

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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From that moment on, that my little childhood world was not that safe, that it depended on a lot of different things, um, and to put it on a – I didn't think this then, but for democracy to really survive and thrive, requires work.

Meet national public media executive Patricia de Stacy Harrison, 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 māi kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Patricia de Stacy Harrison is the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, CPB, an organization you might recognize from the credits for many programs on PBS Hawai'i. The corporation is a private nonprofit that distributes about 450 million dollars in federal funding every year, as enabled by Congress to public television and radio stations across the US, including PBS Hawai'i. Harrison grew up in the New York City borough of Brooklyn. Now known for hipsters and skyrocketing real estate, the Brooklyn of Harrison's youth was a different story – a small, densely populated neighborhood where she says everyone knew everything about you. Harrison calls Brooklyn her mentor, and its lessons informed her outlook on life at a young age.

It was a great neighborhood, and um, just how people expressed themselves. So, you would – when I was older, I had a job in the city – that's what we called New York, the city. You were going to the city. And we would be on the subway, and people just had opinions about everything. It, it was sort of like surround sound. I thought that was normal, and then in our family, the same thing extended, uh, where everyone had an opinion about your life and what you should do, and so I grew up around very strong, opinionated people who didn't listen to the answer, you know. That's why someone said, 'Conversation in New York – it's talking and waiting to talk.' So –

Listening is really important.

No – I figured that out later, but uh, uh...

Are you entirely Italian?

I'm half Italian and half Scottish. So, I'd like to say one half says have a great time, and the other half says you can't afford it, so...um, but mostly the Italian side took over very early. My mother, um, encouraged dreaming, My mother was great storyteller, and um, where my father always thought I had delusions of grandeur, my mother always encouraged that kind of thing. And I remember, um, when I graduated from Midwood High School, um, and it was a very protective time then. This was before internet and that kind of thing, and we were going into the city to see a movie, and we were going to this one restaurant, and I said to my parents, "I want to sit alone." And my father said, "What's the matter with you?" You know, "You're not sitting alone. We're together." I said, "No, I want to know how it feels to sit alone in a restaurant and order what I want, and, uh, pretend that I'm on my way now." My mother said, "Great idea." And so, they sat at one table, and my father goes, "You, you indulge her too much. You know, she's got you, you would say, buffaloed." And uh, it was the best time I ever had, and you know what, years later when I traveled all over the world and I was by myself, I remembered that 16-year-old girl sitting by herself. And the thing is, always have a book or a Kindle with you when you're alone. And um, my mother always said, "Yeah, it's a great idea. Let's try it. Yeah." I was a very, um, curious kid, to the point where my parents just got tired – "Because we said so." They just got tired of answering the questions that one question led to another, and um, so I was informed. I like to say that Brooklyn was my mentor, the most important impact on my life because everyone was so diverse. Um, I, I went to school with Jackie Robinson's niece, um, Asians, um, African Americans, and then we'd go to my grandmother's neighborhood, all Italians, and a high Jewish, um, population. My friends didn't have any relatives, so at a very young age, I didn't understand why they didn't have grandparents, uh, or aunts or uncles or cousins, and I remember asking my parents, and they were explaining, "Well there was this terrible man, uh, Hitler, and um, he killed everybody." I mean, that was the shorthand approach, and I thought, "Well, why didn't anybody do anything?"

What did they tell you about why they didn't have any family?

They didn't want to talk about it because some of them, uh, had been living in Brooklyn for a long time, but they lost – well, that's a euphemism. Their relatives had been murdered, and they were my friends, we were all young kids, so they didn't know what happened, and I couldn't figure out why nobody would talk to me about this. My parents didn't really know what to say, and they just didn't want this to come up, but it had such a profound impact on me that, uh, that quote that 'evil happens when good people do nothing.' So, I was kind of wary from that moment on that my little childhood world was not that safe, that it depended on a lot of different things, um, and to put it on a – I didn't think this then – but for democracy to really survive and thrive, requires work. We can't just go lie down on the Barcalounger and think it's gonna be here in the morning. And uh, so constant vigilance I think is required sometimes.

So uh, Brooklyn, there was a time, as much as you loved it, as much as it raised you, you, you wanted to go?

I wanted to go away to college, and you have to understand at that time, Brooklyn was a very small place, even though there were millions of people there, and the neighborhood was very small. So, the person who was on the corner with the candy store could tell your parents, you know, when you came home. Everybody knew everything about you, and I couldn't wait to get out. And so, we always had these big family Sunday Italian dinners, and my mother announced that, uh, Patricia wants to go away to college, and that's when it started. "Why? Why do you want to go away? This place isn't good enough for you? Where do you want to go?" "Well, um, school in Washington, D.C." "Washington, D.C.? Where is that?" You know, I mean, "Why would you want to go there? What do they do there? They take our money away, they spend it. Why would you – you have good schools here. Why, you're too good to go to NYU or Brooklyn Coll-"

These are tough questions for a young woman to be dealing with, or a young man.

Yeah, yeah. And I just stared into space, and waited 'til it was gonna be over, the beating would be over.

Because you knew it would pass?

I knew I was going, you know.

Why did you decide Washington, D.C.? You lived near New York City...

Um, because it was close enough to fly, but at the time it was like, 25 bucks to fly. Uh, the train...and that's as far as they would kind of, you know, willing for me to go.

But you wanted to be some place...

I had to leave.

...with – but it wasn't just any place. You could've gone to, uh, you know, like, Rolling Hills College...

Oh no, uh, no, I didn't want to do that. I had to - at the time, uh D.C., my parents drove me down, and I remember we went to the Safeway, and the person loaded up some groceries, and my father always had these bills with a rubber band, and he was peeling them off, and I said, "Daddy, they don't tip. You don't tip here." He said, "What the hell kind of place is this? They don't tip? This is where my daughter wants to go to college?"

And, he was just talking to the air, you know, "Washington." And so, um, it was one of the best decisions I ever made, and I love New York and I love Brooklyn, but there's a time when you just have to, you know, see other places.

While studying at American University in Washington, D.C., Patricia de Stacy Harrison met her future husband, E. Bruce Harrison. Together they would establish a public relations agency that became one of the top 10 owner-managed PR firms in the U.S.

I was gonna be a writer, and um, my kids were little, so I was home with them and I was writing the - the Evening Star, which is no longer around, and um, the Washington Post, and I was a freelance, which meant I wasn't really working for anybody. And uh, the only way I could write is I would lock myself in the bathroom because it was the only room that had a lock, and my kids would pound on the door and you know, want something. I wasn't in there for like, days, just so I could get three thoughts together, and um, all of the writing - no matter what I've done, my - if I had to quickly describe myself, I would say I'm basically a writer. And so, when we founded our company, it was an opportunity to really write and prepare things and think things through in terms of, uh, issues and challenges, and um, we had that firm for 20 years, and then we sold it, but I learned a lot. You got to know people and issues, and then you, you - one of the things I think, which may be lost today, is I really think people should read publications that have opinions different from the ones you already have, just so you understand, or you can build your own intellectual capacity about saying, 'Well, I agree with some of it. Uh, some of it I don't agree with.' But why? Because if you're always taking in something that validates what you think from the beginning, how are you going to develop? How are you going to get that brain working, you know? You're just gonna be stuck in some sort of status quo thinking?

And that's actually the premise of public media, the, bringing together diverse perspectives in one place.

It's wonderful; it's just wonderful. And David Isay has, with StoryCorps, which is on NPR - he has this new initiative called, uh, One Small Step, and he brings people together in a safe place, you're not allowed to hit each other - we have to say that now. Um, and they have different perspectives on different issues, and they talk about, 'Well, this is why I believe in this.' And the other person talks about that, and it's not one big kumbaya moment where they leave and they're holding hands like a Hallmark card, but there's an exchange. 'This is why I feel this way.' 'Oh, well this is why I feel this way.'

It's, it's, it's - you don't demonize people as easily as when, when you sit down and you maybe break bread and trade, trade viewpoints.

Yeah, Lidia Bastianich - who's very famous on PBS - Lidia's Kitchen and cooking, and she talks about food diplomacy, where you bring people in and you have this, you

know, lovely food and you talk. And I said, "Well Lidia, in my family, Italian family, you bring people in and they yell at each other, but it's not really yelling. No one ever changes their mind about their opinion. But somehow it all works, you know."

You had to be strong to deal with other people's strong opinion of you. I mean, your family was always telling you what to do, right?

Yeah, but I, I think that it prepared me for the world. The world was a lot easier in uh – when I talked to the New York Times, they picked their own headline for the article, 'After Brooklyn, it's all a piece of cake,' because um, no one cuts you any slack in Brooklyn. It didn't matter if you were five years old. You know, if you were playing a game with your grandfather, he didn't let you win. Um, that was the mentality they – the parents at that time wanted their kids to be strong, to be able to survive. Um, a lot of them were working class, and they had no faith in um, you know, things are going to work out. They wanted everyone to be a teacher so you'd have something to fall back on, and I thought, "Well that's great to be a teacher, but I don't want to do it to have something to fall back on. I want to be passionate about doing the thing I want to do, and not as sort of a security blanket for the future." So, they were very security-focused, um...

And, and I, I hear iron sharpening iron, the idea that you give, you know, you call people on what you think they should improve on.

Yeah, I think so. Um, I think that you help your children – I have three children, and I really want them very much, uh, and they have, um, be able to negotiate the world but be a good person at the same time. And um, I mean that's, that's really what a parent's supposed to do.

After 20 years in public relations and getting to know people in the corridors of power, Patricia de Stacy Harrison served as an Assistant Secretary of State under Colin Powell during the George W. Bush presidency. In a post-September 11th world, she traveled to Iraq for cross-cultural exchanges. Before that, she served as Co-Chair of the Republican National Committee. Harrison didn't think she had a chance at becoming Co-Chair, but her growing concerns for the Republican Party fueled her.

I just felt at the time that I didn't really have any chance of winning, but I felt that the Republican Party, in my opinion, needed to listen to women and minorities, and I felt I wanted to talk to this group, and one thing led to another, and then I'm running for Co-Chair, and I remember at the time Hotline came out, and they had the other two people who were running against me, and they said, "There's somebody else, but she has no votes." I thought, "That's me! I made the paper!" I thought, "Wait, I made the paper, but it's bad news." And then I did win and created um, the new majority council to um, really indicate that it was going to be a minority majority populations, and if the

Party was going to thrive, they had to listen to new people coming in with um, their issues, and um, it was a wonderful, wonderful four years.

Then you became a diplomat. Was that part of the plan?

Well that's – that is so bizarre. No, I don't think anybody, um, would, uh, anticipate that would happen, but um, I was so, so very fortunate, again, really, really lucky, and uh, to become Assistant Secretary of State and work with this –

Oh I mean, but you - it had to be more than luck. What, what did it?

I really don't know, um. I did not, um – my parents lived uh, I live in Arlington, and um, my parents were getting older and I did not want, uh, to leave the country for any kind of, uh, post, assuming I could have that as a choice. This was an opportunity, um, educational-cultural affairs, and uh, you would have an opportunity to actually see how your worked played out, what kind of impact, and then to work with Colin Powell, and um, so I don't know. That happened. And I traveled, I went to Iraq – I went everywhere. I learned so much.

So, you were putting together partnerships?

Well, exchanges are the core where we, uh, bring people to this country, all ages and all levels. And then you have the database that shows so many people who came on these, uh, high-level professional exchanges go back. They wind up government or senior-level jobs. The whole idea, really, is to create mutual understanding between people in the United States and other countries. And then I created something called Culture Connect, where I identified and worked with a lot of people who were in the entertainment industry or they had written books, and we had Frank McCourt, who had written Angela's Ashes. And we sent him to Israel. He, he worked with Israel – Israeli and Palestinian kids, and he started out talking to them. He said, "You think you have a lousy childhood." And then we gave cards out with um, um, an internet address, so these kids could get in touch. So, you had virtual mentors, and they could talk to them about what do I do, how do I get into what you're doing. We wrote – brought Yo-Yo Ma over with the Iraqi National Orchestra to perform here. And um, so many incredible things, the people that I met and listened to around the world, and I came away with the feeling that everybody is just connected. It's like Henry Gates, "Skip" Gates, uh, "Finding Your Roots", and you find out your roots are connected to somebody else's roots. So be careful who you hate. They may be you know, your, your long lost great-great-great grandfather.

As the head of the private nonprofit corporation for public broadcasting, Patricia de Stacy Harrison holds the purse strings to federal dollars earmarked for public media. The money goes to more than thirteen hundred public TV and radio stations across the

country. Here at PBS Hawai'i, the funding amounts to fifteen, one five, percent of our revenues. Like many other stations, we raise far more private dollars than we receive in government funds.

It's a public-private partnership, and I think from the beginning, public media had to prove itself. We have to prove how we are fulfilling that mission every year, and report to Congress how these, these monies are spent, and report to the American people, and I think that's fair.

And you do get hit in Congress with some, uh, broadsides of, you know, "Why'd you do this? Why'd you do that?"

We do. Um, I'd like to say sometimes uh, what offends, uh, someone on one side of the political aisle is the same thing that offends somebody else, and they both come at it from their own perspective. And we will get, um, responses and emails sometimes about a particular show, and someone will say, "Well that – that's very left-wing." And somebody else will say, "That was very right-wing." So overall, we are the most trusted um, in terms of media and journalism and our content because, I believe, the American people own public media, and we're responsible to them, and we relate to them and we connect to them. So, the idea that we're just going to serve part of the public, um, we wouldn't be around. We wouldn't be relevant in the way we are today in their lives.

And this idea that, um, public media is slanted, I mean – the, the, the appropriations are voted on by the entire Capitol Hill crowd, right?

Absolutely.

And then how does – what, what is the support, uh, on, on, when you look at it on, on a partisan basis?

Well we have – we're very fortunate. We have the, uh, Public Broadcasting, um, Caucus, and it's headed by a Republican and Democrat. And you don't have to like everything we do, but if you go around that table to this very nonpartisan group, or very bipartisan group, who serve their communities in appropriate ways, they will let you know why they specifically value public media. And it can be very, very different. Um, one person, one member of Congress said to me, "Frontline - to me, that's the gold standard. I can turn to Frontline and I know they are dealing with the facts. They haven't inserted their opinion. How do I know this? Well, they put their source, uh, availability on, um, online. You can check everything that they have referenced." And he talked about after September 11th how he turned to Frontline because they had done this series on Bin Laden, and he said there was no emotionalism. There was no pushing for one idea or another. It was pure journalism, it was informative, and it gave

me a sense of what was happening at a time when, really, everyone was terrified and confused.

And at a time when the – when Congress, sometimes Democrats dominate, sometimes Republicans – does public media spending pass regardless of who's in charge or who's in the majority?

Well I don't take anything for granted. So - they cannot lobby. We have an association, American Public Television apps – they do lobbying. But I take the opportunity to meet with members and let them know what we're doing specifically in their district. They're Republicans, they're Democrats, and um, I would like to say, because I believe it's true, there's consensus that we bring value to American life, and that's – that's the theme that runs through these conversations. They may differ on what kind of value, maybe it's early childhood education or it's journalism, but um, they have their favorite shows. And I remember someone said, "Don't ever get rid of Antiques Road Show."

Everybody has their favorites.

Everyone has their –

And actually, that has been, you know –

Everyone has their favorite, and um, so I think we're at a point today where we have wonderful bipartisan support, and we're really grateful for people on both sides of the aisle for that support.

Common ground and collaboration are important to Patricia de Stacy Harrison. Recalling a meeting she had with hip hop mogul for a public media project, she says being open and listening have changed her life.

And I said, "But um, you know, I'm too busy to do that." And he jumped up from the seat. He said, "I'm a billionaire, and you're too busy? You're too busy? You're not too busy. Get on the phone, call this person, Bob Roth, who has since become a great friend." He said, "I got somebody here, Pat Harrison. She's too busy to meditate." And uh, he said, "Look, I'm sending you over there." Suddenly my whole life is going over here. And um, I thought, "Well I can't not follow through. What a gracious offer." So, I went to meet Bob, and Bob has been working with the David Lynch foundation, and Lynch talks about meditation as you are in the water and you go down different levels to this area of calm. Up here are all the waves and the turmoil, and, ok. And he said, "Okay, Pat, Russell has called me so, uh, this is a gift that he's giving to you, and um, you have to stay in New York – I think it was four days. And every day, we'll take you through the training." I said, "I can't stay for four days. Here's what I can do: let's do the four days in like, the first day." And he said, "Well you're missing the whole point. It's

transcendental meditation." I said, "Well, okay, maybe a day and a half." He said, "Alright, well, boy, this is a hard case. Alright, we'll try to fit in the four into a day and a half." And um, I found that it was so helpful. At the time my mother was so ill, and eventually she died, and that's what I turned to, um, so that I could continue to work, and um, at the same time have the necessary emotion. But to just find that place of, um, peace. And so, I don't meditate twice every day, which you're supposed to do, but I do it every night, uh, no matter what time.

For how long?

20 minutes.

And it works?

I don't know what it means, 'it works.' It just makes me feel better. It's not a religious experience. It slows your breathing in a way; it's, it does something to your brain. And, um, it enables you to, well, for me, I just sleep eight straight. And uh, if I don't get my eight, uh, it helps me do that.

So that's another example of you, your being open to a discussion and then you follow some dots, and then –

Suddenly I'm with this person. I mean it's...my life is just, uh, like the Wizard of Oz, except the wizard's real. It's available to everyone if you seek him out.

Patricia de Stacy Harrison says the three biggest influences in her life are Brooklyn, her former boss, Colin Powell, and her mother, Marguerite, whose curiosity, zest for life, and care for others continue to inspire her. About her time as U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, Harrison says she loved meeting ordinary people doing extraordinary things. Mahalo to Patricia de Stacy Harrison, visiting Hawai'i from Arlington, Virginia, for sharing her story with us. And mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

People look at their life sometimes as a resume. 'I, I did this, or I failed at that.' But everything goes into that sort of vessel that is you, and sometimes the things that you think, um, that didn't work out so well – you learn something from it. Nothing is ever wasted. I remember, um, when I was at the State Department, and um, working, the honor of working for Secretary Powell, and I don't remember the exact issue, but evidently, I had not, um, provided, let's say, all the information about an event, and what I learned is you prepare, you prepare, you overprepare. And uh, I learned so much working for him and his team, and uh, how you could achieve things and still retain who you are, your values.

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