

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: Kent Keith

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Traditionally, men's careers were like the search for the Holy Grail, and women's careers were like knights-errant. The search for the Holy Grail, the idea being that you start at a profession or an organization, and went as far as you could go in search of the highest position you could get.

Men tended to move around as their career developed, and so, they would be changing locations. So, that disrupted the wife's career.

And so, when they moved to a new location, the wife would look around and say, What needs doing, and can I do it, and can get a job doing that? So that, that was more like the knight errant—

--who went out each day to find someone who needed help, and then helped them.

Um, I like that, because I think I've—I've been more on the knight errant side. You know, find something that is worth doing, and if you have the opportunity to do it, go in there and do your best.

Dr. Kent Keith has had anything but a traditional career, holding diverse prominent positions in the Hawai'i community, from attorney with a blue-chip firm to State official to real estate developer to university president—of two universities. In every role, he says he has lived a mission of helping others find personal meaning in their lives. Kent Keith next, on Long Story Short.

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

Aloha mai kakou, I'm Leslie Wilcox. When Roosevelt High School grad Kent Marsteller Keith was a sophomore at Harvard University in 1968, he wrote a motivational guide for high school student leaders. A list of 10 life lessons such as, "People are illogical, unreasonable and self-centered. Love them anyway." "If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway." "The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway." Thirty-four years later he published these aphorisms in a best-selling book, "Anyway: The Paradoxical Commandments", which

has been translated into 17 languages and sold around the world. Today the President of Pacific Rim Christian University, Dr. Keith grew up in a traveling military family.

I was actually born in Brooklyn, New York. Um, and my dad was there doing public relations for the United States Marine Corps, and then he started being transferred around, so um, I grew up in a lot of places. Couple times in California, couple times in Virginia, I was in Nebraska when my dad was in the Korean War. Um, finally, he was transferred to Hawaii, and I stopped complaining. Uh—

What was it like, making all those changes? Do you think it helped make you better at getting to know people, or was it stifling?

You know, there—there are a lot of impacts, actually. Um, first of all, it was really educational, because every time he was transferred, it was from coast-to-coast, so we drove.

Oh ...

And we'd spend a month exploring America. And so, by the time I was fourteen—arrived in Hawaii when I was fourteen, I'd already crossed the country nine times by car. And each time, we went a different way; national monuments, natural wonders, historic sites. So, it was very educational. It was also educational in learning that, you know, we are one country, and we have common beliefs and values, but we also have different subcultures. And so, you get a sense of, you know, within one nation, there area—there are differences. Um ... it was—it was hard, because I was almost always the new kid in school. Uh, so you know, you have start making new friends, an—and by the time you've really made friends, you're moving again, and you're leaving them. Uh, and that—that sort of had a—ha—had an impact. But it had one benefit, which is that you—you didn't bring any baggage. Nobody knew who you were before. So—

You could start again.

--you got—I got all these fresh starts when I was growing up. So, um, yeah, I think—I think ... for us as a family, it just pulled us closer together, because we were our community. We were the people we relied on.

So, you didn't complain every time your dad got transferred? Oh, no, not again; I gotta meet a whole bunch of new people, and—

No, actually, what happened was, after a while, I began building walls. I began saying, you know, why make friends if you're gonna lose 'em, you know, nine months later. And then, I figured out that didn't make any sense; I still wanted to have friends, and I still wanted to connect with people. So, it's all part of growing up, just figuring out, you

know ... things like, what does friendship mean, what does—what do relationships mean. And uh, so I mean, on—on balance, I think it had—had quite a bit of impact, and for me, I think it was positive.

It must have been tough. I mean, high school is particularly difficult to transfer into, and you were coming from the mainland—

M-hm.

--into Roosevelt High School, public school. What was that like at age fourteen?

Well, I had—I had an advantage.

Oh, you were at Stevenson.

I started at Stevenson. Yeah, so—

Okay.

--my ninth grade year at Stevenson—

Well, intermediate school is—

Yeah.

--is not any easier, I don't think.

No; no, it wasn't. Um, but it was a good school, and uh, I have friends that I—that—that I knew then, still today, more than fifty years later. Um, so that—that kind of got me um, uh, oriented, I guess you would say. And—

It was smaller than Roosevelt.

M-hm.

That's one thing.

Yeah. And then—and then, crossed over to Roosevelt for sophomore, junior, and senior year.

And somehow, you got elected student body president your last year at Roosevelt?

Yeah. Actually, I—I—I was student body vice president uh, junior year, and then student body president my senior year. You know—you know what I think? I think they—they—th ... in terms of the ethnic makeup, uh, there weren't that many haoles

at—at Roosevelt. Um, but I think that people figured, well, I—I would work hard. And so, yeah, let's let him be the—the student body president.

You were in many different school environments. What was it like?

Um, you know, th—the—the most interesting environments really was—was getting a sense of what it was like to be a minority. And my first experience that I remember was in eighth grade in Rhode Island, when the school was mostly African American. Um, and then coming to Hawaii, an—and realizing, you know, we can—we can work together, we—I was in lots of activities, and that really helped. Got into student government, I was in the band, I was in different clubs, and so on. And so, if you focus on doing things together, you focus on, you know, what do we want to achieve, um, a lot of the things don't matter, and you can belong, everybody can belong—

Mm.

--no matter where they're from. So, I think the extracurricular program is what really helped me the most. It wasn't—

Mm.

--so much what happened in the classroom.

Did your father and mother give you advice about breaking into new schools and new communities?

What I remember uh, was that my family wanted us to behave they wanted—the way they wanted us to behave. Um, and we were a little bit different. Um, we had chores. And if the other kids were out playing, that's fine. You'd have your time to play, but right now, you need to mow the lawn, uh, or you need to pull weeds. You know. So, the idea was, it's—it's who we think we are, you know, what our values are and what we think a family means. I mean, we're all gonna be home at dinner, we're gonna talk about what's happening. Um, and so, the worst argument I could make as a kid about doing something was, everybody else is doing it. Uh, that was not an acceptable—

M-hm.

--argument. That didn't mean anything in our family. Um, the idea was, well, you know, what's worth doing and what's balanced, an—and are you helping out with the family, and you know, are you learning what you need to learn.

As the kid of an Army officer, how did that affect you?

My dad was really, really committed. He was—he was a wonderful example of what it meant to be, you know, focused on duty, and you know, integrity, and loyalty. Um, I—uh, I—I knew that he loved us, and I knew that he loved people. His career, though, was about self-discipline an—and about getting a job done. An—and so, he modeled a lot of values. Um, he also pushed us really hard as—as kids to be everything we could be. No particular goal or job, just the best you would be at whatever you decided to do. And uh, he was an overachiever. I mean, he—he went for a hundred and fifty percent. So, you know, I figured later in life I could slack off and just go for a hundred percent.

What was your mom like?

She was there after school when we came home. We could share what our day was like, she gave us advice. Um, you know, she—she kept us um, focused on the things we needed to do. Um, she was a little more forgiving than my dad.

So, you'd go to her first; right?

That's—that's right.

Well, that was the joke. We'd come home, you know, we—we'd tell Mom how we felt, and then Dad would come home, and we'd have to intellectualize it for him.

After graduating from Roosevelt High in Honolulu, Kent Keith was off to the East Coast and Harvard University. There, at age 19, he came out with a list of 10 thoughts that he called the Paradoxical Commandments. This thought-provoking list traveled far and wide, even getting the notice of a woman who became a modern saint.

I continued to—to work with high school student leaders. But it was the 60s, so you know, a lot of conflict—uh, conflict and confrontation, uh, turmoil. And yet, a lot of idealism and a lot of hope that somehow, we could make the world uh, a better place. So, what was um, disappointing to me was seeing so many young people go out in the world to bring about change, and then seeing them come back much too quickly because the change they—they wanted wasn't achieved, and people didn't seem to appreciate what they were trying to do. So, I—I had a couple of major messages for 'em. I was traveling around the country speaking, an—an—and working at high schools and student council conventions. I said, Well, first of all, you gotta love people, because that's one of the only motivations strong enough to keep you with the people, and with the process, until change is achieved, 'cause it usually takes time. It could take a lot of time. And secondly, I said, you know, if you go out there and do what you believe is right and good and true, um, you—you're gonna get a lot of meaning. I mean, that should give you a lot of meaning and satisfaction. And—and if you have the meaning, you don't have to have the glory. The meaning—

M-hm.

--should be enough. People appreciate you, that's fine. If they don't, you're okay, you still got the meaning, that should keep you energized. So, I decided to write a booklet for them. Took me a long time to decide whether to write one at all, uh, 'cause I figured well, people know this, and you know, it's already been said. But I started writing this booklet on how to bring about change by working together. And one chapter was about love, about brotherly love they called it then, about caring about people. And it talked about—about this issue of meaning. In order to get across my point about meaning, I wrote The Paradoxical Commandments. So, each one starts with a statement of adversity, but it's followed by the positive commandment to do it anyway. So, people are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. Love them anyway. So, you start with a statement of adversity, you go into the positive commandment. And they're meant to be examples of an attitude. I mean, I wrote ten of them, because I wanted to call them commandments, and there was a precedent for ten.

M-hm.

So, I thought I'd stick with ten. But they—they weren't meant to cover everything that happens in life, just an attitude toward what happens in life. And uh, I just put it in that booklet, little sixty-five-page booklet, it was just on one page, and we sold twenty-five or thirty thousand copies around the United States, which was a pretty big deal. That was—that was quite a bit. And then, I went on with my life, and literally for thirty years, had no idea what was happening to them. Uh, what I learned later was, people were lifting The Paradoxical Commandments out of that little booklet, and they were putting them up on their walls and on their refrigerator doors, and they got into books, and they were in commencement speeches, and they traveled and traveled. And um ... in 1997, uh, I was at my Rotary Club meeting here in Honolulu, and you know, service clubs often begin with a poem or a prayer or—

M-hm.

--thought for the day. And so, my fellow Rotarian stood up at the beginning of the meeting, and he said, um, Mother Teresa passed two weeks ago, and I'd like to read a poem that she wrote. So, I kind of bowed my head to listen to this—this poem, and what I heard him read was eight of the original Ten Paradoxical Commandments, exactly as I'd written them. I was like, whoa, you know, I recognize them.

M-hm.

You know, I could sort of felt the hair rising on the back of my neck, you know, like wow. Um, so I went up to him afterwards, and I said, You know, that piece that you read, where did you get it? He said, Isn't it wonderful?

I really didn't know what to say, but I said, Well, um, actually, I wrote it. And then, he gave me uh, a really strange look. He didn't say anything—

Like you're a demented guy; right?

Exactly; delusional megalomaniac.

Claiming you'd written something by Mother Teresa; how dare you? Uh, and I said, But—but where did you get it? And he said, Well, uh, I don't know, it was in a book about Mother Teresa. Couldn't remember the title. So, I went to Borders Bookstore, and there was a whole shelf of books about Mother Teresa. So, I just started with the first book and went through every page, left to right, all the way through, and finally found it on the last page before the appendix in a—in a book called Mother Teresa, A Simple Path. And it had been rearranged to look like a poem. I don't call it a poem, actually. I just—

It was a list. And it had been retitled, Anyway, which made sense, 'cause each one ends with the word, anyway. Um ... and it didn't say Mother Teresa had written it. It said: A sign on the wall at Shishu Bhavan, the children's home in Calcutta. And that—that just really hit me, um, because of my respect for Mother Teresa, because of the idea that it was in an orphanage. So, I'm standing there in the bookstore; I want to laugh, I want to cry, I want to jump up and down, I wasn't sure what to do. Um, but I decided if I did all those things, I might get arrested, so I better be calm. But um, yeah, that—

You should have said, do it anyway.

Yeah.

That—that had a really big impact on me. I—I took that as a real message. So, I started speaking and writing about them again for the first time in thirty years.

Now, tell me what—you say that people tend to know this stuff, anyway. I don't think we really do.

Mm.

I mean, we may know it, you know, tangentially, but people don't put these things together sometimes. So—

Yeah.

So, the fact that you've put them together, and they resonate so much; how did you learn all of that so early?

Yeah. Well, I've just been—I've been—I've been very blessed. I mean, there were two major sources um, behind this. One was just my family. I mean, I grew up in a family that lived that way. An—and so, I—I wrote The Paradoxical Commandments, I showed the manuscript to my—my dad, for example, and I remember him looking at 'em and going, Uh-huh, yup, we know this, nice of you to write it down. I mean—

Yeah.

--my parents, my aunts, my uncles ... they did it anyway. They—they were focused on loving people, and helping people, an—and doing what's right, an—and they were not after power, wealth, and fame. They—they did what was meaningful.

Can you remember some of the incidents that might have caused you to pluck out those particular ten—

Yes.

--items?

Yes. Um, well, if you do good, people accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Um, one of the things that happened at Roosevelt High School when I was a sophomore, um, was that the seniors who were leading the student government wanted to eliminate uh, the representative assembly. That would be uh, the equivalent of eliminate—eliminating Congress. I'm sure there were people—people would be interested in doing that nowadays.

But—but uh, but uh, the whole idea of student government is for people to learn how to be citizens, to work together. And so, that would be like eliminating sixty students from—from student government. So, I was against it. Um, and so, um, I stood up an—an—and said so, and turned out to be the only person in a school of about twenty-one hundred who was willing to oppose it. And some of the seniors uh ... were—were pretty upset with me for doing that. Um, but gradually, you know, I kept talking about it, what are we doing, why are we doing it that way, what are the benefits, and ended up with a schoolwide debate in which we argued the issue. And it went to a vote, and the idea of eliminating the representative assembly was—was rejected, uh, fortunately. Well, then I was accused of having done all that just to become popular, so I could become student body president. So, I was like, oh, wow, you know, I just did, I stood up against the so-called power structure, I was kind of, you know, treated badly by—by the—the big men and women on campus, finally the message got through, um, the movement I started was successful, and then they turn around and accuse me of just

having done it out of some kind of crass political, you know, um, opportunism. So, that was one. Um, honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Um, that came from a real experience that occurred after I graduated from high school. Uh, I went work at a uh, student council workshop in Indiana. Um, we had started uh, a high school student leadership institute in Hawaii. Uh, a bunch of us student body presidents got together and did that in the spring of 1966. So, I'd been at the uh, Indiana workshop uh, to learn how that's done before starting uh, our own. And uh, so, you know, I was—I was young, and they—they invited me back, and um, it was the 60s, and they said, Well, we would like you to speak to our students, but we don't want you to attack the establishment. Um ... so, um, so I didn't. I attacked the students. Uh, I was looking at three hundred students who were gonna be student council leaders in Indiana and other states the next year and I said, As far as I can tell, you're a hoax, you're a fraud. You don't care about your fellow students; you just want to get elected to put it on your college application form. You're just gonna hold parties for yourselves. You know, you're really—you're really not making a difference in your schools, and you don't plan to. But you could. You could actually reach out, you could connect, you could find out what students really need, you could—you could create it or you could lobby for it, and you could really change lives. Even just saying hello to some of the students in your schools would make a difference in their lives. So, that was kind of breaking through the bubble, and the students loved it. It's like, okay, let's talk about what's really happening. And they came down, and they lifted me up on their shoulders. And I was a lot lighter then, actually.

Uh, lifted me up on their shoulders, took me outside, and I had one of the most exciting discussions I've ever had in my life about we didn't have to have a student council just to decide the color of the spring prom, or something.

We could actually be human beings who connect with human beings, and make the school a better place. So, gradually, we—students drifted off to—to go to their—it was night—nighttime, they drifted off to go back to their—their rooms. This was at—held at a university campus. And suddenly, I realized that there were four men standing around me. One of them was the director of the workshop, and he announced that I was fired, I would be leaving immediately. They marched me to my room, wouldn't allow me to talk to anyone, wouldn't allow me to call anyone, they locked the door behind me, said You're going to pack now. I packed, they marched me to the parking lot, they put me into a car, they wouldn't even turn on the headlights, they didn't want to attract attention. Drove me uh, twenty miles from campus and dropped me off at a bus stop in the middle of a cornfield at eight-thirty at night. Um, they'd done their research; they realized a Greyhound bus was coming. And I caught it. Um, but I'm sitting there watching the headlights of the cars go by, uh, saying, uh, Well, I told the truth, they understood it, something good can happen, but you know, paid the price. And I decided I'd do it again. You know, honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank, anyway.

After graduating from Harvard, Kent Keith went on to earn a master of arts degree at Oxford University. Completing that, he spent a year studying in Japan, where he met his hapa-haole wife, Elizabeth. She became his teacher outside the classroom.

Her father was uh, uh, Swedish-American, her mother is Japanese. Uh, he was an engineer working for General Electric. And they had a little apartment building; their family lived on the first floor, and then they had outside staircases going to two more floors. And um, so um, I—I rented a room, and uh, I studied. And I studied—the Japanese language is—is challenging. And uh, after a while, my—Mrs. Carlson, who became my mother-in-law, uh, was worried about this—this foreign haole guy who was upstairs studying all the time. We gotta get him out to see Japan. So, she started inviting me down to dinner, and invited me out on a few family excursion.

And then, you invited out her daughter.

That's exactly what happened.

How long have you been married now?

We've been married forty years.

She told you some things early on, very frankly, that shifted your perspective. And you changed; they were hard to hear.

Yes. Um, yeah, I was very fortunate that she was willing—first of all, it was interesting. This was one of the only times that the different cultural backgrounds really came up. Uh, for example, um, you know, my parents were born and raised in Nebraska, we want to be polite, but we pretty much—we're direct, we pretty much say what we want to say, and that's what we mean. Uh, my wife Elizabeth grew up in Japan, it's more indirect, you don't say exactly what you mean, people are supposed to infer it. And so, I would say something, and she'd read between the lines, but I didn't mean for her to read between the lines. She'd say something, and I wouldn't read between the lines, but I was supposed to. So, um, we had to learn a little bit about each other. But th—the gift she gave to me was to give me honest and loving feedback about how my behavior was affecting her. And you know, I thought, well, I'm a pretty nice person, and I love her, and I don't mean—you know, don't want to cause her any problems. Um, but when I was, I needed to know, and that was really uncomfortable. But when she did tell me, I thought about it and reflected on it, an—and I was able to change in ways that—that uh, strengthened the relationship.

You became more intentional, then.

Yeah. Yeah, more conscious of what I was saying and doing, and how that—how that impacted her, an—and how that impacted others. So, um, I'm still learning. Um— --and I'm grateful that she's still teaching.

**The couple has three internationally adopted children.
After returning to Honolulu and earning a law degree at the University of Hawai'i's
William S. Richardson School of Law, Kent Keith set out on his career.**

I've jumped around. I've done different things, each of which was very meaningful to me, but it wasn't a standard career.

It was definitely not a straight line.

No.

And the positions you've held often don't really compute one to another.

Not—not directly. I mean, um, so I started out as—as a lawyer, and um, learned a lot, um, no regrets at all. Um, but decided that—that that wasn't really what I was born to do. Uh, it's really important to understand, because America runs on law an—and litigation, unfortunately. Um, so I was really attracted to—to job creation and economic development. I think having a job is really important; it's—it's a part of—of one's dignity, of course, taking care of yourself and your—and your family, participating in society. Uh, I think having—I think work can be a really meaningful part of one's life. And so, having more jobs and having a variety of jobs, I think is very important. So, I went into economic development. I was very fortunate to work for Hideto Kono and for uh, Governor--George Ariyoshi in that area. Well, my—my period of—of service ended when the Governor's term was up. And then um, Bill Mills uh, from Oceanic Properties, Castle and Cooke, said, Well, how would you like to do it in the real world, not just talk about it in government. And so—so, he said, Why don't you come in to—to Oceanic Properties. And they uh, gave me the portfolio to start developing the Mililani Technology Park. So, like here's twenty million dollars, get the first phase going. And that was really meaningful, because in the next few years, we were able to put in infrastructure and build the first two buildings, and start attracting high tech companies. Again, jobs, a variety of jobs. Um, I was happy doing that, when um, I got a call from a regent at—at Chaminade University um, saying, How would you like to be president? And I said, Oh, gee, that's really—really nice of you, but I'm happy where I am, um, uh, thank you, but no thank you. Um, that was a Friday. He called back on Monday and said, You can't just say no.

You—you've gotta go to lunch and listen. I said, Oh, sure, I'll do that. And I went to lunch, and two weeks later, I was the president of Chaminade University.

What was the next stop?

Well, actually, that's when I became uh, the fulltime unemployed graduate student with a wife and three kids. So—so, one week, I'm president of a university. Next week, I'm in uh, a dormitory at USC in Los Angeles, um, with a 17-year-old roommate. And I'm willing to certify he was the most disappointed freshman in the history of higher education.

Uh, he traveled all the way from Virginia to California for freedom, and they gave him a roommate older than his father.

But we got along really well, 'cause I wasn't his father. I could just be his friend. Um, no, so I—I really—I love learning. I love ideas, I love applying ideas to try to make things better. And this idea of going to school and then applying what you learn, and then going to school and applying what you learn, um, that's been kind of the pattern in my life, as well. An—and I like that very much, an—and very fortunate I was able to do that.

**Your life philosophy, which you developed early on and is evidenced by The Paradoxical Commandments, is a lot about creative tension, and—
--dealing with a level of stress.**

The Paradoxical Commandments focus on what we control. I mean, there are all kinds of external events we don't control. I mean, as individuals, we don't control uh, the world economy, world population growth, natural disasters, all kind of things. We work hard, we prepare, we seize opportunities, but there's all kinds of things we don't control. What we do control is our—is our inner lives, our spiritual lives. And you and I get to decide who we're gonna be, and how we're gonna live. And we can live our faith, and we can live our values, and we—we can be close to our family and friends, and—and we can do what we know is right, and good, and true, no matter what. I mean, absolutely no matter what. That's in our control. So, that's where people have been finding meaning, and that's always available, 'cause it's about us, it's about how we live our values.

At the time of our conversation in January 2017, Dr. Kent Keith is President of Pacific Rim Christian University, which shares space with New Hope Church in Kalihi Kai. It's the only accredited Hawaii-based Protestant university, dedicated to training students in servant leadership. Dr. Keith is the only person we know, to serve as President of two Hawai'i universities, the other being Chaminade.

Mahalo to Dr. Kent Keith of Mānoa, for sharing his inspired life of faith, learning and service, and his teenage words of wisdom that have resonated with people around the world. And mahalo to you, for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.

Are there any of the commandments that you wrote that mean more to you today, than when you wrote them?

Yeah. So, um, you know, being in college in the 60s, uh, was a very political environment. So—so the ones that I—I think I was more focused on were, you know, The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women, with the smallest minds; think big, anyway. Or people, you know, favor underdogs, but follow only top dogs; fight for a few underdogs, anyway. The ones that were sort of more political, more about social change. Um, now, uh, it's the first one. People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered; love them, anyway. I think—I think unconditional love is what holds our families together, holds our communities together, and you know, we don't have to approve of everything that other people do, we don't have to agree with everything other people do; we can still love them, and uh, that's by far the most important one to me now.

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