

# LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



**TITLE: Paula Kerger**

LSS 1314 (26:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 3/24/2020

The greatest opportunities in life are when you take the risk. And I always say it's, you know, akin to jumping out of an airplane. I've never done that by the way. But, you know, you don't have to jump out of an airplane. You know, you can live a very happy life without doing that. But if you want the exhilaration of an experience, then you've got to be willing to lean forward and let go.

**She's the President and CEO of the national Public Broadcasting Service, PBS. Meet Paula Kerger, visiting from Virginia, 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. My guest is a fellow President and Chief Executive Officer in public television – on a much larger scale. Paula Kerger heads the Public Broadcasting Service, PBS. Headquartered in Arlington, Virginia, the national nonprofit media organization provides wide-ranging, high-quality programming for more than 330 locally owned public television stations, including PBS Hawai'i. During Kerger's tenure, PBS has markedly grown its audience and brought to American homes the blockbuster television series *Downton Abbey* on MASTERPIECE, The Vietnam War film by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, and the educational children's series *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*. Kerger has headed PBS since 2006, making her the longest-serving CEO in the organization's history. Before her grown-up ventures in public-service fundraising and educational media, Kerger spent her childhood in a country town outside Baltimore, Maryland. There, a special family member taught her a thing or two about responsibility and serving others.**

I had no idea what I wanted to do when I was a kid. I loved being outside. I loved animals. So actually, my first idea was that I wanted to be a veterinarian because I loved, you know, working with animals. We had dogs and cats. I had a horse when I was little.

**How old were you when you had a horse? And that's every – I mean this is a stereotype, but many, many girls dream of having a horse.**

I think most girls dream of having a horse. And, you know, the thing was, my aunt had horses and I was very close with her. She and I are only about twelve years apart. So she in many ways was more like a sister to me. And, you know, so I rode from the time I was little. I have pictures of me probably, you know, a year or two sort of propped up on the horse behind her. And so every year, like for Christmas Horse was my Christmas list. That was actually all I asked for. And so I think I was like eleven or twelve, twelve maybe when I got the horse and I got the horse at that age because my parents felt that I was old enough that I would be responsible for taking care of it. And it was I think that, you know, I'm not suggesting every parent go out and buy their child a horse. And we lived in the country. I kept the horse at home. But every morning before I went to school, I had to carry heavy water buckets down to the barn and feed the horse, put the horse out, you know, bring it back at night, brush it and take care of it. And I think that kind of responsibility, I mean, you can do this with goldfish as well.

But I think, you know, whatever it is, I think that there's something about having that kind of responsibility, particularly when you're young. The other thing about horses that are interesting is that they're really large animals. And there is – I think that especially for girls, it's empowering. Girls develop deep bonds with their horses. I certainly did with mine. And both the freedom of being able to ride and, you know, to have this relationship with an animal that you're not controlling in the same way that I think sometimes you might be tempted to try to control other things in your life. You develop mutual respect. And that's what I think is also was really important in my relationship with my horse.

### **Did you name your horse?**

My horse came with the name and his name was Raven. This was before the football team. But he was... he was really wonderful.

### **Can you see how that discipline and that relationship translated to your later life?**

Yeah. I mean, I think I'm a highly responsible person. And I think part of that is you learn those lessons early when you have the responsibility of a horse or a dog or an animal or I mean, I don't mean to put children in the same bucket, but when you have the responsibility for someone or something else, that has to come before you. And so, there were many afternoons that I would want to do something with my friends or maybe just stay inside and read or whatever. But when someone is counting on you or something is counting on you, that has to come first. And I think that's a really important lesson to learn at a young age. That sense of something larger than me.

**One of the biggest human influences in Paula Kerger's life was her grandfather, who lived next door to her childhood home in rural Maryland. His diverse interests and skills set the stage for what would come much later for Kerger.**

Grandfather was a professor. And so he was a scientist, but he was also a great artist. And I think that those two pieces of him really influenced me a lot.

**Right brain, left brain.**

Yeah, exactly. He really helped kindle my interest in science. He was a physics professor. And so he did a lot of work in microwave technology. In fact, he started the public radio station in Baltimore. And so I think my path into public media was perhaps destined because of his influence. But he also was involved with the local theater, and he was involved in all the tech work. But he was a great storyteller. Some of my greatest memories when I was a kid was sitting with him and he would just spin these amazing stories about make-believe stories about animals in the woods and all these other kind of things. And it's just, I think it was probably one of the most fundamental formational things for me is growing up with someone that had that great creativity that shared that with.

**I'm sure grandparents who hear this will be very pleased.**

Yeah.

**And your parents, what were they like?**

My mother worked out of the home and my father was an engineer. And so, he also was very science-based. He was more of an authoritarian type. He went to the Citadel, which is the West Point of the South, for those that don't know what that is.

**Hardcore discipline.**

Very hardcore discipline. And so I think that's also where my grandparents actually then came in.

**They were the refuge.**

As I think is often with kids. You know, the parents are the ones that set all the rules and the grandparents are ones that bend them a little bit. But I grew up in a house where music was really important. We had a lot of Broadway show albums and we listened to music a lot and we were very engaged in the community. Both of my parents were very big volunteers. And so from the time that I was little, I was involved in everything from going door to door to raise money for the heart fund, to – my father was a football coach. And so, you know, I would – probably the most mortifying thing I ever did when I was a kid is when practice was canceled because of the weather, he would give me a list of all the boys to call to tell them they didn't have to show up for practice. And most of them were about my age. And it was just mortifying to have to go through and call everybody at home and say, you know, to come to practice, goodbye.

**That's funny. Now, speaking of the make-believe stories your grandfather told, the schools you attended in that rural area also sound like a make-believe land.**

I know.

**Featherbed Lane Elementary?**

I went to Featherbed Lane Elementary. It's like, where did you go to school? I went to Featherbed Lane Elementary. And then Johnnycake Junior High.

**Johnnycakes? Where does that name come from? Johnnycake Junior High.**

Johnnycakes oh, or something – this all goes back actually to the – in the case of Featherbed Lane, I think that's probably more Revolutionary War. But Civil War, you know, and Johnnycakes were something that were made that actually soldiers carried in their packs. And I think that, you know, people find them so unusual. But I think it's a reminder that that part of the country, Maryland is one of the original colonies, has a very different history than Hawai'i. And so I think part of even the names of those schools are reflective of a different culture.

**And what was high school?**

High school was a normal named high school.

**Okay.**

So I went to Randallstown High School, and Randallstown was the adjacent town. So that's like a regular school name.

**After high school, Paula Kerger's love of science and animals inspired her to work toward becoming a veterinarian. But things didn't quite pan out the way she wanted.**

**Veterinarian school, at least now – it's harder to get into than med school.**

Well, that is what happened when I entered college because I realized as I was applying to college that how difficult it was gonna be uhh, to become a veterinarian. So when I applied to college, I actually applied for pre-med. And I have an uncle that's a pediatrician and I have a great, I think she must be a great aunt, who was a very early doctor. So I also had a little bit of that in my family and I thought, okay, I may not be able to get into veterinary school, but maybe I can get into medical school. I mean, how weird does that sound?

But anyway, so I started pre-med and I really loved it until I hit organic chemistry, which I failed. And I, you know, it's the great leveler I've come to find out.

**That's so true. How many people have said that?**

Yeah, organic chemistry. And then suddenly I was in an existential discussion in my head about my future. And I decided that I would take a lot of humanities classes because I was really interested. I loved from the time I was little, I've loved to read. And in fact, one of my earliest memories was getting my library card and my town was small. We didn't even have a library. We had the bookmobile. And I remember going to the bookmobile. And you had to be able to sign your name to get a library card and practicing and practicing –

**Ohh..**

– so I could get my library card and then the whole world opened. And so I've always loved to read. So I took a lot of literature classes. I took some comparative religion classes and so forth. And it was, you know, it was just great. But then I thought, I'm going to live in my parents' house for the rest of my life because there's no jobs I'm preparing myself for. So, I went into business school and I'd been working. I started working when I was 16. My first job was at McDonald's. And I'd worked through college and I'd worked for a group of banks. And I didn't really think I wanted to work in finance. But I knew that if I had a business degree – I was really interested in marketing. And I thought, you know, maybe there's some path and there's some way. Graduated from school with my business degree, not a clue what I was going to do with my life. And I tell kids this all the time because I think a lot of kids think that you need to have your life planned out. And I was, you know, I had this now-checkered college career. All of my really difficult science courses at all colleges, electives. I had this, you know, I'd taken other classes that I think ultimately it's funny, when I back up and look at my college life, I actually have a pretty well-rounded, you know, generalist degree based on all the things I did. But I started looking for a job. And at the time in the want ads and I mostly was looking for marketing jobs and I went on some pretty terrible interviews. And one day, I stumbled on an ad in the newspaper for a job working for UNICEF in Baltimore, which is where I'd grown up. And I went and interviewed for the job, was completely unqualified for a job. It was running their office in Baltimore. But the guy who interviewed me called me back and he said, you know, you're not qualified for this job, but would you be interested in coming to Washington and working for UNICEF in our office there? And I took that job and it was just an amazing moment because I never realized you could work in the nonprofit sector. I thought that's just something you did. I thought that you volunteered and you did these things to pay back. But it just never – I'd never really put the pieces together. There were actually people in those organizations that actually managed them and did the work.

**Paula Kerger's nonprofit career would take her to New York City, where she'd always dreamed of living. After working in fundraising at several nonprofit organizations, including the Metropolitan Opera House, she received a challenging and life-changing job offer – to head fundraising at the New York City flagship PBS station, WNET. At the time, the station was going through financial woes.**

They had started a big capital campaign. Our station in New York had had a lot of difficulties. They'd gone through a couple layoffs. And I thought, you know, this is gonna be a very difficult job and, you know, all the other jobs I had interviewed, I knew for sure that I was going to be successful in it. And this one, I wasn't quite sure. They'd had all these financial issues and it wasn't- I wasn't really clear that it was gonna be successful. But I think oftentimes the greatest opportunities in life are when you take the risk. And I always say it's, you know, akin to jumping out of an airplane. I've never done that by the way. But, you know, you don't have to jump out of an airplane. You know, you can live a very happy life without doing that. But if you want the exhilaration of an experience, then you've got to be willing to lean forward and let go. And you don't get there by yourself. A lot of people help you. And I imagine that it has to be the most amazing experience. And you don't have to ever do it again, by the way. But, you know, it also can change your life. And so for me, it was that job. You know, I took the job and it was really difficult. But it changed my life. I did that work for a few years. We raised a significant amount of money for the station. And then I was starting to think about, oh, I wonder what I might do next? And the then-president said, would you be interested in becoming our station manager? That was the second really risky decision for me because suddenly I was gonna be the boss of people that had been my colleagues. And that's the hardest, I think, career change when you move into a role where suddenly you're in a different relationship with people that had been peers. And it was really hard, but it was again, coming into public television was hugely important. That probably was the pivotal move because it was from that position that I actually got the call to come to PBS.

**Now, there are very few people who run national organizations, especially those with a lot of constituencies. I mean, you have 330 or so public media stations that are members of PBS.**

Yeah.

**And then of course, there are politics and there are filmmakers. I mean, it's daunting. I mean, I can just imagine people saying I could do this part of it, but not that, not this and not all at the same time.**

It's complicated. And I always say, you know, if you want a lesson in humility, run a federated organization, because that's how we're structured. I think a lot of people don't understand PBS.

**Essentially it's a co-op.**

Yes, it's like a co-op we're a- we're a federated system. So every station is individual, locally owned, locally operated, locally governed.

**And many fiercely local.**

Fiercely local, fiercely independent. And the stations themselves, as you know, formed PBS as an opportunity to bring together the resources and create scale across the entire country to invest in programming and content that would enrich all.

**So essentially they're the bosses, but you lead them.**

Right.

**That's unwieldy.**

So a lot of responsibility, not absolute authority.

**I mean the mission makes a big difference. But there are a lot of differences in how our 330 stations operate.**

Right, and as people travel around the country and see different stations, you see that not every public television station is exactly the same, which is what makes it, I think, such an unbelievably important and rich organization because we are absolutely anchored at the local level. And I think of this station in particular, you do so much great work-

**Thank you.**

--that really talks about this community and the people that are here. And you're able to do that because you're from here. And the people that are in the station live here and are committed to making this community as vibrant and important as all the people that live here expect it to be. And that's what our best public television stations do.

**Your job right now is pretty much managing change – change in many aspects of the organization as you look at the country and media platforms and what people are interested in, how they communicate.**

Yeah. We are right now in an extraordinary sea change in media as there's so much change in the way that people are consuming content. And for those of our stations who have been very happy being just broadcast stations to be pushed to understand

that, yes, people will watch programming on their television station, but they'll also stream and they'll also be able to acquire content in multiple ways.

**The whole concept of broadcasting has vastly expanded.**

It has been completely stretched. And so, to get people to agree that the world has changed and that we're going to work together is complicated. And you can only do it if you build trust. And that's why the job -- I've been in the job 14 years, to be honest, because it has evolved so much. When I first took this job, Apple had announced that they were going to sell episodes of Desperate Housewives for \$1.99. And you think about that now and it's like, oh!

That's just you know, that seems so long ago.

**It seems so long ago.**

No Facebook; Netflix was sending you discs in the mail. I mean, the world was completely different. And the fact that it continues to change to me makes this really exciting. And to encourage this whole generation of younger people that are coming into public media to really think widely about what we can be is really exciting.

**PBS National President and CEO Paula Kerger says that being the head of an organization, especially one that reaches across the country and requires extensive travel, can be lonely. But she has support from a key person in her life.**

You can't be a leader and make everyone happy all the time. I mean, that's the -- and again, I talked to young people who are thinking about their careers or actually as I've mentored people that are making career decisions. You have to be really honest about what it means to be leader. It's lonely at times because you- you are very much aware that the buck stops with you. You also need to make the right decisions for the organization. And sometimes those are very hard decisions, particularly when it relates to other people. But you also need to be compassionate. You need to listen really carefully. I think you need to be able to make decisions. I see leaders fumble because they can't, you know, they need more information, more information. You're never going to perfect information, but you need to be able to move with deliberate haste and be able to work with your team in charting a direction and provide that leadership.

**What does it look like to be this national leader with all these constituencies and- and a personal life and you've got external stakeholders, you've got so many people within the system.**

Look, I was a first time CEO when I took this job and I looked to people that I trusted, as I have through my entire career. Actually I still do even 14 years into this job, you would think, I know what I'm doing. I do think I know what I'm doing. But we're always coming



into circumstances in our lives that are new and different and challenging. And so I think what has made the biggest difference for me and I think has really also contributed to the richness of my life is that I look to people that I trust that I can talk to. My husband is one. He's been my biggest proponent. Oftentimes when I've looked at jobs and haven't been sure that --

**Is he in education or media?**

Well, he is a -- he's a writer, but- and he worked for Norman Lear years ago. But his advice is really more about me personally. And, you know, I think that many of us and I think unfortunately more women have a tendency to do this, is we hold ourselves back. We wait for someone to tap our shoulder and say, here, we want you to take this opportunity. Or we will tell you all the reasons why we're probably not the right person.

**As you did in that job interview.**

Well I've done it at multiple interviews. Let me tell you maybe why I'm not the right person and not recognizing that no one interviews for a job that's perfect in every way. And he is a, he has been a great supporter of mine, in part because of the way he was brought up. His father died when he was 5 and was left with six kids and her husband, it was a traditional family, didn't let her work, and suddenly she had six kids and no money. And he tells a story which, you know, again, this is in our lifetime, Leslie. She worked overnights, so she'd be home to put the kids on the bus to go to school. She wanted to get a credit card and she went to the bank and they asked if she had an uncle or brother that could come and co-sign 'cause she was a woman and she was at the bank with her 10 year old son, and the bank officer said, I have an idea. My 10 year old husband cosigned a credit card so she could get her first credit card. He's had that credit card ever since.

**He signed as a 10 year old?**

As a 10 year old.

**They allowed him to?**

Because he was a boy.

**Ohh.**

And so I think that, you know, when- and so when you come up like in that kind of story and you watch your mother really struggling to put food on the table and to keep the family together, it changes you. And he has been my biggest advocate because he looks at me and he looks at what I've accomplished in my life and knows that I don't always get, even to this day, the benefit. I can't tell you how many events I go to, and

people say, oh let me introduce you to the president of PBS, and they shake my husband's hand. Still to this day –

**To this day.**

– you and I both know this. And so I think that we're blessed in our life. We have people that are our “yes.” And he has very much been my “yes.” So that's probably the most personal story I can tell you.

**And you're always traveling or you're often traveling. You have long work hours, but that still works for you. A longtime marriage.**

Longtime marriage.

**With your high school sweetheart.**

With my high school sweetheart. And, you know, it's like I prioritize my life. And even as much as I love my job, my husband does come first. And I think that, you know, again, I think about life is all balance. I believe that, you know, you have your professional life, which is important, but it is not your entire life. I think you have your personal life and your personal relationships, friendships, family. That is very important and that has to be cultivated. And it doesn't just happen. I see a lot of people that get into trouble because they just assume family will always be there. You know, you have to nurture that relationship. Your physical self, I think is really important, and your community self what you give back. But I think that you don't always have it in the equal balance. But I think all of those pieces are what makes a whole person. And when I finally leave this world, I want to feel like I've made this world a little better. Which was the- the “a-ha” moment when I got my very first job and I realized I could earn a paycheck and actually feel like I've done something that made a difference. And that's really the core of me.

**Paula Kerger, President and CEO of the national PBS, is gamely navigating changes of many kinds in the media industry—including technology and media formats, generational preferences, increasing polarization of opinions, and funding sources. She wants young people who are trying to chart out the rest of their lives to know that there's no such thing as a straight-and-narrow life path. Life, she says, is truly a journey. In her words, “why would you close any doors?” Mahalo to Paula Kerger, visiting Hawai'i from the East Coast, 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.**

So I was in umm, International House. I got a call one day umm, from a headhunter asking if I'd be interested in working at the Metropolitan Opera. Now, I love music. Didn't really know a lot about opera, but I've always wanted to work in the arts and almost talked myself out of the job, you know, because when I went to the interview, I said,

you know, I don't really know anything about opera and I'm not sure I'm the best person for you to hire. This is not the way you should conduct an interview.

**And how old are you at this point?**

Oh, I was 30, I guess.

**Okay.**

And the guy that was interviewing me who was the head of development at the Met said, "Do you like music? Do you like opera?" And I said yes. I said, "I just don't know as much as I'm sure other people that could be interviewing for this job." And he said, "We don't want fans at the stage door. We want people that are really serious and that really are interested in this work." If one had asked when I was a kid, "What would I have thought my career path?" Working at the Metropolitan Opera? Of course not. I mean, that was just crazy.

***For audio and written transcripts of all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox visit [PBSHawaii.org](http://PBSHawaii.org). To download podcasts of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox go to the apple iTunes store or visit [PBSHawaii.org](http://PBSHawaii.org).***