

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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Students have access to information, and learning, and knowledge that they've never had before. They're more independent in their learning, and these are all good things. Technology has been a tremendous gift to young people, because it sparks creativity in thinking and learning. I think the challenge is ... for the adults to catch up with the kids, and to have an understanding that kids can create their own learning because they have that technology available to them. And so, it's kind of a reverse catch-up, if you wish. School hasn't ever been that way before.

Art Souza's ideas may sound new, but a lot of his philosophy is based on how he learned best; through experiences. West Hawai'i Island public education official Art Souza, 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 kākou. I'm Leslie Wilcox Arthur Francis Souza, Jr. has gained a reputation as a visionary administrator of public schools. He oversees nineteen public schools and special education services at five charter schools over a large expanse of the Big Island. He started teaching on Hawai'i Island in 1989 at Honoka'a High and Intermediate School. Originally from Honolulu, he was inspired in his teenage years to go into teaching.

I was a little local kid growing up. You know, grew up in Liliha and spent my time going between Liliha and Pu'unui, and Palama, and hanging out in Chinatown at the old Chinese herbology shops, and exploring the rivers, Nu'uuanu Stream, playing baseball. Just the way kids grew up in the 50s.

So, kids would travel all that territory alone?

Oh, yeah, yeah. Well, you went anywhere with a friend or a pack, a herd. And you know, you went up and down the street and just got yourself into any number of adventures.

Did you get into adventures that got you into trouble?

You know, nothing that ever got us into real serious trouble. I think we were smart enough to know what the limits were. But risk-taking; that was part of the adventure, right? So, we took every opportunity to do that.

What's your ethnic background?

I'm Portuguese, Japanese.

And your mom was, too; right?

My mom was Portuguese, Japanese; yes.

So, at this time, that's probably not that unusual. But for somebody your age, and for your mother, that was unusual. I mean, we have so many mixing of races, but those two races weren't the most common races to mix.

Yeah; I think that's probably true. Maybe that's where a little bit of the risk-taking and the adventure comes from. I think my grandparents and my mom were that way. And I think that's vestiges of the plantation camps. You know, I think the people had to rely on one another, and that sense of community was strong. So, that integration and that opportunity to engage with each other was greater, perhaps, than sometimes it is now. Yeah.

Was that an accepted intermarriage in your family?

Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah; it worked wonderfully well for my parents. I think my parents' philosophy was real experiential. You know, they let us explore. At least, I had that opportunity. Maybe it was a little bit more tight-strung for my sisters. But I really had freedom to just kind of get involved in adventure, and to learn experientially.

What did your parents do for a living?

My dad was a sheet metal worker, Shop 39.

At Pearl Harbor?

Out at Pearl Harbor. And my mom was a registered nurse at Pearl Harbor as well, and before that, at St. Francis Hospital.

And you lived pretty much on the site of the current State Education Building?

Yeah, yeah; that's right. From the time I was a little boy. I was born, and then until I was about six or seven years old, I guess—six years old, maybe, we lived in Perry's Court,

which was just ... an interesting little enclave carved out of the middle of Honolulu, right where the Queen Lili'uokalani Building is now. And there were about six or seven homes for rent in there, and that's where we lived for the first five or six years of my life.

Did you ever report to work in that building on the land where you used to live?

You know, interesting enough, I probably do. Because I end up in the Lili'uokalani Building often enough for meetings and Board of Education hearings, and those kinds of things. So, hadn't thought about it that way, but yeah, you're right. Yeah.

Did you have a sense that you would go into education?

Yeah; very early on. I think my inspiration was, as a sophomore in high school, I had an amazing social studies teacher who let us, you know, talk about things, and express ideas and thoughts, and share what we were pretty radical notions in 1962. And I just thought that was ... to allow people to think and speak that way would be a really important thing to do. So, that's what encouraged me, and I became a teacher, I think, as a result of that.

What was the teacher's name?

Terrence Healy; he was a teacher that I had at St. Louis High School.

Did you ever have a chance to thank him later?

I did. One of the really neat things that happened. There was a reunion at one point; I don't know if it was our fifteenth year reunion or something. But there was a football game out at the stadium, and he came to the game. And we had a reception before the game, and I had a chance to say that to him. So, he passed on shortly after that, so I was happy to have been able to do that.

So, you believe it was one teacher that sort of made you pivot?

Without question. You know, I had a lot of teachers, but there was something special about this guy, and he just let me to do what I want to do.

That's when you started thinking, I might want to be an educator myself.

Yeah; yeah. Yeah; so that led me to the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. And I was fortunate to go to school probably in the most socially dynamic time in the history of our country. I started college at Mānoa in the Fall of 1966, and lived through so much of what was America at the time: the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam, the Women's

Movement. And so, boy, what an opportunity. I probably spent as much time at marches and peace gatherings as I did in classrooms. But I learned. I learned.

And you continued your education after UH Mānoa, where you majored in ...

I was a history and English major; a dual major. Yeah; my education was interrupted quite a bit by travel. You know, I spent a lot of time independently traveling, and you know, it was a time when, you know, as a young man, you're looking to make meaning for yourself as well. So, I spent a couple of years traveling around South America, and you know.

Did you do that alone?

Yeah. I traveled in South America, and then later, my current wife Vicky and I traveled for another couple of years space in time, and spent time in Africa and the subcontinent. So, I've spent a lot of time just on the road, and ... you learn an awful lot about the human condition that way.

What kind of travel? Is this backpack travel?

Yeah; yeah. Just backpack, and you know.

No plans?

Vague ideas of where you want to go. But when I was traveling in 1971 and 72 in South America it was very inexpensive. You know, for a dollar a day, I was a rich man. Riding buses and hitchhiking and doing that kind of thing. But to be immersed in the indigenous cultures and to see the things that were there to see and experience was amazing.

Did you travel continuously?

You know, pretty much so. I mean, there were brief stops to do a little bit of work here and there, but it was pretty much continuous travel. And you know, starting in Mexico, and going through Latin America, and then all the way down into South America, and you know, I got all the way down into Tierra Del Fuego, and got out to the Galapagos Islands. And did a lot of things that a lot of people don't have a chance to ever do.

That's amazing. So, you just kind of broke out of college and said, This is what I'm gonna do right now?

Yeah; I needed to do that. You know, college was stale. I was learning, I was experiencing. But I really wasn't getting what I needed. So, this was something I

wanted to do. You know, I tease people now that say that that was my retirement, that's why I'm working so long now.

But it was the most important learning that I ever have experienced. It was worth twelve PhDs to have been able to do that kind of thing, and to just absorb people, and absorb cultures, and understand how people think, how people learn. It was really amazing.

After spending several years traveling the world, Art Souza came home. He went back to school, eventually earning two Master of Arts degrees in community leadership and in educational administration. In the meantime, he started teaching on O'ahu, and later made a permanent move to the Big Island.

What made you move to the Big Island?

Thirty years ago, O'ahu was crazy enough for me and my family. So, my wife and I just had our first child, and it was a chance to get to the Big Island and get to some place quieter.

Did you move directly to Waimea?

Yeah.

That's where you live now.

Yeah. We did.

And why'd you choose Waimea? Did you have family?

You know, my wife and I had been on vacation going up to the Big Island a number of times, and we just kinda fell in love with the area. And it all worked out nice, because the school I wanted to work at was at Honoka'a High School. I wanted to teach at Honoka'a High School. So, we ended up living in Waimea. I taught English at Honoka'a, and eventually became a vice principal there. Went off and did principaling at Waikoloa Elementary School, and came back to be principal of Honoka'a High School. So, it all worked out.

I think a teacher and a principal are not necessarily—I mean, that's not necessarily an incremental step.

No.

Those are two different jobs. Really; aren't they?

Yeah; they're very different jobs. And you know, in all of my years of education, as an educator, there's nothing that will replicate that time I had in the classroom. That's the best work; working with the kids that way.

So, why did you go into administration?

You know, it's one of those things. You do it for the right reasons. First of all, I was asked. And I said, if I'm gonna be asked and you have that kind of faith in me, Mr. Kainoa, I'll step in and help out where I can. But over time, you come to understand that your span of help, your span of influence that you can over kids and communities becomes greater as an administrator. So, one thing led to the next.

So, the systems part of it attracted you? Being in charge of not just a classroom and individual lives, but a systems approach.

I guess you could call it a systems approach. Not a systems in terms of the structural bureaucracy, but the systems approach in terms of, Wow, can do more for more kids.

Reach.

I can reach. And what if we did this with this community? You know. So, it was that kind of thinking. Yeah.

The community leadership masters came in handy?

Yeah; it did. It did. I think it just sparked a way of thinking about how we might be able to do education a little differently. Yeah.

So, from teacher to vice principal, to principal.

M-hm.

And, then what?

And then, to the complex area superintendent position. I was principal at Honoka'a High School in 2005 at the time when Pat Hamamoto, who was superintendent then, asked if I could step in. There was a vacancy; the previous superintendent had left. And again, it was as much as anything, a call to duty. I was asked to do it. And you know, I hadn't really thought about being a superintendent, but when asked to serve, and you think you can serve that purpose, you do it.

You know, for those who aren't familiar with the structure of the DOE, people may not realize what a critical and strategic job the complex area superintendent is.

Yeah.

Would you explain that, what exactly it is that you do? And there are others statewide as well. Others in the state, as well.

Yeah. It's an interesting structure. It's one that was created by by Pat as a way to try to decentralize the Central Office and personalize supports in a very unique way for each unique community. So, a state superintendent sits at the top with a deputy and five assistant superintendents at the state level. And below that are fifteen of us; my colleagues. And we are scattered about in different areas of the State. So, my particular area is on the Big Island in West Hawai'i. My colleagues are Brad Bennett in Hilo-Waiākea, and Keone Farias in Keaau-Kau-Pāhoa. I have nineteen schools in my area; they're all Title 1 schools, which means that they meet the poverty guidelines. So, we have access to federal dollars through that means. I also am responsible for special education services in five charter schools.

That is a huge responsibility. And you know, when you say West Hawai'i, I know that's the title. Honoka'a is really northeast; right?

Yeah.

So, you kinda go right around the top of the island, and down on the other side to Kohala.

Yeah; it's an interesting geographic area. I go as far as east as Hilo to Pa'auilo, which is the school that's furthest east. And then, I'm responsible for all of the schools in Waimea, Honoka'a up to North Kohala, and then down through the Kealakehe complex in Waikoloa in the central part of the island.

That is a huge and diverse area.

Yeah; and then down to Kona. Yeah.

Down to Kona, too.

Yeah; down as far as Ho'okena, near Miloli'i, is where my area kind of stops.

That is monstrous.

It's a large area.

That's like an island in itself.

Yeah; I spend a lot of time on the road.

DOE Complex Area Superintendent for West Hawai'i Island, Art Souza, strongly believes that community building will help to build academic success in these rural areas.

The opportunity is the challenge, and the challenge is the opportunity. It's how you reconcile all that. And it's about how you lead, how you choose to lead, and how you build those partnerships and relationships with all those entities. And you get better at it over time. And I think I've gotten better at it over time.

How long have you been complex area superintendent?

This is my twelfth year. No one teaches you how to be a superintendent. You don't go to superintendent school. So, I remember the turnover from the previous superintendent to me was about a thirty-minute meeting where I said, What is this job, what do you want me to do? He says, just read those books. And that was it. It was exploratory learning and experiential learning.

And that's exactly what you love to do.

That's exactly how I learn best. So, that wasn't a challenge for me. I mean, yeah, you have to learn the rules and regulations, and yes, I did have to read those books. But finding my way, and creating the learning and creating the leadership as I learned it was really a remarkable opportunity.

Now, everyone talks about collaborative leadership.

Yeah.

And I believe you're a collaborative leader. Were you always? Was that your nature?

I think so. Yeah; I think so. And I think that's the only way we can learn and lead. You know, can I tell a story real quick?

Sure.

So ... because it just strikes me as kind of a metaphor for education. But Gloria Steinem tells a story about a time when she was in graduate school, and she was out on a field trip with her class. And she watched as this turtle perched itself on the side of the road, a very, very busy thoroughfare. So, she raced over, picked the turtle up, and took the

turtle back down the hill from whence it came, and dropped it back at the pond, and feeling good about herself because she salvaged a dangerous situation. Her professor came up to her and said: You realize what you just did; it took that turtle six weeks to get up the mountainside to come to a place where she could lay her eggs safely, away from the predators and allow her children to scamper down to the pond to safety. And so, Gloria Steinem asked him in return: Well, what should I have done differently? He said, Next time, ask the turtle. And I think it's a great metaphor for education; it speaks to why we try to do education by infusing policy, whether it's at the federal or state level, or we infuse millions of dollars in technology or fancy curriculum, but we don't ask the turtle, we don't ask the kids, we don't ask the communities, we don't ask the people who are most impacted by our work. So, I think if we kinda flip the notion of how we do education, and make it more of a community business, I think we'd get further with our outcomes.

And yet, there's less and less of a sense of community, even in rural areas, because people are working or they're isolated. How do we get that community fabric?

You know, I think it's incumbent upon us as educators in schools to create that opportunity for community. You know, school traditionally has been a standalone process where kids come at eight o'clock in the morning, and they're dropped, and at three o'clock they go home, and we've done our job. But we haven't made ourselves very welcoming to community, and we have to recognize that there's huge wealth and resource. The teachers are in the community, so how do we create the community as the classroom. So, I think it's that reciprocal trust that has to be built. And we're getting there; that's kind of the process of what we're trying to do in West Hawai'i now.

So, how does that actually help the students?

What happens is that we're creating opportunities for site-based and place-based learning opportunities, mentorships, internship opportunities for kids. It's a funding source that can hopefully help to develop opportunities for more money for our dual college and dual credit programs. And I think it just creates an opportunity to have more voices tell us what education should look like. Because you know, I believe that our authority and our accountability, and our authenticity as school leaders really comes not from us doing it, but from us being able to say, Are we acting that way on your behalf. And so, that's kind of why I believe that through this partnership, and through this community building we'll make some gains.

So, you feel empowered and free in your position to do what you think best? I mean, 'cause you know, you just hear of so many people who feel like they're just in straightjackets of bureaucracy.

You know, there are elements that are straightjacket-like. I mean, it's the bureaucracy. But I think within that, there's plenty of room for flexibility, there's plenty of room for autonomy. But you have to be willing to take risks, and you have to be able to know that it's not always gonna be easy to fund. There are those challenges. But you have to start somewhere; right?

What's it gonna take? That's a very complex—speaking of complex. You talked about that several times. That's a tough thing, to change somebody's way of thinking based on their experience and their concerns.

You know, one of my favorite metaphors, if I could share with you, is one I read in a Paul Theroux book some years back, where you know, we have so many entities that are involved in education; right? We have the department, we have the collective bargaining units, the legislature, the governor's office; you name it. But traditionally in education, when we bring all these entities together, it's much like two bald men arguing over a comb. You know, because—

Who said that; Paul Theroux?

Paul Theroux, it's a great visual because when you think about it, ideally and philosophically, you're there for the right reason. We're here for kids, we're gonna do the right thing for kids. But you so quickly default to: But I gotta take care of my kuleana first, and I'm gonna do what I need to do for my entity. We have to switch that thinking. And so, yeah, that's the hard work of transformation, is it's changing traditional ways of thinking, and getting agreement that, Can we get a common agenda around hopes and dreams for kids?

You're not a digital native.

No.

No such thing as cell phones in your time, or nobody was using the web or smart TVs.

M-hm.

So, you're teaching children who are all digital natives.

Yeah.

And obviously, infrastructure has been added, and policies have been made. But also, you know, there's an argument that children are even hardwired differently now.

Yeah.

What have you seen?

I think students have access to information, and learning, and knowledge that they've never had before. I think they're more independent in their learning, and these are all good things. I think that technology has been a tremendous gift to young people, because it sparks creativity in thinking and learning. I think the challenge is for the adults to catch up with the kids, and to have an understanding that kids can create their own learning because they have that technology available to them. And so, it's kind of a reverse catch-up, if you wish. School hasn't ever been that way before.

Where teachers sometimes have to get out of the way, or they have to be able to lead and follow.

That's right; that's right. And so, the role of the teacher is different, because you're not just the dispenser of information and knowledge, but you're a facilitator of learning. And that's a different way of looking at it. The young people today are just absolutely brilliant. I'm amazed by, when I go and see what these guys are learning, what they're capable of doing, when you see their senior projects and you see what they've accomplished at graduation. Sometimes, we just have to get out of the way and let 'em learn.

And yet, you say all the schools in your district are Title 1?

Yeah. Yeah. So, we have those challenges, and you know, the social and emotional needs of our communities are such that, yeah, we have issues with drugs, and we have issues with teen wellness and teen suicide, and we have issues with teenage pregnancy and all. And the role of school has changed dramatically, and all the more reason why we have to understand we can't do all of those things, and educate. But our job is to make kids well, to create leaders who will sustain their communities. You do that by having the community involved. So, if you have a successful student, I believe that has to be mirrored by a successful community. They're one and the same, and we should have the same measures in defining what a successful student and a successful community look like.

You know, as you named some of the challenges, I thought, you know, you have to have a certain mindset to do the job you have. Because many people, when there's a problem, when there's a fear or a problem that takes precedence because that's a danger. You have all of those things on your horizon, you know, as possible problems or threats, or immediate.

But you have to see the bright skies around the darkness, or you couldn't do your job.

You know, I like to think of myself as irrationally optimistic. And I think you have to be. And I think if you ask any of my colleagues in any of the fourteen other complex areas, they have the same challenges I have. You know, some might be larger than others, but we have to remain positive in our belief that, you know, if we do it right, those goals, and aspirations, and hopes that kids have will be realized. They will be realized.

Although, on the other side of the fence, if you do it right today, it doesn't mean it'll work tomorrow.

Yeah.

So, you're always having to change, as necessary.

Yeah; that's a good point. You know, the work of the educator is probably the most dynamic one there is, and you always have to be aware of that. And that's the biggest challenge in education when I'm asked. It's not about lack of funding or resources; I think we have enough to work with. The challenge is changing mindsets. You know, I've been an educator for forty years, and we've been talking about transformation, but we haven't really come much of a way toward real true transformation. So, it's a constant effort to do that.

Following his philosophy of asking the turtle what it wants, State DOE Complex Area Superintendent for West Hawai'i Island, Art Souza, allowed his sons to find their own way in school. His older son Nathan graduated from private Hawai'i Preparatory Academy in Waimea, and gravitated to the arts. He now lives in Portland, Oregon. Ethan graduated from public school at Honoka'a High, and works in environmental conservation on the Big Island. Mahalo to Art Souza for your passion and vision for quality public education in rural areas. 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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Do you ever want to just get your backpack and hele out?

Oh, you know it; you know it. I don't have too much longer for my formal working with the Department. I'm kind of ready to start that transition, I hope it includes some backpacking. Absolutely.

Where would you go now? You've been to South America and Africa.

Yeah, yeah. No, there's a lot of places that I haven't been. I've always had this fascination with the Trans-Siberian Railroad, and getting up into some of the more remote areas of what was previously the Soviet Union. I'd love to get to China; I've never been to China. Those would be two destinations.

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