

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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I know so much about food, which is interesting. And it never came out of me until I started doing these pop-up dinners and these speaking engagements. I did a Poke 101 class for Pinterest. All these kids—you know, I say kids because these tech companies are all kids. And all they know about poke is, it comes from a store. So, I got to teach what poke really is, where it came from, how it became, and all this stuff. And when I was done, my friends goes: How'd you know all this stuff? I go: I don't know.

So, you didn't go look it up.

No.

You had it in your head.

Yeah.

And your heart.

Yes. And your heart is the thing. The intent; right?

M-hm.

So, I am realizing as I'm getting older, I can do anything I want, as long as there's good intent.

Lanai Tabura has been doing just about anything and everything in broadcasting since his first television audition when he was six years old. DJ, comedian, television host, actor, entrepreneur; his passion has turned to cooking, and he has dedicated himself to sharing aloha across the globe through food. Lanai Tabura, 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. Lanai Tabura, who was named for the island where he was born, knew from a young age that he wanted to be in front of the camera. He became a familiar name early on in his life for being a disc jockey at a popular radio

station, and then for his comedy. It wasn't until later that he became known for his cooking, and rose to national attention when his team won the Great Food Truck Race. Yet, cooking was one of his earliest life lessons. Lanai had to grow up quickly when his father left, and his mother went back to work. As the oldest child, home responsibilities fell to him.

I grew up on a plantation. My father left when I was young. Three brothers. And my mother said one day: I gotta go to work, I can't stay at home with you guys anymore; you're gonna have to step up. What does that mean, you know, at twelve years old. Step up; what do you mean? I'm not gonna be home 'til nine, you gotta cook dinner. Cook dinner? I'm twelve years old. For three kids.

And how old were your brothers?

Makani, who's right under me, is two years younger than me. And then, you had Adam, which was five years under him. And then, Stevie, which is a year under him. So, you know, the youngest were four, five years old. And then, Makani was ten. You know. So, that's tough, you know. And you grow up on an island where there's not a lot of ... which I think was good. There was no fast food. The stores closed at six. I think the life-saver about our grocery store; you could charge. Remember those days where you go: Oh, put it on the Tabura's tab.

Exactly.

My mom's tab. And at the end of the month, you get the bill; right? And then, you can divvy up. But my father left with every penny in the bank and the clothes on his back. Left us in a two-bedroom house, plantation style. And we had nothing. Zero, you know. I remember when we applied for welfare, I was so embarrassed. 'Cause it's Lāna'i; everybody knows your business. I was like: Mom, I can't take this book to the store; people are gonna know we're on welfare. Today, they have a credit card. Back day, they were pages of books.

But they also knew your dad had left.

Yes.

They knew everything.

Everybody did; everybody did. He went to the airport and left the car. For two days, we didn't know where he went. Two days, you didn't know where he went, and then we found the car at the airport.

Did you ever reconnect with him?

Never.

You ever want to?

No, but I forgave him. There was a point in my life where I was so angry about it. There was a point where I would go in the bathroom in high school, and cry. 'Cause like: Why, why? What's wrong this guy? You know. And all that anger, of course, built up to bitterness.

And bitterness really poisons you, too.

That's the word; very bitter. And then, I was on a cover of a magazine.

Why?

I think it was for a TV show I did. I was in my early twenties.

Okay; early twenties.

Yeah.

Got it.

It was a TV show I did, and I was on this cover. And he saw the cover, and he was in the mainland, and he wrote to the editor and said: I think that's my son, I need to get ahold of him. The editor wrote me like five times before I finally wrote back and I said: Yeah, that is my dad, you can send me his info. So, the only contact I've had with him was through two emails. One was him apologizing to me for what he did, and mine was forgiving him for what he did. And I said: That's it; you've finished this chapter for me, 'cause now I feel this pressure is off, and I feel that I can move on now, the bitterness is gone. I said: If you want to contact my brothers, it's up to you and it's up to them, 'cause we're all adults now. So, that was my last contact with him.

Did he try to reach your mother?

No; and you know, my mother is not the type to talk bad about anybody. So, she always made it open. You guys want to talk to him, you can call him; you want to see him, you can see him. 'Cause he will always be your father. But to me, a father has a different meaning. He'll always be my dad.

Right; that's a verb. Right? It's what you do.

Yeah.

So, really, these are really formative things that happened to you. I mean, things that change you.

Big time.

So, you were twelve years old thinking ... Where's the food that I'm supposed to cook for dinner?

Yeah; yeah. So, if it wasn't for my grandparents, who taught us how to grow vegetables, I don't think we would have survived. And my grandfather really became the father figure, even though he was a very harsh man. He was Mr. Miyagi; everybody called him Mr. Miyagi. He would teach you through lessons; he wouldn't tell you. He wouldn't tell you that the fire is hot. He's gonna give you a lesson, you know, or he's gonna somehow drum up something so you go through the experience, so you get the lesson. And then, he'll ask you after. That kinda guy; very old school.

Did you learn well that way?

Lots.

Was that a good way for you?

Yeah; I think so. Now that I think about it, yeah. But at the time, I'm like: God, you—

Why doesn't he just say what he means?

Yeah; yeah. Why don't you say, you know. I remember when I was a junior in high school, I wanted to go to junior prom. And my mom said: You can't; we don't have any money. Expensive, you know, a tuxedo and everything. And my grandfather was listening to the conversation. And he goes: Hey, come outside. So, I go outside. He goes: You see this cabbage; not growing good. Help me. I said: What do you need me to do? We need to till the ground. Start tilling the ground. Next thing you know, it's an hour in, I'm sweating. I'm like: How did I end up tilling cabbage?

What's going on here? Next day he goes: Tomorrow, I going come back here one o'clock. You help me; we're gonna plant new cabbage. So, he shows me how to plant cabbage. This goes on for, you know, three, four months. Comes time for junior prom. Boy, come outside. He goes: I need you to help me pick the cabbage; too heavy, my back sore. I get a big bag, fill up the bag with cabbage. Let's go to the store. We go to the store, we sell the cabbage. Look at all the money; I go: Grandpa,

look at all this money. What are we gonna do with it? He goes: You go to the prom. Three-month lesson.

Yeah; that is a great formative lesson.

Yeah. But he did a lot of stuff like that.

And then, how did you learn to cook it?

Trial and error; trial and error. Salt and pepper, you know. That's all you had. It's not salty enough, put more salt. You know. Too much pepper, put less pepper. And then, of course, you watch your grandparents cook, you watch your mom cook when there were those days. You really paid attention, 'cause you didn't want to just eat Spam and rice every day. You got tired of Spam and rice every day.

Did you think it was drudgery, or did you enjoy this?

You know what? I enjoyed it; I enjoyed it. It became a competition amongst the brothers. You know, my third brother Adam became an amazing chef. He cooked for Steve Jobs. He's cooked for all these different celebrities. You know, we won the Food Truck Race because of him.

So, this life event that could have really unnerved you and really put you on a bad trajectory, it actually turned out to be something that became embedded in your life and a springboard.

The biggest blessing in disguise. Everything happens for a reason. And I think things would be much different if my dad was in my life. And it could be way better, it could have been worse. It would have been a different path, for sure.

Lanai Tabura wanted to be on television from the time he was a little boy. After graduating from high school on Lāna'i, he headed to O'ahu to attend Hawai'i Pacific University. He didn't stay long, though, because he found a new passion.

I went to a floor wax audition. And it was a thousand kids, and my cousin ended up getting it. But I was so fascinated by the concept of it. Like: Wait, do it again? What do you mean do it again? You know. I was like six or seven years old. And I was so fascinated about the concept of you can be in front of this thing, and then people can watch it later. And I was fascinated about television, and I was fascinated how people can act like somebody else. And then, you started watching television, I started watching Checkers and Pogo, and I started watching Andy Bumatai, High School Daze, and I started watching Booga Booga. And it fascinated me how they can make people laugh, and how they can act like somebody else and make people laugh.

That was the fascination, I think. I never thought I'd do standup comedy. I started doing standup comedy 'cause of James Grant Benton, Augie, and Andy. That was just a hobby. I wanted to do standup comedy because of the timing; the timing part of it.

Which is the hardest part.

Yes. And I found out that if you can master the timing, you can say anything you want. You can act, you can host, you can do interviews. You know, radio really helped me with the timing part on interviews as well.

How did you get to O'ahu to do all of this?

I had a scholarship, believe it or not, for volleyball. Hawai'i Pacific University, Nahaku Brown did a clinic on Lana'i, and I was a pretty good volleyball player.

You were all-state.

Yeah. Oh, thank you. Nobody knows that. But anyway, she was offering a management scholarship, 'cause they were gonna start an NCAA team. Turned into a club team. I got into radio at the same time, and then kind of moved out of it.

What's a management scholarship?

They offer a couple scholarships for people to help with volleyball teams, like the women's volleyball team.

Oh, I see.

So, you know, the guy that sets up the court, and you know, gets the water, and you know, gets ready for game day, gets the uniforms ready.

She saw your business side.

Yeah. Yeah. Thank you, Nahaku. But yeah, she really is the one that got me to O'ahu. 'Cause we couldn't afford college at all. My mom was pissed when I dropped out.

Why did you drop out?

Radio. When I started, my first day of college was my first day of my radio gig.

Oh ...

Yeah.

There was competition between the two.

And it took over. It took over not a little bit; it took over a hundred percent. I was so fascinated by radio. Again, I can tell people what to do, and they don't even see me. This was pre-Facebook, My Space, social media. So, you know that everyone's listening to you. We had a twenty-one share at night, which was like three out of every five teens listening to us at night.

That's phenomenal, because there were so many radio stations.

Yes.

I think we have the highest per capita in the nation.

Yes. We did; there was like thirty radio stations for a million people. You know. But I was so fascinated by radio, and that was it. I was indulged in it, you know.

And it paid you, too.

It did. And that was the other thing; it paid me. Right? College wasn't gonna pay me. Working part-time at San Francisco Rag Shop was paying me pennies. And being in radio, my first year was minimum wage, but after I proved that I could do what I could do, ho, I was living it up. You know. I had a car, I had a house, a condo. I had a tab everywhere I went, because everybody wanted you to talk about their bar or their restaurant. You know.

And yet, did you foresee what would happen to radio? I mean, it hasn't died like many people predicted.

No.

But it's not the same; it's a lot of consolidation and recorded voices.

Yeah. There was one thing that I really ... I really saw clearly, that it was gonna come to an end for me. I saw it ten years before. I'm still in radio, by the way. I do shows in Japan. But the actual twenty-four/seven, nine-to-five, working in radio every day, I saw it ten years before it even came.

You knew you would be recording your voice, and it would be played on different channels.

Yes; yeah. I seen it. 'Cause now, I can eliminate that person, I can eliminate this person. So, unless you were at the top of the food chain, you weren't gonna get paid, 'cause you were gonna be one of the people eliminated. Right? So, I started my TV career, 'cause I knew that I needed to get out of something else. And then, I started my entrepreneurship. Try everything, what do I like, what don't I like.

I wonder if one of the reasons you did the entrepreneur—I don't know if it was innately inside you, or did you see fewer opportunities that were already created for somebody like you?

It was my mom. Such a great question. It was my mom that told me: What do you want to be? I don't know; I want to be on TV. How do you know; you never try 'em. Right? Well, what you want to do; you want to be a realtor? How you know; you never tried it. You gotta try it first. You gotta go see what it is first. What if you don't like the format? What if you don't like how it works? What if you don't like the politics of it? You know. What you going do? That's why until today, I was like, if I get opportunity—I look at everything as opportunity, by the way. If I see opportunity, I'm gonna go dig into it. I'm gonna go dig, and hey, how does this work? I want to try.

And you're willing to give your time to try it out?

Yeah. I could die tomorrow. I could die tomorrow; and then what? My best friend died when he was thirty-five, and it was another huge lesson to me to try things. Don't be afraid. I'm always gonna pay taxes, I'm always gonna work, so why not try it. You know. I commend people who can do something for thirty years, forty years, you know. But it's kinda not for me.

So, if you had a choice between a good, steady job and this tantalizing opportunity that you didn't know if it would pay off, what would you do?

Tantalizing, one hundred percent.

Yeah.

A good, steady job is boring to me. And it's for other people. You know, I commend you again. That's good, if you could. I wish I could, because it's security; yeah? But it's so boring to me. It's so boring. I have so many wealthy friends that have been doing the same job for a long time, and they're miserable. They ask: What are you doing now, how come you're doing this? It's like they tell me: I live vicariously through your social media, or your Instagram or, you know. And it's not that I'm trying to brag about what I do or anything. I just do stuff that I love to do. I want it to be fun. Everything has to be fun.

And you've made it pay off for you.

It's going to pay off.

It's going to pay off. Six years ago, I went bankrupt. I lost three houses. I think I had four cars. For what? It was nothing, cars were nothing, the houses were nothing. But it was a huge lesson, and I'm still going through that lesson, you know. So, now, I have a new guard. How do I not go through the same mistake; right?

Well, maybe you were trying to control circumstances before, and now you try to control yourself.

Yeah; that's what it is. It really is. I never had money before, and when you hear these stories about people who won the lottery or have done good. You know, Larry Price always used to tell me: You're not going get rich yet. And I go: Why you always tell me that? He goes: 'Cause you need to learn, still.

Oh ...

It's not your turn; it's not your turn.

So, did you just go crazy because you had available money that you didn't before?

Oh, yeah. And I went crazy in a sense of not just for me; taking care of other people. Which I should have ... you know, I didn't have kids. I wasn't prepared for that. Nobody teaches you that. You know, no one teaches you about taxes. In school, they don't teach you that. No one teaches you that it can run out. No one teaches you that this job can end. You know, that kinda stuff. So, I'm going through it every day still, today. I think I'm gonna be that guy that doesn't retire; for sure. I love to work. So, I'm gonna be working.

But you are gonna save money; right?

I'm gonna; yeah. I started.

Because that's the thing, is when you're always living hand-to-mouth, regular savings is not a ...

Yeah.

It's not something on your list, because you don't have it to save.

Yeah. And it's not part of your ritual, it's not part of your everyday thing. Because you never had it. You know, I never had it.

And then, you assume if you have it, life will be easy.

It's not easier. It doesn't get easier. I think it gets harder. You know, more money, more problems. You know. It's funny, 'cause when you get more money, you think: Okay, now I can get the things that I need. You know. Or I need to get that, or I've always wanted to get that, I need it. You really don't need it. You know. You need toothpaste and you need toilet paper. Okay, I'm paying my bills, my kids are okay, I'm paying their bills, I have enough to pay for them to go to college. Do I want to be wealthy-wealthy? That's starting to turn. Before, if you asked me ten years ago. I want to be wealthy, I want to be one of the wealthiest guys in Hawai'i. Now it's, I want to be one of the most happiest guys, and I want to be doing what I love to do guys in Hawaii.

In 2013, Lanai Tabura and his team entered Food Network's The Great Food Truck Race. They traveled more than four thousand miles across the country in their Aloha Plate Food Truck in a competition to see who could make the most money. Well, their team won, thanks to the support of thousands of former Hawaii residents who came out to support them.

You know what's so interesting about that whole race was the word aloha. I'm gonna keep coming back to it, but the word aloha. This is what happened. I'm not gonna tell you the whole story, but what really happened was, what clicked it, and what sparked it, that Coconut Wireless, was one text. I text Brook Lee, Miss Universe, good friend of mine: I am going to Idaho, I don't know anybody in Idaho; do you know anybody in Idaho? That one text created this phenomena of thousands of people showing up to a food truck to support people they don't know. Why? Nobody knew what was going on, nobody knew.

That's right; the show wasn't on at that point, right?

No; it wasn't on. Those thousands of people that you didn't see on the television, because they thought we were cheating, showed up because they wanted to eat. They wanted to eat Hawaiian food, in the middle of Idaho, that they haven't had for a long time. People from twenty years transplants that lived in Idaho, fifteen years or what have you, people going to school showed up. And I'll never forget; I was in Minnesota, it was twenty degrees, raining sideways. We went to an ice cream shop, and there was a guy who comes out with a University of Hawai'i hat. And he looks up at me, and he goes: Lanai, what are you doing here? And I go: We're doing this food thing, and I'm looking for a place to park. I couldn't say anything. He said: What do you mean, this food thing? Oh, we have this food truck, and bla-bla-bla. He goes: Come here tomorrow, this is Grand Avenue, everyone will be here shopping. I said:

Really? I said: You from Hawai'i? He goes: No, the girl who owns this ice cream place is from Hawai'i, my ex-girlfriend. What? Yeah. He goes: I love Hawai'i, I going tell all my friends come tomorrow; park over here. We show up; about two hundred people waiting in line, tents, raining sideways, it's twenty degrees. Who are these people? We take about forty-five minutes to prep. I walk out. And I did this in every city; I would go down the line and I would thank people for coming and let them know we're gonna open soon. There was a lady, she's gotta be in her seventies, and I said: I want to thank you for coming. She goes: No, no, no; I want to thank you. And I said: Thank me for what? She goes: I've been living here for twenty years, and I never knew this many people from Hawai'i live in Minnesota. You guys know what you did? I go: What do you mean, know what we did? She said: You brought all of us together, through food. And I was like: Holy moly, I never thought of it like that; right? Where were we? We were in the capitol of Spam. Spam is made in Minnesota. Right?

Then it's a genetic connection.

Yeah. There was another connection; Spam is made in Minnesota. I meet this guy Matt, who helps us with the parking and everything, and I said: What are you doing here? He said: I came to school here and ended up working here; I created a group called The Frozen Ohana. And I go: What's The Frozen Ohana? He goes: Twenty-five hundred of us that get together every three months and have a barbecue, because we homesick. And I go: Homesick from where? He goes: From Hawai'i. I go: There's that many people here? He goes: Yeah. And that's what happened in every city. I have a story for every little city, but that one was halfway into the race, and that one when it clicked in. This is why people came together, 'cause of the food and the Aloha that they wanted to share with their friends and their neighbors.

Plus, they wanted to support somebody who was on a quest.

Yes.

A Hawaiian on a quest.

Yes; totally.

So, are you using what you learned from that to do your pop-ups now in different cities all over the place?

I've been on this new journey because of it, of teaching aloha. I have this passion for aloha. I have this passion for teaching people that if you have aloha and good intent with anything that you do, you can do anything that you want. You know what I mean? You can be the best at anything you want, because you enjoy it. You know, find what your passion is, and do it with good intent and aloha. And that's what I've

been on this journey through with the food. I've been teaching it through food subliminally.

I can see how you do it.

Yeah.

So, what's an example recently of aloha through food?

I've been doing these pop-up dinners with different chefs. And I sit with them, and we create the menu. And the menu is always gonna be the plantation days and the migration of immigrants that came to Hawai'i. From Hawaiian food is the first dish, to Chinese, to Japanese, to Korean, Portuguese, Filipino. You know. So, I walk through the timeline of it, and I figure out, will this dish represent that community or immigrant that came to the plantation. Yes, it does. All right; now we're gonna create a story behind it. So, when you come to my dinner, you're not gonna just have dinner; you're gonna get an experience. And the experience is gonna be the story of when the Chinese came in the late 1700s to trade sandalwood with Kamehameha, and then they introduced us to noodles and rice. And when the Japanese came and introduced us to teriyaki sauce, and the musubi, and that's how the Spam musubi came about. And the Portuguese gave us oil and batter. And the oil and the batter, they saw the Japanese guy eating raw shrimp and they said: You cannot eat that raw. And they grabbed the shrimp and dipped it in the batter and in the oil. That's why when you look at an okazuya, it's flat, our tempura. The Japanese took it one step further and put panko. These stories is the way that I'm gonna get to you and share what aloha means. At the end of the day, all these plantation workers got a kau kau tin. They sat in a circle, hot rice in one hand, hot food and vegetables in the middle. And the Japanese said: Yeah, try my musubi. And the Chinese said: Yeah, that's noodles, try my noodles. What did it do? It brought us together. And the Hawaiians taught us how to share, which is aloha.

Since he and his team won The Great Food Truck Race, Lanai Tabura has developed a passion for teaching aloha through food. Whether it's through his cooking shows or his pop-up dinners, he says he's on a mission to share aloha. Mahalo to Lanai Tabura for sharing his life 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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I have kids. I want my kids to live in a better world. It's a tough world right now, you know. So, my whole thing is, how am I gonna use what I have built to help people. My

mom has done it her whole life; she still does it today. My grandparents did it. You know, my grandmother would make a big pot of chili and feed everybody. You know. And then for years I'd go: Grandma, how come there's all this Tupperware on the table? How come you feeding everybody? She goes: Never mind, you just bring this to Uncle's house next door, you bring this to Auntie's house. That was how we lived on the ahupua'a. That's how we shared, that was aloha. Right? We have to bring that back. We've made life too difficult. So, I don't want it to be difficult; I want it to be simple. Ah, maybe I'm dreaming. But I think I've made a pretty good start.