

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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I remember this one time, right before my mom passed. I think it was maybe two or three months I'd been out on the streets, and she saw me on Kapi'olani Boulevard. She had lost a lot of weight by then, and she started crying and she said: I thought you were dead. You know, where have you been? And you know, I was dressed kind of scantily clad, and ... I remember feeling a little embarrassed to see her. And the only words that could have come out of my mouth at that wasn't: I'm sorry, Mom, I'll be home, I'm sorry what I did to you. It was: Mom, do you have money?

She was a young wife, mother, and assistant vice president at a local bank when events in her life triggered a downward spiral: drug addiction, life on the streets, and a spot on Hawai'i's Most Wanted List. Lois Kim candidly shares her story, 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. Recovering addict Lois Kim describes her childhood as growing up in a stable middleclass family environment, surrounded by siblings, a grandmother, an auntie, and her parents, who were immigrants from South Korea. Her father was an engineer who later become involved in local politics, and worked on behalf of the Korean community in Hawai'i. She says her mother was a workaholic, an entrepreneur whom some referred to as the Godmother of Korean Restaurants. Kim says her mother would take a struggling business, and turn it around with her instincts, reputation, and cooking skills. And it was not unusual for her busy working mom to send a taxi to pick up her children at school.

With all that work she did for so long, were you close to her?

Not growing up; no. I remember always longing to have what I saw on TV, the Western family. Longing to have a mom that would pick me up every day, go to like after school practices with me, hug me, say I love you; all that cheesy stuff. I remember longing for that. But today, in retrospect, I think she did the best she could. She came from a different culture than I was brought up watching on TV.

She was busy providing for you.

Yes.

So, that means when you were sick from school, you were alone.

My grandma; my mom had brought over my grandma to watch over us from Korea.

So, you always had somebody in the house?

Yes; either grandma, or before that, there was this auntie that my mom trusted with us.

You said your dad was a politician. And was he a strict father?

He was very quiet. Extremely strict; he would make my brother and I uh, meditate at night. You know, he'd sit us in front of him, he'd sit on the couch, and he'd watch us for an hour. And I think we were like ... I was ten and my brother was six. You know, for a ten-year-old to sit there with their eyes closed and meditate for a whole hour was impossible. But my dad just grinded it into us. He tried to teach us a lot about discipline and being strong. He wasn't very loving in a sense, only because, you know, traditional Asian family; he was the man of the household. But when he spoke, you listened.

He would spank you?

He did, at times. I remember being afraid of the golf club at times.

He would hit you with his golf club?

Yeah. For me, looking back today, it's just discipline; a different type of discipline. I wouldn't call it child abuse. Maybe some might today, but it was just to make me a stronger person.

What were you like as a kid? Besides being bratty.

I was an introvert. Childhood was kind of rough for me, only because you know, I couldn't really fit in well.

Did you speak Korean, or what was your language like then?

My first language was Korean. So, going into school, I really couldn't converse with the other children, the culture was different. So, I was kind of an outcast. And then, I think later on, as I got older, I turned to food to comfort myself. And this is back when childhood obesity wasn't that prevalent. I was extremely overweight. I remember being the biggest kid in class, bigger than all the boys and the girls, height wise and weight wise.

Did you get picked on?

I did. I got picked on, but because of my size, I was able to stop the bullying right there.

How were your grades?

My grades were mediocre, only because I think it bored me; high school didn't really challenge me. At some point, my father thought that maybe it would be a losing investment to put me through college, only because my grades were pretty low. I was determined and stubborn.

What made you determined?

I think a little bit of my dad refusing to pay for my college. 'Cause I knew in the back of my head that, you know, that's what parents are supposed to do. They've provided for me up until now. They haven't provided a loving family style, but they've always provided financially. And it goes without saying, they're gonna provide for my education. But that day when he told me that he's not gonna put an investment into my education, is when I realized: Hm, what? I'll show you. My father paid for everything for my brother. 'Cause in our family—and I think it's typical of all Asians, you know, a son you take care, he's like the king of the family.

Yeah. So, I can see how there were a lot of reasons to feel resentment and worry.

M-hm.

As a child.

I did; I did have a lot of resentment, a lot of anger.

But somehow, you said: I'm gonna go to UH. How did you pay for that?

I worked at the bank as a teller, and I got grants and loans. I'm still paying off my student loans now. But I made it happen; I made it happen. Yes.

You enjoyed college?

It was challenging, and that's where I excelled, because it was something that mentally stimulated me. And when I graduated, I graduated on the Dean's List. So, I was holding down a job, paying for college, and getting good grades.

What happened next? At some point, you met somebody that you married.

A gentleman I was working with at the bank introduced me to his friend. He said: Hey, look, I've got this friend, he lives in Guam, but I think you guys would match; you guys are both intellectuals, you're both Asian, both Korean. And that's an important thing. So, I started emailing him. We emailed back and forth. He came down to visit for about ten days. My family met him. He was the perfect son-in-law my mother and father had always wanted.

What about you; were you in love with him?

Well ... I loved how happy my mom and dad were. And he was a good man. You know, he is a good man. He's good on paper, accomplished. I think he was pre-law at that time. So, love was probably the farthest thing from my mind. He just made logical sense.

And at some point, you had a baby.

About a year or two into our marriage; yes. The right thing to do; right? The typical thing to do. I had a daughter. I remember giving birth to her, and just instantly falling in love, and thinking: I'm gonna do everything in my powers to protect you; and at the same time, I'm gonna do everything in my heart to love you and show you the love that I've always longed for. But time will tell.

What happened to change your daughter's life, your life, your husband's life?

Those turning points in life; huh? So, I was at the top of my career, doing so well. My father and I were finally building up a relationship. You know, he called me just because he was lonely or bored. I've never had that. It was amazing. I remember receiving a phone call saying: This is St. Francis Hospital; you need to come here right away. I asked for more information, but of course, they couldn't give me any information over the phone. I remember driving up to St. Francis, and the first person I see is my mom. She runs to me, and she collapses in my arms. She tells me that my dad passed out, he's on life support, and he's in the ICU. Speaking to the doctors, they told me that he's got like, ten percent brain activity left, and prepare yourself.

Shortly after Lois Kim lost her father, her mother was diagnosed with cancer, and the grandmother who looked after her as a child passed away. It seemed that just as her life was finally coming together, those she loved were being ripped away. She says she couldn't cope with so much loss, and that's why she spent more time away from home, at bars and clubs, where she met someone who introduced her to cocaine.

It did a weird thing. It alleviated some of the pain; it made being conscious and awake a little bit more bearable. And that's when the downturned happened. You know, of

course, the more your body gets used to something chemical, it needs a little bit more. And then, that's when I started to experiment with crystal methamphetamine. I can handle it. This drug will never bring me down. I'm just gonna use it for now to get over this hump, and then get back on track. You know? I'm not an addict. This drug is not gonna consume me. Couldn't have been more wrong. It took everything from me. And I let it.

So, I need to ask you. You still had family; your husband and your child.

Yes.

So, you didn't lose all your family.

Not at that point; no. My mother was still alive, as well. But I acted selfishly at that time. I told my husband that I don't love him anymore. I moved out. I stayed with my mom, and then I remember just going out frequently. And it was this perpetual snowball. Like, I wouldn't come home 'cause I was embarrassed because of my drug use. Then I'd feel guilty, and do more drugs. Then, it would prolong my stay out on the streets, you know, staying at strangers' houses, drug dealers' houses, just trying to get high.

What was a day like for you when you were on crystal meth?

It's hard to demarcate when the day starts and ends, because crystal meth is a stimulant and it'll keep you up for days on end. So, I guess to describe, let's just say, okay, in the morning, my day would start with having nothing in my pockets, and wondering in my head: How am I gonna obtain this high?

And where were you waking up?

Sometimes, in stairwells. Sometimes in game rooms. Sometimes ... at strangers' houses, being woken up to man on top of you. It was an adventure, to say the least, I guess. So, I'd wake up with nothing in my pocket, with a goal in mind. My only priority at that time was to obtain more drugs. So, I'd go out on a quest. For a lot of women, there's only a few ways you can obtain drugs out there. It's either you sleep with a drug dealer, or you obtain something worth something, to sell. And because I was Asian, I could fit in with the tourists. I quickly got drawn into what we called boosting, which is essentially shoplifting from stores, and obtaining items that a high demand on the streets.

How did you learn to do that? I guess your native wit takes over. How did you do it?

You have to learn to survive. So, you know, in the dark world of the drug world, there are some people known as professional boosters. So, I would go to them, pick their

brain, learn from them. And they taught me a few tricks and things that I could do to get past sensors. And then from there, I took that and just melded my own theories into it. So, I was able to support my habit that way.

And all this time, what were your thoughts about your daughter?

There would be moments she'd creep into my head.

But generally not?

No. I knew she was safe. I knew she was well, she was happy. Well, in my head, I convinced myself that she was happy, and that me being in her life might just be worse. So, I kinda tricked myself into justifying why I wasn't there for her, or staying out on the streets longer.

Did you think of the future? Like, I'll just do this for a couple more days, and then I'll stop. Did you have that feeling, like it was not gonna be what you did forever?

That's how it began. It did. I told myself: You know, it'll be just until I get over this, or I'll wake up someday.

Get over what?

The grief, the pain, the loss. But then, it slowly turned into ... towards the end of my drug addiction, I was hoping that it would be the end of it. Like, I would die high. Like hopefully, this drug will do so much damage to me that it'll just take my life from me. Towards the ending of my drug use, I was shooting ice intravenously, using needles.

Well, how did it get to be in your past? What happened to change this, where you're hoping to die high?

So, naturally, I got in trouble with the law.

I remember seeing you on Hawai'i's Most Wanted. And it said that loss prevention officers at a store, you were a known person to them, and they followed you and they caught you with a couple of items.

Like, five of them just jumped out of the bushes, called me by name, and you know: Drop what you what you have in your hands and don't move. Something out of a movie. But yes, they took me. It was enough to convict me with felony charges. I think I had drugs on me, so another felony charge. I got into OCCC, and that's when I learned that ... my mom was in a coma. I guess the reason why when she saw me on the streets and asked me to promise to come home that Thanksgiving was because she

needed to tell me that she needs me there for her when they're removing the tumor. I wasn't there. So, in OCCC, I got a phone call from my brother saying that Mom's on life support, we're taking her off. I begged and pleaded, and asked him to bail me out, let me be there for her. You know, I wasn't there for her when she needed me the most, let me be there for her now. He said, no. So, eventually, I did get put on probation. But it's the weirdest thing. The judge knew I had nowhere to go. So, at that time, my mom passed, her funeral happened. I thought my daughter and her dad had moved back to Guam. Nobody communicated with me while I was incarcerated. And then, the judge let me out on probation, out on the streets. So, I went straight back to the game rooms, got high within an hour of getting released. And I think that's when you saw me on Hawaii's Most Wanted, 'cause I absconded. They were looking for me. I think I was on the run for about two to three months. They found me in a game room, took me in.

While serving time in prison in Kailua, Lois Kim was enrolled in a mandatory drug rehabilitation program. She recalls a life-changing moment of clarity. During an exchange with her counselor, she declared that since she lost everything and everyone she loved, she just wanted to die high. The counselor wasn't buying any of it. She looked Lois Kim dead in the eye, and challenged her to get off her pity pot. Something clicked.

I was like: What? I was on a pity pot. I'm better than this. I'm stronger than this. I was bred to be strong, through my upbringing. Why am I acting this way? And that's when that proverbial turn in your life happened again for me. You know.

It's interesting that that got to you, because you probably knew that at some level already.

I knew it; I knew it. But she said to me in a challenging manner, just like how when my father had told me: I'm not paying for your education. Oh, I'll show you. Oh, get off my pity pot; you don't think I can? I'll show you. Well, getting over addiction and all that trauma in your life is never a one-day thing, or one-thing thing. I remember just, you know, beginning my healing process at that time. But again, I was incarcerated, and then sobriety was hitting me. And when you're sober, all this guilt just comes rushing back into your life, into your wellbeing. I remember having recurring nightmares of seeing my mom and my daughter with their back towards me, and me screaming out to them, but they wouldn't turn around. I didn't know where my daughter was. I knew there was so much I needed to say to apologize, so much I needed to explain, but I didn't know how.

How many years had gone by since you left the home?

Maybe two years straight, and maybe ... four years altogether, where I'd come home once in a while. So, a straight two-year absence from my daughter's life.

And how old was she then?

She was probably about six when I started. And then, through seven, eight, nine is when I was gone.

Did you feel like you owed your—was he your ex-husband by that time, an explanation?

He knew.

So, no need to have words over that?

I remember apologizing to him, 'cause I knew that was what needed to be done. But as for an explanation; no. He knew what I had gotten myself into. I mean, it was plastered all over the news; he knew. He knew exactly what grievance I was going through too, 'cause he was there when my father had passed. He was there through the whole thing. So, he knew why I did what I did.

What was it like between you and your daughter when you were reunited for the first time?

It was kinda ... you'd like to think it was like a storybook ending, where we ran into each other's arms, and lived happily ever after. But it was kinda awkward in the beginning. She had her wall up, and I didn't know how to get past that without offending her. It was kinda like two strangers meeting ... but they're family. So, it was baby steps. So, from the first meeting, we started talking on the phone every day, 'cause I was allowed to talk on the phone for fifteen minutes at a time. I'd call every evening. We started to play this game that we made up, where she likes to act out a role, and we'd role-play. And then from there, it went into her coming and staying, and sleeping at the furlough house on weekends. And then, when I graduated from the furlough program, her father actually allowed me to come and rent a room from him.

So, you had regained, if not his trust, at least a second chance. And your daughter, too. You know, your daughter had to be onboard for that too; right?

I think what happened was, he knows that who I was while high or addicted isn't who I am. He knows the core being of me is responsible. And I think that's the thing; responsible. Maybe not so loving, maybe not so caring, but he knows I'm a very responsible person. And I remember before he allowed me to rent that room, we had to interview with his landlord. So, what took me off guard is my ex-husband telling the landlord: You know, I don't back anybody up, but I'm backing her up; she's very responsible, she's changed, she's a good person. That's the first time I've ever heard

him say anything nice about me. And that's when I knew I'm doing well. When I got reunited with my daughter, I shared every part of my life with her: the embarrassing parts, the hard to swallow parts. So, she understands. But the importance is that I told her it was a bad choice, and we come up from that. I didn't alleviate any of my wrongdoings, I didn't wash my hands saying it wasn't my fault. I told her: Yes, it was Mommy's fault, Mommy made bad choices, but I can fix it.

At the time of our conversation in the Spring of 2018, Lois Kim told us she was employed fulltime, and continued to work on her recovery and rebuilding her life with her daughter. She was also committed to earning a relationship with a son, who was born during the years of her addiction. He lives with his paternal grandmother, who still isn't ready to permit Kim to establish a bond with her son. Lois Kim says she understands, and sees this as another opportunity and challenge to prove herself. We wish her personal peace and sobriety, as she shares with everyone her first published work, Mommy Loves You, a heartfelt message she wrote for her daughter during a critical period of her journey back. Mahalo to Lois Kim of Honolulu, O'ahu, for sharing your story with us. And mahalo to you, for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

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What did she make of your book, Mommy Loves You?

The book helped open up the discussion. She told me that she had thought I abandoned her. She thought it's because I didn't love her. And at one point, she thought I was dead; she thought I had passed. The lucky thing for me is, I got sober while incarcerated. I also got to heal while incarcerated. So, I was speaking about having all that guilt and turmoil inside of me. That's when I got granted an opportunity to write a children's book. At first, I didn't want to do it, because I thought it hurt too much. Like, who am I gonna write to, who am in gonna give it to; I don't know her address. But someone encouraged me to. I wrote it within two, three minutes of sitting down. It just ... flowed straight out of me. Did the artwork. And that's when I think I really began to heal.

And if I'm her, my question is: How do I know you're not gonna go right out and do it again?

You don't. You don't. I don't. I would like to think I won't. You know, addiction is a very scary thing. I would say ninety-five percent of my sisters in addiction has gone back. And like you brought up earlier, the whole relapse thing. I haven't relapsed. I hope I never will. But statistically, it's likely. Those times when I think about relapsing, I

remember how horrible my life was back then. I remember everything I've earned today, and how hard I've worked to get it. I think before I get high, I think about my child, my children. I need to be responsible. That's a part of my past that, you know, been there, done that. Let's never, ever revisit that. But it's a notch under my belt. You know, I've been there, done that, I've lived through it, and hopefully ... I can forever remain a success story.