

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: Billie Gabriel

LSS 1103 (26:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 9/19/2017

Everyone gathered around the television to watch the special about Vietnam. And then, they showed ... the chopper landing. You could hear bullets flying, so the Vietcong were there. And them jumping out ... tying rope on the legs of two American soldiers, and dragging them ... to the helicopter. I didn't know that was my brother, until the announcer said: We have recovered the bodies of. And at that point, my mother ... it was a wail; it was a cry that you ... never want to hear.

Her brother, James Gabriel, Jr., was the first Native Hawaiian soldier killed in action during the Vietnam War. Five decades later, she continues to honor his sacrifice. Billie Gabriel, 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. Billie Gabriel of Honolulu lost her older brother, James Kimo Gabriel, Jr., to the Vietnam War in 1962. Not only was her brother the first Native Hawaiian soldier to be killed in action, but also one of the first U.S. Special Forces soldiers to make the ultimate sacrifice in Vietnam. Four years later, Sergeant Barry Sadler released the song, The Ballad of the Green Berets. The original lyrics were written to pay tribute to James Gabriel, Jr. In 2010, Billie Gabriel used her public relations contacts and experience to spearhead the Hawai'i Call for Photos project. She tracked down photographs of two hundred seventy-six Hawai'i soldiers who lost their lives during the Vietnam War. The plan is to display photos from across the nation in an education center to be built in Washington, DC. Billie Gabriel read the letters from her late brother, hoping to gain an understanding of his views on Vietnam. What she found brought her closer to the big brother who died when she was just eleven years old.

Yes. My mother is pure Hawaiian, and my father is half Hawaiian and half Filipino. So, yes, there's a lot of kanaka in us. There is; there is. And there were nine of us. And my father was ... quite the disciplinarian, very old school. It was his way, or his way.

Was he affectionate?

He was not. My father was not; he was very stern, hard worker, a perfectionist, and he expected the same out of his children. My father was a voracious reader. He would

make me read the dictionary with him. That's what I had to do; read the dictionary. And every week, I had to randomly choose a word, and I was told that I needed to use that word in conversation with him for the entire week. And my mother, on the other hand; she was a very humble, giving, loving, local girl from Waialua. When she was going to the eighth grade, my tutu pulled her out of school and told her: From now on, your classroom will be our lo'i, the ocean, and my kitchen.

Wow ...

So, she never went past eighth grade. That became her schooling, and she may not have, like my father, been a voracious reader, or loved words, but her family and her home; that was her life. So, she was the balance in in our home. She filled that part that gave us the softness.

Nine kids; that must have been a hard household to support.

It was. And you know, and I grew up in Palama. Proud to say that I'm a product of Mayor Wright Housing. And when I tell people that, either it raises an eyebrow, or they laugh because they can't imagine; You grew up in the projects? You know. And I thought, Well, back in the 50s, Mayor Wright Housing was not what it—you know, back then, families, they manicured their lawns, they watched the other kids. If you did something wrong, you know, Auntie would come pull your ear and take you home, and then you would get double spankings, you know, for doing something wrong.

And your father was working?

He was working. My father was with the Royal Hawaiian Band, and he managed all of their engagements, and their travel, and everything. My mother was a homemaker, stay-at-home mom. And she was there for the family. We always, you know, came home; there was always something on the stove. We never knew that we were low-income.

Because you felt like you had enough?

We had enough, and we were happy.

I think you've said that your mother ... she never yelled, and she never complained. And I find that so hard to believe, having been a mother myself.

Me, as well. She never raised her voice. She never did.

With nine kids?

With nine kids. She didn't. Because my father ruled with an iron fist.

Now, I think you were seven among the nine children.

I was the seventh; yes.

And what was your brother, Kimo?

He was the first. So, there's a thirteen-year difference between Kimo and myself. So, really, the only thing I remember is ... he was the brother who taught me how to spit-shine my shoes. So, whenever I, you know, do that, I think about him. But, you know, he was always in his ROTC uniform. Just looked immaculate. I remember him being happy-go-lucky, always having his ukulele, and singing a lot, joking. Always hugging my mother. Always; Hi, sweetheart. You know, just very loving.

But loved the JROTC program at Farrington High School.

Yes; yes. And I believe that that's where, for him, a seed was planted about serving your country, was in the ROTC.

Did he talk about joining the military after high school?

He talked to my parents about that, you know, and they both said: If that's what you want, you know, we'll support you.

In 1956, James Kimo Gabriel, Jr. enlisted in the U.S. Army right after graduating from Farrington High in Kalihi. He excelled in the Army, and qualified for the elite U.S. Special Forces, also known as the Green Berets. In 1961, Kimo was sent to Vietnam as an advisor to train the local civilians who were recruited to serve in the South Vietnamese Army. That meant teaching those villagers to fight North Vietnam's experienced regular army, as well as the elusive Vietcong Guerillas in the south.

He would write to my mother every two weeks. Because I still have her letters, and when I look at the date, every two weeks, he would write to her.

What did he write?

Well, when he was in basic training, he'd write about, you know, how the boys, the Hawaiian boys, they were just joking, playing jokes on each other, and how they missed the Hawaiian food.

To have succeeded in Special Forces, he must have been quite the person. I mean, that's something most soldiers don't want to do.

Yes.

Or aren't able to do.

Aren't able. He was very focused. So, from my father, I believe, he got those traits. Being focused, setting your mind on doing something almost to perfection. And he really did want to, my mother said, become a Special Forces soldier.

Your brother entered the Army before the war began. Had his feelings about the war, about his service changed over that time, I wonder?

Once he got to Vietnam?

M-hm.

I could see the transition in his letters. The earlier letters would talk about, We're here training, I can't tell you what I'm doing, but I know we're preparing for something big. But even he didn't quite know. So, he would talk about things that they were doing. He'd also talk about the jungle, the conditions in the jungle, or the weather, how bad it was there, and that there were these giant ants, and ... leeches. And local boys, we don't know what leeches are; we see slugs on the ground, but you don't see leeches. And so, he would say, these leeches would attach themselves on you, and they would expand.

With blood.

Yes, as they suck out your blood. And you can't hit them off, because you're in the jungle, and you don't want the Vietcong to hear you, to see you, any kind of movement. And the last few letters were really about not just the conditions, but ... I remember one in particular where he told my mother; he said: When I'm in a quiet place, I ask myself, What am I doing in this hell hole? These people don't want us here. Sometimes, I wish I could trade places and be home; and he says, But then again, I realize I need to be here. Better me than my brothers or others; I'm here to fight for all of you.

Close to the time he died, he sent something. He enclosed something in a letter to your mother.

M-hm. He enclosed the Green Beret Creed. So, I read the creed. And it's almost like he knew, or he was preparing himself. He knew that, I may not get out of this.

And in the creed, I believe it says, you know, Even if I'm the last, I'll keep fighting 'til the end.

Yes; yes.

That's my profession, and I'm a consummate professional.

Yes; exactly.

It probably took you a while to find out what did happen to him in Vietnam.

M-hm; m-hm.

Are you able to tell that story?

Times had a magazine article that was written in 1962, and the title of it is, We Are Overrun. And in that, they chronicle what had happened. But what I read then, and what I just learned about a month ago; two different stories.

Okay; tell us the difference.

Well, the first story that I've been led to believe for ... forty years has been that there were four Special Forces that were advisors. And they were among the first Special Forces sent there. And the advisors go there to train the villagers how to fight.

M-hm.

And so, he was in a platoon of four. And what I read was that their camp was overrun, and that my brother and Sergeant Marchand were the only two who were injured, and that the other two Special Forces soldiers were forced to carry them into the jungle, so that the U.S. troops weren't gonna come back there and find Vietcong. I was led to believe that they carried them into the jungle, and ... they were too heavy, they were slowing them down, so they were told to just leave my brother and Marchand there, and the Vietcong executed them. Tied both their hands behind their backs with their tee-shirts, and shot them in the back of the head. That's what I have led to believe all these years. And just recently learned that two of the four Special Forces, they were down at the river. So, they had left the camp, went down to the river.

This was before the fighting began?

Before the fighting began.

Okay.

They went down to the river to bathe. So, that left Marchand and my brother there, and they heard the sound of these bells, like bamboo bells. So, they sent up flares to see if they could see who was out there in the jungle. They were just ambushed at that time, while the other two were still down the river. So, that left two men fighting about fifty Vietcong guerillas who were coming in. But the signal came from someone in the camp, that these four Special Forces were training. So, what I've learned is, they plant villagers in the camp to serve as spies, and they relayed to the Vietcong: Here's where we are positioned here, we're gonna be moving here, now's the time to attack. I had never known that there were only two in that camp when they were killed. Now, I understand why my brother's last words were: We have run out of ammunition, we're being overrun. So, they said that he was changing clips. He had already been shot twice; changing clips, shooting, on the phone calling for backup.

What do you remember about the day you heard?

You know, it is almost like yesterday, when I think about it, and I share the story with people. I was eleven, and this was in 1962. My mother and I, we were in the garage doing chores. She was hanging clothes, and I was, you know, outside doing my chores. And this black bird, this Alala flew into our garage, and just fluttered up in the garage, on the ceiling. And I looked at it, my mother looked at it, and it looked like she was in distress. And my mother told me: 'A'ole ho'opa 'e manu. Don't touch the bird. So, I ran in the house, and came out with a bowl of water. When I came out, my mother was sitting on the ground with the bird in her lap. And she was stroking the bird, and the bird died in her lap. And she looked at me and she said: Tomorrow, we will have visitors. I had no idea how connected she was to our 'aumakua, ho'ailona. Even I was not exposed to that, at that age yet.

So, she knew at that point.

She knew, at that point. She felt that this was my brother coming to her to say goodbye. So, the next day, I was at school, and my brother and I were pulled out of class, and told we needed to go home. So, when we got home, parked in front of our home was an unfamiliar car. So, I thought: They must be the visitors my mom talked about.

Because she didn't explain further at that time.

Did not.

Okay.

Did not. So, from there, the 'Alalā was the ho'ailona to prepare her.

And what does ho‘ailona mean?

Ho‘ailona is a sign; it's a sign. Hawaiian culture, we believe that our 'aumakua, our spirits, come in different forms, our ancestors. It could be a good sign, it could just be an omen of something to come. So, I knew that she felt that the 'Alalā was her visitor carrying a message. But I didn't expect that they came to tell her that he had been killed. I thought maybe to say that he was coming home, or something. And when I walked in, and my mother was just ... crying.

Did your dad cry?

You know, that really is one of the only times I did see my father cry.

James Kimo Gabriel, Jr. was awarded a Bronze Star for Valor, and a Purple Heart. At the time of his death, Kimo's wife, who was living in Okinawa, was expecting their first child. Later, the Gabriel family would welcome her to Hawai'i, along with James Gabriel, III, the son Kimo never saw. In 1963, Kimo's remains were recovered from Vietnam, and he was buried at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific at Punchbowl.

And his wife, who is Japanese ...

Japan national?

Japan national. Well, he met her in Okinawa. And so, when he passed, she was six months pregnant.

Mm ...

So, she came here. And to prepare for her coming here, my father taught himself to speak Japanese; to prepare for her. Because he wanted to make sure that she was gonna be comfortable coming here.

Your father did that?

Yes. Fast forward thirty-two years later to 1994, and the memorial that's down at the State Capitol, Korean-Vietnam Memorial. There was a dedication ceremony, and I was asked to be on the planning committee to represent the families. For the dedication itself, they asked: Would your mother come and lay the wreath to represent all the families? And I said: Absolutely, I'm sure she would. So, I brought my mother. And General Cockett was standing on my left, General Richardson on my right; both Hawaiian generals, very proud that she was standing there with the wreath. So, the

Taps played. Then, they did the flyover, the Missing Man formation. So, the three jets, and one flies off.

M-hm.

So, we were watching that. And as that jet flew off, a black bird flew in its place. And my mother looked at me, but this time with a smile, and she said: Kimo's here, your brother is here.

Billie Gabriel says the ho'ailona of the black bird also appeared at the dedication ceremony to honor her brother at the Gabriel Memorial Field at Fort Campbell, Kentucky in 2010. Also in 2010, Billie Gabriel would become part of the photo project that would make her feel closer to her late brother.

Call for Photos is part of a national project that was being launched in Washington, DC. And the gentleman who founded the Vietnam Wall, Jan Scruggs, felt that he wanted to put a face to every name; fifty-eight thousand plus names engraved on the wall. He wanted to put a face and a picture because they were building an education center in Washington. And this education center would be for future generations to learn about the various wars that the United States has been involved. One room would be dedicated to Vietnam, and it would be called The Wall of Faces.

How many faces would there be?

Fifty-eight thousand, plus. So, Jan's vision was to put the face and a story to every name.

Billie Gabriel spent much of her professional career as a fundraiser who coordinated and publicized events such as the Kapi'olani Children's Miracle Network Telethon and the Easter Seals Taste of Honolulu fundraiser. In 2010, she answered the call to spearhead what she considers the most important project of her life: tracking down the photos of two hundred seventy-six Hawaii soldiers who never came home from the Vietnam War. Completing the Hawai'i Call for Photos project would take several years.

I decided, okay, here's where the PR skills come in, here's my networking with friends. So, I contacted the various stations, and Honolulu Star Advertiser. And I went to see the president then, Dennis Francis. And he's one of those who was accustomed to me knocking on the door for money, and he says: Okay, Gabriel, what do you need this time? And I said: Something very simple. And I put the list on his desk. And he says: Well, what is this? I said: Here's a list of two hundred and seventy-six men who were killed in Vietnam, they were all from Hawaii, I need to find their pictures. He said: Okay, so what is it that you want me to do? I said: I'd like you to publish their names in paper and state that I am searching for their photos, and if you have a photo to contact me.

And I'd like a full-page ad. So, he said: This is about your brother. And I said: You know it's not just about my brother; he's one of the two hundred and seventy-six. It's about all the families and all of these young men, and it's a project that we need to make sure that we put a face to every name that's engraved on the wall in Washington.

So, you ended up speaking with many of these family members.

I did; I did.

I can't imagine the emotion involved in those calls.

Heart-wrenching. Yes; yes. One man called me, and just berated me for five minutes on the phone. How dare you, how dare you publish these names of all our men who died in Vietnam, in a stupid war. And then, he said: My nephew was nineteen when he enlisted. So, I thought: Okay, this is a family member, I can understand now why he's so emotional. And he says: That boy, poho his life; he's going over there to fight for people he doesn't even know. Why? So, I told him: Uncle, I know how you feel, because my brother also died in the war, he was the first Hawaiian boy. And his voice changed, and he says: Oh, you local girl? And I said: Yes, I'm from here. And he says: Oh, I saw the article in the paper, I thought I was calling somebody in Washington, DC. I said: Oh, no, no; this project is for here, and I'm trying to find all the pictures so that we can honor them. So, he did send; subsequently, he did send a picture in. But that's when I understood that this project was bigger than just finding the pictures. I became an 'umeke, a bowl for many of these families to pour their emotions into. We cried together, we laughed together, you know, and we talked about our respective loved ones. But collectively, we knew that we had to stand by the fact that no matter which side of the fence you stood about the war, how you felt about it, we were here to see that our loved one would be honored for their courage, for the sacrifice they made, and that they would never be forgotten. That was our bond; our bond.

And you could come together over that.

We could come together on that; yes. They soon became family to me. Some of them called and said: I just want to meet you, just to hug you, to say thank you. But it just allowed so many people to have a voice, and to finally say what they've been wanting to say for fifty years.

Through the efforts of Billie Gabriel and many others who lost loved ones to the Vietnam War, Hawaii became the eighth state to locate all of the photos for its section of the Call for Photos project. Billie says she'll continue to honor the memory of her brother, James Kimo Gabriel, Jr., and all the soldiers who are casualties of the Vietnam War. She's working on new memorial projects with Hawaii high schools. Mahalo to Billie Gabriel 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.

For audio and written transcripts of all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit PBSHawaii.org. To download free podcasts of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, go to the Apple iTunes store, or visit PBSHawaii.org.

I was invited to go to Washington, DC for Memorial Day to represent the State in laying the wreath. My mother told me: Whenever you're on sacred ground, to remove your shoes. Then, President Obama, I had a chance to meet. And he says: I know who you are. He says: As soon as I saw you standing there with bare feet, I knew you were a local girl. And he just started laughing.