

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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Even my friends would say: Oh, that's not a good idea. You know, if you come from the mainland and you steal away one of the local girls, they usually kill you. You know. You'll end up in the Kunia cane fields someday, you know. Well, I mean, that was a joke, but I mean—

They were joking.

--people would say that.

Yeah.

You know, to me.

Even his mother said to him: John, now this girl is a performer, and she works on the stage in front of strangers every night; there will be lots of people in the audience wanting her. John, are you sure? You know, so there was a lot of ... people.

So, it was the two of us out there, just on our own, trying to make sure that the feelings we had for each other were real, you know.

When Kanoë and John Miller fell in love during the 1970s, they faced persistent doubt and opposition from family and friends. All these years later, they say challenges and adversity have only strengthened their marriage. Kanoë and John Miller, 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. Our guests today are a husband and wife who say that naysayers made them stronger. Kanoë Miller, born Kanoë Lehua Kaumehe'iwa, was crowned Miss Hawai'i in 1973. For twenty years, she would be one of Hawai'i's top fashion models, and at the same time, and up to the time of our conversation in early 2018, she's been performing hula the iconic Halekulani Hotel in Waikīkī, O'ahu, with only a few breaks over forty-one years. Today, Kanoë and her husband, John Miller,

own a digital entertainment company, creating videos and live shows of beloved Hawaiian Golden Era music and hula, with Kanoe as the featured dancer.

John Miller grew up in Denver, Colorado and became a military pilot, and served in the Wyoming Air National Guard. In 1976, John says he left the freezing cold of Wyoming to head to the warm shores of Hawaii as a pilot for Aloha Airlines. One fateful night in 1977, as he was walking through Waikīkī, O'ahu, he stopped in at the luxury hotel, Halekulani. It was a moment that would change his life.

When I first came out here, the second year I was working for Aloha Airlines, I lived on a boat in the Ala Wai. And I used to go for a walk in the evening if I had the evening off. And I walked by the Halekulani, and I saw Kanoe dancing. And I thought: That's probably the reason I'm here. You know.

What made you say that? Because there are other hula dancers along the beach at Waikīkī.

You know, well, there was a lot of entertainment. But Kanoe just has something special. You know? And so, I went in and sat down. And the way she dances, she relates to everybody. But I thought she was just relating to me. And so, I thought: Oh, my god, this is heaven. You know.

A lot of other guys in the audience kind of had the same expression on their face?

Probably. I didn't look at them, though. I was just looking at her, you know. So, yeah, I was probably Number 16 in line.

And it was about the Lovely Hula Hands; it was all about that.

You know, if you've seen her dance, you know it's about the whole everything. And I just thought: Oh, my god, she's dancing right to me. And so then, I tried to talk to her, and I realized she'd never even seen me. You know? It was like, I was just another tourist. And she said something like: Are you having a nice vacation? You know. And I thought: Oh—

And where are you from?

Yeah; where are you from? I thought: Oh. But I still was smitten. I just thought: This gal has something different than anybody else. So, I just kept coming back, and coming back. And after I came back enough times, I realized that she had a ring on her finger. She was engaged, or married. I thought she was married. And I thought: Oh, man, I'm too late. You know. But I still kept going. Like everybody else, they go the Halekulani for the music and to watch her dance.

Was that a ring to ward off suitors?

No; I was engaged to someone else. And normally, you know, when you dance hula, you're not supposed to wear any nail polish, no jewelry except your Hawaiian bracelet. But he insisted that I wear this ring. So, I wore it.

So, you're engaged.

I'm engaged.

And then, actually, after a couple years of me being smitten by her, a friend of mine who knew that I really was infatuated with her called me up one night, and she said: John, Kanoe is not married; there's an article about her in this magazine, and it's all about The Fox of the Month. And it's like all these questions about what she hopes to meet in her perfect guy.

You know, this magazine; it was called ...

O'ahu.

O'ahu. And every month, they had wonderful articles, and it was more tailored for the single young set of Hawai'i, of O'ahu. And every month, they had a Fox of the Month. And I was Miss November. And they had asked me: Describe your ideal man. And I did. Describe your ideal life. I did. When my fiancé read the answers, the first thing he said was: You're not describing me. And that was my reaction: Sure, I am. Of course, I am. Yes, I'm describing you. He says: No, you're not; everything you say in here is not me.

Well, I read this article, and every question they asked about, what's your perfect guy like ... it was me. And I thought: Well, she's talking about me, and obviously, she hasn't gotten married yet, so he's not the right one. Must be me.

By the way, you have to tell the story of how you got that magazine.

Oh. Well ... one of the pilots that I got hired with, his wife was along for the whole time that I used to go and watch her dance, and take people there. I would take them there. I took everybody there. And of course, she would see me going: Oh, gosh, she's so beautiful. You know. And of course, everybody feels that way about Kanoe when they watch her dance. But she was the one that called me up and told me: I read this article about Kanoe in the magazine. And so, she called me kinda late at night, you know. So, I said: Well, what's the name of the magazine? She said: Oh, I don't know, but her picture's on the front. You know. So, I walked to all the bookstores looking for

this magazine. And the magazine wasn't there; it wasn't for sale in newsstands. So then the next morning, I called her back up and I said: Where did you see that magazine? And she said: Oh, at my hairdresser's; it's a little place called Shear Power over in Kailua. I said: Okay. So, I drove over there. And I went in, and I went upstairs, and I walked in, and of course, the dryers were going and ladies were cutting, and you know, it's a real female place.

Boy, you had it bad.

I know. And I walk in, and there's this table, and there's the magazine with her picture on it. So, I walked in, and this one lady looks up and she says: Can I help you? And I said: Well, yes, you know, a friend of mine got her hair cut yesterday, and she told me about this magazine that has an article about someone I'm interested in; could I have that magazine? And she says: No; those magazines are for my customers. And I tried to think really quick, you know. I go: Could I get a haircut? And I took her aback. I said: If I get a haircut, does that make me a customer? Then, could I have the magazine? And she says: Okay, sit down and I'll get with you in a few minutes. So, I sat down and waited for my haircut. At the end of my haircut, I got the magazine. And as an aside, I had my hair cut from her for like, twenty-five years after that.

Faithfully.

I was very loyal.

You paid for that magazine.

I paid for it; right. But then I took the magazine and read it, and that's when I realized: This girl is talking about me. You know?

Okay, now; what did she say? What did you say was your perfect guy?

What did I say? The most important question was: Describe your ideal man. And I said: Well, my ideal man is a global thinker. He thinks three hundred sixty degrees, all the way around, his vision goes out. You know, it's infinite, and it goes three hundred sixty degrees; he can see both sides of the story no matter what the issue is. He has to be a global thinker, he has to be a big thinker with big ideas. He needs to have a big heart, and he needs to have big hands. In other words, generous. I want somebody who is generous in their thinking, generous here, and generous here. And that's what I ask for. I said: I want a life that ... watch out what you ask for. I want a life that goes up, that does down, that goes sideways, that whirls around like a Mad Mouse ride. I don't want flat-line; I want highs. I want highs, I want desperate lows. I want to turn to the side, I want to go on two wheels, screaming. You know. I got that.

So, I renewed my efforts. I was down there that night, you know, a trying to ask her if she would go out on a date with me. You know. And I told her that I had read this article, and that I thought that she was describing me.

And I was like: Stalker.

Yeah. And she was thinking: Oh, my god, how do I get rid of this stalker?

Did you feel any attraction to him?

Oh, yeah; immediately, soon as he came up to me. I was like: Wow, this guy is really cute. Wow, he's really attractive, but I am engaged to someone else. And I really like him, but no. I'm engaged to someone else; no, no, no, no, no.

So, I asked her if she would go on a date. And she said: No.

Yeah.

So, I just thought: Okay, how can I bridge this gap? So, I asked her: Well, how about if I come here and just walk you to your car? Now, this is the old Halekulani, where you drive in, and you parked on the grass, right in front of the old building. So, all the cars were parked right there on the grass; everybody parked there. And where she danced was just out at the House Without A Key. So, I knew that the walk would only be like, thirty steps or so, you know. But I asked her: How about if I come and walk you to your car; would that be okay? 'Cause that way, maybe you could get to know me.

Yeah; actually, what you said was: I read that article, and I think that if you got to know me, you would see that I'm the guy you're talking about. So, I said: Okay, you can walk me to my car. Okay.

So, I guess she felt safe. You know, there was lots of people around. I didn't look too creepy, I guess. Had my hair cut like a pilot, you know. So, I would go every night, and wait until she got off, on the nights that I could go. Sometimes, I had to fly. But she would let me walk her to the car, and we would just talk about a little something.

Oh, but the walk would only take, you know, thirty seconds.

Yeah; the first week, the walk was like, just thirty steps. But after the first month, I think it was probably taking about an hour to get to the car.

Yeah.

And we could talk about anything. You know, we weren't in a rush. She wasn't in a rush, and of course, I wasn't in a rush.

And I really enjoyed talking to him. And we had a lot of things in common. You know, lot of interests that were the same. Lot of almost kinda the same dreams. You know, which every time after I'd leave him, I'd go: Gosh, he and I have the same dreams, same ideas, same visions, but I don't have that with my fiancé, as much as I love him. You know, we don't have the same ideals, I think. So, anyway, I looked forward to him coming and walking me to the car.

I think I had been coming for about two months, and she was letting me walk her to the car. And one night, I just told her: You know, I think I'm in love with you.

Of course, I was really afraid. Terrified; terrified. Because I knew he was right, and I knew he was the right person for me. But now, I had to break off this six-year engagement to someone that I thought I loved, away from his family that I love so much. So, it was like, you know, seeing this giant maw open up in front of you, like a giant crevasse that you know you're just gonna go plummeting down into. It's very frightening to break off from people you know and you love, a lifestyle that is comfortable to you, to go off with somebody you've only known for maybe two months. And he's from the mainland, he hasn't lived in Hawaii very long, he doesn't know us as a people yet, he's totally from Colorado. These are things that are frightening to me.

Kanoe Kaumeheiwa had feelings for John Miller, but was conflicted because of her six-year engagement to another man. In turn, her fiancé did not appreciate John's sudden appearance in her life. John asked to meet with Kanoe's fiancé at a church in Kailua, Windward O'ahu, to sort out the difficult situation. John sought the advice of the church's brand new priest, and after several hours of counseling, the priest had some advice for the three of them.

He came up with the solution and he said: Okay; I want you to not see either one of these guys for a month, and I want you to go and date. I want you to go out there and date as many people, and as many dates as you can, and all different kinds of people.

And I want you know, that's hard for me, 'cause I'm not a dater. You know, I'm really a one guy kinda woman. And I don't like to date, and I feel very uncomfortable. But I did it. And he also told me: I want you to go on Kailua Beach, and I want you to take these long walks, and I want you to spend a lot of time by yourself, and I want you to think about things. So, I followed his advice. And one of the things I realized is—oh, and the priest also said: I've asked both your suitors to stay away from you, and give you space and give you time. And I said: Okay. So, I did; I spent one month totally by myself. Ooh; I lost a lot of weight, 'cause I was very stressed. Oh, I looked great. One

of the things I noticed is that he was honorable, and he stayed away. And my fiancé did not. And I did date for a month, other people. And when that month was over, ring-ring-ring-ring-ring; called him up.

And said?

And said: Let's get together.

So, you were clear.

I was clear.

You were clear at that point.

And I had to say to my fiancé, it's finished, and I had to break it off.

A year later, in 1979, still facing skepticism and opposition from family and friends about their relationship, John Miller married Kanoe Lehua Kaumeheiwa. Kanoe said that in the early days of their relationship, only one friend and one coworker supported their decision. Without wavering, the couple set out on their dream honeymoon across the U.S. continent, visiting more than thirty states.

We were both gonna take three months off, and drive around the United States. And I had an old Corvette, and so we decided, let's do this Route 66 thing.

Well, we grew up watching Route 66; yeah? In the 60s. And for the two of us, we found out that was like our dream life, to be vagabonds, to be in this open convertible, to travel untraveled roads, or highways or paths that had never been taken. If you look on the map of the United States, it's all these main highways and other main roads. But then, there's these blue highways. The blue highways are the path that nobody takes; it's the ones that go through the back areas. We were quite interested in taking those roads. And that's what we did for three months.

So, we planned that. And the wedding came, we took care of all that. And then I shipped my car over to the mainland, and then we headed out.

Yeah.

Life was good, and the marriage seemed ideal. So much so, that friends would often call them Miss Hawai'i and Captain Aloha. But life has a way of not going according to plan, and the couple confronted a series of major financial and personal challenges, including the 2008 collapse of John's employer, Aloha Airlines. However, Kanoe and John say the obstacles they faced made their relationship stronger.

I thought: I'm marrying an airline pilot, life is grand, I'm going to have children. Someday, he'll retire at age sixty. We'll take up golf, we'll go on cruises. Oh, this is lovely. Right? And lots of things happened along the way that didn't happen, and we didn't have children. Lots of things fell apart. But not us. I think one of the turning points in our life was ... well, the main thing is when Aloha Airlines went down. Basically, everyone was out of a job, including him. And we had losses. We lost pensions, healthcare. Let's just say we were living here; everything dropped. The level of our revenue stream went from here to ... there. And we didn't know what we were gonna do. All he knew was to fly; he was an airline pilot. All I was, was a hula dancer. He was about fifty-five years old; he was not at an age where airlines might want to pick him up. Mandatory retirement age at the time was sixty; he was fifty-five. I highly doubt an airline would pick him up. We were faced with who are we, and what do we want to do? And we decided that we were gonna stick together, and we were gonna put our talents together, and we were going to do a business together. And that's what it is. And the business is that we became a digital entertainment company. And that was hard because, you know, I don't know anything about business; he doesn't either. We really had to teach ourselves.

It's storytelling. It's what you do. What she does is with the compositions, the musicians, and through the art of hula. And there is such a wonderful history in Hawai'i ever since David Kalakaua got interested in the ukulele, up until, you know, Kui Lee wrote I'll Remember You. There's just a huge repertoire of storytelling. And it shouldn't be lost; it should be perpetuated and continued.

Lovely hula hands, telling of the rains in the valley, and the swirling winds over the pali. Lovely hula hands.

There's a feeling deep in my heart, stabbing at me just like a dart. It's a feeling heavenly.

We created the DVD to preserve that kind of storytelling through hula. So, I had to choose ten of my favorite hulas to dance to from that Golden Era. I have many, but I had to focus it down to ten. So, we created the DVD. And then, the next thing we noticed is that DVD sales several years later started to drop off, and people now wanted downloadable things. Okay?

So you have to learn that.

So, we have to learn that. And that's where he taught himself, and he also went to all the outreach classes, the Pacific New Media classes at the University of Hawaii. He taught himself websites, and he taught himself how to write an app.

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So, you had to learn about yourselves individually, and then what you could deal with as a couple.

Yes. We both wear different hats. Sometimes, he wears the creative hat, where he's doing layouts and editing. And sometimes, I wear the bean-counter hat. You know, I do all the accounting and the bookkeeping. And then, sometimes, we switch; he becomes the CFO, where he thinks about the large picture of our finances and which way we're going, and I do the creative, which is choreographing dances or writing articles for our magazine. So, we switch all the time. You're asking: What are the challenges there? To communicate. Constantly. And to share roles, and to, I think, respect what each person brings to the table. That, I think. We don't do anything, unless we pass it by each other. Emails where we must answer somebody, a business question; we both discuss it first at length, and then he usually composes the email, and then I have to approve it. So, everything we do is done with complete communication.

Any tips for people who are about to set off into the unknown land of marriage?

You've gotta really count to ten before you speak.

If you're mad at each other.

If you're mad at each other. I didn't do that so much when we first got married. I've learned to do that. You know, just take a deep breath and count to ten, leave the room. You want to say something, but you don't. You just don't say it. Wait. And it'll calm down, and then it'll go away. Respect the person. Very important.

That's the most important thing.

Yeah.

Even if you're mad, and the person is doing something you don't like, you still need to back off and remember who it is that you fell in love with.

Yeah.

And that that's still there, that person is still there. And that's more important than you winning your argument.

Uh-huh.

Do you still think of each other the way you used to when you were courting?

I like more things about her now than I did when I fell in love with her. When you find out that someone also has determination and courage, and stick-to-itiveness, and a bunch of other characteristics that you really weren't thinking about when you're like, going on your first couple dates, it's just a bonus.

When we have gone through the hard times, which we certainly have, to see his gumption, his positive thinking, his optimism, his drive, is something I really like. Which I didn't know he had that.

As I speak in early 2018, you can still see Kanoe Miller grace the outdoor stage twice a week at Halekulani's House Without A Key. And Kanoe and John Miller, who have always defied the naysayers, have expanded the reach of their live hula productions with performances in Japan. With digital storytelling, they continue to share the charm and beauty of old Waikiki and Hawai 'i with the world. Mahalo to this dynamic and committed couple, Kanoe and John Miller of Kaneohe, O'ahu. And thank you, for joining us for this edition of Long Story Short on PBS Hawai'i. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

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When you are confronted with the naysayers or the negative personalities, or people who say you can't do that, I think that gives us the strength to show them.

It's inspiration.

It's inspiration.

It's inspiration, you know. You can get beaten down by naysayers, or you can become more strong. And I think that's all the way through our lives together.