

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: Francis “Palani” Sinenci

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And do hale stand up to strong, strong winds?

Well, we really haven't had one that's Category 5. But we had a storm ... and we had campers at our site. And you know, we heard the wind—whoosh. But we were living in a cement house with a pitch roof. So, the next morning, I go outside; our pitch and tar roof, that thick, blew off the house. I go: Oh, god. So, I went and looked down at my hale. Six leaves blew off the hale, which were not tied.

That's it?

Six leaves.

So, very durable construction.

It is durable. It's like a coconut tree; it bends with the wind. Yeah.

He lashes together hale, or traditional Hawaiian houses, that can withstand fierce winds. Francis “Palani” Sinenci, 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. After retiring from the U.S. Air Force as a Chief Master Sergeant, Francis “Palani” Sinenci is now a chief of a different order. He has built over three hundred hale, or traditional Native Hawaiian houses, thatched with grass or leaves. Uncle Palani, as he's often called, is a master hale-builder. He grew up in the isolated town of Hāna and Kāpahulu, Maui, to a Native Hawaiian mother and an immigrant Filipino father.

I had a really fun life. 'Cause I was born in Hāna, the plantation was just winding down, and cattle was being brought in, so I was in that transition stage. And so, I just grew up fishing all the time. You know, we lived right close to the ocean, right next to a boarding house with all mixed ethnic workers from all over. They had Japanese, Portagees, Filipinos, Hawaiians, and we lived in a place called Old Camp. My dad was from the Philippines. He was a plantation worker.

And he came to work plantation, and he got sent to Hāna?

He almost went to jail, 'cause my mother was only fifteen years old when they got my older brother.

And your mom was from Hāna?

Yeah; my mom was from—

Hawaiian from Hāna.

Yeah. But lucky thing he didn't go to jail, 'cause I wouldn't have been here.

Oh; 'cause that was your older brother.

That was my older brother.

Got it.

Yeah.

How many siblings do you have?

It was altogether, nine. And there were two girls and seven boys. And I'm number two. And I lived with that number-two syndrome for all my life. 'Cause my older brother immediately got hanai'd by my tutu lady. So, I was the oldest in the family, so I had to take care of my siblings while my mom and dad went to work. Yeah.

So, does that mean you took care of feeding them during the day? Your siblings.

After I got to be about like eight to ten years old, yeah, I started taking care of the younger ones. I was a really good spear fisherman, 'opihi picker. And we did a lot of kalua pig, and all. You know, regular stuff.

So, you gathered your food.

Oh, yeah. We were gathering. We were on the lower part of the ahupua'a, I guess you call it, and we're mostly ocean people. So, some of the people from Kaupō or Ke'anae, they'd grow the taro, these guys would grow the goats and whatever. So, we'd trade, you know.

You would have the fish.

Yeah, we'd trade. We had fish, and then every week, we'd get taro. I didn't know where it came from, but they brought in taro. Sometimes, we'd have goat, and we'd have beef. So, I was on the border of when Hawaiians just starting to start eating rice. So, I was raised up eating rice. And taro; we pounded all our own taro. Every week, we had taro.

So, whatever you ate came from the land?

Came from the land.

And the sea?

Yeah. It was fun. I had a good childhood.

But you ended up traveling all over the place. So, you went from a very small and remote area, very isolated by geography.

Yeah.

What made you leave?

Well, about my high school days, I joined the Civil Air Patrol. It was the thing; it was a way to get off island, free, on Air Force airplanes. So, I joined the Civil Air Patrol, and we used to travel to different islands, and got a taste of other than Hāna or other than Maui.

After graduating high school in the isolated town of Hāna, Maui, Francis "Palani" Sinenci says he got itchy feet, and wanted to see the world. So, he enlisted in the Navy, and left behind his rural life and worked on the flight deck of an aircraft carrier, the USS Hancock.

I was an air crew survival equipment technician. In other words, I took care of the pilots' survival gear, and some of his environmental systems within the aircraft, like breathing, his G-suits, his ensemble.

Did you rig up his parachute?

Oh, yeah. In fact, one of the pilots got shot over South Vietnam, and he jumped out of the plane. Not ejected; jumped out and used my parachute. And he came back to me one day and he says: Here's your Crown Royal. So, the person that packs the parachute that was used gets a bottle of Crown Royal. That's the tradition.

After traveling the world on an aircraft carrier, Francis "Palani" Sinenci wanted to attend college. So, after four years in the Navy, he returned home to Maui to enroll in school. That plan did not last long, as Sinenci says he got itchy feet once again, and enlisted in the Air Force. Sinenci would spend the next twenty-five years in the Air Force, rising to the rank of Chief Master Sergeant.

I know what happened between the time you were in the Navy and the time you joined the Air Force.

Met my wife.

Yes.

Yeah. I went to a party. And she looked fourteen years old, playing the piano. And I asked my auntie: Hey, who's that little girl playing the piano? She goes: That little girl is nineteen years old; she's going to University of Hawai'i. Oh, that changed my whole ... oh, yeah; intelligent, too. I don't know if she's watching. But anyway ...

Long story short; we've been married fifty-one years.

And I know you call her your wife for life.

Mm.

And I asked her where she calls home, because you've lived so many places.

Yeah.

And she said: Wherever my husband is.

Good answer.

It is a tough life. And she's in the Reserves, or she was in the Reserves.

Was.

Right? So, how did that work? You then joined the Air Force.

Luckily, we lived close to the base. And she went temporary duty sometimes, off base to other bases, but only for two weeks at a time. You know, the Air Force and the service is like one big family. They always take care of each other. Yeah. So, there's no worries.

During the time you were in the Air Force, and then the—first, the Navy, and then the Air Force, were you keeping Hawaiian traditions? Or how much a part of your life was Hawai'i?

Well, actually, I kind of wanted to distance myself from home. 'Cause I wanted to see the world. And I go: Oh, man, the world is my oyster. You know, I really loved what I was doing, and I was traveling a lot. And I go: Hāna is just a little dot, you know, I grew up there.

At the end of your service in Air Force, in which you did very well, you were all set to retire on the mainland.

Uh-huh.

Where?

South Carolina, Charleston.

Why South Carolina?

Because I had a home there. And my home was like Hawai'i; I had banana trees, literally, my back yard was a Hawaiian garden.

And you were okay living in Charleston.

Charleston, South Carolina.

Rather than back home.

Yeah; my son was there, my wife was there, you know. So, yeah. And all my friends were there. Close to the golf course, I had all my imu rocks. You know, I was like at home.

What happened? Why aren't you in Charleston right now?

So, one night, a friend of mine calls me over to his house. He goes: Hey, brah, come over. Hawaiian Senior Master Sergeant. Come over, and let's watch some some videos. He just came back from Hawai'i. So, I go: Sure. So, my wife and I go over, and we're having pupus and drinking beer. And he shows the Merrie Monarch. I go: Wow! And I started getting emotional. And I said to my wife: Tomorrow morning, I'm putting in my retirement papers. And she goes: What? Where we going? I go: We're moving back to Hawai'i. And she goes: Really? Yeah. She goes: What about our house? I go: We'll sell it or leave it for the son.

Just like that.

Just like that.

And it was the call of the Hawaiian culture?

Yeah.

Which you had not really repressed. You'd lived it, but you also didn't really seek to immerse yourself in it.

Yeah.

Wow.

And it was Eddie Kamae, and he was playing, you know, cowboy songs and all that. Wow; I really got choked up.

So, it was two films; Merrie Monarch and Eddie Kamae?

Eddie Kamae; yeah.

Wow.

And later on, I told Eddie Kamae; I go: You know, you're responsible for bringing me home. When we had a chance meeting over in Maui at a festival.

Inspired to reconnect with his Hawaiian roots, Francis "Palani" Sinenci retired from the Air Force, packed up, and shipped out to Hawaii from South Carolina.

And you knew where you would come when you got home, you would go to Hāna?

Well, actually, I didn't go to Hāna. I just wanted to come home. You know. And so, I came home, and the first thing my brother-in-law says: Hey, you know what, we need a kūpuna at school. They were lacking teachers and stuff. I go: What's a kūpuna? You know, like, all my Hawaiian stuff was all left back in the old days. So, he goes: A kūpuna, you know, a teacher, an elder. I go: Oh, okay. I don't know anything about kūpuna. So, he goes: Well, you know what, go and interview with our principal, Jan. I go: Okay. So, I show up. And I considered myself old at that time; I was forty-eight years old, you know.

I was forty-eight years old. 'Cause in the military, when you're forty-eight, you're an old man. And you really are; they make you feel like an old man. So, I was doing backflips, and they called me an old man. So anyway, I went and interviewed. And she goes: You're from Hāna; yeah? I go: Yeah. She goes: Can you speak Hawaiian? I go: I can understand. You know, I was brought up by my tutu lady, and yeah, I can, little bit. She goes: No problem. She says: Here's what you gotta do; we're gonna hire you, with all the classes I need to take. So, I had like, two 'ōlelo classes, and an 'ukulele class. She goes: Can you sing, play 'ukulele? I go: Sure. You know, what local boy doesn't know how to play 'ukulele. So, I got these three things; now I gotta go. So, immediately, she hired me immediately. And so, I had to report to work on Tuesday. So, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday nights, I was in school. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday days, I was teaching. So, I was going to 'ōlelo classes. By the time Friday came, I just said: I gotta get out of here. Honolulu of course, I was living here. And I used to just jump on my truck and go to the airport and fly to Hāna, and just go fishing. Just forget everything. Sunday night, fly back here. Same thing; teach. I was working like, twelve to sixteen hours a day, retired Air Force.

Yeah; your wife told me you don't have a lazy bone in your body. You're always doing something.

Yeah. It's weird.

You just keep going.

I just don't want to waste time. Because tomorrow is not guaranteed. That's the way I look at it.

Francis "Palani" Sinenci kept himself busy reconnecting with his Hawaiian heritage, practicing taro cultivation and working as a kūpuna, or Hawaiian cultural elder, at Helemano Elementary School in Wahiawā, Central O'ahu. One day in 1994, he received a request from a fellow kūpuna that would shape the rest of his life.

So, one day, one of my kūpuna says: Uncle Francis—we always call each other auntie and uncle in front of the kids as a sign of respect. And I don't know if she's older, or younger than me. But she goes: Uncle Palani, why don't you build us a hale? I go: What's that? She goes: A hale. And I grew up with hale 'au'au. That's bathroom.

M-hm.

Hale hopau pilikia, hale unu, and these kinda hale. Not a sleeping house. She goes: Hale pili. I go: Oh, pili; like pili grass? She goes: Yeah. So, I said: You mean a grass shack, don't you? She goes: Yeah; it's a hale, not a grass shack. 'Cause when I was growing up, a hale was a grass shack. I want to go back to my little grass shack.

Everything was grass shack. So, I go: I don't know anything about building a hale. She goes: Well, we're gonna send you down to Waimea Falls Park, and you're gonna see Uncle Rudy, and he's gonna teach you how to build a hale. So, I go: Okay. So, I go down to Waimea Falls Park, and meet Uncle Rudy. He's back there by all his archaeological stuff in the back. And he's smoking a pipe. So, he introduced me. He goes: Oh, you want to build a hale; yeah, boy? You want to build a hale, boy? 'Cause he was about sixty.

I go: Yes; yes, sir. So, he brings out this pad, and he starts drawing the posts, the tenons and, you know, how to connect the hale. I go: Wait a minute; I know how to do that. And he goes: Really? I go: Yeah. He goes: Why are you here? I go: No, when I was in the sixth grade, that was my homework. Our teacher, Mrs. Naone said: You guys go to the library, and go find something Hawaiian, and come back and do a show-and-tell, you know, story. Gotta write about it; you gotta draw the pictures. So, that's what I did. Everybody did like, lamalama torch, all the other things, you know. I chose hale-building. So, he writes down all these things that I need to do. You go to Bishop Museum, you look, you go read this book, this book, this book. So, I went to Bishop Museum, looked at the hale there, they let me go inside. And I got Russ Apple's book, Dr. Russ Apple, and I read through it. I go: Oh, yeah, this is easy. So, I went out and gathered the wood, and I built a little hale, about a six-foot hale for a project that I was working at one of the schools, Helemano School. And when I built it, I invited him to come up to come up for the christening or blessing. Yeah; oki ka piko. And he came up; he goes: Wow, boy; you get 'em. Now, if you like become one master, you gotta build one twenty-by-forty. I said: Uncle Rudy, I'll never be a master; this is too much work. He mentioned that: You need to go back to Hāna, and go build a kauhale at the Hāna Cultural Center.

What's a kauhale?

It's a group of different type of houses. Or a village, like a small village.

He wanted you to build a small village?

Yeah. So, I go to Hāna, and I see Ms. Coila Eade, who was kind of my mentor too. She's there, and she goes: Yeah, we need a kauhale. So, she goes: You know, I'm from Hana. She goes: You know how to build a hale? We don't know that you can build a hale. So, I had to go out and gather more wood, and build a small table model, using dental floss for the lashing, then cement and rocks, and built a hale for them. And I presented it at the meeting, and they said: Okay, you're hired. So, I started my career right there.

And were you loving the process by that point?

Doing the first one, and then making the model, you know, everything sinks in, and you get some muscle memory.

So many different things. You get the rocks.

Oh; yeah, yeah.

I mean, it looks simple, but it's not.

I mean, for me, well, it came natural, 'cause I worked with cords and stuff. After I finished the kauhale, everybody in Hāna was like, jumping in and helping out. In fact, one of the hale that I built, we didn't have pili grass, so I had to use the alternative thatching materials, which was loulu palm, palm leaf, loulu, and ti leaves. And that one hale took about almost half a million ti leaves to thatch the totally enclosed sleeping hale. So, I had the whole community out there, gathering dried ti leaves, and then putting them in bundles. And then we lashed it all on. And that catapulted me to a hale-builder, master hale-builder. In fact, when I called Russ Apple—he was still alive, and I said: Russ, how do you become a master builder? And he's been tracking, he was tracking me. He goes: You're a master. I go: No way; I gotta build a twenty-by-forty before I proclaim myself a master. And the first twenty-by-forty I built, my wife and I, in strong wind, started to build it.

Where was that?

In Hana, at the place where we're at right now. So, I built my first twenty-by-forty with my wife's help.

And it's your hale.

Yeah. So, as we were building, the wind was blowing, it was starting to rain. And we'd build these A-frames, and stand it up like this, and my wife was holding it in the wind. I go: Don't you let that thing fall. Oh ... she didn't. And we built the hale.

Do you marvel when you put those together about, you know, how you do it? I mean, you know, how durable it is.

I'm awe every time I build.

What are some of the things that impress you about the building?

How they can stand up to the weather, and how ingenious and simple, ingenious how those fittings come together. And I firmly believe—you know, these EZ Corner tents that

you see pop up, you know, people put them together? It's almost exactly like a hale. The framing and everything is the frame of a hale.

If I were to be there to watch you do the work, what would I be surprised to see? What's some of the most interesting parts of the job?

You will probably be amazed at how many people we can hold on the 'oloke'a, which is the scaffolding system. By the way, you cannot build a hale without. I mean, many have tried, and I've got reports back where they used modern metal scaffolding. But an 'oloke'a, has to conform, or a traditional hale building 'oloke'a is actually building a hale, then another hale over it. Because the scaffolding system has to be commensurate to the size of the hale, and the workers. So, it's gotta be kind of like ergonomic; yeah. So, it's gotta fit the guys and the people too.

So, first, you build the scaffolding.

No; first you build the foundation, then you build the scaffolding after the posts is all in to build the roof part.

And what do other people use you hale for?

Mostly for gathering places, like most of the hale that I build are called hale hālāwai, which means, you know, meeting place. And gathering, and some just for show.

Over the last twenty years, Francis "Palani" Sinenci has tirelessly built various types of hale across Hawaiian cultural sites, schools, private residences, Haleakala National Park on Maui, and even on the U.S. mainland, and in China.

The title that I have as a kahuna kuhikuhi pu'uone suggests that I'm an architect. The word kuhikuhi pu'uone, breaking down the word kuhikuhi pu'uone was to show how to build on a pile of sand. So, now we have architects who use blueprints. Back in the old days, they used a pile of sand. Like, if a kahuna is gonna demonstrate how to build a heiau, he would go like this. He would say: Okay; get the sand, and then stack all the rocks, stack all the wood. And I actually did one, demonstrated how to build a hale on a pile of sand. So, kuhikuhi means to show or direct, or envision; pu'u, a pile, a pu'u; one, sand. So, someplace I read, over on the Big Island, that became the title for the royal architect, kuhikuhi pu'uone. And at one point, somebody said: You're a kuhikuhi pu'uone. I go: I didn't get that title; somebody else gave me that title, I didn't put it on myself. I've met more people building hales than people do, except if you're a concierge. Of course, you meet a lot of people.

I have people from all walks of life that walk away with something. Either just making a shaka or understanding the Hawaiian culture, or just coming to find out that, hey, I

appreciate my job more than building hale. You know, either positively or negatively, it impacts everybody.

Well, you bring people together to build it.

Yeah.

And then, it becomes a gathering place forever after.

I've had people get married, met at these hale gatherings. And then divorced, and came back again.

Yeah; halawai, the word for meeting is really a truism. Hale halawai; you meet, you gather, you eat. And most of my haies are used for pa'inas. Yeah.

How many hale have you built now?

It's over three hundred.

This takes tremendous energy and strength. And you're doing this, and now you're seventy-six now.

Takes a village to build a hale. Literally.

So, are you doing mostly the overseeing now? Because you're in your seventies, and you're doing the main work.

Overseeing; I wish that was so yesterday.

So, you're out there doing it.

But I mean, keeps the blood flowing, you know, keeps the energy going.

In 2018, Francis "Palani" Sinenci was featured in Ka Hale: A Revival, a short film about his efforts to preserve the traditional practice of hale-building. The film received a People's Choice Award in the American Institute of Architects Film Challenge. Working with his hands and showing no signs of slowing down, Uncle Palani also is rebuilding structures from Hawai'i's past. In addition to restoring a Native Hawaiian fishpond in Hāna, he's now turning his attention to recreating plantation era Portuguese stone ovens.

Mahalo to Francis "Palani" Sinenci of Hāna, Maui. 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, I devised this shaka. And you coil it up, you pre-cut all the lashing. Like if I say: Hey, throw me a number three shaka.

And what's a shaka?

This is called a shaka, a coiled piece of rope. Okay; this is how we test to see if you did it right. So, you're supposed to throw. Did it come out? Oh, yeah. See, no knots.

No knots.