

You have teenagers now.

I do. And, yes ... seeing what what they did for me, you know, at the time I didn't appreciate it. And in fact, my relationship with my father was kinda rough when I was in high school, just because he valued education a lot, 'cause he was an educator. And I was more of the ones that, you know, I was happy with getting a C, I was happy with being the lower one in the class in the top class, but not really pushing myself too much. 'Cause I was more worried about who I was gonna go out with on the weekend, or what my friends were gonna do.

I would think that when a son goes into the same profession as his father, I think people tend to think, Oh, of course, you know, you wanted to do that from the beginning. Did you?

No. Growing up, I was always the one that seemed to have to take care of my younger cousins. So, we'd have a party, a family get-together, and our family was pretty large. My dad had several brothers and sisters. And so, we would have these large gatherings, and I had younger cousins, and I would always seem to be the one that was kinda taking care of them, making up games, keeping them occupied while the adults did their thing. And so, I just enjoyed that; I just enjoyed playing with them, kinda connecting with them, and just trying to keep them entertained, I guess. And so, it was my father, though; he was the first to say, Hey, you know, I've noticed that you really work well with kids, and so, you might want to think about being a teacher. I didn't really find myself, as far as you know, taking school seriously until I was in college. It wasn't until my second year in college in which I thought, Okay, like, I can't fool around. This is my parents' money, and this is my life I gotta deal with. And and I had always wanted to make them proud. And so, I just always wanted to kinda, you know, make them happy. And so, I think once I started buckling down, started getting better grades, and taking it seriously, then our relationship changed, you know, much better. Yeah.

'Cause he took your behavior really personally.

Yeah. And I think he always knew that I had what it took to do well, but I just didn't apply myself. And I kind of feel the same way, too, with my kids. If I don't see them trying hard, I get upset. And so, I'm kind of similar. It's like, even though we try not to be our parents, we somehow still do become them.

Right.

Kevin Matsunaga took a teaching job on Oahu as soon as he earned his degree in elementary education from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Wanting to look out for his father after his mother died brought him back to Kauai.

Once I was in the College of Ed, I got a job at the A-Plus program at Hokulani Elementary School behind the dorms. And I loved it. I loved, you know, interacting with them. And I kinda knew that, okay, I think this is what I want to do.

And you met and married, along the way.

Yeah. So, my wife was actually my boss in the A-Plus program. And I was her aide. I taught on Oahu for seven years, and that's kinda like towards the end is where things happened with our family. And in 2000, we moved back to Kauai, and I was able to open a brand new middle school that was, you know, coming on board. And so, I got to be there from the very beginning and kinda helped shape how things were at the school.

And Chiefess Kamakāhelei is a very interesting middle school, for those who are used to old school buildings, because everything about it is really built with middle-schoolers in mind.

We have different houses for each grade level. And if you go into the sixth grade house, there's less planters, because kids as sixth-graders, they just want to move around. You go to the eighth grade house, they have a lot more planters, places for kids to sit, because eighth-graders just want to sit and hang, and talk story, or go on their devices. And so, yeah, our school, you know, they took a lot of feedback from a lot of people in how middle-schoolers act, and what kind of space they need, and they put it into the school. So, you know, here seventeen years later, it still looks fantastic. We have an awesome staff that keeps it looking like a new school. And when we have visitors for the first time, they often ask, Is this a private school? We do have, you know, quite a bit of the population that needs some assistance.

At what point did digital media kick in with you?

When I applied for the job, the principal, Maggie Cox, at the time—she's a board member for the Board of Ed now. But she knew this was gonna be the school that

everyone was gonna look at for technology. So, she said in the interview, I want a morning announcements show, I want it live, I want it live TV. So, instead of, you know, when we were going up to school, you had, you know, someone coming on the PA system, playing the bells, you know.

Ding-ding-ding.

Yeah.

And so, she wanted it on TV. She had seen other schools do it, and so, that was one of the requirements. And I was like, Sure, I can do that. But I really hadn't done that up to that point. I had worked with kids creating videos at my other school, but nothing was live. And so, I was like, Okay, I gotta figure out how to do this. I love computers and gadgets, and so as a teacher, I always tried to bring in some sort of technology aspect into it. So, I had my students—they had pen pals in Florida, you know, at that time through email. We did all kinds of things. And so, this was one thing that we did. And I was sharing this project at a technology conference that the DOE used to sponsor, and across from us, across from my booth was a high school that had set up their things, and they had videos. So, I'm sitting there across the way, and I'm watching these videos. And like, they're really, really good. And like, Waianae High School, you know; wow, they're doing some really awesome stuff. And so, I struck a conversation up with Candy Suiso. And at that time, I wasn't really doing a lot of digital media. I just thought, Wow, that's really cool, what they're doing. But we just hit it off, and when this job came on, when they said, Hey, you gotta teach this live, or you gotta have this live morning announcement show, the first person I thought of to go for help was Candy. And so, I contacted her, and she allowed me to come out and visit the program. And that's where I got a lot of good advice, took it back to our school. At that time, I only taught an advisory class, and that class kinda ran the morning announcements, and I asked to teach one elective class. And so, that was the beginning of our media program. And then, back then, we just, you know, were doing PSAs, small kinds of videos in school. And Candy created their first, like, workshop for teachers and students. And so, she, of course, you know, let me know about it. And what we did was, I took two students to Oahu one summer, and we went to one of their first camps. And she gave us, at this camp, this binder with all of these awesome, you know, lessons in them, activities. And I kinda treated that as my digital media bible, and I used that for years and tried to, you know, supplement it with my own. Kept in contact with Candy. And she was the reason why, you know, I kinda credit her a lot with our success, because she was very, very open with sharing anything that she had to help another teacher. And so, I've tried to take that example and lead that same way, by giving, you know, anything that I have to any other teacher that's starting out.

So, there was nothing official to pick up off a shelf.

There was nothing.

Or link to.

We had nothing. You know, it was just a handful of teachers that were doing a lot with digital media. And we just helped each other. You know, we all just shared what we had, things that worked with us, things that didn't.

Isn't that interesting. And now, your group, which is called the Hawai'i Creative Media Group, is teaching other teachers on all islands.

Yeah.

It's a formalized group now.

Yeah.

Outside the DOE, but still very active in helping DOE teachers.

Yes. And you know, every single person on our team is just hugely talented. I mean, you know, they just know so much.

What do they have in common? I mean, because when you see digital media teachers in Hawai'i, it's not like you can stereotype them. Not by age, or anything else. What would you say is the common denominator?

I think the common denominator is that each one of us is dedicated to our programs. I mean, I think, like any successful program—and it could be a band, you know, that has an amazing instructor.

Needs leadership.

Yeah, you need leadership. And I think that's where all of us—what we all have in common is that we really, truly care about our students, and giving them the best opportunities that we can provide them. Going above and beyond what's called for in the school day to mentor them after school, on weekends, or setting up programs like our camps. Each person is just dedicated, you know, beyond measure. Everyone is just focused on how they can help their kids. And they don't do that for themselves. You know, they don't put their name out. It's for the kids. And so, I think you need people like that to have a successful program.

It wasn't long before Kauai's Kevin Matsunaga started entering his students in national video competitions. This required a new level of commitment, and skills and efforts that went beyond the classroom.

If you're gonna take your students to STN, or Student Television News, the really ambitious competition nationally, you have to raise money to do it. I mean, parents don't have money to take their kids to the Northeast, or wherever it's gonna be. And there are other neighbor island competitions. How do you get the money to do all of that?

We have to fundraise.

How do you do that?

You assemble a dedicated group of parents. You know, you work with them from the very beginning. You explain, okay, this is what we do, this why we do it, and here's where we want to go; but I can't do it by myself. I need support, I need parents to help work, you know, craft fairs, or you know, our breakfast, or sell cookbooks. You know. You just need to have a large number of people that are behind you. And for us, we're really lucky; we have really good parents that, you know, understand what their child gets out of the program, and so they're willing to put in that work. And it's a year-round thing. I mean, we start fundraising when we come back. We're already planning what we're doing in the summer, for next year.

How much money do you have to raise, say, just for the Student Television News competitions?

It used to cost about fifteen hundred at the lowest, up to like, twenty-eight hundred at the highest. It just kinda depends.

Per student?

Per student. And so, last year, since we went to Atlanta and New York, it was probably close to like, twenty-five hundred a student. This year, surprisingly, it's close to that. Because we're in LA, but then, nobody wants to drive in LA. You know. And so, we have to rent a bus, and buses are expensive. So, you know, a day in a bus, you know, is several hundred dollars. And we're staying at hotels that are two hundred a night, you know. And so, yeah, there are cheaper places that we could go to, you know, like the convention hotel. Even the convention hotel is two hundred a night. And so, it adds up. And so, yeah, we have to raise a huge amount of money.

So, you're teaching digital media like nobody's business, and then there's this other operation which you're also part of, which is just generating funds.

It's like I'm a professional fundraiser, almost. You know. 'Cause we're going from thing to thing. We've done carwashes, we had a golf tournament, we just had our breakfast this past weekend. And we've done craft fairs. Our digital media, Hawaii Creative Media created a cookbook this year.

I mean, so your weekends are pretty much gone for that; right?

A lot of times; yeah. And so, unfortunately, you know, my family has had to kinda take some of that on. But all of my kids have been in through my program, so they understand why it's so important, so they don't give me a hard time.

Your students need to perform quality work in a, quote, foreign city, on deadline. And no excuses. You know, no dog ate your homework; it's all about here's the deadline, if you fail to get it in, if your computer didn't render quickly enough, too bad.

It's probably the most authentic assessment that you can ever find. You know, the DOE talks about trying to get authentic assessment. But these competitions, I don't think you can find anything better than that. Yeah, like you said, the students, they have to perform, they have to be ready, they have to problem-solve if something happens. They have to navigate their way around a city that they've never been in, they have to go and find a story on a topic that they were just given that morning, and they only have a few hours to get it done.

And they have to depend on each other to do the work.

Exactly.

So, everybody's important.

Exactly.

And you have to put things aside if you have issues.

Yes. And sometimes, those lessons take a while to learn, but they get there at some point. But yeah, it's all of those things. I tell my parents and my students that, you know, digital media, yes, that's the name of our class, but we really teach a lot of life skills. You know, how to communicate with each other, how to get along with other people that, you know, you may have a hard time with. Meeting your deadlines, and being prepared for your interview, and having your equipment read, and you know, all those things.

Talking with adults, and setting up interviews.

Yeah. You know, we fully believe in that, you know, we need to teach them what they're gonna see. And so, when the deadline, when the clock hits zero, even if you're five feet away and you're ready to put your flash drive into the bucket, it's gone and you've lost that chance, 'cause you didn't make that deadline.

And an amazing thing happens, and it was chronicled in this documentary that PBS Hawai'i did about your schools going to Atlanta for the competition. The Hawai'i kids all sat together from different schools, and they cheered for each other, even when they themselves were up for the same award, and lost.

Exactly; yeah. It's something we started, you know, a couple of years back in which ... you know, it's hard to pinpoint what exactly that is, other than that's just the aloha spirit, and ... you can just see it, you can feel it. All of our schools, we all know, and the other schools know that, too. But for those of us in Hawai'i, we understand it's really hard to get there, because we have to travel, no matter where it is. We have to raise money, and you know, get your paperwork approved by the district. And you go through all of these hoops to get there, so we understand how much work is involved. And I think there's just the respect that we have for one another that, you know, when we get there ... if we don't win, but Hawai'i wins, it's still a win. And I think that's just the culture here in Hawai'i.

And the middle school PSA contest winner for 2016 is Chiefess Kamakahelei Middle School.

Hawai'i, Hawai'i, Hawai'i, Hawai'i ...

I think it's fascinating to think about, because so many people here think, Well, you know, our public schools, they're criticized for being mediocre.

M-hm.

And some of these top-performing digital media teams are coming from low-income schools or isolated schools.

Exactly.

How do you explain that?

They have good teachers. They have dedicated teachers that are willing to put in that extra effort, that believe in the kids, and will do anything to help them succeed. I mean, look at Waianae; Searider Productions is a prime example. You know, that community is known for so many other things. You know, the negative, the

homelessness, and everything else. But they've totally broken that stereotype down, you know, by the success that they have. And it's because it started with Candy, you know, and what she believed in, this idea to use digital media in her Spanish class. And then, it came down to her students, John Allen, who—

Took over for her.

Who is there, yeah.

As a teacher.

Was a former student, who totally, you know, bought into it, saw what it did for him, and he wanted to do the same for others. And so, you gotta have that person that's willing to be that dedicated person that is willing to put in those extra hours.

Even though it's often not even a regular class. You're doing it after school.

Yeah; yeah.

Or in between other projects, summers. Is there something really inspiring or life-changing that you've seen happen in your classes?

I think the thing that inspires me more than anything is just seeing that change in a child. And I think that's one of the reasons why I became a teacher, is because I like to see change. You know, so in my spare time, I like to weed in the yard, because I can see the progress that I've made, or the progress I haven't. But I like to see that progress, and teaching does that. Because you can work with a child, put in this effort, and you can see before your eyes them, you know, getting it. You know, that spark; Oh, I got it now, I understand what you're trying to say. And then, you see them apply that. That, to me, is inspiring. I mean, that's the kinda stuff that keeps me coming in every day and being a hundred percent committed, is because you see this change, and you see the kid that started with you who could barely say any words outside, wouldn't talk to you unless you asked a specific question, and then to see them grow in the time that you have them to where they're a confident, you know, young person willing to speak to anyone. I mean, that's the stuff that's inspiring, more than anything else. I think that every teacher uh, every digital media teacher pushes their kids to try to be great. And that transforms itself into other areas that the kids are working in. And I think that prepares them just for life in general.

That cuts across everything, then.

It cuts across anything. I think it doesn't matter whether it's in school, outside of school, in their personal private life. I think just knowing that you have someone who believes in

you, that wants you to do well and is not gonna let you settle for anything less than great.

Teacher Kevin Matsunaga's goal for his students is not to win contests; it's do their best. Their best often wins local and national awards. And Matsunaga has been recognized as the State Public School District Teacher of the Year. Mahalo to Kevin Matsunaga of Lihue, Kauai for your innovative teaching example, and your commitment to students year, after year, after year, preparing them for life and the workforce. And mahalo to you, for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.

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Every day is different. There are no two days that are gonna be the same. Even if you have the same students every single day, the kids are gonna come in, and some days they might have a great day, some days they may not. You know, you're teaching different subjects, you're teaching different things, and ... that's what I love best about teaching, is that every single day is different. If I got stuck in a job in which I did the same thing day-in and day-out, not too much change, it would be hard for me.