

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: Florence "Johnny" Frisbie: Islander at Heart

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Did you often feel a tug, a struggle between your Polynesian side and your European Western side?

Even though my brain, my thinking brain has been developed to be able to absorb the European, the Western world, but I go by my heart. My heart speaks, yeah, not my brain. My heart tells me.

Johnny Frisbie has lived a storied life as a writer, television personality, and nurturer across cultures throughout the South Pacific, New Zealand, Hawai'i, and Japan. She grew up in a tiny place called Pukapuka. Florence "Johnny" Frisbie, 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. Florence "Johnny" Frisbie of Honolulu was born to a native Pukapukan mother and an American father in Tahiti. Her family moved from island to island frequently in the South Pacific. As a teenager, Johnny wrote and published Miss Ulysses from Pukapuka, an autobiography of her journeys across the South Pacific. Pukapuka is an atoll in the Cook Islands. After the death of her father, Johnny, aged sixteen, and three siblings were orphaned, separated, and raised in different families in New Zealand and Hawai'i. Johnny was taken in by the Engle family of Kailua, Windward Oahu, and enrolled in high school. She hadn't had much formal education.

Your life took you to ... you went to Roosevelt High School.

M-hm.

Where you did so well that you—

M-hm.

Did you get a scholarship to Punahou?

Yes, uh-huh. Yeah, I got a scholarship to Punahou. Yes; yeah.

Which is amazing to do so well academically.

I know; it surprised me. Yeah. But then, I was thinking about it. I was very, very serious about each subject, say biology, English. I was serious, I was keen, and after each class, I would go to the teacher to please explain what I didn't understand. You know, because it's transforming a thinking in Polynesian to English understanding of the subject.

And different tools, everything was different.

Yeah. So, I would always go, and the teachers were always so good, so good, and they would explain to me. And so, go home, and then I was able to do my homework.

Your outdoor childhood, and all the curiosity and exploration, and resilience; how did that translate when you then started living more suburban lifestyle, you know, in more crowded places?

M-hm. Well, I don't know that I have actually been in that kind of a lifestyle very much. But in order for me to survive and not totally give up who I am, my nature, you know, I found ways. I found ways to go maybe in a bush or to have plants that I can talk to or nurture, and never to be in concrete blocks like that. But I find it's a survival instinct, and I've been very careful not to lose me, who I am.

Johnny Frisbie adapted quickly to life in Hawai'i and the Western style of education. After graduating from Punahou School, Johnny set her sights on a career in nursing. However, an old family friend set her on a new journey.

I was accepted to Queen's. I applied and I was going to start, and then James Michener, who was kinda looking after me at the time said, No, you're going to go overseas, you need to expand your vision of the world. He said, You're going to go either to the Far East, he said, or Europe. And he said, I'll get you a job. So, immediately, I received a letter from the Army that I had a job in Tokyo. So, get ready, two weeks later, was off to Japan.

What did you do in Tokyo?

I worked for the Army, secretary to one of the ... yeah. But ... why did we go there?

Well, actually, I'm picturing you in Tokyo after a lifetime living on Pacific islands, and it doesn't compute. Did you enjoy that?

Loved it. And there weren't many Polynesians, and the Japanese were fascinated. You know, they just used to stare. You know, stare. And those who could speak to me said, Where you from? You know. And I would explain, but they didn't know. You know, a lot of them didn't know. Made lots of good friends. They're wonderful people.

But only stayed two years?

Two years; yeah, m-hm. That was the contract; yeah.

And what was next?

Oh, and then, I came back to Hawaii, and my sister introduced me to Carl, who was in the Navy, was getting ready to go to Japan to film the club, the military nightclubs for his television program. And so, my sister said, Oh, my sister just come back from Japan, I'll have you meet her and find out things. Well, there you go. So, that's how it happened.

The man to whom Johnny Frisbie was introduced turned out to be Carl Hebenstreit, also known as Kini Popo, a popular Honolulu radio DJ, and the first on-air personality for KGMB-TV's inaugural 1952 broadcast.

You married a man who was very well-known in Hawai'i.

M-hm.

Kini Popo is what everyone called him. Carl Hebenstreit, a radio and TV personality.

M-hm.

And I think you mentioned that you could talk to him about writing the way you could your dad.

Oh, yes; absolutely. Yeah. I mean, he had an amazing command of the English language. And so, he was very helpful with my second book. M-hm, my second book, when I was still learning the English language, still reading and studying, you know, grammar and all that. But he also was a beautiful person.

And with him, you had four children.

Yes.

In New Zealand.

Uh-huh.

Yet another part of—

They grew up in New Zealand. Yeah; two were born here. Ropati and Carla were born here, and Haumea was born in the Cook Islands, and Stirling was born in New Zealand. Yes.

And then, you stayed for a bit.

I stayed on.

Years.

When Carl returned to Hawaii, I stayed on. Three years, I was there. When the last of my kids left, then I decided, Oh, well, time to move on.

And you were still close to him, even though you were no longer married.

Oh, we're very close now. Yes, he and Haumea meet at least once a week, and I'm invited. If I'm not invited, I invite myself. No problem. And I love his wife, Christine. Yeah; beautiful, beautiful friend.

In 1948, Johnny Frisbie became the first Polynesian female published author with her autobiographical book, Miss Ulysses from Pukapuka. And while living in Hawai'i during the 1950s, she was one of the first to turn heads and raise a few eyebrows with her choice of swimwear.

There was a time on Waikiki Beach when no one wore bikinis. And then, you came along. You're credited with being the first.

Yeah. Yeah, there was a Tahitian girl, too, who wore the bikini, and gave me courage. Yeah, gave me courage. But the thing that I can claim fame for was that I wore a bathing suit when I was six months pregnant and onwards. Okay; that was in 1957, and it was unheard of. You know, it was unheard of. I was very proud of that.

And how did you come to be, I guess, one of the first two women to wear a bikini? How did that happen?

Well, I didn't think it was an issue. You know, it was just natural. You know, we grew up half-naked and naked; you'd go swimming naked, the girls and the boys over there. The girls there, we quickly take off our dress. We didn't have panties or bra. Take off

and put it on the bush, and run down, you know, into lagoon. And I mean, it's no big deal. So, I just grew up not thinking about shame or rules, or restrictions. To this day, I have to be very careful I don't upset people because of my quickness to do what's natural.

After the birth of her second child, Johnny Frisbie planted roots in New Zealand. She says there were a number of Pukapukans living there, and she wanted her children to experience their cultural heritage. In 1976, Johnny made her debut as a television personality and had a chance to share her perspectives on life with New Zealand viewers.

Television began in the city where we lived, Dunedin, which is south, on the south island of New Zealand. An Australian producer was there, and he'd come from Australia, and he had worked on a program called Beauty and the Beast in Australia. And he wanted to start one for New Zealand viewers. And so, he asked me; he wanted someone other than all European. There were four panelists. So, he asked me if I would, and I said, yes, sure. You know. So, the program was about a male presenter and two women on the side. And he would a letter from viewers from all over, from solo mothers, grandmothers, you know, teenagers needing answer, needing help. And so, he would read the letter, and would turn and say, Johnny, what do you think of that? You know, we were not to give our advice, to give advice, but to give our opinion. But my viewpoint was very different to the other three, so it always very different to every letter. There was never one that just.

For example; can you give an example?

A solo mother who is alone with her baby, and wanted to know what to do with the baby. She can't cope, they had very little money, and the father is just ignoring her. What do you do? And so, my reply was, Do you have family? You know, can you go to your mother or father, or auntie, or distant relative? You know, this is kind of the village clan type reply. I said, you know, have courage; even though they might not be happy with you for having this baby without the father, you know, just seek their help, find out, you know, and make amends. Yeah.

What did the others say?

They said, Oh, well, you did what you did, you're paying for it. Kind of that kind of thing.

Thanks for the advice or the opinion. That went on for quite—you did that ...

Ten years; ten years.

Ten years.

Five days a week. Yeah.

And did you have fans writing you about how they really liked your advice?

Yeah; the Polynesian Pacific island community were very, very grateful. They were very proud of the fact that they had someone on television, you know, and speaking on all our behalf. Yeah.

Were you controversial, too?

A little bit, yeah.

And you don't mind. Not at all, right?

Well, it's the truth as I understand it. And also fairness, you know. You know, I mean, we all think differently. You know, different cultures, the thoughts and feelings are all different. And I'm not about to cow down to what is supposed to be the correct way to think and feel, and all that, you know

And then, there was Pacifica. What's that?

Pacifica is an organization that uh, Patty Walker, a very dear friend, and four other women and I started. Patty and I were on the New Zealand Maori and South Pacific Arts Council, and while at one of the meetings, we thought, Why don't we create a Pacific Island women's organization to help the women who are lost, and those who would like to be a nurse but don't know where to go and how to get it moving, and get Pacific Island children, kids, students who are doing well at school to further their education, get a scholarship for them, or guide them. But, yeah, it helped. It was such a successful program for Pacific Island, especially the women, you know, stand tall, you know, have confidence, you know, go back to school. You know, I mean, they come from the small islands, eighth grade, and then that's it. And so many of them enter college now, and it's moved on. Professors and doctors, nurses. Yeah.

In 2015, Johnny Frisbie returned to her home atoll of Pukapuka in the Cook Islands after being away for over fifty years. She was reunited with her eldest brother, Charley Frisbie, given away at birth to his grandaunt, and he'd become the oldest living Pukapukan.

After many, many years away, you went back to Pukapuka to see your brother.

M-hm. Yeah; and to film a documentary called Homecoming. And we flew from Honolulu. The producer director of the film, Gemma, we flew to New Zealand, and

then to Rarotonga, and we waited there for a boat to sail to Pukapuka. And it doesn't happen often. And we were lucky, because during that month of July, the Cook Islands was celebrating its fiftieth internal self-government from New Zealand. So, they are no longer a protectorate of New Zealand. So, all the island people from the different islands congregated on Rarotonga to celebrate this great event. Lots of beautiful music, drumming, singing, dancing; the whole thing was just mindboggling. And so, we asked to board the boat that was to take the Pukapukans back to Pukapuka. And they said, Yeah, come onboard. So, we did. Five days sailing, and every night, every day, there's music and drumming. The Pukapukans would just, you know, stay up all night waiting to get home, playing the 'ukulele on both sides of the deck, you know, singing. It was beautiful.

Five days of that?

Yes; five days, five days of that.

That is a very difficult atoll to get to.

Yeah, it is; yeah.

No regularly scheduled boat or air ...

No, no.

We had to charter a plane, eight-seater. We had to, or we would be stuck there for goodness knows how long. That way, we were assured of getting back to Rarotonga.

What was it like after that great sailing prelude? What was it like going back?

Well, it was so amazing. I fell into it as if I'd never left. Just totally, totally into it. You know, and just walking on the reef, just on the beach collecting shells, and talking. You know, the language came back very quickly. And grating coconut, peeling taro, and scaling fish, and gutting fish. You know, just cooking it the way we used to in the old days. And it was just unbelievable. I just fell into it, and it made me wonder, gosh, have I been longing, homesick all these years, and I just kind of buried it somewhere? You know.

Did you want to stay?

No, I didn't because I wanted to be with my family, with my kids, my grandchildren. In that sense, yeah, that's utmost to me.

But you could go home again.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

It was all the good that you remember.

Oh, yes. And church, you know, attending the church service with that beautiful singing. It's like chanting, you know.

Oh, the harmony. I sat on the benches in the village where my mother comes from. I sat almost where she used to sit.

Wow.

Yeah; makes you wonder why I ever left.

After living in New Zealand for thirty years, Johnny Frisbie returned to Hawai'i to live with her daughter, Haumea Ho, widow of the late Hawai'i entertainment icon, Don Ho.

Seems like you've lived a larger-than-life life. Because I mean, for example, your daughter is Haumea, she was married to Don Ho.

That's right. Yeah.

I mean, that's a different kind of culture. You know, the show business culture.

Yeah, yes, yes. Yeah; that's why I came to Hawai'i. She asked me to come and be with her when Don passed away. And it was very wonderful; wonderful, wonderful to be with her. And also, my sister was married to Adam West, Batman.

Batman.

Mm; yes.

You were a performer. I mean, you danced, you sang.

Mm. Yeah.

So, that was just part of life.

Yeah; m-hm, m-hm. Yeah. It wasn't a career.

You continue to write. And I think when you write, you know, it makes you think maybe better. I mean, just because you're involved in the exercise of putting things down that have to be true and authentic.

M-hm.

What insights have you come to over your life as you look back?

I've been very lucky. Delved a lot in philosophy, and so, I want to make things honest, and develop that aspect of my soul, my nature. And I'm very, very much into writing about my philosophy about anything and everything that comes to mind. And I'm discovering that I haven't really committed fully to what the majority of people think about some things, and how they do it.

When people remember you in years to come, how do you want them to remember you; as nurturer?

Well, that's just me. I mean, I have no profession. I think what they see, what they've gotten out from me, if any, that's probably, and I have no label to say, you know. It's what they got from me, good or bad. I don't know. Yeah; hopefully, some good things. Yeah.

You mentioned your birthdate, and it means that as we speak now in 2017, you're approaching eighty-five?

M-hm.

I don't know what eighty-five looks like anymore, because a people are so healthy longer. But you don't seem like you're anywhere near eighty-five. I'm sure you've been told that before.

I'll tell you a story. About a week and a half ago, I flew to California to see a friend. And his daughter, I've never met before, came to the airport to meet me. And I was waiting, and she was looking around for me, looking around for me. And finally, she called me and she said, Johnny, you know, where are you? I said, I'm here. And she said, Okay, I'm gonna put my hand up, when you see me, you know, come forward. And so, I did. And she came over to me and she said, I expected a gray-haired woman, lots of wrinkles! And she was yelling. You don't have any wrinkles!

How old do you feel?

I feel young. You know, I'm exhilarated by things, excited about things. And I feel love, I feel love all the time. But physically, as of last year when I was gardening at my son's

place in Punalu’u, I felt the physical change, you know. I’m crouching and weeding, and I can’t quickly stand up, you know. I had to kinda—ooh, you know. You know, help myself stand up like that, and I thought, mm, now this is not good. But you know, accept it.

And that was only last year.

Yeah, yeah. Yeah; last year.

You know, people at age thirty are saying, My knee, it’s killing me.

At the time of this conversation in March of 2017, Florence “Johnny” Frisbie was about to embark on yet another journey; a multi-week trip across the Pacific. Even in her mid-80s, it seems the odyssey of Miss Ulysses from Pukapuka is not over yet. Mahalo to author Florence “Johnny” Frisbie of Honolulu for sharing your story with us. And thank you for joining us. For PBS Hawai’i and Long Story Short, I’m Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.

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Have you ever regretted saying too much?

Saying too much; no. No.

Have you ever regretted saying too little?

Mmm, no. No.

Do you not have many regrets?

That would be, I mean, that would be the best place to be in life, no regrets.

Yeah, there’s a couple of things, but not much, no.

[END]