

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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We're about to celebrate fathers and the life lessons they passed along to their children, 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. Welcome to a special edition of Long Story Short celebrating dads. You'll hear stories of how fathers and father figures influenced business adviser Pono Shim, comedian Augie T, entertainer Melveen Leed, champion spear-fisher Kimi Werner, and community advocate Kamuela Enos.

Let's start with a clip from my 2012 conversation with Pono Shim, CEO of the O'ahu Economic Development Board. His parents, Alvin and Marion Heen Shim, were known as political visionaries. Pono shares the life lessons he absorbed from his father, and lessons related by family friends.

What have you learned from your dad?

Oh, gosh.

I take it he didn't sit down and tell you: Son, here's the way it is. This is stuff you just learned through osmosis?

What did I learn from Dad ... so much. Guardianship; a lot of guardianship. Here was a man who was born very, very poor, whose parents were divorced really young. And so, he would tell me that he really was raised like an orphan. And then, he came to Kamehameha from Maui. And when he came, he was so poor. I remember Uncle Bill Amona when my dad died—he was my dad's classmate. He said: Pono, when did your dad make his decisions that his life would be committed to making a difference for people, to serving people? He

said: He never really talked about that. And Uncle Bill said: You know, when we were at Kamehameha, all of the students were boarders. This was at Bishop Museum. And he said: You know, I have these pictures of watching your dad almost like his hands are under his chin the fence, because all of us from O'ahu would get visitors on the weekends, and they'd come and they'd sometimes take us home, but they'd always bring food and gifts. And he says: I can just see your dad kinda just watching us, and nobody ever came for him, and he had this smile on his face; he didn't hold it in a negative light, but he would just observe. And he says: Something keeps taking me back to those moments.

So, he went from being essentially a loner at the fence, kind of dreaming, with nobody coming to see him, to having friends from many walks of life, and a big family.

Yeah. Well, you know, I wouldn't say he was a loner, because my dad was kolohe. I mean, really, really, kolohe. His oldest and best friend was Uncle David Peters. And Uncle David tells a story, and he'll still tell you the story of how the two of them got arrested at age five.

Five?

Yeah. He said: Officer Hanohano arrested these two boys who weren't in school; so vagrancy. And you know, they would blame each other—Yeah, your father got me arrested. And you know, I don't think anybody who knows Uncle David and my dad would say it was Uncle David. My dad was kolohe. But yes, he had a lot of friends. Very, very engaging; very well-connected.

What was the secret to his forging so many tight relationships?

When I was in kindergarten, my first day of school, I came home and he said: How many friends did you make today? And I said: None. And he said: Weren't there other kids there? I said: Yeah. So, he said: Let me teach you how to make a friend. And he stuck out his hand and he said: Hi, my name is Pono; what's your name? And so, he practiced with me. And probably the most significant thing ever taught to me in my life was that. If there's one thing I look back at—first day of school, Dad said, How many friends did you make today. And so, I'd like to believe that's what he was doing, and he'd make friends. But then, how do you keep friends? That's the thing. And I think it's because he was able to really focus in on the relationship, and put a priority on the relationship.

Our next guest learned early on about prioritizing his relationships. Comedian Augie T found out that his girlfriend was pregnant with their first son while they were both still in high school. Knowing he'd have to make sacrifices to support their child, he followed his father's admonition and gave up something he loved—boxing, a sport he says taught him life values like discipline and hard work. As Augie explains in our conversation with him in 2018, those lessons were soon put to the test.

At sixteen, I became the Golden Gloves champion. I boxed; I was like PAL champion. At sixteen, I entered the Golden Gloves, I won the Golden Gloves. At one time, I was ranked seventh in the U.S. for boxing at junior flyweight. And then, I made that mistake. You know, I don't call it a mistake, because I love my son, but like I did, I made a mistake and made my girlfriend pregnant. And with that, came responsibility. So, my dad was like: Eh, boxing; you have to go work, because I'm not supporting your kid. It was tough working at Jack In the Box, you know, knowing that you have to pay for medical. And I wanted my son to carry my name, so it was important for me to work hard, so that I can be a good example for him growing up. But I wasn't making enough money. So, I applied at Kapi'olani Medical. I got on the bus, and I wanted one interview that day. I told her my story, and I said: I'm determined, I want to work. And you know, the rest is history. I stayed there for sixteen years. The day I graduated from Farrington High School, I got part-time with benefits. Now, having benefits is like, a lot. You know, they were able to cover my medical expenses, and because I worked at the hospital, the hospital paid for the other half. So, I was able to, you know, take care my son and, you know, provide. So, you know, that for me was big, providing. Because even as a kid growing up in public housing, I never wanted to be part of that vicious circle, and I saw a lot of that happening. And there was a side of me that said: Yeah, Augie, you screwed up, but now you gotta take responsibility, and you gotta work. Yeah? And that's what I did.

And you did it by working pretty much all the time.

Yeah.

In many ways.

Yeah; and I still do, Leslie. I still do, and I love it. I love being out there and talking to people, you know, watching people's lives change. You know, it

helps me as an entertainer doing comedy. So, you know, I'm thankful every single day. Yeah.

It's amazing to have such a long run of it. Because you're on a treadmill, and you have to be creative and be okay without sleep many times.

Yeah.

Because you got a day job, you got a night job, you're promoting.

M-hm. Twenty-six years of doing comedy.

How has your humor changed over those twenty-six years?

Yeah; you can tell. I mean, when I first started, I was like the moke action guy. You know, a little older now, I'm seeing life differently. You know, there's a lot of observance.

You do more social observations.

I talk about my kids, I talk about my family. You know, that way, you cannot get in trouble.

You can get in trouble talking about your family.

You can. You can, by your mom. That's it. You know, you shouldn't say that, Augie; so stupid, you.

You know, but they love it. They love it when I talk about them. You know, I have an overachieving daughter that created B.R.A.V.E. Hawai'i. It's a anti-bullying foundation. My stepdaughter does my bookings. Bo and Taj, you know, they help Dad look good; they do my hair.

They both are hairstylists, and I talk about them. They're both, you know, openly gay men. You know, twelve, thirteen years ago, talking about your kids being gay was like, almost like, whoa. But now, I get stories on how people say: Aug, because was so easy for watch you accept who your kids are made it easy for me. So now, I get guys, construction workers, cops: Augie, I like tell you something. What's that, brah? Eh, my boy mahu too.

All right. Yeah!

How was that for you? Did you immediately accept when they told you they were gay?

Yeah. You know, at the end of the day, that's your kids. That's why it's so hard for me to see parents that you know, like, disown their children. That's your kid, that's your blood, you know. Yeah; I might not agree with everything, but that's my kid at the end of the day.

In the fall of 2018, Augie T performed at what he called his last headlining show at Blaisdell Arena and announced he would no longer focus on comedy; he would be pursuing other projects.

Our next entertainer, Melveen Leed, had an outdoorsy childhood. Growing up, she split her time between her mother on O'ahu and her grandparents on Moloka'i. With her birth dad out of the picture, Melveen's grandfather was her father figure. In our conversation in 2018, she recalls how her grandfather introduced her to music, the wild outdoors, and the meaning of hard work.

I was brought up a real, real old-fashioned way, and I'm so glad I was. Washing our clothes in the streams, you know, growing up like that, growing our own vegetables and fishing, hunting, you know. And we knew how to work hard.

What did the family hunt for?

Well, my uncles and them, especially. I went on just a few, but I would never do that again. As I said, my grandfather used to say: You carry down what you shoot. Oh, shucks. You know, no, I'm not going to carry the deer down by myself. Uh-uh. So, I wasn't interested in that. I was more interested in fishing. And my grandfather taught me how to make fishnets, from scratch. Yeah.

Did you try to throw them, too?

Oh, he taught me how to throw. And so, we had a needle to make the nets; that's called a hia. Okay? And then, we had the rectangular wood, and that was the size of the eye of the fishnet. And that was called the ha ha. See? So, my grandfather would teach us how to patch the nets, and he had a

pocketknife that he used and we made the hole, and we patched the nets, you know. And so, things like that. My grandfather was a remarkable man, and he was the one that actually made an 'ukulele for me when I was only about three years old. And so, I played the 'ukulele and sang for all my grandparents' guests.

How did you learn; did you watch somebody else?

My grandfather; yeah, I just watched him. For some reason, I'd watch someone play an instrument, and I'd grab the instrument and I'll play it. You know?

From the beginning?

Yeah; by ear.

From an early age?

Yeah; early age.

Tell me, did you know your biological dad? Was he in your life?

I learned about him only when I was about fifteen years old. That's when I knew who my real father was. 'Cause it was kept a secret from me. Walter Chun Kee; that was my dad. He was from Maui. And then I found out I had siblings on Maui. So, I have one sister and three brothers. And so, one brother, we lost; that's Jimmy. So, I found that we have siblings, siblings there. And then, we found one more sister in Puerto Rico. My dad was busy.

You've been married several times.

Yes.

Do you have stepchildren and ...

Oh, yes. They're all like my children, still, you know. Yes.

Lots of family, all along the way.

Yes. And you know, it was a learning time for me, too. Because I had gone down to the bottom. I picked myself up, you know, every time and I said: I can do this. Yeah? And I'd start from scratch. I'd leave everything behind, and I'd start from scratch. I mean, everything; my clothes, everything behind. I just walked out and started from scratch.

Wow.

Yeah.

You seem like a very hopeful and optimistic person, because you got married again.

Yeah.

And then, again.

Yes. I probably was looking for like, my grandfather's image. You know, 'cause he was a perfect father, grandfather, husband to my grandmother. You know, he was a great caretaker, and he was an inspiration. And I could sit and talk to him. He was a man of few words, but when he spoke, they were words of wisdom. You know, I look up to him. And I finally found that man, and that I'm married to now. Yeah. And he reminds me so much of my grandfather; very dignified, you know, and very caring, and puts me on a pedestal, puts me first like how my grandfather put my grandmother on a pedestal first. She always came first.

Our next guest also spent much of her childhood in nature. Kimi Werner, a former national spear-fishing champion, spent her early years in rural Ha'ikū, Maui. In a 2016 conversation, she recalls her childhood living off the bounty of the land and sea. Thanks to her father's influence, she would develop a lifelong love for freediving.

My life was just one that was really focused around nature. We lived on this property where we had absolutely no neighbors in sight, and so, the only things that I really knew were just my family and the natural world that was right outside of my doorstep, really. Our house was like, a little shack, pretty much just falling apart at the seams. And I remember I could never really explain to kids like, what color it was, 'cause it just depended on what kinda moss was growing

on all the rotten wood. But at the same time, it was just an absolute magical childhood. We spent out days outside, and gathering food with our family.

So, you say you didn't have a lot of money; you had these natural resources. Did you feel poor?

I never felt poor. I mean, I remember when I did start school in kindergarten, like kind of realizing then that I had less material things than all of the other kids. But I never felt poor. In those years, especially, I would say I felt so rich with just activity and fun. I mean, every morning, my job was to go out and gather the chicken eggs from under the house, and pick whatever fruit were ripe, and to spend the days underwater diving with my dad, and just watching him bring me up fish and lobster for dinner. Like, that doesn't feel poor.

You would float above him as he went way down?

I was just a tagalong. I was about five years old when he started taking me diving. And I would just float, and just watch him. My main goal was to keep up with him. And I remember, as long as I could see the bubbles of his fins, I knew I was going in the right way. And then, when he would take a drop, then I'd be able to catch up, catch my breath, and put in my orders for dinner, really.

And would he actually be able to get you what you wanted, the type of fish you wanted?

He would. He would pride himself on that, basically. If my mom wanted to eat octopus or if she wanted to eat lobster, or fish, whatever it was that she wanted, he always, you know, would see it through and make sure he got that for us.

It's amazing how formative that experience of foraging as a little kid and diving with your dad, I mean, it seems to have shaped your life. That's what you do as a career, to a great extent.

It really has. You know, I think like anything, you adjust and you adapt. And I definitely did adjust and adapt to the new more modern life that was given to me, and I got bicycles, and nicer clothes, and friends, and you know, got used to the store-bought eggs. And we just evolved that way. But I think it was later in life when I was an adult, still kinda going through the motions of what seemed like progress, and was there with my, you know, degree and my job, and doing

everything I could to kind of connect the dots of what should make a fulfilling happy life, but still, there was just something in me that just was longing in a way, for the past, and realizing that it had been that long, and there was still just something calling me back to those really early childhood memories. It is what shaped my life. I think for the longest time, I believed that you have to let go of the past, and you can't go backwards. And even though I did accept that, finally, when I was about twenty-four years old, I just kind of started to realize that, you know, maybe it wasn't something that's just left in the past; maybe it is something that I can incorporate into my world today.

Our final guest also took up his father's passion, not right away, but later in life. Kamuela Enos is director of social enterprise at Mao Organic Farms on O'ahu's Wai'anae Coast. Mao helps at-risk youth in the community reconnect to the land, their ancestral roots, and themselves. Kamuela's father, activist Eric Enos, was a pioneer of this land-based approach to community healing through the operation he co-founded, Ka'ala Farm, also in Wai'anae. When Kamuela sat down with me in 2018, he reflected on his father's journey and the indirect path that would lead Kamuela to the same work in what's now known as 'aina-based education.

It was borne out of this idea of reclaiming land and identity as a response to the Hawaiian renaissance, of having had that part of our identity kind of been told explicitly to step away from. You know, it's important for you to assimilate into contemporary American society, and to, you know, be a good American, and to take all the vestiges of your ancestry, your language, your practices, and put that behind you.

When did your father start reclaiming the land?

You know, I remember that, 'cause I was really young. And he, you know, was from Wai'anae, he went to Kamehameha Schools, and then actually, he went to college. And going to college at UH in the late 60s, early 70s, you can only imagine, like, colleges across the campus, you know, that was the heart of the civil rights movement, and the birthplace of the Hawaiian renaissance too, when you started actually learning your history and realizing that we weren't allowed to understand our ancestry from a place of strength. He was coming of age, and he was heavily radicalized, and he got a job teaching at Wai'anae High School, where he got a chance to really see it, from how I understand it, his stories. He was one of a few men who was of Hawaiian ancestry from the

community actually teaching, and he was able to hear how teachers were talking about kids from Waianae. So, he often tells me like, he had to quit, or he would have been arrested.

He was so angry at the messaging.

And just like, the disregard and the blatant racism that he saw behind the scenes. And then, he took up work with an organization that worked directly with at-risk youth. And it was from that point that ... it was called The Rap Center, where he began to take students—young adults, actually, not students, that were kind of out of the system, hanging out at the beach parks, walking in the mountains, to kinda get them away from where they would just hang out and associate, and do all the things that were leading to their delinquency, back up into the mountains to kinda understand, take them out of their environment and put them in a new environment. And there, he started seeing all the remnants of the taro patches.

How did he come to acquire the land?

That's a really interesting question. I think back in the 70s, it was just like: You know what? We're just gonna clear this place out, bring water down, and reclaim it. And if people don't like it, then they can come and talk to us.

Was it abandoned land? Who owned it?

It was in the back of the valley.

Probably State-owned?

State-owned land. And they just decided to have these youth repurpose their time at this—I don't know what they were supposed to be doing, but what they ended up doing was cutting, clearing out haole koa, and putting in PVC pipes and bringing water back down. And then, learning from people on the east side of O'ahu who were still doing traditional taro farming, like, how do we grow this. And I think that was a really important thing for me to understand. Like, he wasn't just trying to reclaim ability to grow food, but he was trying to reclaim the ability to grow people, and therefore, the ability to regrow community.

And it's so interesting that it's not like you suddenly see your future open up. I mean, you are following clues along the way, listening for the sounds in the forest, kind of.

And getting slaps in the head when I step out of line. You know, I think it's never about us; I think it's always about how people guide us. And like, you know, we have to learn how to humble ourselves to the fact that we're put on paths, and kicking and screaming, and resenting it is part of it at times.

Or taking the wrong path.

Taking the wrong path.

Taking the wrong path.

You know, I think there is no straight path. My dad used to always tell me: You gotta walk the crooked path straight. It's like, it's not a clearly laid out path for you. And you know, it's one that you have to open yourself up to the process of learning. I was put on the path intentionally that has really allowed me, more than anything else, an opportunity to be in a place to help people I care about.

Thank you to Kamuela Enos, Kimi Werner, Melveen Leed, Augie T, and Pono Shim for sharing personal stories about fathers, father figures, and fatherhood. To all loving fathers, mahalo nui for your guidance and wisdom. On behalf of PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

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AUGIE T:

I worked for Mayor Billy Kenoi, and we did a senior summit. And he goes: Aug, you like come up and say something? And of course, he was worried, because you know, I talked about my dad. You don't want to talk about being old in front of old people. But, my dad lives with me, and he's dealing with dementia. And I talked about my dad, and how, you know, he remembers stuff like forty, fifty years ago, but he cannot remember anything in the last ten minutes. I came home one day, and he was like: Who made this soup? I go: Dad, I made the soup. I never know you know how make soup, Augie. This good soup.

Where your brother Ernie? Ernie lives Mililani. Ernie live Mililani? I never know
Ernie live Mililani. Who made the soup? Dad, I made the soup. Good soup, this.