

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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From what I understand currently, in a heiau, there's always a caretaker of the heiau. And that person that is the caretaker usually is housed on the heiau. But also, that person is the one that usually receives the signals or, for lack of better words, receives the messaging. And then, that messaging is then translated to the people. And that person, since he is the one that talks to the gods, is not technically human. So, it's kanaka ole.

Kūha‘o Zane, a member of the Kanakaole family from Hawai‘i Island, 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. His full name is Kūha‘oimaikalani Keli‘iaweweu Tien Chu Zane, better known as Kūha‘o Zane. He's a Hilo designer whose work is emblazoned on airplanes, and used on aloha shirts and company logos. His grandmother was hula master, Edith Kanakaole. The Hilo arena where the annual Merrie Monarch Hula Festival is held is named after her. Kūha‘o's mother is Nalani Kanakaole, a respected kumu hula and chanter. And his father, Sig Zane, was inspired by Hawaiian cultural knowledge to create striking and popular aloha attire sold through his longtime Sig Zane Designs Store in Downtown Hilo. It was clear that Kūha‘o would be expected to follow in his family footsteps, but he says his parents didn't push him while he was growing up. They gave him the freedom to explore his own interests.

It wasn't too crazy of a childhood. But being born definitely to my mom Nalani, and then to my dad Sig, there was definitely some large shoes that came along with this. But they were pretty good at kind of sheltering me from that, from the pressure of it, and not necessarily putting in too much attention to it, but just trying to like, usher me right into, I guess, the career that I have today, but ushering me into something that I liked. And it took me a little while. School was kinda rough for me; I wasn't really the best student at all whatsoever.

You grew up traveling because of hula. So, something as Hawaiian as hula didn't keep you here; it let you go all over the place too.

Yeah; yeah. I got left behind a few times. There was a couple Tahiti trips that I really wanted to go on, but my mom just left me home. But no, that is true. And it's weird that even going to Paris at such a young age, it kinda like sparked a lot of like, artistic energies. Like seeing the Mona Lisa, like, understanding that there's that much regard for art at such a young age, maybe that fueled a lot of my career, I guess you could say. Like, oh, maybe I'm interested in art, for some reason. Or maybe I'm interested in design. Like, why is this building designed this way. And so, travel definitely had a part to play with it, but of course, the roof of all of that was sharing hula, or sharing our culture.

And who would have thought that hula would be literally a ticket out.

Being able to travel at a young age is so important, and such a pillar of my character now. And I can definitely see how, even with my mom in her traveling at such a young age too, she had that same type of exposure. So, yeah, I could see how it added to her personality.

Your mom does hula. And your dad did, too.

Dad started dancing, too.

When he married your mom, he started dancing.

Yeah. I think he originally moved to Hilo for college. He always tells me the story about he went to Puhi Bay with a couple of his friends, and there was a pa'ina or a party happening there. And there was a hālau dancing, and he was watching from, you know, in the dark, and he was like, looking under the tent, and he was watching these like, people dancing. And he said it was like, so energetic, like raw type of energy. And he was like: I've never seen this in Waikīkī, like what is this? Is this even hula? And so, he remembers the energy of that, and he wanted to be a part of that. And the crazy thing is, he went to stand in line for food at the party, and there was this joyous like, auntie at the poi bowl, and like, scooping the poi, and he remembers that joyous like, infectious like, personality that that auntie had. And that ended up being Edith Kanakaole. So, it was my mom's mom. And I think from there, he started to go to college, and he went to class under Edith. 'Cause my grandma was teaching at the college at that time. And I think it was grandmother told my dad to start dancing. My dad's pretty high-strung. You know, like he's a typical dragon, Chinese dragon. But he's very speeded, and he's always trying to get things done.

Really productive.

Yeah; really productive. He cannot sit still watching TV. That's like torture for him, to watch TV. And like when I was growing up, he would be ironing, or doing something, folding clothes during TV. I was like: Dad, can't you just, like, chill out? And then, my mom is like, very laid back in her demeanor, as far as her day-to-day personality. I mean, of course, in hālau, very different.

We know that kumu hula are dictators—

Yep.

--of the world.

Exactly; it's a dictatorship. I tell that to people all the time. This is not a democratic scene at all. And you have to do what they say, period.

No voting.

Yeah; no voting.

I've heard that your mom is a very strong woman.

She has a really strong will for life, I guess.

You know, your father shared with me a really nice thing he says about her. That she gave him this great gift, which was to say: Your words have consequences, whether they're bad or good; so be careful what you say.

Yeah.

Because they will live on.

Yeah. I believe that came from my grandpa on my mom's side. 'Cause he was a man of like, very minimal words; he did not talk much at all. But yeah, words are consequence, and that's something that was kinda ingrained in me, too. And honestly, like today, especially with youth today, and even with social media, that amplifies it, that you have to share so much, you have to talk so much, you have to be around. You know, it's almost weird to have that upbringing that, like, my mom drilled that into me, that like, word is consequence, you know. And even on a business level, like when you're trying to market something, that you have to kinda be conscious of that. And I think that definitely adds a different tone to how we market ourselves, or how we share with share with the world ourselves. But yeah; that was something that my kumu used to say.

Hula and other Hawaiian cultural practices are at the root of Kūha'ō Zane's career as a designer. The hula tradition started in his mother's family many generations ago, and continues to be as vital now as it was then.

Who was in the family before Edith? I mean, what's the family line like?

So, above Edith was Kekuewa, Mary Kekuewa Kanahēle. And she was the one that held the hula lineage, basically, and it got passed down to her. But that's my great-grandma. She was the one that was taught in hula kapu, and so, she was taken at birth and had to live away from her family. But from birth all the way to about nine years old, she was raised in the practices of hula. And so, she got taught down in Puna. And understanding too, this was the time when hula was, you know, banned and it couldn't be practiced.

This was all about saving hula.

Yeah; saving hula at that time. So, like, since it was banned by the missionaries at that time, they had to kinda go out into the caves, literally, to practice.

And without her parents.

Without her parents. So, she was given away at birth. But it's also too, like that concept that if you're given away at birth and you go to learn hula, that you want to elevate the status of your family for the next generation, and the next generation. I mean, that's basically a sacrifice to be able to give away your child, you know. And so, if it wasn't for that one little break, I don't even know where we would be today. But yeah; so Mary, she was kinda like the beginning of the hula lineage.

Your family tends to be matriarchal.

Yes; definitely.

Lots of strong women.

Yeah.

So, what's it like to be a man in the family?

I think growing up, it was a little weird. I was always, like, looking for, I guess a masculine type of entity to look up to.

M-hm.

And my dad was that, obviously. But also too, I was like, looking in hula, and I'm like: Why is hula like, so feminine? And especially like when you come to O'ahu, and the movements are very feminine too. But I know that when I'm dancing our style of 'aiha'a, I'm really tired, it's very athletic as a hula style. So, I was always like, looking for that masculine entity to like, look up to. But over the years, I realized that it was up to myself and my cousins that are all male dancers, that it was up to us to embody that. And I think that we definitely hold it down for our generation, for sure. And I even look up to even my cousin Ulu, who's a couple years younger than me, but to me, he's like just one of the best dancers as far as an image of 'aiha'a as a style. He's stylistically one of my best dancers, in my mind. Yeah.

And that's the protected, save the hula, hula.

Yeah; yeah. Our style of our bent knees, and low to the earth type of bombastic—I think that's a term that they use all the time.

And did Mary bring that out? She brought out the dance, but you interpreted it.

I think Mary brought that style, that bombastic style. But I think it was really with my mom guys' generation that they elevated the choreography to what we have today. And my mom used hula choreography, as it could stand up against any of the great, you know, disciplines, no matter if it's ballet or modern dance. She feels that hula choreography can stand alongside those and garner that same type of respect. And so, I think a lot of what fuels her for her choreography is to be able to show that to the world, that it can stand up in that manner.

And it's rich and deep; it's not a simple dance.

And it's also a capsule for our culture and our storylines, you know, that we have.

Do you know that your family used to be the guardian of the heiau?

Yeah; it's weird, because you can go to multiple different heiaus all over Hawai'i, and you'll find a Kanakaole there.

Very spiritual.

When you think about gods as far as like, the understanding of Hawaiian gods, you can also look at it as gods are just energy. And so, certain gods are responsible for that type of energy. And when you look at it as environmental energies, then it's not necessarily such a religious thing. Then it's more just how well are you in tune to your environment and those energies that are responsible for your environment. And so, I think that us as Kanakaoles not necessarily just trying to just receive messaging from the gods, but really

analyzing what these energies are, and the intersection of these energies over a heiau, and then how to translate that into certain messaging that we'll be able to translate for the people.

There's a burden that comes from having a huge name like Kanakaole. You know, so your work has to be top-notch. I mean, I would imagine there's a lot of judging, good and bad; right?

Oh, god; yeah. I mean ... I get kind of told that I'm judgmental at certain points. But not in a bad way; I don't mean in a bad way. But like, my mom's a Merrie Monarch judge; what am I supposed to do about it?

She's been a judge all my life; I understand. But I think it's more the proper intent to use that judging t ... I mean, judging has such a bad connotation to it.

Well, it's analysis.

Yeah, analysis; exactly. And making sure that your judgment is of pure intent to improve. And so, if that's there, then I think that that's like the winning factor judging, you know. I mean, that's why you go to Merrie Monarch, is to um, get judged by these legends of hula, and hopefully improve your craft just a few steps at a time.

There's so much intellect in hula and in dance.

Yeah.

And in music. Do you think people appreciate that?

I think about that. And same thing like, with an aloha shirt. Sometimes we'll be designing it, and we're like: Oh, do you think the customer is gonna like this? Do you think the customer is gonna understand that story? And to me, my answer is always like: If they understand it two lifetimes from now, then you did your job.

Kūha'o Zane started experimenting with designs at a young age. While this would eventually lead to working with his father, he had to leave Hawai'i to better understand the role that his cultural upbringing would play in his design work.

Many sons run away from being in business with their dad.

I tried.

Oh, yeah. Or you try to get away, but it's your destiny.

Yeah.

Well, how did it work for you?

He tricked me into it, probably.

Something like that.

He mentioned you for a long time, before you came along.

Yeah. I wanted to run away multiple times. Especially when I was a kid.

Because your dad made it clear, this is what you're gonna do; right? Did he say that?

No.

Oh, he didn't.

He never said, like: Here you go, this is your job, you gotta do it.

But you were expected to come along?

I think it was an unsaid, unspoken thing, you know, that I was expected to take this company over. So, when I was in high school, I started designing tee-shirts, and that's basically how this whole graphic design thing started. His partner Punawai Rice, he kinda taught me how to do like the simple things on CorelDRAW, I think it was at the time. But I really had some thoughts in my head. Like, I would see surf brands out there at that time, and I feel like they weren't speaking to me specifically. And so, I wanted to design my own tee-shirt and put my own ideas out there. And that was like the start of this whole graphic design thing. And then, so I wanted to open a surf shop; that was my initial thing. And so, I did a business plan, and like, did a five-year projection, and I gave it to them. I'm a junior at this time, or a senior at this time in high school.

How'd you know how to do a business plan?

Oh, my dad kinda like told me what it was, and I drew it together and researched it a little bit. But it was a terrible business plan, probably. But I gave it to my grandpa, my gung-gung on my dad's side, and asked him for a loan. I think it was like ten thousand dollars, or something. But he told me, no.

And that ended there?

And that ended right there. And then, I ended up doing more graphic design, and so doing my tee-shirts, and I used to sell them in school. So, like some people would be selling musubis in school, and I'd be over here slanging tee-shirts in school.

So, that's kinda how the whole graphic design thing started. And then, I ended up going to design school in L.A., Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising. And that's where I really fell in love with design.

Did you feel like you found your people there, another kind of creative energy there?

I feel like I ran into people that spoke the same language as me. But in that same vein, didn't. Because that's when I really started to figure out special the culture that we have here, how special it is. Because I would simply like, go up to people and tell 'em my name, like Kūha'o, or something. And they would tell me that their name's Joe. Like, not anything against Joes or anything. But I would tell 'em, Kūha'o. And they'd go like: Oh, what kind of name is that? Oh, what does it mean? I'd be like: That means rain from clear sky. And then, they would like, start reflecting upon their own name, and like, I don't mean to do that or anything, but then I started to really like, realize that you know, what we have in Hawai'i is really a treasure, and how do I translate that into design. And so, although they spoke the same language as me design wise, I realized that I had a unique voice in the culture that I could be able to now use design to communicate. Yeah. But that was my runaway time. Two years in L.A. was amazing.

But did you come home right after?

I tried to stay up there. I did a couple internships while I was up there, but my dad reeled me back in really quick.

He was ready for you.

He was like: You know, you gotta start working.

And how did you folks figure out what work you would do?

Well, actually, I came back, and obviously, coming back from college and coming back from design school, I thought I was the baddest designer, ever. And I quickly got humbled to that point. But he made me work on the floor. So, I had to work in the shop for, I think the first two years. And so, I didn't even touch a mouse for like the first, like, six months that I was working for my dad.

He was trying to let you feel what people want?

I guess that's what it was. Like, I really got to hear the customers and see what they like and understand our customer psyche to a certain degree. But also too, like, you gotta have an appreciation from sweeping the floors, all the way to making even like HR decisions, you know. And that definitely built some sort of perspective for me. But yeah; that first two years, I didn't even design anything for Sig Zane Designs. I was doing my own things, 'cause he wasn't letting me. And I think that that definitely built some perspective, for sure.

How well do you get along? Are you colleagues, or is it still, you know, very much father-son, generational?

Mm ... okay. So, that's a complicated answer. Complicated order. We get along. We definitely have a type of chemistry when we work with each other. But it's just like any other family business; like, we have our times that we completely disagree. But I think that hula plays a role into that. So, in hula, since it's a dictatorship, it's almost like these split personalities that like, you have this dictatorship where you have to believe and trust in everything that your kumu says. So, if your kumu says jump in the fire, you gotta jump in the fire, no questions asked. And I think that that bleeds over into the business world, as well. Amongst my team, I encourage everybody to vocalize what their perspectives is, because everybody brings a unique perspective to the table. But at the same time, when push comes to shove, and you gotta make a call, you gotta have that complete trust, just that exact same thing that you have in your kumu, exact same thing in that trust that, if you're a leader, you gotta make the decision, and you gotta go with it. And so, if my dad makes a call, I may disagree with it at some point, and sometimes I'll vocalize it, but he's the leader; I gotta follow him. So, I think that that's where it kinda plays with each other, you know.

And that's not just because he's your father. It's because he's ... what is the reason for your saying: You're the guy.

Two levels. He's more experienced than me; period. You gotta respect experience; period. But on the other level, it's like, especially on the Hawaiian side of things, if you're given a position, that's your title, and you're the one to make those decisions. And it's up to you to make the best decision. If you're a konohiki of an area, and you make the decision that a kapu is gonna be set at a certain point, then you're the one that makes the call. If you don't make a good call, then maybe you'll be removed from your position. But it's up to you as a worker to follow through on that decision, and give it your best. And if in hindsight that decision's not that good, then maybe your time will come up that you'll be able to be a leader.

You also do things that really, he's not around to oversee or to be the dictator at. I mean, you're running a shop in Honolulu, living in Hilo.

I think that in his time, his energy and his characteristic had to build Sig Zane to what we have today. And that's why that personality type was needed or essential to have a certain type of strength, and a certain type of weakness to build what we have today. But for me, I think that I'm most excited when a team can do it. I don't like to do it all by myself. I can do it all by myself, it's fine, but I actually am a lot more ecstatic when something is achieved when I'm not there, if the team can pull things off. We have an event happening next Saturday that they're doing the installation and everything. And I'm watching it on Instagram, like looking at it happening without me there, and I'm completely ecstatic about it. Like, that means that we had the right chemistry to build a team that can achieve things without you.

That's right.

Yeah. So, that's the transition point between me and my dad. Like, my dad had to build Sig Zane to this point of what we have, and then now, I'm trying build a team that can carry on Sig Zane without us.

When you describe yourself to people, say in the Western world, I mean, it's so strange to reduce yourself to a profession; right? So, how do you describe yourself?

I don't know; it's kinda hard to describe myself. We did a Hawaii National Bank commercial that airs every so often, and they had me say: I am an entrepreneur. And I'm sorry, but I fought that lady. I was like: I don't want to say that; no, I don't want to. That's weird; why are you gonna call yourself something; it's up to the person watching, it's up to the spectator to give you that title, not yourself. So, in that vein, I can't really call myself anything. It would be awesome if I could call myself a designer or hula dancer, or practitioner. But it is really difficult to describe myself in the Western context. And a lot of times, like, going to New York Fashion Week or something, it's hard to put myself into one little capsule. So, a lot of times, I just tell people I make aloha shirts.

It's an interesting leap into the Western world from a Hawaiian perspective, and yet, I don't know why it surprises me that this would be something that would be successful and robust. But I think we really haven't seen a lot of it. I mean, you are who you are, and you know, there are so many skills that come from being who you are, and knowing what you do.

It's one of my personal things that, like, growing up, my favorite designer wasn't Hawaiian. You know? No matter if it's even Steve Jobs or something, you know, like somebody that you look up to. So, I think that when I was growing up, Na Makua, Nelson Makua was the only graphic designer that was Hawaiian, that was getting Pele Awards, that was winning advertising. You know, so I think that having him as somebody that I looked up to, I had to make sure that I do enough in my career, or achieve enough my career that can stand as a feather in a cap for not only myself, but

Hawaiians as a race. You know. And I think that that's definitely what motivates me on a day-to-day basis, is how can Hawaii or Hawaiians design Hawai'i. Yeah. But no, we haven't seen full breadth of it yet. I think it's still to come.

Kūha‘o Zane is the creative director of his father’s Hilo-based design businesses. Kūha‘o also is the president of the Edith Kanakaole Foundation, a Hawaiian cultural educational organization, and he continues to dance hula with his family’s halau. Mahalo to Kūha‘o Zane of Keaukaha, Hilo on Hawai‘i Island, for sharing your life stories 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's expected of you in hula?

Definitely when I was younger, it was large shoes to fill. And the pressure would get to me every so often, but not in a bad way. But I mean, it's kind of a bummer, like, dampen your mood to know that you're expected to do so much, you know. But at the same time, it's like that's what kuleana is. It's like, it's a responsibility, as well as a privilege. And I think that it's up to us, each of us as family members, to be able to convert that from that responsibility into a privilege, And respectful for those, too. So, on a hula level, what I'm expected to do is definitely to carry on the halau. And I'm sure that being a kumu—oh, I still cringe when I hear that. But I'm sure that being a kumu is somewhere in my journey down the road.