

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: Livingston "Jack" Wong

LSS 1107 (27:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 11/14/2017

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What have you failed at?

Well, organic chemistry, for sure.

You actually failed?

You know, I think I got a D, if I remember correctly. But I had to take it again. And so, the second time, I'm like: I don't really want to take it again, I'm gonna try something different. There's been a lot of little failures along the way, but that's really the one that for me, turned direction and helped me see something different.

A son of two doctors, Livingston "Jack" Wong never questioned that he would be anything other than a doctor when he grew up. But barely making it through organic chemistry in college was life-changing. Today, he's the chief executive officer of Kamehameha Schools. Livingston "Jack" Wong, 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. Livingston See Mung Wong, Jr., who's best known as Jack, was born into a family of medical doctors. His legendary father, Dr. Livingston Wong, is a retired pioneer in the field of organ transplantation in Hawai'i. Jack Wong's sister, Dr. Linda Wong, is blazing her own trail in transplant surgery. His later mother, Dr. Rose Wong, was an internist in private practice. Although Jack Wong grew up with the expectation that he would become a doctor, he ended up going in a different direction, but he stayed close to the values of his childhood. Family, education, and service to others remain precious to him. And these values help guide him in his job as chief executive officer of Kamehameha Schools.

Jack Wong was born in Boston, where his Hawai'i parents had moved to do their medical residencies. He was named Livingston after his father, and no one could tell him for sure how he picked up the nickname Jack.

I've heard lots of stories, but the one that I think I really remember was my mom telling me that when they were living in Boston, it was probably about six months or so after the shooting of JFK that I was born. And since John F. Kennedy's nickname was Jack, they named me Jack, after John F. Kennedy. And I was also Junior, so you can't call me Junior all the time, so Jack kinda came from there, from Boston

It makes sense; Jack, Boston timeline.

Yeah. I think so. So, you know, we had a simple kinda childhood. But it's interesting; you know, both my parents are doctors, and they worked.

How many kids?

So, we had five kids. And I have three older sisters, and they're all very nice to me. And I have a younger brother.

He's not nice to you?

Well, he's nice. I'm nice to him.

Oh; gotcha.

Yeah. There are five of us, and we, you know, had a great childhood. But we worked; you know, we did a lot of following our parents around in their careers, and supporting what they did.

What does that mean? Does that mean you spent a lot of time in their offices doing your homework?

Yeah. We spent a lot of time in their offices, we waited in the car. But we also spent time, you know, with my mom in her office, helping her with her medical practice. And so, we would answer phones, we would file. We would do all the support things around the side to make sure the practice was good. So, like a family business, and mostly for my mom.

What about food? Could you eat in the cafeteria?

So, you know, it was interesting, because you know, most of our childhood, we actually grew up at my grandma's house. And so, my Popo, who was living in Nu'uauu at the time, she used to own a Chinese restaurant long time ago. And so, she ran her house like a Chinese restaurant. So, we'd come there for dinner every night, come there for lunch, and all my cousins would come. There was probably like twenty of us would eat

dinner together every night. And so, while my parents would work, we'd just go my grandma's house and eat with our cousins, and our uncles and aunts. And so, she cooked for us every night, like we were at a Chinese restaurant.

That's a very different vision of family.

Yeah.

A family that was close in many ways, but not conventionally. What about the personalities of your parents and how they influenced you?

You know, it was interesting. You know, I think my dad was—you know, he had a really visionary side to him, and he liked innovation, he liked taking chances. And I hope I got some of that from him. You know, his work in transplant surgery, his work with the emergency medical services, and understanding people and systems.

He did the very first kidney and bone marrow transplants in Hawai'i. That's a risk.

Yeah. So, I think he was a risk-taker, he could see innovation, he had a really good vision for the future. And I think he really brought that. Whereas my mom was very much, you know, in the background. She had a lot of humility to what she was doing. And I think hopefully, that part, I got from her, too. But I think the common thread—and maybe because they were doctors, the common thread was always the human element; being with the patient. You know, we talked about a lot of things, but it was always about patient care, and about how each patient really mattered, and not letting down a single patient. And I think, you know, as we approach our work, whether it's education, or it's medicine, or if you're doing, you know, accounting, you know, each person matters. And I think that's what we got from my mom; every single patient mattered. She didn't have a lot of patients, but every patient. You know, we all knew her patients. You know, we talked to them on the phone when they called, we knew who they were, we knew their families.

Jack Wong remembers being a little awkward as a kid, accidentally breaking objects, and coming under the watchful eye of his older sisters, including one he considered scary.

You said you have three older sisters. So, did the sisters become the de facto mom when neither parent was present?

They all had their own mothering ways. But my second to the oldest sister, Linda, she was the boss. Right; she was the one who would crack down on the rules, make sure I studied. And you know, I remember at the end of every school year, you know, when everybody else, you know, runs off to summer and they would do things, she would

head to the bookstore and she'd make us buy workbooks. Because we'd do math workbooks, and English workbooks. And all summer long, you know, she'd be testing us. She pushed us really hard.

And that was her decision to do that?

I think it was her decision. I think she enjoyed torturing me.

You know, she had a very high sense, you know, of achievement.

And you would listen.

And we would listen.

All the kids would listen?

All the kids would listen.

Was there pressure on you to become a medical doctor?

There was a lot of pressure. And so, you know, it was interesting, 'cause you know, growing up, you know, a lot of times families would be asking the question: What do you want to be when you grow up? And in our family, it wasn't: What do you want to be when you grow up? It was: What kind of doctor do you want to be, Jack? And you know, I remember when I was really young, I'm like, I want to be a surgeon, just like my dad. And you know, my dad was pushing me to be a surgeon, and then he realized, you know, like, I had no hand skills.

Well, you were breaking a lot of things.

I was breaking a lot of things.

I was a little clumsy, and I couldn't tie my shoe. And I don't know if this is a test for surgery, but apparently, I could not tie my shoe. And even now, you know, I joke around with my family that I use the bunny ears, 'cause I don't—

People with bunny ears. I barely remember; there was a rhyme, right, about how to tie your shoes.

I don't know if there's a rhyme. I just know, like, when you make two loops and you just tie it together, as opposed to the one loop and you tie it around. And it took me such a long time to tie my shoe. And I think that's when my dad realized: Maybe surgery is not for you.

So, you headed off to UCLA after Punahou.

M-hm.

And you know, most undergraduates don't start off knowing what they want to do. Did you?

Yeah. So, I spent two years doing a science background in chemistry. And then, I kinda got stuck on organic chemistry. And then, I switched, tried a number of different things, and landed in economics. And found a different path, and understood I like numbers, I like the analysis that goes with, you know, finances and economics.

And you were an outstanding economics grad, I read.

Yeah; yeah. So, I liked the field, and law school seemed to come naturally. And you know, in our family, it was expected after you graduate from college, that you do more schooling. So, it was really like: What do I do next?

How did you break it to your father and mother that you weren't going to medical school?

I think they found out. I don't remember them finding out, but I remember when I graduated from law school, my dad was saying: Okay, good job, you know, but it's not too late to go to medical school. I said: You know, let me just try being a lawyer for a little while, and just see how that works out.

And what about your sister Linda, who did become a doctor, and I know she was very influential with you and what you studied. What did she say?

You know, it's interesting. I think she understood that she didn't want to see me fail at it, or be miserable doing it. So, she was very supportive. I mean, she really understood, I think, that it's better to succeed and be good at what you want to do than fail at something that, you know, you don't really like.

Well, it sounds like you weren't really accustomed to failure, anyway.

Failure is hard; failure is hard. But you know, I think we learn our best lessons from failure.

What have you failed at?

Well, organic chemistry, for sure.

You actually failed?

You know, I think I got a D, if I remember correctly. But I had to take it again. And so, the second time, I'm like: I don't really want to take it again, I'm gonna try something different.

And you went into economics, and then ... law isn't exactly, you know, a logical next step.

I don't know. You know, it was interesting. Maybe in our family, it might just be a little bit of, you can be a doctor or you can be a lawyer. So, if you're not gonna be a doctor, I guess you're gonna be a lawyer. And maybe there was a little bit of that.

After graduating from the UCLA School of Law, Jack Wong worked in corporate law in Los Angeles. When he decided it was time to move home with his wife, he joined a Honolulu law firm. In 1997, Jack Wong accepted a job at Bishop Estate as senior counsel, specializing in commercial real estate.

In 1997, a year of great tumult, tumultuous year at what was then the Bishop Estate, you joined the team at Bishop Estate. And just offhand, I can recall that was the year that the Broken Trust essay was published in the Honolulu Star Bulletin, written by respected community members saying the trust is misgoverning. At what point did you walk into this?

So, I walked in, I think, fairly early in that process. You know, I remember I started, and you know, it was like a snowball starting to roll down a hill. And I remember hearing, you know, a few stories, you know, before I started.

And what made you want to go to then Bishop Estate?

It's interesting, you know. I came to do corporate work and real estate work. And to me, you know, in a lot of ways, you know, our landholdings at Kamehameha Schools and our corporate work and our investments, there's so much to do. There's so much to operate, so much to run. And that was my background. And so, I found it fascinating from a legal background, from a financial background, and knowing we had a mission behind us was amazing. You know, I didn't think much, you know, going there about the governance issues, 'cause it really was not in the area I was working. But then, as time went by after I got there, you could kind of feel the energy change in the place, and you knew that this was something, you know, more than just a press story.

I mean, the headlines didn't go away after. It was front page every day. And there was a lot of just feelings of betrayal, and anger, and you just wondered if the whole place was gonna implode sometimes.

Right; right, right. I think we all had a feeling, all of us who were there at the time had a feeling, had that exact feeling. You know, it seemed like you were on such shaky ground. Yet, you know, for all the things that were going on at the governance level, a lot of our work on the staff level was, you know, how do we maintain our operations, how do we maintain the lands, how do we make sure we keep doing good work. Because that work needed to continue. And I think our teachers and our class felt the same way; we still gotta serve, you know, our kids every single day.

Once Bishop Estate became Kamehameha Schools, and there were new decisions to be made, and you know, speaking of broken trust ... they say when something's broken, at least it lets the light in, you know. What changes had to be made, and were made?

I think, you know, what's amazing is that we had some amazing leaders who really understood the changes we had to make. And so, I give so much credit to Dee Jay Mailer, you know, who came before me. She really understood, you know, that you first have to heal the organization and people. And she did a great job of making sure we healed, and then we came together. And we understood, you know, our relationships with our alumni, our teachers, our community, our lands. And so, her bringing all that together had allowed us to kinda launch from where she left us at a great place. But it took time, took time to heal the organization.

How many years later were you appointed interim CEO?

So, it wasn't until 2014, I think, that I was appointed. And it had been a long journey.

And this year marks twenty years. You've been CEO for more than three.

More than three; yes. But it has been an interesting journey, and I think along the way, I had to progressively understand a lot. I got to progressively understand the organization at a deeper level. And I think that's really what made, you know, my appointment as interim CEO really special. 'Cause I think at that time, I understood the organization a lot better. I came in understanding the real estate, our investments, and our finances, but I had an opportunity along the way to work on our John Doe case in 2003.

Admission case.

Admissions case; and I think that was meaningful for the organization. We got to understand kind of our mission and purpose.

That's right. So, you brought economics and law, and a love of education. I think I remember when you were appointed interim CEO, the endowment was at 10.1 billion, or at least that's what was reported. What is it now in 2017?

You know, right now, it's about 11.7. But you know, it changes every day. And one thing, you know, we work hard in the organization is to understand that, you know, the size of our endowment and how we manage it has to be long-term. And you know, the markets change so frequently, and if you kinda react to it every day, and you react to it every year, we have to take the long view of how our endowment grows over long periods of time. So, it is something we look at carefully.

Is that the first thing you look at when you walk in? Ping.

How much is it today?

I try not to.

But I do watch the markets, so I understand what's happening. But it's interesting. As you watch the markets, you have to watch the political landscape and the global landscape, because those things impact the markets. But you know, for us, it's great because, you know, that's what impacts education, too. You know, understanding the global impacts of what's going on politically impacts our markets, impacts our lands, and it's what our kids should be thinking about, 'cause that's world they're walking into. So, we spend a lot of time thinking about what are the global events, and what's going on.

I know Kamehameha has worked, with your leadership, on a strategic plan, and I don't know how you can see that far ahead, but it goes way far. How far ahead?

So, we have a strategic vision that's a twenty-five-year vision. So, it's supposed to be one generation. Our strategic plan is five years. And so, we do it in chunks. And our first five-year plan is 'til 2020, and our long-term vision goes out to 2040. And I think an organization like ours has the benefit of seeing long-term, but you also need a sense of urgency. And so, the long-term vision is really to give us that long-term vision of where we're going, and how do we see in one generation change in our community. The five-year plan gives it a sense of urgency so that your work every day is towards shorter goals. And so for us, you have to have a combination of both.

Because the Princess left such a large legacy to Kamehameha, I know people are always saying: Well, let Kamehameha do it, they got all the money. Is that true? I mean, should you be doing more?

Well, it's interesting. What we're really learning in our strategic planning process is, you know, our vision is really to have every Native Hawaiian succeeding in education.

Every Native Hawaiian?

Every Native Hawaiian succeed in education. And by every Native Hawaiian, we also mean every child in the State should be succeeding in education. But this is not something even we can do alone. And the realization that you have a long-term vision that you can't do alone really requires you to reexamine how you approach your strategies. And for us, it's about partnering, it's about working with other organizations that are already doing great work, and really supporting them.

Managing partnerships is difficult, I mean, as we see in marriage. Has it been difficult to find good partners, or you know, how do you pick a partner?

So, I think, you know, there are so many people doing wonderful work in education that we've not had any problem at all finding great partners doing great work. I think, you know, my question is: How do we support them best, and how do we make sure they succeed? And I think that's always a great conversation to have, but you know, everything we do, whether it's partnerships or by ourselves, is always about choices; right? Because there are so many great things we can do. How do we choose as a community, what's the right path for education. And that's not something we can do alone. You know, we at Kamehameha Schools can't do it alone; we need partners, and partners need to work together.

So, these are education partners.

There's not only partners in education, there's partners in social service. We certainly have our ali'i trusts that we need to be working together better, and making sure we can all move the lāhui together successfully. So, you know, we absolutely have to work together with all those partners. And I think we're not the only organization; I think a lot of organizations are looking on how to better partner in this community.

There are some things that have been really difficult to get a handle on. I mean, somebody was here the other day and saying, you know, one of the big elephants in any room is Hawaiian sovereignty. And also, what's happening on Mauna Kea. You know, is it really a clash between Western science and Hawaiian culture? I mean, is that how it should be posited, and what can Kamehameha do to bring some light here?

It's interesting. You know, I think, you know, for us, our role is education, and our role is to make sure our keiki, you know, are well-educated, make good choices, understand their community, understand how to lead their community. And from that, I believe great things will happen. And whether they are on the left side of an issue, or the right side of an issue, or right in the middle of an issue, I want our keiki to engage. Because when our community is engaged, we will move forward; right? Our fear should be a lack of engagement, when we're not hearing noise, when we don't hear from our communities, and our keiki, and our youth. That's when we should worry. When we hear noise and we hear people engaging, we should smile.

So, Kamehameha doesn't want to be in the position of making decisions; it wants to promote education and—

That's where we start.

--engagement, and ... go for it with training.

Our start is, we put our keiki in the center. We start with that premise. And we're saying: What do our keiki need to succeed as adults? You know, if they need to know how to engage civilly with their community, they know how to articulate an issue and participate in the process, and if they know how to have their voice be heard, then we're doing our work. And that's the vision for our future.

Would you lay out in numbers the breadth of Kamehameha? You know, the real estate and students.

So, let's see if I can get the numbers. Right now, we have about fifty-four hundred kids in our K through 12. We have three campuses. We have about five thousand four hundred students, and we graduate about seven hundred every year on our Maui campus, our Hilo campus, and our Hawaiiiana campus. We have thirty preschools, and we have about sixteen hundred keiki in our preschools. And we have scholarships that educate another eighteen hundred in our preschools, and another five hundred in K through 12, and another two thousand in post-high. And then, we have community education programs that if you count how they reach our keiki and our families, probably have another fifteen thousand Native Hawaiians. And so, kinda by the numbers, that's our reach. We also have about three hundred sixty-three thousand acres of land that we manage, about half in agriculture, and we have commercial lands in about fifteen different areas that we focus on.

It's a tremendous kuleana.

It is.

**So, could you maybe share some leadership tips about how you maintain every day?
It's just huge.**

I try to draw from my parents. And you know, I think if I draw from my dad, I understand that we have to understand how systems work, we have to know how to innovate and how to lead, and have it work from a vision. And so, I think that's always important in what we do. But I also know from, you know, my mom, we have to make sure, and I have to make sure we have a sense of humility and know how to help others succeed.

Is it always possible to just know what is in the best interest of the keiki?

No. You know, I think that's why we have to work with partners, and we need a lot of voices, we have a great board, we have executives, we have teachers and administrators. All the voices have to help understand that, 'cause it cannot just be my voice, it cannot just be the voice of a few. And you know, that's the challenge in education, is that everybody's working, and everybody has great ideas, yet we all have to figure out how to best serve each child.

And you have to be an optimist too; right?

You have to be an optimist. You have to see the positive and the growth. And so, a lot of times, you know, our biggest thing is, we have to see the good things in what we're going. And that's our encouragement, understanding the really, really good things we do.

You know, I'm trying to imagine sitting at your desk, and you have so many constituencies to address. I mean not, quote, just the financials and the legalities. I mean, there are so many people affected in so many different ways by the school and the investments. And you know, some have felt betrayed, some have very different ideas than others. How do you manage that?

There's many ways to manage. My dad or my mom would look to something, where you know, when we talked about their work, and things were stressful, you know, it was always the patient was in the center of everything they did; patient care, taking care of their families. And I think the same for us.

So, you're saying put the keiki in the middle.

We put the keiki in the center of everything we do, and we make better decisions. And I pause, and I think about that a lot. That, and we think about, you know, our roots and our history, and our ancestry, and Princess Pauahi. And you know, we make decisions based on our history and our values.

It used to be that people felt like they had to choose between their culture and a quote, good education. Now, I think you're addressing that; right?

Absolutely.

How have you addressed it?

You don't have to choose between culture and academics; you can have both. And when we're really strong in what we do, understand our culture, and our kids understand their identity and their background and their ancestry, they will find academic success, because of that strength. And so, how do we treat our culture as a competitive advantage, and how do you grow from that strength. And absolutely, what you're saying is true.

That if you're grounded in the Hawaiian culture, it can make you much better in anything you do.

Right. And that will become your competitive advantage in the classroom, in the workplace, out in our community. And that's something we believe as an organization; we've always believed that. But we have to feel like we can say it out loud.

You know, you talked about your family growing up. What's your family like?

Oh, my family's wonderful. It's interesting. You know, I have my wife. We met at UCLA, and we have three wonderful kids.

And do you expect them to be lawyers, like you were expected to be a doctor?

Yeah. You know, it's funny; it's funny. We had a discussion when our kids were young. You know, and I'm very careful not to tell my kids what they should be doing. And I think one thing I just don't know is, I don't know what great areas go to into now. I mean, I think kids have to figure that out and see what the future's gonna bring to them. And so, I have one daughter who lives in Los Angeles, and she's in finance. I have a second daughter who's in New York, and she's doing communications. I heard that's a good field.

Well, you've gotta communicate.

And I have a son who's in ninth grade. So, we have a wonderful family. And you know, I think kinda like, you know, my own family, I think we try to stay, you know, quiet and do our work, and everybody tries to work hard. And try to stay in the background when we can.

And is the family business Kamehameha?

Right now, yeah.

Our conversation took place in the Fall of 2017. Mahalo to Livingston Jack Wong of Honolulu, the CEO of Kamehameha Schools, for sharing his story with us. And mahalo to you, for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.

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You are a lifer at Punahou.

M-hm.

You're of Chinese ancestry, and you are sitting in the CEO spot at Kamehameha Schools, primarily for the Hawaiians and Hawaiian culture. Does that get difficult for you at some points?

I don't think so. You know, it's never about me; it's always about those we serve. And I'll let the rest fall as it falls. So, I don't think about that. I know what I'm here to do, and I'm gonna do my best, and I'm gonna put a hundred and ten percent into it. And I believe in our mission, and I believe in what we're doing. And I think it's a calling, and you know, I'll do my best every single day. And then at some point, somebody will say: Okay, you're done. And maybe that's okay, too.