

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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So one thing my parents always told my brother and sister and I...I mean, I just remember this, even when we were little, it was like, you can't rest on your laurels, you know, you always have to continue to you know, earn your keep in a way, and uh, like even as kids, you know, that was something they instilled in us. So, I think it's great, you're pushing yourself, you're trying to accomplish something, and uh, and then you move on and you continue to grow and evolve and see what's next.

Not resting on her laurels pushed this young athlete to keep entering figure skating contests until she knew she'd become good enough to compete at the Olympic level. Kristi Yamaguchi 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, Kristine Tsuya Yamaguchi, better known as Kristi Yamaguchi, won an Olympic gold medal in figure skating for the United States in 1992. Since then, she's been a professional ice skater, and author, wife, mother, the 2008 winner of Dancing with the Stars, and a philanthropist. A resident of Alamo, California, she stopped by to talk with us here, on Long Story Short, during one of her frequent trips to Hawai'i on behalf of her Always Dream foundation. Kristi Yamaguchi always set goals for herself, something she learned to do at a young age after overcoming a birth defect in her legs. Her parents encouraged and supported her along the way, believing in dreams, despite their own experiences as children, forced to live in internment camps.

So, I was born in Hayward, California, so that's a suburb of uh, in the San Francisco Bay area, in the East Bay, and uh, actually, my parents were living in Fremont at the time, but I was born in Hayward. So I grew up in Fremont which was sleepy town back then, and uh, you know, I can't complain, it was a great, diverse, and um, you know, pretty easy place to grow up in.

Your dad was a dentist?

He was a dentist.

And your mom?

Ah, she was a homemaker, she was full-time mom, although she did work part-time as we were getting older in high school. Both my parents did spend time in the Japanese internment camps, my dad's family was in, Poston, Arizona, and he was about five years old when the family was sent there, um, course his brothers and sisters were more teenagers, so they remember it and you know, probably affected a little more by it, but I think my dad being five, he just kinda like going with the flow and making the best of it that he could...and then, my mom uh, Carol, was actually born in the Amache Colorado internment camp. So she was born, one of the New Year's baby, they called her, in Amache. So, uh, you know, the families went through that and they did have to start over, you know, once, uh, they were released, and find their way, but I think, you know, it was a huge lesson, obviously, in perseverance, and just, um, you know, a lot of pride in who they were and being American and wanting to assimilate and prove their loyalty, and so, um, so it was interesting time and it's...funny, not funny, but that generation never really talked about it, and...

Have your, have your parents talked about it?

Not much, I mean...my mom doesn't remember, obviously, because she was just an infant, but my dad has opened up a little bit more about it because um, like my sister and I and brother and also now his grandkids are doing school papers, or school presentations on the family and have been interviewing him on different occasions and it's given him a chance, I think, to reflect a little bit on what he remembers.

At the time your mother was born, her father was fighting in the war, with the 100ths.

100th Infantry Battalion, so different from like the 442nd and the 100th that you hear about, but he was in one of the first non-segregated units in Europe, and um, well, basically because he was the only person of color in his unit, and uh, he, yes, he had gone through two rounds of boot camp because while he was in boot camp, the war broke out and they didn't know what to do with him, and eventually they sent him um, you know, with the 100th Infantry Battalion to um, Europe. We really don't know much about what that experience was like for him, and I think growing up, uh, the one thing that we do remember, like my brother and sister and I was like, he did have a lot of nightmares at night and there...you know, was, I think still was living with post traumatic stress. I think as we got older we started to realize, you know, through his life experience what he's been through. But I think one of the proud moments is that we know...he was awarded a battle field commission and was promoted and uh, he was, his uh, commanding officer was actually quoted that he was undeniably one of the best soldiers in their unit and that's why he received that battlefield commission, so, I think reading that and seeing it in the New York Times was just like, wow, you know, takes a

lot of character, a lot of strength, and uh, you know, to really fight for what you believe in and you know, against maybe some, you know, obstacles that are there.

That's amazing, that's absolutely true. What did he do after the War?

So after the War, he was a mechanic. He settled in Gardena, California, and that's where I know where my mom and her brother and sister grew up and went to school, and uh, he was, I think, also a part-time fisherman, and to this day, my parents won't eat fish, or my mom won't eat fish, because she had enough of it growing up, but yeah, I mean, he was just a great dad. I know he provided for his family and uh, husband, and a great grandfather, I just remember having so much fun visiting them and um, you know, enjoying the time we spent together.

You were born with a birth defect, malformed feet?

Yeah.

And here you are later, winning Olympic gold on these feet?

On these feet, yes. My mom always described it like this is how my legs were when I was born, they were like uh, just crossed and twisted. I didn't have, I think, the severe where I had to have surgery, but I did have casts, um, for the first 18 months of my life and then was put into corrective braces, um, and I remember wearing those until probably past the age of like, two or three, because I remember trying to walk with this bar in between my feet, and sliding on the wood floor, so I just discovered that Army crawling was the quickest and easiest way to get from point A to point B, um, but yeah, you know, I think I was just really lucky my parents were proactive at correcting it, you know, so early on and allowing me to have the opportunity to you know, pursue skating.

And after the braces came off, you weren't daunted, you were ready to skate.

Ready to go, yeah, I mean, I did ballet, and that was, you know, one area of dance that I really loved and then that led into skating and I think um, you know, when I showed the interest, my mom did ask the pediatrician, is this ok? You know, with her condition? Even though much of the corrections were done at that point, and I think the advice was yeah, I think this is great because it helps with strengthening and coordination, and um, it will be good for her.

That's a great inspiration for those who, who have that corrective work done.

Yes, absolutely, and you know, to this day I know, I am still bow-legged, it's just how, the shape of my legs, and uh, you know, a lot of skaters out there, successful skaters, who

are good jumpers who are also bow-legged, so, it's like, oh in some ways it maybe was even an advantage for the sport I chose.

Kristi Yamaguchi started ice-skating as soon as her mother felt she was old enough. Her passion for the sport grew immediately, and soon the rest of her life, and her parents' lives, started to revolve around her ice-skating schedule.

At what point did skating cross your eyes and your heart?

I was six years old when I really first started skating and my older sister, Lori, skated for, you know, a couple months and it wasn't really her thing so she moved on, but I was kind of like, wait, that seemed kinda neat, I wanna try it, and then, I kept asking about it and my mom took us to see the local ice show, and at that point it was like—that's it. That's what I want to do. So, she said, ok, when you're six and old enough, I'll take you to go skate. And, so I had to wait till I was six and went to try it for the first time and loved it and I think, every day asked when we were going back. And I remember my very first competition, I was about eight years old and um, you know, just kinda not really knowing what's going on and I went competed in skating and I thought I skated fine, whatever, and um, my mom always reminds me, you were 11th out of 12th. And, it was just like...it was kind of a wake-up call and I didn't understand, like, how come those girls have these shiny medals and they're running around wearing these medals, how come I didn't get one of those? And she's like, well you have to be top three in order to get those medals, and I think that's when the competitiveness and the like, hey, I want one of those, what do I have to do to get one of those? Ah, kicked in, and that's where it started.

That requires an incredible commitment from your parents, as well.

It's a huge commitment, but luckily, they didn't know what they were getting into, they just thought, oh, ice skating, and you know, they saw an activity that I took to, because I did try everything else—gymnastics, soccer...

Were you good at all those things, too?

No, terrible. And I just, my heart wasn't in it, but I think when they saw how much I loved skating and how I was improving and really taking to it, um, they said, you know what, let's go with this and see what happens. So, you know, yeah, I mean, right away they just kind of rolled with it and I was going you know, several times a week and by the time I was in junior high, it was every day, before school, sometimes after school, and competitions on the weekends, at least once a month, probably.

How much did you have to give up in social life to pursue skating?

There was...yeah, I mean, skaters do not have the normal social life because um, I think I maybe went to one football game in high school, and you know, and I, couple school dances or whatever, but it's...you know, I was in bed by 7:30 every night because I was up at four and on the ice from 5 to 10 or 5 to 11, every day, so um, training schedule was, you know, early in the morning and then I would rush off to school, and then, um...

At eleven o'clock?

At eleven, yeah, I did have special schedule through high school where half of my classes were on campus and half of them I did through independent study, so yeah, so in that case, too, it was just not the normal high school schedule.

Not really...you'd have to give up...you had to give things up because that's everything...that's all, all in.

That was all in. It was all in at that point, but for me, it was a choice. I didn't see it as giving it up, it was like, well this is what I want to do, so...

Well, what did you want to do? With...I mean, obviously, you wanted to skate, but what did you want to do with it?

Um, at that point, you know, once I was 15, 16, it was the Olympic goal was there. You know when I first started skating, I just loved to skate and perform, and be in the shows and wear the pretty costumes, but as I got older, and particularly in the high school age, um, competing at the world level was my goal. And um, in 1989, uh, when I was a senior, was my first world appearance and then, at that point, um, I think the prospect of making the Olympic team was getting closer and close.

You know, I think for most of us, we've had experience competing in, maybe, junior high or high school sports or perhaps, college, but I can't imagine the level of competition at the Olympic level. Just what kind of focus you need to have and the skill level.

Well, you know, it's practice every day, and like I said, several hours a day at that point, um, and it's a lifestyle for sure.

And what do you fill your mind with?

You know, I mean, I was just a competitive person, by nature, and you know, every day in practice I was competitive, even with my training mates, and um, you know, it was just, I knew I had a task at hand and I worked really closely and really well with my coach of uh, from the time I was nine years old through the Olympics, I was with the same coach, Christy Ness, and she was um, probably had one of the biggest influences on my life as a mentor and um, teacher, so learning you know, work ethic and setting

goals, and the mindset was always, ok, what is my goal today? What is my goal in the next hour on this session? And there was always something to work towards and um, you know, she made it clear, if you're working and putting that time in, it's gonna, you're gonna get, you're gonna make strides forward. And so that was always my motivation was like always trying to push myself. She would always tell us, her students, there's no secret to success, it's plain and simple hard work. There's no question, you know, the effort that you need to put in. And there were times that we were training and you know, she would yell out to someone, one of her pupils—don't be afraid to work hard. You know? Because, you know, maybe one of us was slacking or you know, not putting 100 percent in and it was just like, ok, ok, you know, get the work, and it was true, you know, I think it's just, you can't expect results if you don't put the work in, and as a youngster and a teenager, having that engrained in you, I think, was so valuable because even beyond, you know, after the Olympics, it stayed with me and it was just, you know, not satisfied with just getting through it, but putting the work in. And it could be as simple as, I'm gonna practice this jump ten times this session. And hopefully there's an improvement and I'm not falling all ten times, but, you know, putting the effort in and or it's like I'm running through my long program routine twice this session and hopefully without mistakes. So, you know, yeah, it's, it's always having a purpose every time you're going out there.

And it's very um, self-directed, it has to be, right? You're preparing yourself for this gargantuan competition and challenge so it's necessarily, solo and self?

Pretty much. You know, I think when I was older and um, you know, especially becoming a mom, you...looking back, just like, wow, it really was a pretty self-centered life that I lived. You know, it was an individual sport, I had my individual goals, and it was up to me to just focus in and make that happen and of course, I had a team of people around me...

Helping you, and you didn't have to make room for anybody else, they made room for you.

Right, right, exactly, and they were, you know, the common goal was for my success, right? So, um, yeah, there's a very, very narrow focus through that whole thing.

Have you always been able to keep your head in it?

No, no, and I think that's the humbling thing about being an athlete in, in skating, that you're gonna have some great performances that you're like, wow, that was it, and that is what you live for, but there are many where you skate off the ice just really disappointed and really wanting to go back out there and do it again, because it's like, wow, there were just way too many mistakes in there that I know I shouldn't have made.

But you can't look back, right? You gotta keep moving.

Yes, and you take that and you learn from it and hopefully in the next competition, uh, you learn and don't make those same mistakes.

There are many talented skaters, and uh, as you get older and you get ready to uh, to participate in the qualifying, you know, you really don't know whether you're that caliber yet, do you?

Not really, yeah, I mean, I think it's just...you're taking small steps along the way. I mean, you know, people ask, oh, when did you know you were going to become an Olympian? And I'm just like, like, a year before, maybe? And they're like, really? Like you, you know, up to that point you didn't believe it or know it? And I'm like, no, you're just trying to compete in your region and then in the West coast and then nationally and...

Could you feel the competition get tighter and tighter as you...

Oh yeah.

..went up?

Yes, definitely, and the pressure and the expectations and um, you know, figure skating being a judged sport, you know, that adds a whole other layer of subjectivity and just like, how am I fitting in, am I doing what the judges like, and things like that, but yeah, I mean, the competition was always close and the U.S. has always been traditionally competitive world, at the world level. So um, the talent pool was just...it was tough to even be noticed in your own country.

What was it like approaching that fateful day in 1992 when you won gold at the Olympics?

I feel like from '91 and '92, it was like walking on eggshells, the whole time, you know, it was just, ok, you have a goal, you have a plan, and it's just trying to make every step go just how you want it to go. Um, you know, trying to stay healthy, injury free, getting the rest, and eating properly and just, you know, not leaving anything on the table to be an excuse for uh, it not to work out, right? So, um, yeah, it's like living that...just eat, drink, breathe, sleep, you know, skating. And, you know, you'll hear that from Olympic athletes all the time, and it's kind of true, you know, Olympics isn't every four years for us, it's every day, and uh, it's Groundhog Day.

So it's a short game and it's a very long game, too?

Yes.

Commentator Scott Hamilton said, you know, you do all these jumps in your routines but people don't so much notice how hard those jumps are because you, you know, it's part of a story you're telling, visually.

Mm, mm hm, yeah, so I mean, I think I...was also proud to be a part of the generation that really pushed the sport technically, as well. You know, my biggest competitor in those 90s, early 90s, was Midori Ito from Japan, and she was the first to land, successfully land a triple axel in international competition and so, you know, she pushed the boundaries as um, you know, a figure skater doing the amount of triples that she incorporated and then incorporated the triple axel, Tonya Harding was also doing the triple axel, that '92 year at the Olympics, so uh, technically, the women that year were really, really pushing beyond what we've seen in the past in women's competition. And so, I had to up my game too and incorporated the triple lutz, triple toe combination, to be...

But not the triple axel.

Not the triple axel and I tried to master it and it wasn't mastered at the level where I was comfortable to incorporate it into the competition, so I knew the triple lutz, triple toe combination had to be perfect, and had to be my um, answer to their triple axel, and it put a lot of pressure on me for that particular move, but um, yeah, I knew I had to have it, and it hadn't been done at the Olympics before um, by anyone, so it was fun to be able to kind of push the envelope that way.

And you did, and you won.

After winning Olympic gold in 1992 in France, Kristi Yamaguchi went on to become a professional skater, and she married another athlete, former Olympic and professional ice hockey player, Bret Hedican, and they now have two teenage daughters. She also found a way to give back to the community.

Every Olympian, after their Olympic career ends, must look at what life looks like then, after spending almost every waking moment consumed with uh, competition and their art, um, did you know what you were going to do after you ended your time with skating professionally?

I didn't. You know, I think um, yeah, so much was spent on skating itself and the career path of a skater, uh, that I wasn't really, I never really had a plan after that, but I think, you know, I had the natural segue of, you know, I found someone I wanted to spend the rest of my life with and start a family with, so really, as soon as I got off the road from

touring as a skater, we started a family. And that really took over, um, for the next uh, you know, four or five years, just being a mom. But all through that, you know, after, immediately after the Olympics, even while I was touring, there was always a sense of continuing to have a purpose in life and to make an impact um, beyond just being an athlete and you know, my parents had always been very involved in the community, you know, volunteers at school, and at church, and in the community, so, you know, they were like, you know, you've been so lucky, what are you going to do now? How are you going to give back? And um, that really uh, inspired me and spurred me to look at, hey what am I passionate about beyond, you know, skating and myself. And it was children. And uh, in 1996, shortly after the Olympics, I established the Always Dream foundation, who was all about um, you know, inspiring the hopes and dreams of underserved children, and I knew that that was uh, going to become my next passion and my next step in life, beyond the Olympics. We've been going strong for 23 years and the last eight years, we've been focused on early childhood literacy and have uh, a reading program in Kindergarten classroom aged kids, and you know, we're all about leveling the playing field, because not everyone is given the resources and opportunities or have that at their fingertips growing up, not even books in the home, so how do you develop a foundation for learning if you don't have books in the home? We are providing the tools for the families and the kids to be able to develop those literacy rich environments at the home, and hopefully give them, you know, the edge they need to have success in school and in life.

Kristi Yamaguchi found time during her busy life with family and foundation to compete on Dancing With the Stars in 2008. Reluctant at first, she says that once her competitive spirit kicked in, she was in it to win it, which she did. Mahalo to Kristi Yamaguchi of Alamo, California, a frequent Hawai'i visitor for sharing her life story with us. And thank you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

When we looked to expand our foundation outside of California, this was a natural um, place to desire and um, you know, we know the need is great here and it was the perfect fit for the foundation to come out and um, do it's work. So, yeah, it's, Hawai'i definitely has a special place in my heart and my family's heart, my older daughter, Keara, is a hula dancer and she's um, earned her uh, her Hawaiian name and you know, has big dreams and aspirations to someday be at Merrie Monarch.

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