

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: Kamuela Enos

LSS 1117 (26:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 4/24/2018

The poverty we see in our community—and I say this a lot, was recent and learned behavior. Our ancestors weren't poor, we were taught to be poor. Like anything that you're taught, you can unlearn too. So, it became like, well, how do I unlearn this, how do I find a way to restore, you know, that sense of purpose, that sense of connection.

He comes from an 'ohana of cultural practitioners who turned to the wisdom of the past to create a better future for their struggling communities. Kamuela Enos, 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. Kamuela Enos is the director of social enterprise at MA'O Organic Farms in Wai'anae, O'ahu, a low-income area where he offers internships to teenagers and young adults. They work on the farms in exchange for a stipend and college tuition assistance. After a few stumbles of his own, Enos found his path to his calling in life: serving others, while perpetuating Hawaiian ancestral responsibilities. Kamuela was born into the Enos 'ohana of Wai'anae. His father, Eric Enos, is a cultural practitioner and activist who co-founded Ka'ala Farms years before MA' with a similar mission to heal at-risk youth by having them connect with their roots.

I knew it was special. I think part of what I think the reality was, is to be raised in a family that was doing something that was in front of a curve.

Meaning?

My father was Eric Enos, one of the founders of Ka'ala Farms, was doing 'āina work, restoring traditional practices, what is now an actual industry. It's a thing; 'āina-based education, right? It was borne out of this idea reclaiming land and identity as a response to the Hawaiian renaissance, of having had that part of our identity kind of been told explicitly to step away from. You know, it's important for you to assimilate into contemporary American society, and to, you know, be a good American, and to take all the vestiges of your ancestry, your language, your practices, and put that behind you.

When did your father start reclaiming the land?

You know, I remember that, 'cause I was really young. And he, you know, was from Wai'anae, he went to Kamehameha Schools, and then actually, he went to college. And going to college at UH in the late 60s, early 70s, you can only imagine, like, colleges across the campus, you know, that was the heart of the civil rights movement, and the birthplace of the Hawaiian renaissance too, when you started actually learning your history and realizing that we weren't allowed to understand our ancestry from a place of strength. He was coming of age, and he was heavily radicalized, and he got a job teaching at Wai'anae High School, where he got a chance to really see it, from how I understand it, his stories. He's one of a few men who was of Hawaiian ancestry from the community actually teaching, and he was able to hear how teachers were talking about kids from Wai'anae. So, he often tells me like, he had to quit, or he would have been arrested.

He was so angry at the messaging.

And just like, the disregard and the blatant racism that he saw behind the scenes. And then, he took up work with an organization that worked directly with at-risk youth. And it was from that point that ... it was called The Rap Center, where he began to take students—young adults, actually, not students, that were kind of out of the system, hanging out at the beach parks, walking in the mountains, to kinda get them away from where they would just hang out and associate, and do all the things that were leading to their delinquency, back up into the mountains to kinda understand, take them out of their environment and put them in a new environment. And there, he started seeing all the remnants of the taro patches.

How did he come to acquire the land?

That's a really interesting question. I think back in the 70s, it was just like: You know what? We're just gonna clear this place out, bring water down, and reclaim it. And if people don't like it, then they can come and talk to us.

Was it abandoned land? Who owned it?

It was in the back of the valley, and ...

Probably State-owned?

State-owned land. And they just decided to have these youth repurpose their time at this—I don't know what they were supposed to be doing, but what they ended up doing was cutting, clearing out haole koa, and putting in PVC pipes and bringing water back down. And then, learning from people on the east side of O'ahu who were still

doing traditional taro farming, like, how do we grow this. And I think that was a really important thing for me to understand. Like, he wasn't just trying to reclaim ability to grow food, but he was trying to reclaim the ability to grow people, and therefore, the ability to regrow community. You know, I was raised in the context of growing up with an activist parent, where I think the things he was doing, none of my peers that I grew up with, their parents did. My mother was always very much a fan of reading, and a big fan of education. So, she would just make us read, so we had our noses buried in Tolkien when we were like, fourth grade, and then we were just reading Albert Camus in seventh grade. And she just said: Read, read, read. So, kind of like embracing like, intellectualism, if you will.

So, body and mind.

But then, also growing up as a Wai'anāe boy. And just going to all the public schools, Mākaha Elementary, Wai'anāe Intermediate, Wai'anāe High School, where I eventually dropped out. And like, I call it the blessed schizophrenia of trying to reconcile these three separate, completely different worlds; right?

Okay; the three worlds were?

Like, I mean, being part of restoring our ancestral practices and being immersed in not just taro farming, but community organizing.

Okay; that's one.

The other was like, just having a love of reading, and especially like, not just reading to escape, but authors that like, more philosophical bent; right?

People who really provoked your thought.

Provocative thinking.

And the third?

The third was having the people I grew up with, and like, who were my best friends, who I love to this day, really living in the realities of poverty. As good, as wonderful people they are, like, their daily lives was really bounded by struggling to make ends meet and all of the things that happen when you live in that context, with the violence, the drug use, the alcohol. You know, and like, those three realities kind of didn't sit well with each other, especially as I got older and my peers became more and more who I identified with, and I started to reject the other two a little bit more. That kind of took a while to weave those three strands back together into something.

Is that why you dropped out of high school?

Basically. I think part of it was the school wasn't challenging enough for me, and second, I had a pretty poor attitude about things, so I won't put it all on the system. I don't know, I just felt disconnected. And non-air-conditioned Wai'anae room and learn about something, and have them fit into the system. Versus, how do we flex the system to meet them where they're strong, and take those strengths and have them from a strengths perspective then move into like, okay, now I gotta sit in a classroom because I'm passionate about this. Versus, you're stupid, you don't know how to sit in a classroom.

She also brought air conditioning to her media classes.

Ho, man.

At what age did you drop out?

I dropped out when I was sixteen. I started drinking when I was like, a freshman. But we really started in earnest when I was sixteen, and dropping out, and just hanging out with all my friends. And it's all people that I love to this day, and I just realized ... you know, we were all doing that together as a way to lift each other up. It was a fun that was really volatile, and it became un-fun really quickly.

Did it get bad, sometimes result in people getting hurt?

It's always the case in Wai'anae. But to me, it became something to reflect on, 'cause it's not just the thing that happens in our communities, it happens in communities all over; right?

Right.

How people respond to historical traumas, and what vehicles or mediums are there for them to medicate.

So, do you think you and your friends didn't know it, but you were feeling the effects of historical trauma?

Oh, yeah.

Of feeling dislocated.

Absolutely.

And unseen.

Right. Yeah; and you know, if you're not given a platform, you make one.

And you can make a bad platform, as well as a good one.

Oh, a heck of a bad platform.

Kamuela Enos' parents did not insist that he return to high school after dropping out during his senior year. However, they required two things: he had to earn a general education diploma or GED, and he needed to get a job. Kamuela did so, working minimum wage jobs after picking up his GED from Waipahu High School.

There was this older Japanese guy who was handing out the GED diplomas kinda just looked at me and he's like: What are you doing? I was like: What? He was like: What are you doing; you shouldn't be in this line. He was just like, staring at me. And I was like ...

Did he know you?

He didn't know me from Adam. But he could see the test scores, and he was like: Everyone here is struggling; you shouldn't be in this line. I was like, okay. Then I went from like, I'm going to celebrate getting my GED, to it was a long and reflective drive home to Wai'anae. I was like: What am I doing? I'm in this line; right? And then, that was further reinforced when the only jobs that I could get was like, working you know, at the fast food restaurants and different places where, you know, people hardly bother to remember your name as staff. And you're not there as a calling, you're there because you have to be. And what that really lifted up for me was the time I spent in Ka'ala with my dad. And that's when everything made sense. Like, we're working in a place where we're caring for land. We weren't making a lot of money, but we had a sense of purpose, I had a sense of love for what I did. And it was at that point that I realized the value. Then things came back around. I was like, you know, not only was I unhappy in the jobs that I was doing, but more important, I felt a lot of people I was working with was unhappy, and I felt like I want to do something about this dynamic.

And then, what do you do about it?

You go to college, and you drop out of college, 'cause you realize that you're unprepared to go to college. And then, you know, I was lucky enough to have a partner at the time where she basically gave me an ultimatum: You're gonna go to college, or we're not gonna be a couple. And I was like, okay. So, she had a degree, so I went to college and I was supported. And when I went to college, I took a Hawaiian studies class. It was from Glen Kila; he was teaching Hawaiian studies at

Leeward Community College Wai'anae. Then my brain just broke open. I was actually learning things I was really interested in, I was learning from a person who respected me as a learner, and I was learning in a space where I could see myself doing this for the rest of my life.

Doing what; learning or what?

Being part of ... making a living, getting a living wage, being engaged with understanding how our heritage, how our ancestry is being deployed in a contemporary way that helps others.

Did that mean you wanted to be a teacher, or did you see another way to do that?

I still didn't know, but I knew like, I loved learning about my culture, but I also loved trying to apply it. And not just learning about it as a museum piece, but then watching my father and the work that he was doing with Auntie Puanani Burgess of trying to create jobs out of ancestral thinking.

So, you're going step-by-step, not really having a direction, but kind of following the clues as you go along.

Yeah.

And responding.

The ancestors leave you clues that you have to pick up.

Nuggets along the way?

Sometimes it's a hug, sometimes it's a swift kick in the butt. But I think that when ... you follow the work, you'll know when you're in the right. I believe your ancestors live in your intuition. And like, there's something that is telling you, this is what you're supposed to be doing. You know, in those moments, you have to listen to that.

Like his father before him, Kamuela Enos went on to earn his bachelor's degree in Hawaiian studies from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. After contemplating several career paths, he decided to focus on a master's degree in urban and regional planning. It led him to his true calling, and eventually, back to Wai'anae.

Well, you know, I was really lucky when I was getting my master's program, that like as I mentioned, I took a class from Bob Agres, who was then the executive director of HACBED, the Hawai'i Alliance for Community-Based Economic Development. And that nonprofit was a network organization that was basically created out of this idea that

Auntie Puanani Burgess and others like my dad had pushed on. Like, how do communities develop their own economic engines. Like, how are we not dependent on outside jobs that quite often don't pay as well, and aren't maybe the best fit for our environment. How instead of fighting those types of development, how do we be developers of our own jobs. And HACBED had asked Bob Agres; they had asked him to help create this organization that helped practitioners across the State wrestle with that question. And I was lucky enough to be in classes where I really found my love and I was interned at HACBED for a while. And I began to see that I really want to be at the intersect of how we create jobs in using our ancestral thinking so that we're creating powerful opportunities for employment.

Did you know what that looked like at the time?

I'd watched my dad try to do that. I mean, that's what Ka'ala was trying to do. They had backyard aquaculture programs where they would have families raise tilapia in their backyards.

I remember there was a time, was it in the 80s, when practically everybody had a tarp and a ...

Tilapia, yeah, and aquaculture. And like, that was an attempt to kind of look at the ancestral practice of fishponds or 'ōpelu fisheries, and to have people do it in their backyard as a way to generate revenue. And I was really fascinated by the idea, and I was able to work at HACBED. And, you know, my younger brother Solomon is one of the founders of MA'O. He was the first intern. So, I was always tracking what they were doing. So, right around the time I was finishing up my class, a position opened up. I was working at this other organization called Empower O'ahu with Richard Pezzulo and it came out of the EZ Economic Zone initiatives that under, I guess the Clinton administration, where they gave money to communities to be able to start up economic empowerment zones. So, me and Richard was working there, but then a position opened up in MA'O as education specialist. And I was like, I really feel that this is the time to come back to my community. 'Cause I had been living in town for ten years while I got my bachelor's and my master's. And as much as I love Mānoa, I was getting homesick. I really felt like I wanted to be back where I could be directly engaged in like, working with my own community, and it's an opportunity to grow our ability, to be strong again. So, I took it, and I was working there for ten years. And while I was doing that, I'd continue to be helping Bob Agres every once in a while in the class that he was teaching at Department of Urban and Regional Planning. I love both the Hawaiian Studies Department and the Urban and Regional Planning Department, and Leeward Community College as an institution, 'cause those three places really allowed me to learn who I was and how I serve best.

And it's so interesting that it's not like you suddenly see your future open up. I mean, you are following, you know, clues along the way, listening for the sounds in the forest, kind of.

And getting slaps in the head when I step out of line. You know, I think it's never about us; I think it's always about how people guide us. And like, you know, we have to learn how to humble ourselves to the fact that we're put on paths, and kicking and screaming, and resenting it is part of it at times.

Or taking the wrong path.

Taking the wrong path.

Taking the wrong path.

You know, I think there is no straight path. My dad used to always tell me: You gotta walk the crooked path straight. It's like, it's not a clearly laid out path for you.

Kamuela Enos walked the crooked path straight back to Wai'anae, where he felt he could best serve the community through his work at MA'O Organic Farms, an organization that provides college tuition assistance to area students in exchange for their work on the farms.

When people hear your title, I think many people, including me, are not quite sure of what it means. You're the director of social enterprise at Ma'o Farms.

I know; right? That's the cool thing about running your own business; you can make whatever titles you want. But I think to me, the idea of social enterprise is, we measure two things on a daily basis on our farm. There's the sales of our product and the GPAs of our students. And all the revenue from the farm doesn't go to staff; it goes back into the mission of the program. And the mission is to make sure that our land is productive again, and the people who are working in the land are empowered. And that's, to me, a really important narrative. When people talk about what does it mean to be a Native Hawaiian business, to me, it doesn't mean that people have Hawaiian DNA running a business. To me, it means that to create a product or a service for society without externalizing the cost on people or land. 'Cause our ancestors did that. That was how they ran an ahupua'a. They were the first social entrepreneurs. They were able to create tons and tons of kalo, tons and tons of fish without exploiting people or diminishing the land's carrying capacity. That's how ahupua'as work. So, I feel that's why it's really important to root our practices in ancestral thinking. And that's why the two things we track on a daily basis is sales and GPAs. That's what our ancestors tracked. And I believe our makahiki ceremony where the chiefs would come and look at abundance of land and fitness of people, those two measures, those two metrics are

the same metrics that we've translated into sales and GPAs. The sales of our product is our land is abundant again, GPAs is our people are fit. I mean, it's not a full measure, of course. There's other things we're trying to add into it.

But grade point average is the recognized college standard.

You're reporting to your chief. Like, that's what our ancestors did when the chief came and checked on his or her people. They say: Are my people fit, is the land productive? My responsibility is to have that happen. So, if we create our businesses that emanate from that same idea, then I can say the programs that we're running is ensuring that not only is food being grown, but it's being grown organically. And the difference in organic production is that you care about the soil's regenerative health over annual yields. What's more important is that the future generations have the right to grow from that soil. So, that means that we're generating revenue in ways that's caring for the soil specifically, and that the farmer is not someone that's getting a minimum wage with no upward mobility. Like, they're using this opportunity to pay for their college. Which for some people is a pathway out of their community, but I want to focus that as a pathway back into your community as a person who has a degree now, that can advocate. You know, if you're given a gift, you better make sure that you are using it to help others. And to me, as a parent now, like, I wrestle with like, with doing the work that I do now, knowing all the challenges environmentally, economically, socially, politically that we're facing. Like, you know, what kind of things am I asked to set up for my grandchildren, so that they can thrive in climate change, thrive in all these different things that are happening, and then be a part of changing it and recalibrating it. So, I did want to acknowledge that, you know, we do what do 'cause people invest in us, and invest like at their own expense and provide incredible sacrifice so that we can thrive. Right? When you work with youth and land, then you're kind of creating a breaking point in generations of poverty, and you're with them authentically, working alongside them. Then, they actually begin a chance to clear that space to actually see their worth.

To see things differently.

Yeah. And to apply the things that they learn, and see a future for themselves. That for me, the big thing I always think about is, I had a really rare childhood. And that what I just stay awake at night thinking about is, how do I make the childhood I had available to as many students as possible. where you are able to have a deep sense of what your ancestors did in a place from a strengths perspective.

And you have your own children now, too.

I have two children. I have an eight-year-old and a five-year-old, who I love dearly. And like, to me, the fact that I can kind of replicate that experience for them, but also

give them more agency in helping to—they can say what they like about it too, and they can give input is really exciting. One of the joys I get in the work that I do now in MA'O which really drives me is the same joy I think my father had when he was doing Ka'ala, is I get to show up and go to work every day in what people would have considered impossible. I get to go to a job where young adults from Waianae are running the largest organic farm on the island, while getting a 2.0 in college. If you would have asked people fifteen years ago we were gonna do that, they would have told you: You are crazy, there's no way that the largest organic farm on O'ahu is gonna be in Wai'anae. Much less that kids from Wai'anae are gonna work there, much less kids from Wai'anae are gonna work there as college students maintaining a 2.0; that is impossible. So, the fact that I get to work every day in a space of what the other people consider impossible really helps me think that things that people are saying are impossible now, can be possible.

In 2010, President Obama recognized the work of Kamuela Enos, and appointed him as a member of his advisory commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Kamuela says he'll continue to live by the examples of his ancestors, while keeping a focus on modern day problems like climate upheaval and the health and wealth disparities of his community. Mahalo to Kamuela Enos of Waipi'o and Wai'anae, 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.

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.

When you work with youth and land, then you're kind of creating a breaking point in generations of poverty, and you're with them authentically, working alongside them. Then, they actually begin a chance to clear that space to actually see their worth.

To see things differently.

Yeah. And to apply the things that they learn, and see a future for themselves.