

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: Puna Dawson

LSS 1216 (28:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 5/14/2019

Did you have that sense that you were—because your life has been one of service, and you’ve done an astounding number of things, was that an intention?

I think it kind of happened. I've been very fortunate to be at places that have opened doors and given me experiences, I mean, from one end of the Earth to the other. I thank my kūpuna, because they planned it, you know, and I'm just walking that path.

Puna Dawson often happened to be in the right place, at the right time, meeting remarkable people. Was it chance, or part of a greater design? Puna Dawson, 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. Cecelia Ann Camille Keikilaniwahinealiiopuna Kalama Dawson, better known as Puna, is a Hawai'i cultural practitioner on Kaua'i. She's the second-oldest and first daughter born into a family of eleven children on O'ahu. Descended from Hawaiian ali'i, her parents taught her as she was growing up that like her ancestors, her life purpose must be to serve the people. While she did not seek to meet prominent and extraordinary individuals, they certainly crossed her path in surprising ways, in surprising places. Who else can say they were called to give a man a ride on Kaua'i, and it turned out to be the Dalai Lama? More on that later. She lives in Anahola and Līhu'e, Kaua'i, but grew up in Kailua on the Windward side of O'ahu.

Kailua was a big place close to the ocean. I that was what our life was all about. And my family, you know, when I look back at all of my siblings, my parents had playmates for us. Because they had so many. And we were poor, but we just didn't know that we were poor. Being there in Kailua, it was a rich community of people that really knew one another, that saw each other at church, walking to and from, you know, school. The people of that time are names that you read about in today's time, but they were aunts and uncles, and everybody knew everyone.

And now, it seems so odd that anyone who describes themselves as poor would live right ... you lived behind what is now Buzz' Steakhouse, and right across from the beach park. And now, it's a whole different upscale neighborhood.

Oh, it sure is. But back then, you know, in one of the homes that we lived, my dad grew everything. And he was a cook. My mom was a princess. But he grew everything, and he taught us to respect and appreciate the ocean, because that was our icebox. Our house was a one-bedroom house.

With eleven children.

With eleven children.

Up to eleven at a time.

Eleven children. My dad was a man of many trades. And he was able to build us steel bunkbeds. So, we had three bunkbeds, a daybed for one of the children, and then a crib. And we all lived in this one bedroom. I mean, all the children did. My parents slept in the living room. He made that bed, too. And we had a closet that was about this big, and a bathroom, and a hallway kitchen. I call it a hallway kitchen because that's exactly what it was; it was a hallway. Small house, but lot of love.

And did you want to go home, or did you feel cramped at home?

Oh, no. I thought everybody lived like that. And we always had extra people. My dad, you know, all the people that kinda grew up—Whitey Hawkins, all these uncles and aunties that he knew from the ocean came home; brought 'em home. And children.

So, when you were a child, your home was full of people who had a range of backgrounds, and came to eat, came to socialize.

My dad; yes.

Your dad would ...

My dad and my mom. You know, because my mother was a hula person, we always had hula people there. Back then, the Lucky Luck show, you know, we'd go and perform, Auntie Genoa would play music, the Bee Sisters would play music. My dad, between his fishermen and friends, we lived down the road from Don Ho, we lived, you know, in Waimānalo it's Uncle Gabby. But it wasn't unusual for them to show up at our house and kanikapila in the front yard. And my dad was a boat builder, so he built so many boats. And last count, he built sixteen boats, and he gave them all away. And these were big sampan style, you know. The people who would come to our house

would not just play music, but you know, talk story, and talk story. And so, our life was full and rich.

Auntie 'Iolani Luahine came to your house. I mean, you've seen her dance in person. You know, she's no longer with us, and not a lot of pictures even remain of her, especially moving pictures. But they say it seemed like she was possessed by another presence when she danced. Did you see that?

She was dedicated to hula, and of that time. You know, when you look and read about the history of that time, I had no idea we were living in that time because she was part of it. 'Iolani came on my mother's birthday and asked if my mother would go and chant for her at the beach. And so, we went. And she danced right there at the water's edge, right at the mouth of Kawai Nui, the river in Kailua. And she danced there. And you know, when you say that she's possessed, it's like she's from another time. It was as though she was on top of the water, at the water's edge, just floating. Because of her dedication, when she became this other person, it was a real gift to me in my memory, because it helped me understand the histories of past.

So, here you are, I mean, treated to this amazing dancer, while also, you're off to St. Anthony's Catholic School in Kailua with your long hair down to your ankles.

Big bush.

Bound up behind your head.

A bush. My dad didn't want us cutting our hair, so our hair was big. Anyway, at St. Anthony's, again, at the right place at the right time. You know, Hedwig von Trapp was—

Okay; stop right there. Hedwig von Trapp was your teacher.

Yes.

And who was she?

Hedwig von Trapp of the von Trapp family. She came to school in her dirndl and her kerchief.

The Sound of Music family.

The Sound of Music.

The actual one of the kids.

Actual; yeah.

Grown up.

The actual. And you know, she was a gift to the school. My auntie, Melia Meyer's mother, found this woman, brought her to our school. They were so involved with education. And she became our music teacher. So, you know, Mihana Aluli and all of us going to school there, we learnt from this woman. Besides, of course, Auntie Irmgard. But we learnt from this woman about harmony and voice projection. We didn't know we were having voice lessons; it was what she demanded of us at the time. But, you know, I attribute my ability to hear harmony to that woman. And what a gift.

Puna Dawson's family life revolved around the ocean, whether it was boat building, fishing, or especially canoe paddling. As much as her mother expected her to follow in her hula footsteps, paddling always came first for her. Yet, her life experiences, guided by her relationship with her mother and other Hawaiian cultural practitioners, pushed her in another direction.

I loved sandboarding at the mouth of the river. That was my favorite sport; and canoeing. And you know, all our family were canoe paddlers, canoe builders, makers. And my passion was canoeing. And I'd show up for hula with my hair wet, and show up there, and I never thought I was going to be a kumu hula of any kind. In fact, I'm really lazy. But I never thought, because I believed that my mother was going to live forever. But not too long after that, my Aunt Maiki Aiu passed away. She and my mother were two peas in a pod, and were both graduates of Auntie Lokalia Montgomery, and so, they did everything together. But it was such a shock when Auntie passed away, because it made me realize that that could happen to my mom, too. And I will say that helped me be more responsible.

Because you were the next in line to be kumu hula once your mom passed?

No; it was, you know, never appreciating what is right around you. Never appreciating them. And that was a real wakeup call. Because my aunt was surrounded by beautiful people, and you know, and my mom too, and my aunts, my other aunts, that when she passed, it shook us, all of us. But it shook me enough to say to my mom: I'm ready. I'm ready.

You had been the daughter who wasn't showing interest in hula.

Oh, no. I would say to my mom every time: Oh, there's a new race, mom; right after this race, I will show up.

I see.

I promise you, I promise you.

It's not easy; as everyone who ever goes to Kamehameha Schools knows, not easy to make Concert Glee. You did so. What was that like? Because it did take you many places.

It did. You know, I'm gonna say this on record; I had the best friends in school, and Robert Cazimero was one of them, Kaohu Mookini. I mean, you know, all the names that you hear. Wayne Chang, all of these people were the who's-who were all part of this group. And Auntie Nona Beamer was our Hawaiian teacher.

You must have thought that was really normal to have all these amazing people around you.

Really. And what happened was, at the right place at the right time. Kalani Cockett came and he saw the Hawaiian ensemble, our group, and picked the whole group up and, you know, the rest is history. We became The Hawaiian Expression. And so, we traveled, but we traveled with our teachers. Mr. Mookini, who taught science, was our musicians, the Bee Sisters. You know, all of these people that were known musicians of the time were a part. Barry Yap from Kauai, you know, Beverly Noa, Ed Kenney.

Wow.

These people were—

They traveled with you and worked with you.

They traveled. You know, we'd show up in Belgium, we'd show up in Paris; every place that Pan American flew, we had a show there. And we were housed in Zurich. And a group of us, you know, it was like a pod. And it was wonderful, because we were at places that you only read about, you know.

Was Hawaii small enough now that many other people had these experiences, or were they coming to you because your family was so involved in the community?

I think it was just timing. And I say it all the time; it's just timing. All the places that I've been and continue to go to, in the name of aloha is an expression that my mom used. What happened was, she saw so many things being written about Hawai'i, and she totally disagreed with it. And she became part of the Aloha Council with Auntie Pilahi Pahi. They wanted to push to make sure that that idea and the flavor of Hawaii didn't disappear. And so, my mom started to travel. And she chose the places that we still

had agreements of peace—Germany. You know, if you look at Kalākaua and the things that he had made peace agreements—Japan, all of these places, that's where she wanted to go.

What were the original things that your mom heard that were being said incorrectly about Hawaii, that made her want to go on her mission?

Oh; hula. Things about hula that just drove her crazy. All knowledge is not in one school. That's correct. But what was happening was, things about huna, about lua, and especially about hula was being printed, and printed in all these different languages—Japanese, you know, German, a lot of Swedish and things. And talking story with Auntie Pilahi, you know, they were: We gotta do something about this.

Well, what exactly bothered them? What was being said?

Well, the practice of huna especially. Huna is in every culture; every culture. And the expression of unihipili, coming to your center. It's when you translate something that has no foundation, and you create it. And that's what they saw. You know, in the expression how the word aloha was turned around or expressed without thought, without foundation. I mean, the words itself in that word aloha, it is so pronounced, because it is characteristics of who we are as a people. And in reference to hula, hula is not something that you can really learn. It is there in you. And different people are able to help to bring it forth. I believe that that was really what bothered them the most. And my mother said: My grandchildren, great-grandchildren are gonna be reading this and believing it if we don't speak out against it, if we don't show the other side of the picture—

Correct the record.

Right. Then, you know, we're at fault. So, it became a mission of hers in her later years to try to, you know, create that huliau.

After high school, Puna Dawson assisted her mother teaching hula in Kailua, while remaining an avid paddler and hoping to build the sport. She followed her husband, Kalani Dawson, to Kaua'i when he was assigned a short-term job on the island. And she was there when Hurricane Iwa hit, which extended her husband's stay. Commuting back and forth between O'ahu and Kaua'i after that, she became part of the Kaua'i community until moving there permanently. Then, a second hurricane hit.

My husband worked for the telephone company, and he went to install of the PBX in Poipu. The very following week, Iwa hit. And then, we were on loan to the island. And getting ready to come home, and then Iniki hit.

'92; that's a long time.

That's a long time.

So, you were there ...

I was there from '89, continuously. But in that time, my friends and family on the island would say: Oh, teach hula; why don't you teach hula. I go: Oh, no; too much work. Plus—

I'm leaving anyway.

Yeah.

Plus, my husband and I were very involved with the canoe club on Kaua'i. And he bought me a microwave. I know. He says: I'm gonna buy you this microwave because I want you to come and be the coach for the women's crew on Kaua'i. And so, I said: Oh. Well, when I went there, when I went there to be the coach, what happened was, you know, coming from O'ahu, where everything was more systematic, we go to Kaua'i, and I have people who don't run, they paddle when they want to paddle. I mean, they were wonderful, but you know, it was a different lifestyle. Anyway, he said: We need to help them to become long-distance paddlers.

Okay; now, what does this have to do with the microwave?

He bought me the microwave because I said: I'm too busy, I can't do this, you know. He bought me the microwave, got me the classes, and I became the microwave queen. Anyway, come back to the canoeing. Why I even went on that tangent is, my mom came to visit me a couple of times, and you know, we have friends on island. Everybody knows everybody. And in the years that I was there, I met different kumu. And so, when my neighbor said: Oh, can you teach us a song, we're gonna have this convention. And I said: Oh, let me send you to my friend. So, I sent them to Kapu Kinimaka. Love that girl. Anyway, sent her. Well, these were older women. They were schoolteachers at Kapa'a School, and just wanted to learn a hula so that they could share. Well, after about three days, my neighbor comes back; she goes: We can't dance over there, we cannot do the duck walks. Kapu was progressive and young. So, I said: Oh, I have another friend. So, I called Auntie Beverly Muraoka. I sent them to Beverly, and Beverly was teaching down at the boats. The Lurline would come in, and so, her classes were right there in front of the Lurline coming in. So, here are these schoolteachers who like everything to be exactly right; right? All learning hula with all these tourists around them. And so, they come back again three days later: We can't be down there, we don't even know the songs, you know. Well, my mom happened to be home at my house, and she heard me talking to my neighbor again. And she says:

How many times did you send them away? And I said: Twice. She goes: This is the third time? I said: Yes. She goes: No; you're not sending them away. She walked out; she said: Come tomorrow, you folks will have hula over here. And that's really how I started to teach, is because my mom was there. You know. Otherwise, I would have probably passed it on forward.

Wow; that's interesting. Yeah; do you think that was meant to be?

I believe so. Going to Kaua'i, my husband encouraged me. So, anything that I wanted to do, he encouraged me to do it. But he loved the fact that I was not only doing the culture, but you know, seeing where it was going, and utilizing the things that I was taught as a young girl.

You mentioned that two hurricanes kept you on Kaua'i, even though you had planned to move back to O'ahu. What was your life like? Iniki really hit Kaua'i—well, both hit Kaua'i hard. What was life like after that on Kaua'i for you?

Oh, my goodness. You know, I was working at um, Smith's Flower Shop right at Wailua. And we had this big funeral. So, I go to work that morning, and I'm doing all of this stuff for funerals. And what I noticed is the peacocks in the garden are walking out of the garden in a line. And I'm saying: That is so unusual. And the 'Iwa birds that you usually see in the mountains were now in the lower areas, where I could see them outside of our flower shop. And my husband calls and he says: You've gotta go home; you know, this hurricane is really gonna come. Anyway, I'm driving home, and I see on the open plains cows and horses sitting on the ground. And they only do that when they're gonna give birth or something; right? So, I mean, all of these signs were showing that things were different, something was happening. My husband opens up all the windows and all the doors, and everyone's saying: Go up to the mountain, go to the school because that's gonna be the safest place to be. But he looked at the house, he says: There's concrete around everything around right here, we have a coconut tree right in front of the house. Anyway, when Iniki hit, um, it came like a locomotive, the sound. And the wind went right through our house. And our house was fine; we were perfectly fine. Then, we hear the noise again. So, here is Iniki coming, the other half, 'cause I didn't realize we were in the eye; other half. I saw a house that I was at the open house just the week before, falling off the mountain. You know, like the piano just falling off the mountain.

Wow.

It was at that time that I met my neighbors. So busy coming and going, I didn't know my neighbors. And my neighbors next door, the three girls had really bad asthma. My brother Kamohai, he sent a generator; I had the first generator in Anahola.

Oh, that was so precious.

And so, we hooked up these girls, because they needed it for their machines. I met the neighbor across the street, all the neighbors, and pretty soon we had all the kids at our house. And you know, we would walk down to the beach to go and swim in the ocean, because we didn't have running water. I mean, there were so many things we didn't have. In that time, getting to know the neighbors, getting to know the people, I think that Anahola community really came together, and people not only knew one another, but took care of each other.

Wow. So, you've just described a powerful, destructive hurricane in terms of what good things it did for you.

It did. And it did for the island. It made everybody appreciate. Lucky we live Hawai'i. But lucky we live Kaua'i. It made everybody appreciate what they have. And we have a lot. You know, simple is best.

Puna Dawson's experiences of meeting remarkable people in history and living through significant events have all been part of her journey. Mahalo to Puna Dawson of Anahola and Lihue, Kaua'i for sharing her 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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Along that theme of you coming in contact with leaders and just really remarkable people, you had an interesting guest in the backseat of your broken down Subaru one day.

Yes; I did. I called him Toptim, 'cause that's what my brother said; his name was Toptim.

And in fact, he was ...

He was the Dalai Lama.

Dalai Lama.

Yeah.

And he was sitting in the back of your Subaru.

Yes.

Holding your pikake plants.

Yeah; yes. He came to the island. My brother just said: My friend wants to come, and his name is Toptim. When he came—because I didn't know who he was, I had no idea, and so, I had all my buckets with the plants and stuff in the backseat.

Because you worked in a flower shop.

Yeah. And so, I had to pick up all the flowers. And so, when he said where he wanted to go, I said: Oh, I'm gonna go there, but we've gotta pick the flowers up on the way.

What was the Dalai Lama's reaction to that?

Oh, he was game. He's a fun-loving guy. We arrive at the airport, and here he's sitting with my packages of pīkake, smelling wonderful. And the girls come out to help me, and they tell me: Auntie, Auntie, that's The Chosen One. And I'm going like: Yeah, I guess so. And so, we proceed going inside. And the girl comes up and she has a newspaper, and she shows it me like this. And I turned to my brother and I say ... he goes: Yeah, Toptim. Because he couldn't say the long version of the Dalai Lama's name. From that moment, it was like: Oh, my goodness, I just took this gentleman from one end of Kua'i to the other end of Kua'i picking up flowers.

And covered him with plants.

And covered him with plants. I mean, literally, you could only see him here, and everything else was around him.

Did he make a comment about it?

He said: Oh, this is joyful. You know, he used that word joyful quite a few times. And he found humor in everything that we were doing.

It is pretty funny.

Yeah, it is. All I can say is, I've been blessed. I've been really blessed.