

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: Community Stewards

LSS 1109 (25:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 1/9/2018

Maybe because I've been given so much, and I feel so blessed, that for one, I think everyone ... it's a basic need, a basic right, you know, to have healthcare. And I really want to make sure that people are afforded that opportunity.

It's real sad, because we've got this population of patients that cannot get the things they need, and yet, we're surrounded by wealth in this land. But we never give up, we never turn our back, we never say we can't do it. We still do what we can.

I like to say servant leadership is about identifying and meeting the needs of others, rather than acquiring power, wealth, and fame for yourself.

All three speakers are in professions that uplift members of our community. And it isn't just a job for any of them. Rather, it's an extension of the deeply-held values that guide their lives. Community stewards, next, on Long Story Short.

One-on-one engaging conversations with some of Hawai'i's most intriguing people: Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox.

Aloha mai kākou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A steward is someone who looks after other people or things, like finances. A community steward looks after the members of a community, especially when it comes to basic wellbeing: healthcare, food, housing, safety, and evening meaning in life. In this edition of Long Story Short, we'll revisit three previous guests, all of whom can be called community stewards. We'll learn more about how their personal values and passion for caring led them into career choices in which they're helping those in need. We begin with Connie Mitchell. She's the executive director of Hawai'i's oldest and largest nonprofit agency dedicated to homelessness. It's the Institute for Human Services; no small task in an expensive state that has one of the highest homeless rates in the nation.

My parents, being really open, said: Why don't you go to church? You know, and they actually encouraged me to go. And I went to a church on Judd Street for many years. And, you know, that helped shaped my own faith.

Was it the same faith church that they believed in?

No. You know, they weren't Christian. And I think there was a woman that went into the neighborhood and was just, you know, looking for children that might want to go to church. And so, I started going to Sunday School, and then ended up really just learning so much about God's love, you know. And that was like, a little foreign in some ways, you know, from the culture that I was coming from. But I'm thankful for that, and I think that my faith has actually inspired a lot of the choices that I've made, you know, throughout my life and work, particularly. So, I kind of like, you know, was embracing the Christian faith, and then at the same time, you know, my parents practiced their own cultural practices and faith. So ... I think it's in some ways typical, you know, of people who grow up in Hawai'i. You know, you're exposed to a different way of thinking. And I'm thankful for the way that Hawai'i is, you know, that we are able to ... no matter how we think or how we believe, that we're able to get along most of the time. I think as a child, you just know if you're playing with other people, you're playing with them, you're getting along with them, and you don't think about those other things. But that kind of childhood, growing up in a diverse community very much shapes how you feel when you grow up in a lot of ways. And so, yeah, you know, I think when I think back to the people that I did know and ... in the work that you're doing, or the things that you're trying to do, you know, it's just really great to know that you have friends of different kinds. We are, despite the diversity, very much a connected community. You know, people have relationships, strong relationships that go on for a long time.

What do you see in the homeless community in that sense?

I think one of the things that I've struggled with is that, you know, sometimes I see people that I have known from before also. And it makes me particularly ... wanting to find a way to help people. And at the same time, we have a lot of people who are not from Hawai'i, and I have often thought about how I really would want to impart knowledge about the values that we have here in Hawai'i. Because so many people come, and I feel like they, not knowing some of the practices and the values, seem to not be so respectful, and really have a lot of expectation of the people here. And while we should be helping them, you know, when in actuality, if you come and you have an understanding of the values, you know that you want to be a part of the community, and to give back to the community too. You know, so I'm not saying that everyone like that who comes just wants to take, but there are some people who, you know, don't have a sense of responsibility or kuleana. And I think that that is something that is very strong and, you know, just really wanting to encourage people to understand that if you come here, can you be a part of our community in a constructive way. What I envision is being able to try to convince people that they can be a part of the community again. You know, they don't feel a part of the community; that's why they're out there. You know, they don't have a place to go, and we have to, as a community, figure out how to do that. I believe that every one of those people

who is capable of working could work if they weren't using drugs, or you know, their mental health was stabilized.

Those are big ifs.

Yeah; but we could do it. I believe that it can be done, if we have the will to provide the services, you know, and to walk alongside some of these people so that they can believe also. Because I don't think they believe it right now; they don't think that there is a way out. And I've seen it happen, that when they start to believe and they actually take a chance on us, they're able to get out of that situation.

You've got to talk to lawmakers.

Absolutely.

You've got to talk to funders. You've got to talk to homeless people, and supervisors, and community leaders, and business owners.

So, there's no usual day at IHS. Everything is urgent. And you're right; you know, we really look at the community as a major stakeholder. You know, we serve not only the people who are homeless, but we serve our community. You know, and as a part of that community, we have people who are policymakers, we have people who are funders. People who are just the public. You know, we really want to help people understand better what homelessness is about in Hawai'i, and we want them to understand how we all can help them better.

What keeps you going?

That's a good question. I think it's really seeing people turn their lives around when we are able to help them. And it happens quite often, I have to tell you. 'Cause, you know, we're always sharing among the staff. We basically do a little blast, you know, to let everyone know when someone's getting housed or exiting into housing, or they got a job, or they're really on their way. Some of it is getting them back home to the mainland. You know, we started a relocation program, and that has been really successful. You know, I believe it's a win-win-win for the person who's going back to the family, the family, and for the State of Hawai'i. So, I think just, you know, being able to do some new things, find some new solutions, partner with new people who have similar passion and just really want to make a difference, you know, that's really exciting to me, to see so many people like that.

Dr. Elliot Kalauawa is the chief medical officer at Waikiki Health, a nonprofit community clinic that provides medical and social services to all comers, regardless of their ability to pay. Dr. Kalauawa started his life on Hotel Street in Downtown Honolulu, where his

single mother spent much of her time drinking and gambling. Yet, he grew up with strong, positive values.

Even though my mom lived that lifestyle, I always felt loved by her. I never felt like she was neglecting me. I felt like that was just normal, to grow up there. And then, because of my other family, my godmother, my aunts, my uncles, they all showed me love. And so, I always felt like I was loved. And that's why I never felt like I had to join a gang to get love there. You know how some of the young ones go to, or to belong. You know, I felt real love. And that, to me, was the key.

Did your entire childhood go this way?

I would say it started to change some when I went to 'Iolani from ninth grade. Because the thing was, when I was growing up, part of me felt like I didn't know where I really belonged. 'Cause I was growing up in the housing, and all my friends in the housing were people that, when we'd go to school at Palolo Elementary, they were in the special education class. And I look back, and I think I could have got into trouble with them. But I give my mom a lot of credit. My mom was very strict, even though she was doing that type of lifestyle. Her feeling was, she never wanted me to have the kinda lifestyle she had. So, she would always tell me that. She would tell me: You study. And even though she wasn't home when I'd come home from school, I guess because I knew she could be so firm, and because I knew she really wanted me to do that, when I came home, I would study. I got all my homework done, then I would go out and play with the housing kids. Her influence was so strong, even though she wasn't physically there, I sort of always felt the need to obey. You know, she's the kind of person who really didn't care what others thought. This is what she told me, and she would tell me this several times. She said: Don't care what people think if they're not feeding you. And so, that's why I grew up having that kind of a ... you know, that tough thing, where it's hard to offend me, because I have a tough skin. And I tell people, you know: Just tell me what you think. Because I like it to be constructive, and to me, in order for it to be constructive, the person has to tell you what they feel.

And that probably helps you as a doctor; people can tell you things.

Yeah.

Right?

Yeah.

Do you ever judge people?

Oh, not at all. No. Especially when I look at, you know, my lifestyle, what I grew up in. There's no point judging anybody. Because on the surface, we might be different, but below the surface, we're all the same. One of the things like to tell students and residents at our clinic, 'cause we see homeless patients, I tell them; I say: If you take a homeless person, put him in one exam room, tell him to undress, and you'll be back in to examine him, you take another person, say, a doctor or lawyer, tell him to undress, you'll come back in and examine them. And this is where people who have a stereotype about the homeless won't really understand. So, if you did that, and then you go back into either room, sometimes you can't tell who the doctor or who the homeless person is. Because the homeless person has the same desires. And some of them are very clean, they're not like what the stereotype you always see. I mean, there's some that are dirty and, you know, don't shower. But some are very clean, some are very educated; they just had bad things happen to them, you know, are very intelligent. So, that's why I was raised never judging people.

You really can't cure everything that's wrong with them.

No. One of the things in medicine, especially in my field, you know, internal medicine, because we're a primary care field is, if the patients can come in and just talk to someone about their problems, it's amazing how much good it does. Because I have patients who will come in, and I just let them talk. They talk the whole visit. At the end of the visit, I haven't given any recommendations, and they'll tell me: I feel so much better. And that, to me, is the joy. But I just enjoy the interaction so much, even though I know that medicine today is limited on how we can help them. The point is, I just enjoy that interaction so much, I don't get frustrated. The patients that I see, in general, a lot of them are from the same background that I'm from. So, that's more so. In fact, two homeless patients I saw over the years were kids I grew up with. One of them, I saw his name in the chart, and I went in, and he didn't know who he was gonna see, and he had his back towards the door. I went in, I called his name, he turned around, and he didn't recognize me, 'cause it was years. When I told him my name, he said—and he was homeless. And I told him my name. He said: You know, I remember as a kid, you always talked about being a doctor, and I wondered if you made it; and I guess you did. You know. And then, another one of my patients, I played Little League Baseball with him. And then, couple weeks later, after I saw him, I'm coming into the clinic, I'm walking through the waiting room. He's with another homeless patient, and he stops me, and he says: Hey, tell my friend here that you and I used to play baseball together. And I said: Yeah, we used to play baseball together. I guess his friend couldn't see that his homeless friend grew with a doctor. You know. And so, yeah, when I see these patients, you know, I see patients that are like my mom, I see patients that grew up the way I grew up. And I really enjoy that. I remember some years ago, one of the Waikiki small newspapers was doing a report, and they asked me: What is it like treating at Waikiki? And I said: Treating at Waikiki Health is like being in a third world country. And said: It's real sad, because we've got this population of patients that cannot get the

things they need, and yet, we're surrounded by wealth in this land. But we never give up, we never turn our back, we never say we can't do it; we still do what we can. And I'll give you an example. If somebody comes in, doesn't have insurance, and I suspect he has pneumonia, instead of getting a chest x-ray, 'cause I know he can't afford it, I might treat him, then have him come back the next day or few days later to see how he's doing clinically. You know, see if he's making progress. Because I can't do the chest x-ray, so I'll have to rely on what he's told me and my physical exam, and how he responds to treatment. Other patients, I tell them; I say: Okay, we need to get this test. And if it's a test that's not urgent, I say: This is the cost of the test, so why don't you try to save your money, and I'll give you two months to try to save your money, so that we can get the test. And some of them will do it; they'll cut back on different expenses. Maybe they won't eat out, you know, at fast foods as much. So, we have to kind of plan it. So, our whole approach to treating somebody without insurance is different. So, it's not quick to do the test. And then, when it comes to medications, we rely on samples that the drug companies give us. Or again, sometimes, some of them will go and ask maybe a family member to buy their medication for them. I've been at Waikiki Health now thirty-one years. In fact, two days makes thirty-one years. And I look back, and I say, I feel real fortunate, 'cause I've got a career that I truly enjoy. I mean, it's not work for me. You know, you hear the cliché that, you know, when you enjoy, it's not really work. Well, for me, it really is. I go to work, and I just enjoy every single day.

Dr. Kent Keith is president of the Pacific Rim Christian University in Honolulu, and former head of Chaminade University. Back when he was a sophomore at Harvard University, he read a motivational guide for high school student leaders. Thirty-four years later, he published these life lessons in a book called: Anyway, The Paradoxical Commandments. It's been translated into seventeen languages and sold around the world, and guess who often gets credit online for these penetrating lessons? No less than Mother Teresa. But no; she never made such a claim. The book is based on what Dr. Keith gleaned growing up in a military family that relocated often. It reflects his passion of helping others to find personal meaning in their lives.

By the time I was fourteen, I arrived in Hawai'i 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 are differences. It was hard, because I was almost always the new kid in school. So you know, you have start making new friends, and by the time you've really made friends, you're moving again, and you're leaving them. That sort of had an impact. But it had one benefit, which is that you didn't bring any baggage. Nobody knew who you were before.

You could start again.

I got all these fresh starts when I was growing up. So, yeah, 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.

No, actually, what happened was, after a while, I began building walls. I began saying: 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 is figuring out, you know, things like, what does friendship mean, what do relationships mean. And so I mean, on balance, I think it had quite a bit of impact, and for me, I think it was positive.

You made friends at Stevenson, and they went up to Roosevelt with you. But what was it like? You were in many different school environments. What was it like?

You know, the most interesting environments, really, 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. And then coming to Hawai'i, and realizing, you know, we can work together. 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, a lot of the things don't matter, and you can belong, everybody can belong no matter where they're from. So, I think the extracurricular program is what really helped me the most. It wasn't so much what happened in the classroom.

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

You know, I don't remember them doing that. What I remember was that my family wanted us to behave the way they wanted us to behave. And we were a little bit different. 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, or you need to pull weeds. You know. So, the idea was, 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. And so, the worst argument I could make as a kid about doing something was: Everybody else is doing it. That was not an acceptable argument. That didn't mean anything in our family. The idea was, well, you know, what's worth doing and what's balanced, and are you helping out with the family, and you know, are you learning what you need to learn. You know, they were both wonderful. I was so blessed to have them as parents. And they were a great team together, and we never doubted that they loved us, we never doubted that they cared about us. And I was always proud of them.

When you were a nineteen-year-old at Harvard University, you wrote ... some ten thoughts, and they've resonated around the world. They were found posted on a wall at Mother Teresa's children's home, and in fact, she was given credit for writing them. In fact, it's you, a former nineteen-year-old, writing some very wise and clever sayings.

Well, it was the 60s, and I was in student government here, and then I went on to Harvard, and I continued to work with high school student leaders. But it was the 60s, so you know, a lot of conflict and confrontation, turmoil. And yet, a lot of idealism and a lot of hope that somehow, we could make the world a better place. So, what was 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 wanted wasn't achieved, and people didn't seem to appreciate what they were trying to do. So, I had a couple of major messages for them. I was traveling around the country speaking, 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, you're gonna get a lot of meaning. That should give you a lot of meaning and satisfaction. And if you have the meaning, you don't have to have the glory. The meaning should be enough. People appreciate you, that's fine. If they don't, you're okay, you still got the meaning, and 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, '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 we called it then, about caring about people. And talked 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.

How did you learn all of that so early?

Yeah. Well, I've been very blessed. I mean, there were two major sources behind this. One was just my family. I mean, I grew up in a family that lived that way. And so, I wrote The Paradoxical Commandments. I showed the manuscript to my dad, for example, and I remember him looking at them and going: Uh-huh, yup, we know this, nice of you to write it down. I mean, my parents, my aunts, my uncles, they did it anyway. They were focused on loving people, and helping people, and doing what's

right, and they were not after power, wealth, and fame. They did what was meaningful.

You've had some very prominent positions, but you haven't handled your career in the traditional ways.

Right.

You've come in, come out, gone here, gone there. And as you look back, what do you think about your progression?

You know, I just feel very fortunate. I feel very lucky, because each job was meaningful; it was about something I really cared about. I believe that each time, I was able to work with a team to produce results that helped people. You know, it's interesting. Years ago, I read a book; the author suggested that 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. But because of the way our society was structured then, with couples, men and women and so on, careers, 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. I like that, because I think 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. But if we know what's meaningful to us, then we look for things in that arena. What you have is, you have this dissonance or disconnect between here's what our culture says, you know, are the symbols of success, we're gonna measure you by those, but here are the sources of meaning that are really gonna energize you and make your life worthwhile. Can you bring those together, is the question. So, if you start with the meaning, and you end up being successful, that's terrific.

Dr. Kent Keith, Dr. Elliot Kalauawa, and Connie Mitchell; each comes from a different background, but all grew up feeling loved, and now carry that love into their work as community stewards. Mahalo to our three guests, all of Honolulu, for sharing with us your passion for caring. 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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Do you think you would be unhappy in a place that had well-heeled patients who could pay their bills with insurance, and cash?

Yeah. Because I would feel like I'm not doing all that I can do.

You're gonna be more accurate and better connected, and more likely to do the right things if you're focused on serving others, rather than just looking at your own power, wealth, or fame.

When you think back to the people that maybe were your mentors, I think back about the people that were mine. If there were not those people in my life, then I don't think I would be doing what I'm doing.