

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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I remember you in the 1970s, 'cause I was a news reporter, and you were, I would say ... a protestor, a resistor, an activist, and an advocate. And some would say, radical.

Yes.

Are all those things true?

Yeah.

She started as an activist, but now helps to bring opposing sides together to build what she calls Beloved Communities. Puanani Burgess, 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. Puanani Burgess is a Zen Buddhist priest, a poet, mediator, and community builder. In the 1980s, she was part of a group that helped bring about community-based economic development in Wai'anae, and later other communities. This started during the controversial development of West Beach, known today as Ko Olina Resort, which Burgess and her allies started out opposing. She's been married for more than fifty years to activist, attorney, and retired executive director of the Wai'anae Community Mental Health Center, Hayden Burgess, also known as Poka Laenui. Puanani Burgess spent the first twenty-five years of her life with a Western first name, but later embraced her Hawaiian identity and the name Puanani.

I was born in 1947. And I think a little bit of time went by after World War II. But during that time, parents were very cautious about what they named children. And coming from both a Japanese and a Hawaiian background, they were doubly cautious. So, in those days, they were giving children English names; that's what we called them. And so, it was beautiful American kind of names so that when we went to school, we wouldn't be ... looked down upon if we had a Japanese or a Hawaiian name. So, my parents named me Christabelle, and I was named after my father, who was Christopher, and it's Yoshie after Yoshiyuki. And Sonoda is my family name, and Burgess is my married name.

Where does Puanani come in?

My mother told me that she stuck in Puanani just in case when I grew up, if I wanted to be attached to where I come from, I would have something.

But those were the days when people wanted to be known as Westerners.

Yeah.

Americans.

And hid all of their children's identities behind that American Western name.

Well, so you were called Christabelle or Christy?

I was called Chris.

Chris?

Yeah. Throughout all of my high school, up until college, I was known as Chris Sonoda.

Now, Hawaiian, Japanese is your ancestry.

Yeah.

With some ...

Chinese, French, German.

Most of the blood is Hawaiian, Japanese.

And Japanese.

So, your dad Japanese, your mom was on the Hawaiian side.

Yeah.

Did that create any cultural crosscurrents?

Oh ... those two races were always in conflict with each other, and I could not understand why. I just knew that it was. I wrote a poem called Choosing My Name. And in it, I put a line in there that my father's family would call my mother kuroi mame, which meant black bean.

To her face?

In back of her, but in front of me. And so, I really didn't know what that meant until I got older, and then I understood what they were saying about her, and that notion of color. And it reminded me of how my mother would introduce me when we'd be going to somewhere, to a store, and she'd see her friend. She'd introduce me: This is my daughter; look at her, she's so fair, isn't she beautiful. It was the color of my skin that really was important to her, that I was light.

So, that's the Japanese side. What did the Hawaiian side say?

Well, they didn't much care for her being married to a Japanese man. And I never understood the racial tensions; I just knew that they were there, and they were played out in different ways. It made it very uncomfortable to go to family gathering, 'cause you never knew where you stood. And so, you just sort of made your way.

What did your parents do, and what were your parents like?

You know, I remember my mother as being a civic leader. So, she was someone who could organize people. She also was pretty well educated for her day. She went to Mid Pacific Institute when it was sort of the Punahou for the middleclass. And she turned out to be a really good teacher for me. She was the one who really pushed me toward education and reading. So, she taught me how to read when I was very young. And that that saved my life.

Where were you living then?

At that point, we lived in Kalihi, on Colburn Street.

Now, you moved around quite a bit in your youth; right?

Quite a bit.

Wai'anae, Liliha?

Liliha, we lived at Damon Tract before going back to Wai'anae. I think, you know, it's really hard to talk about poverty and being poor.

What was the reason for the poverty? Was it employment?

I think it was employment, but it was also ... I think, you know, my mother suffered a lot. She had various degrees of mental illness. And so, her life had never been happy, and she'd always been trying to figure things out. And I think the marriage between my

parents was not always the best and most comfortable. But I think they both tried the hardest that they could to make a good life.

And stayed together?

They divorced when I was eighteen. And I continued to live with my dad, and my mother lived on her own. So, it was a very chaotic childhood, and yet, I'm here. So, I went to the University, and my major was English, and I thought I wanted to be a writer. And poetry was something that I didn't know I could do, but I did. And so, I started to develop that part of me. And so, my poetry has been the way for me to really start to deal with some of the hard truths of growing up.

While Puanani Burgess—still going by the name of Chris Sonoda, was discovering her talent for poetry at the University of Hawai'i, she met and fell in love with Hayden Burgess, the future attorney and community activist from Wai'anae.

I think, you know, Leslie, the thing that changed most in my life was meeting the man I was going to marry.

Is that right?

Yeah.

In Wai'anae?

I met him at the University. But he and I knew each other when we were children. So, he lived around the corner from where I lived. My family lived in a row of Quonset huts on Halona Road in Lualualei Valley, and his family lived on Pu'u O Hulu, which is right around the corner from us. And then, we met when we were at the University. I was a freshman, he was sophomore. And it was very clear that we were made for each other from the very outset, I think within the first couple of months.

What made it clear?

I think his confidence. He was sure that this was the relationship for him.

And you were young when you got married; right?

Yeah; I was twenty.

Twenty.

That's fifty years; that's a lot of time.

And?

And I still like him. And we still get along.

And you have children together.

We do; we have three incredibly interesting children. And so, when we married in 1968 ... I like to tell this story; I like to remember it. He told me in the first month of our marriage: Your job is not my wife; I'm gonna do the work I'm put on this earth to do, so that means you have to do the work you were meant to do, and it's not my wife, so you gotta figure that out.

Did you know what the answer to that was?

I had no idea. And I was mad. Because I had been brought up to be a good local girl, I'm gonna be a good wife and a good mother. And here's this guy that I just married telling me: That's not your job; you gotta go find your job, 'cause this is not it. And I thought: Oh, what did I step into?

At the age of twenty-six, Chris Sonoda Burgess embraced the Hawaiian name given to her by her mother, and began calling herself Puanani Burgess. But she was still figuring out what job she was meant to do. While in her second year at the William S. Richardson School of Law at the University of Hawai'i, she began to find her way.

The childhood that I had created where I wanted to go, but I didn't know what that was called. So, I tried law school. And a really interesting moment was in my second year of law school, I clerked for Cynthia Thielen.

The Republican lawmaker.

Yes. She was Legal Aid attorney, and she was the attorney for the Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana. And Cynthia was a great mentor. So, she assigned me to the PKO. So, I did research, and I helped negotiate things. So, one of the things I helped negotiate with them was the building of the first hālau on Kaho'olawe. And the 'Ohana thought: We cannot be there always, but this hālau will stand for us, and it will remind the Navy that we have returned, and we're here to stay.

A lot of people disagreed, you know, with what they were doing and the style that they did it. But if you ask those same people today—and there have been articles written by people who had been critical about that movement then, you ask them today, and they will tell you that the 'Ohana and Kaho'olawe has done more to spiritualize Hawai'i and Hawaiians than anything that has come out in a long, long time.

You know, once I got bitten by the activism bug when I went to law school ...

The Hawaiian Renaissance was in full swing at that time.

Yeah. Everything was happening. And we were engaged in working with some of the people at Makua and Sand Island, who were pushing back against evictions.

All social justice projects.

Yeah; all of them. And so, we entered the stream just at that time. And we entered with education. And we entered with being able to organize a cogent strategy.

What was life like at that time?

Wild.

Wild and heady?

It was wonderful. I mean, because I was organizing with a group of people who were my age: Eric Enos, Gigi Cocquio, Hooipo DeCambra, Sister Anna McAnany; a whole group of leaders. We were all in our twenties and thirties together.

And that was the 1970s, wasn't it?

Yeah.

And yet, you were in law school, and decided not to continue in, I think, your third year.

Yeah.

Why not? That seems like a good thing to arm yourself with, if you're an activist.

It was. And ... I don't know. I didn't want to be a lawyer. Because I worked in my husband's law firm in Waianae, I understood what the ordinary practice of law was like. I didn't want to do that. I wanted to be more active. So, the law school helped me develop infrastructure in my community. So, we built organizations in which we were doing the work.

You were doing the incorporations.

Yup. And the 501c3's and helping people establish themselves, and finding the funding, and talking. I became a great dragon feeder.

What is a dragon feeder?

Dragons are systems, big systems, like government, like KSBE, DOE. And dragons have lots of rules. And they usually give you those rules in writing. And your capacity to read and follow those instructions allow you to get into the dragon's lair. And so, law school prepared me so well to be a dragon feeder and a cultural translator. So, I was working with community activists, and I was translating it into language that the dragon could understand.

I'm sure you helped get grants with byzantine rules too; right?

Yes. And I was giving them back the information that they wanted from us. And so, the rule was, if you don't want to obey or follow what the dragon wants you to give him or her, don't apply.

During the 1970s, Puanani Burgess continued to involve herself in community struggles in Hawai'i as an activist and advocate. In 1984, she and others from the Wai'anae Coast community opposed the Ko Olina Resort development and what it meant for the land, other natural resources, and the way of life. The mediation between residents and developers became a turning point in Puanani's approach to community building.

So, it was at that time that we were doing the mediation with West Beach, was a really big deal.

West Beach is Ko Olina.

Yeah.

The future Ko Olina, now thriving Ko Olina.

Yup. And at that time, those of us in the community were pushing back against that. And we were saying: You know, you folks going make money, but the only way we going make money is if we drive from here, and go over there and work. And then, maybe you going build houses, but the people who going occupy those houses will not be people from here. We need to have economic development that really is built from our value system. And so, that conversation began to take place between us and the people who were the powerbrokers in the downtown business and political sector.

So, you mastered the cultural translation skills. Were you still a resistor, a protestor, an activist?

Yup.

So, you're on the other side of the table, saying: This is what we want.

Yes; this is what we want, this is what we need, this is what we're fighting for. And yet, I was beginning to listen to some of the things that they had to say.

Because it turns out, they weren't monsters?

No; they weren't. And I think that's the point about building Beloved Community, that you figure out a way that you can hear the other side of the story, and not necessarily fight against it, but create a space where I can show you who I am, and you can show me who you are, and collectively, we can figure out what parts of this work and we share.

And yet, at that time, I'm sure that was a brave stance, because in the parlance of the time, that was selling out. Right?

Exactly. And that was hard. And that's where that poem, He Alo Ā He Alo, came from. For me, it was a pushback against people who were criticizing us for doing the mediation with West Beach. And I said: Come here; come stand in the lo'i with me before you start yelling at us about what we should and should not be doing. One of my best teachers was Tanouye Roshi, who was a Zen Buddhist priest at Daihonzan Chozen-ji in Kalihi Valley. So, he was the mediator for the West Beach agreement. And it was interesting, because he could bring the Japanese side of the mediation. Because they were Japanese developers that were doing the work at West Beach. And so, culturally, he brought the owners of the development to the table, not just the highest administrative officer of the development company. We were now dealing with the owners of the development. And Roshi Tanouye, the first thing that he said to me is: You have to always negotiate at the right level. You folks are the owners of your community; you have to talk to the owners of that.

What was the result of that? You know, were there compromises that had to be made, that you wish had not had to be made?

Well, the developer wanted to continue to build, and our effective stoppage of that really kept people from work. And so, the compromise was, we resolved that they could continue, and that the funds that they contributed to the community were going to be used to build economic development from our point of view. So, that was both the compromise and the promise. My understanding is that they were soundly criticized for doing this. They didn't have to; they could have held out. But now, all the other developers are now having to think about and work with communities who are pushing against them. So, there's precedence.

Puanani Burgess continues to bring people and organizations together who at first see each other as opponents, or even enemies. She creates a space in which each can share with dignity what he or she believes is important. She calls it Principles of Building a Beloved Community.

Well, I think, you know, I always long for calm, for a space free of tension. And ... I'm always trying to figure out how I help other people enter that space. I think a lot of my work is being a trickster. And so, I use a lot of technique that looks like one thing, but it's something else. So, one of my tools is a ball, and I do a process called The Weather Ball. And in it, I ask you to tell what the weather is like inside of you right at this moment. And so, when people tell what their weather is like, they often tell you why it's that way.

And do you think they're really honest with you on that first go-around?

First go-around; yeah.

What do they tell you, for example?

They say: Oh, the weather is stormy, that you know, before I came here, I had a fight with my husband. We do the story of your weather before I ask anybody even to tell their name, where they come from, or why they're here. 'Cause in communities, certain names carry meaning. So, in Wai'anae, if you say Burgess, have some people who like talk to you. But if you say Burgess, have some people who never want to talk to you. So, no information in the first round. And so, when people do the Weather Ball, this is the first round, and you hear truth from somebody, as much as they can give it to you at that moment. And because it's a ball, the way people hold it is like this. And if they're scared, they squeeze it. You know. And that gives them comfort, so that they can release what it is. And so, that as a first round really helps people to understand. And for me, it's a way of managing power in the circle. So, most of my circles do not require anybody to raise their hand. Once you get to the point of asking people who's ready, and somebody raise their hand, then you know the power going shift to that person, because they're the ones who ready to talk. And then, everybody else going follow, and then every other circle, they going wait 'til that person raise their hand. So, I don't do anything like that. It's just, I start, and I'm not in the power grid; I'm facilitator. And then, we just go around. And so, it's not anybody choosing to start. A lot of, you know, what I've done in the past, I do things around vision mapping. Helping people talk about what their vision is, and then having people show each other their vision maps. And then, recognizing: Oh, we agree, I never knew that. And because people don't have a way of talking to each other deeply, they never get to see the depth of what they really mean, until someone like me facilitates a process in which they can both come in equally, and they can both show up as they are. So, one isn't mediating, and the other one is not the one who's being victimized.

At what point could you tell your husband: You know, you told me go find out what my job is. At what point could you come back and say: Hey, this is my job.

I still don't know what my—I know what my work is. My work is auntie. That's what I've become. I've become auntie to so many people.

You know, there are a lot of women who don't like to be called auntie, because they think it connotes age.

Yes.

Others say it's respect, it's a family spirit. You're on that side of it.

Yeah; it's all of that. It is age, it is experience, hopefully wisdom. But my job is auntie. And I take it very seriously. So, I get to work with all kinds of people and all kinds of different organizations, and I'm auntie to them. And because I am auntie, the ways I'm able to teach them is not just modern ways; it's also older ways. I can teach them through poems, through stories, through experiences. So, you know, auntie is such an important job.

Auntie Puanani also is an ordained Zen Buddhist priest. She says the lessons learned from her mentor, Zen Priest Roshi Tanouye, have taught her how to breathe and remain calm during conflict, to help her see the multiple sides of situations and stories. And she continues to share her thoughts through poetry. Mahalo to one time fierce protestor and resistor, now calm community builder Puanani Burgess of 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.

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So, when I wrote that poem, Choosing My Name, and I spoke about that very difficult part in our lives, and the place it was printed was the Star Bulletin, so everybody saw it, including my Japanese family. And so, they started to call my father and asking: Why is she revealing these things? My father, to his credit, said: That is her life; it's what she experienced, she has a right to it, leave her alone.