

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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The land is the religion, the health of the land is the health of the people, is the health of the nation.

Meet this Moloka'i physician and Kaho'olawe defender, Dr. Noa Emmett Aluli, next on Long Story Short.

Dr. Noa Emmett Aluli has been serving Moloka'i as a physician for more than four decades. He's perhaps best known for his work alongside other protestors to protect and restore Kaho'olawe, where the U.S. Navy carried out bombing drills for 50 years.

Dr. Aluli grew up in an extended Hawaiian family in Kailua, on Windward O'ahu. His family line includes medical doctors; academics; and the Hawaiian patriot, Joseph Nāwahī, who in the 1890s opposed the U.S. government's annexation of Hawai'i. Dr. Aluli's family also includes notable names in Hawaiian music, including his aunt, the late Irmgard Farden Aluli.

The Alulis are known for music. Are you musical?

No. My father would say: Don't even try to sing, son. I'm named after my dad, who was named after his dad, and it just goes on. Musical—and on the other side, the Meyer girls. You know, Malia was the oldest, and Mele Meyer, and—

Manu.

—Manu. Those are all my father's youngest sister's kids. And so, it was one, two, skip a couple houses, my dad, his brother, then my Auntie Irmgard were there. But on the other side is my mother with 14 in her family.

You were surrounded by people.

Yeah, yeah

So, all these cousins, and aunties and uncles.

And we had to know them personally. We just kind of really had to stick together and support each other. My grandpa was one of um ... I think seventeen people who testified at the very first hearing on statehood in 1935. There were about 150; Umm, 90 were in favor, 60 uhh, were against.

And he was...?

He was—he had conditions. He said for the wellbeing and wellness, and the non-extinction of the Native Hawaiian, he had hoped that we would be recognized, as they had the year before, recognized the Native Americans and set up them as, you know, governments within-

-Mhmm.

—the government. So, he—that was what he was thinking. He was always—he was one of the organizers of the ummm, homesteading act, and he certainly kind of argued for it. We—we have that kinda like DNA or ancestral memory, or responsibility that—that we've kinda like grew up with.

Okay. So, with that scene set, that's a lot of people around you, and people before you, and lots of talents. But definitely, the DNA, as you mentioned, for standing up and standing against what you felt was wrong.

M-hm.

So, you have Chinese and Caucasian, but you pulled on the Hawaiian.

Right, three-quarters, give or take. I don't know exactly, but you know, those days, you never keep track... English.

English.

Irish ... English, Irish. We have a coat of arm in—on my grandpa's side, Cockett. And the other one—

That's another famous name in Hawai'i. So, Aluli, Meyer, Cockett.

Yes; fortunate.

Did you feel privileged when you were growing up?

Didn't know it, but yeah, we kind of like were able to afford good schools. Umm, never went hungry. Umm, you know, was able to compete in the ocean, was able to fish and—never hunted, though. But privileged in the sense that we were given lot of opportunities, and had to prove that we would be able to kind of handle things in the years to come. That was the big test of growing up.

One of Noa Emmett Aluli's first major tests was self-imposed— he chose medicine as his career path, for the sheer difficulty of the training. First he earned his undergraduate degree at Marquette University in Wisconsin. Then he returned to O'ahu and graduated in the first class of the John A. Burns School of Medicine at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

I heard that in your high school yearbook, Saint Louis, you said you intended to be a doctor.

Well, I did that because it was the biggest challenge that anybody could ever accept. And umm, it was kind of like in a sense and I'm gonna do it. But then, it was a challenge all the way through, you know, undergrad, and getting into medical school, and enjoying medical school especially in...It was a lot of work.

Did you think you were not gonna make it at any point?

Umm, yes, because I couldn't- I couldn't discipline myself to study things that I couldn't really put my hands around. You know, all the science. And the way we were learning things just by memory, rote, repeat-repeat-repeat.

You're better at learning by doing.

Yeah, exactly. So, after my one year in a rotating integrated umm, residency program, I told the professors that I wanted to go and learn from the community.

That's Hawaiian culture, isn't it?

Yeah. So—and I chose Moloka'i, because I was there in my fourth year as a rural health elective. Umm, and I wanted Moloka'i because they were changing too. And the professors in that time were studying what happened in Kahuku; was happening in Kohala, where the plantations were closed and the big hotels were gonna be the tourist destinations, and how people were gonna make that change. And Moloka'i was going to change that way, too.

Also, Moloka'i is known as the most Hawaiian place. Or the most Hawaiian island, I should say. Because I think it's, what ... the last data I heard was nearly 40 percent of the population is Hawaiian, and many are more than 50 percent.

Yeah. Well, and it's actually because it was a leper colony there.

Kalaupapa.

Yeah, Kalaupapa. People just were afraid of being there. And because it was actually the beginning of the homesteading program. The very first homestead was Kalama'ula. And then, Keaukaha was the second one on the Big Island, and then came back to Ho'olehua. So, it really had a real strong kinda like presence there. And a small island, so everybody knew everybody else.

Was it hard for you to make that transition? You were kind of a suburban guy.

Yeah. No, it was pretty easy. Because the way we were brought up too was, you know, you go to a house and you eat anything they serve. And- and I think it was because I was kind of like out there and interested, and people wanted me to stay on Moloka'i, so they kind of took me in—uncle, auntie, and taught me what they could. And you know, I think it was—when I look back, they kind of like had hoped that I would usher them to the next realm, taking care of them that long.

Moloka'i would not be the only island drawing Dr. Emmett Aluli's interest. His medical career was just blossoming when his next major life test presented itself: Kaho'olawe. On January 4, 1976, Dr. Aluli was one of nine people who protested the U.S. Navy's use of the island for bombing practice. They defied restrictions and landed on the forbidden "Target Isle." These nine people came to be known as "the Kaho'olawe Nine."

I was kind of like on call for three days and I was working at the Queen's emergency room. And then, we had 72 hours off.

Mhmm.

So, I decided this was an opportunity; I wanted to do, I wanted to get away. And so, I just kind of joined the group that was from Moloka'i that was asked to come and kind of like see whether we could be part of this reclaiming of at least the fishing rights. Fishing around the island was so rich, and the fishermen, local fishermen wanted to be able to go there and fish. And they were kind of like unable to get there, except that they snuck on. So, then we just decided: Well, we're here, we may as well go and look around a little more.

How did you all get together?

It was a guy named Charlie Maxwell.

From Pukalani, Maui!

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Who was kind of like against what was happening uh, with the umm, telescopes at Haleakala. But he was the one that was really kind of like organized uhh, and reached out. And uhh, but nobody knew that this was gonna be a publicity thing; they weren't really serious. And so, when we kind of like knew the Coast Guard was called, alerted—

And you gathered on—

Yeah; there must have been like about 30 boats, more fishing boats.

So, Charlie had called; he put out a call for: "Let's go to that island."

Yeah.

Even though they say it's forbidden.

Yeah; yeah. And let's make a statement.

Let's make a statement and let's land there.

Yeah.

Okay; and did he say you might get arrested, and it's worth it?

No, no. We never got that: "Be careful, you might get arrested."

It was more like: "Let's just do this."

Do it.

Okay.

But remember, there was an Alcatraz occupation, there was Wounded Knee, and so you know, people were just kind of thinking: "If this is what we gotta do as Native Hawaiians, let's do it." So, there was all that push to do something.

So, 30 boats left, but then they turned back.

They turned back. Otherwise, they would have been confiscated.

And how did you get through? Did you say: "I don't care if the boat's confiscated?"

No; so what it is, it was, once again, a reporter who kind of like knew a boat that was the fastest, that can outdo the—pick us all up, boom, take us in, and then get out.

Ah ...

So, that was how we did it. We went, and the reporters turned back, 'cause it was the boat that they had been on, but they took nine of us to the island. And then, the Coast Guard came and took all the other seven.

But you and Walter Ritte were exploring the island for two days. Were you making yourself scarce, or were you just really exploring the island?

We were just kind of—we were bent on exploring the island.

And so, it was okay if you just—

Yeah. We just took off.

Wow.

In slippers.

For two days.

Yeah.

Before they came for you with handcuffs.

Actually, they cuffed our ankles. And they gave us a bar letter. And so ...

What's a bar letter?

I mean, you can never return; you're barred from the island.

Oh, I see. Which did not happen; you went back.

So, we went back. Because what we felt and saw was something just really different. You know, like I personally had to go back and see whether it was real, that the land could be suffering that bad.

Noa Emmett Aluli and others kept returning to Kaho'olawe in protest, despite those military restrictions. Then tragedy: On March 7, 1977, the charismatic musician and

activist George Helm was heading back to Maui with park ranger Kimo Mitchell, in bad weather and rough water. The two were never seen again. Dr. Aluli says that Helm, the fellow member of the Kaho`olawe Nine, had great potential and power as an emerging leader of the Hawaiian people. Dr. Aluli was devastated by the loss of George Helm.

I was wanting to just drop out completely. You know, and just kind of move on. But something just told me that, you know, you just at least carry his suit, and then you see that you're successful. And so that's one of the reasons why I'm still there to make sure that their loss or our loss is something that you know. We kind of like can make a difference and be able to kind of show some successes on the island, and show that we can green the island, and show that their life lost, not lost forever.

And did you know the other members of the Kaho`olawe Nine very well?

No, not—not very well; not very well. But I knew, because they were organizing on different levels, the—more like a legal kind of understanding of our claims and our rights.

But it wasn't—there weren't nine people picked because of their particular relationship and role. It was just- kind of an ad hoc group?

No. It was kind of a mixed bag. Yeah.

But what an amazing set of accomplishments was made by a group of people who didn't even necessarily know each other ahead of time.

M-hm; m-hm. Well, so the magic—you know, they call it magic.

The magic.

Umm, because we knew that the more people we could take to the island, the more they would be inspired to kinda like do work that—

And you said you felt a kind of spiritual presence there.

I did. And I still do.

What does it feel like?

It feels as if you're with nature, so strongly connected to it uh, that you're kind of like feeling uplifted, or you gotta pass that responsibility, you know, that you kind of like sweat on that, and you understand that land. But then now, you can get uh, get into the worship of the gods of the land. You know, and that was it, you know. Pele creating new land, her sister Hi'iaka the healer, and then there's the other sister Kapo, and all the nature forms of all her brothers and sisters. You know, that's all the people of old worshipped and had that connection to.

Dr. Emmett Aluli and others in the grassroots organization Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana, or P-K-O, continued their fight to stop the bombing on the island. In 1980, the U.S. Navy and P-K-O signed a Consent Decree, requiring the Navy to begin cleanup efforts, which are unfinished to this day. Then in 1990, President George H.W. Bush ordered an immediate halt to the bombing. Three years later, Congress voted to end military use, and Kaho'olawe was turned over to the State. Since then, P-K-O and the Kaho'olawe Island Reserve Commission, a State agency with which Dr. Aluli worked for more than 20 years, have focused on restoring the island that many regard as sacred.

Dr. Aluli draws parallels between the Kaho'olawe protests four decades ago and the Mauna Kea protests against construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope on Hawai'i Island.

The land is the religion, the health of the land is the health of the people, is the health of the nation. What it is, is the decision, the Supreme Court decision is, there's no... "Mauna Kea is already destroyed, so it's no longer sacred." They could have used that argument against us. I mean, what, just bomb the s--- out of the island; no longer sacred. So, we have to rethink this whole thing through, but you know...

Do you think there are a lot of analogies between Kaho'olawe and TMT?

Yeah. It's the same kind of arguments for Mauna Kea. And that's the sad thing. We've kind of like really kind of like got stepped on. I think indigenous folks around the world have their own culture science-

Mhmm.

—and understanding. And that is respected even more. It's just a matter of this next generation kind of coming up and proving it, yeah? That you can manage the forests, the native forests, like, you know, the Hawaiians of old did, and get as good results as the sciences of today.

No longer the Target Island, Kaho'olawe remains damaged by decades of bombing. There's a long-term strategic plan to restore the land, called I Ola Kanaloa, or "Life to Kanaloa." Kanaloa is the ancient name for Kaho'olawe, ... after the Hawaiian god of healing, voyaging, and the ocean. Elements in the plan are experiential learning for students; and healing programs for abuse survivors and former prisoners; also, restoration of Kaho'olawe's native habitat and cultural sites. Meanwhile, in his medical practice on Moloka'i, Dr. Emmett Aluli continues to tackle another challenge: the health of Native Hawaiian people.

We still have the only cardiovascular risk factor study. Then putting that together with some of the uhh, economic determinates of health, and you know, the access that poor people don't have, or uninsured don't have. And putting that together, and just really looking at it, and using that as a tool on Moloka'i: this is where we are. And it's worked. And then, from that study, we went into the Native Hawaiian diet study. So, if you eat more taro, sweet potato, reef fish, you know, limu, you should be healthier. You know, how to kind of integrate more, how to kind of like ... I guess, extend care more permanently, especially to the Native Hawaiians and how we're gonna continue together like benefit from the different ali'i's kind of like priorities. Then comes the- A part of that medicine is just trying to finish off some of my research, like creating health systems across the board for Native Hawaiians. That we have Hawaiians that should start looking at the different programs and support that they need, so we can really do a good cleanup and a good kinda future. 'Cause the way it looks is, we're not getting any better.

As far as?

As our health.

As our health; oh ...

I think more the social and economic determinates of health are increasing, and so ... sometimes I look at: How do you change the "ainokea" attitude?

To “aikea.”

To “aikea.” You know, the famous—and how do we—can I look at being able to instill that pride again. You know. That—because I think people are looking at: Oh you was coming- you owe me, you owe me, you owe me for taking the land, for you know, taking the Kingdom, and there’s a lot of pissed-off guys out there. And how do we kind of make them kind of like ... ‘Kay, we gotta work a little bit harder, we gotta learn our politics, we gotta bring that leadership back, we gotta bring that trust back. We will be able to survive, but we just have to depend on our connections to land a little bit more. We gotta get our strength back, connections to the land, our relationships to the land. And to make it sincere. I think that—that’s what we gotta do. And I’ve seen that happening in different areas.

For example?

Oh; in some of the fishponds, He‘eia and umm, you know, I see it kind of like umm, flowering in some of the farming projects. You know, especially in Moloka‘i and the Big Island.

Because you think the health of the land is reflect ... that’s a determinant of the health of the people.

People; right. Right. And then, how we work all together as a nation, or as a community, or as a ahupua‘a. That we just, you know, automatic.

But in these decades since Kaho‘olawe, you say, you know, the health of the people has not improved.

Well, I don’t see it, because there’s something else that’s interfering. I think it’s just “ainokea” attitude that’s... we’re addressing suicide also. Umm, on Moloka‘i, we’ve had a string of suicides. Depression setting in. You know? And we’ve gotta talk this through a little bit more. We gotta focus on that.

Yeah. I mean, I think you’re a person who’s in it for the long term. I mean, you hung in there with Kaho‘olawe, and you’re still in there. And you’ve worked really hard on

Hawaiian health. But you haven't really gotten to see the fruition of your hopes, all your hopes.

I feel like ... it'll come. I feel it'll really come. I mean, I'm seeing it develop umm, in some key people. You know, we've had couple of young guys come in and, you know, and get credits working in my clinic, and I just—they're teaching me more than I'm teaching them. My patients ask me: When are you gonna retire, Doc? I said: When I don't enjoy it anymore.

Do you still feel like that activist inside?

Umm, yeah; yeah. And like, folks like Art says: We gotta watch you, Emmett.

And that competitiveness that you had when you said: I'm gonna be a doctor, just because it was a hard thing to do.

No, that was—that was just ... I think that pushed me through, because I said: I'm gonna do it. Like it's pushed me through with Kaho'olawe, I'm gonna do it. With the other issues I've been involved in, I'm gonna do it. And you know, I don't expect to be able to do it all, but at least some footprints.

And some continuity,-

-Yeah.

—you'll leave behind, people who can do it, or who will carry it on.

Who will carry it on.

You seem like you're prepared for the long view. You know, things can't get done as quickly as you want, but you're gonna keep at it.

Yeah. And people know that. People know that. Stay out of his way.

Longterm challenges and the never-ending desire to heal the land and the people—these seem to define Dr. Emmett Aluli's life journey. As of this conversation in the summer of 2019, Dr. Aluli is 75 years old, and he says he has no plans to stop working to

heal people and the land anytime soon. He says he's most thankful for his family, his medical practice, and his good health. Mahalo to Dr. Noa Emmett Aluli of Ho'olehua, Moloka'i, for sharing your story with us. And mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

What do you think the people of Moloka'i can teach the rest of us?

"Moloka'i, the friendly island" is because we adapted or adjusted to the leprosy.

Mhmm.

And it was okay to go there, and they're family. And then, there's—what I like is: "Moloka'i ku'i la'au." You know, strong, powerful healing. But the one that is being really shared is: "Moloka'i 'āina momona."

Plenty.

Plenty fruits. And I think a lot of people are adopting that we gotta make our lands rich with food again.