

# LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



**TITLE: Sherry Menor-McNamara**

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Well, I wake up around 3:45 in the morning, I enjoy working out and so, uh, I actually would go to the yoga class every morning and after that, work out by the gym on the treadmill or with weights. I know, it's kinda crazy, they call me crazy. I also enjoy it, because mentally, physically, it just helps me uh, focus, and also it helps me prepare for the day.

**She's focused, determined, and enjoys a challenge. Meet the super energetic CEO 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. Sherry Menor-McNamara is the president and CEO of the Chamber of Commerce Hawai'i. When she took the top position in 2013 at the age of 42, she became the youngest leader in the Chamber's 165 year plus history in Hawai'i, and the first female leader. Menor-McNamara continues to advocate business legislation and initiatives for the Chamber's twenty-one hundred business members in Hawai'i. Sherry was born in Tokyo, Japan, but was raised on Hawai'i Island where her father, the late State lawmaker and Hawai'i County executive, Barney Menor, had family roots.**

But one thing that I'm so proud about and I always like to talk about, is the fact that I'm from Hilo. I went to public school, Hilo Union, Waiakea Intermediate, Waiakea High School, and lot of people don't know that or they automatically assume I'm from Honolulu or went to private school, but I'm a proud public school graduate, uh, love going back home, something about walking off the plane and the air in Hilo is just so different, uh so, I'm just most proud about that. So, Grandpa and Grandma Menor, they immigrated from the Phillipines, uh, so first it was my grandpa who came to Hawai'i Island to work in the sugarcane fields...uh, then he brought his uh, wife, Grandma Paulina, and the oldest son, my Uncle Ben, and oldest daughter, Auntie Ella, and they moved...they came to Hawai'i Island, moved to Pāhoā, and four kids later, uh, they established roots in Pāhoā and all the kids were raised in Pāhoā as well. Uh, they were raised on a farm, so they had everything there from tangerines, mountain apples,

vegetables, uh, pigs, anthuriums, macadamia nuts, uh, so everything was on the farm and that's how they fed themselves.

**And so your father was part of that family and also uh, Ben Menor, who would grow up to become a...Associate State Supreme Court Justice.**

Yes, the first Filipino Associate State uh, Supreme Court Justice in the nation. He was also a State Senator. And so, for the Menor family, grandpa and grandma always emphasized public service and always to help others. My dad, uh, actually, was also in public service. He was in the House of Representatives. At that time, he represented Makiki, uh, and after that, he was asked by the Mayor of County of Hawai'i, Mayor Matayoshi, to work for him and so that's how we ended up moving to Hilo, when I was four years old, and so that's where I was practically raised.

**However, it's complicated, you actually were born in Japan, how did that happen?**

Yeah, so my mom, uh, she was born and raised in Japan and so uh, then she moved to Honolulu and at that time, her parents, her grand...uh, her father, was not doing well. So, she decided, when she's pregnant, to go back to Japan and I ended up being born there.

**So how did your father and your mother meet? Because she's a Japanese national and he's a Filipino-American uh, Senator, or was he at the time a politician?**

Yes, uh, so at that time, uh, my mom was a single mother, my older sister, and my dad is campaigning for the seat, the House of Rep seat, and he knocked on doors and he ended up knocking on the right door and if he had not knocked on the right door, I wouldn't be here. [LAUGHS] That's how they met.

**I never knew love was born going door-to-door.**

Right? [LAUGHS] One of the plus of campaigning.

**So, they met and that was...but then you were born...did they move to Japan?**

No, so they...they met and so that's when my mom had to go back to Japan, while she was pregnant, and then I was born there. But she came right back, and so, although I was born in Japan, I wasn't raised there. My whole life, my whole childhood life I was raised in Hilo.

**And were you an American citizen?**

Now that's where it gets complicated. [LAUGHS]

**Ok, what happened? How does that work?**

So, my mom and dad were not married, uh, when they had me, and so, because they were not married, I was just a Japanese citizen. So funny story is, I was going through some photo albums, their wedding album, and I'm all like, why am I in your wedding? [LAUGHS] And...

**They had not mentioned that to you?**

They did not until I was 16, and that's when I realized that, ok, I'm just a...I'm applying to college scholarships and one of the requirements was to be a U.S. citizen. So, it wasn't until I was 16 years old that I became a U.S. citizen.

**You went through the citizenship class?**

I did. I had to go through the process...yeah.

**Oh, did you feel badly that your parents hadn't told you?**

No, I thought it...they thought it was going to have a serious impact and I would be impacted by it, but I thought it was kinda funny.

**Can people guess your ethnicity? I bet they can't.**

Some...

**It's an unusual combo in Hawai'i. And probably many places.**

Yeah, other places, I get everything. I get everything. Not necessarily just Filipino and Japanese. But here, some people say I pull more Japanese and others say I pull more Filipino, so I get both sides, uh, some...there's a lot though, they'll realize I have both Japanese and Filipino in me.

**They can tell.**

They don't.

**Oh, they don't at all.**

They don't. It's one or the other.

**And you had already become...at 16, were you already the student body president or the class president at uh, Waiakea High?**

I was. I really, uh, enjoyed student government. So, from 6<sup>th</sup> grade, actually, I served as uh, I was student government president.

**I take it you were a good student, you were a student leader, where did that come from, do you think?**

I think it was my dad's uh, my dad's side of the...well, my mom and dad, it's that strong work ethic and also the value of helping each other out. Uh, public service was really important, especially my dad's side.

**And you enjoyed it, it wasn't...you're saying, aw, I gotta go do this because my parents want me to...**

No, I actually enjoyed it, I really did. Uh, I don't know, something about civic engagement, something about public service, uh, it was in me and I grew up with it and I think in a way, it's still in me. From my mom, who struggled, uh, living, coming to the US, living in Hawaii, without even knowing any English and starting up her own business, she recognized the importance of good education and studying hard. Her term was always *gambate, gambate*, try your best, never give up. My dad's side is more about public service and giving back to others, helping each other out, so I think it's a marriage of both of them.

**Now, after high school, and there's something about your bio that makes me think that it wasn't a straight shot for you, that you didn't pursue a goal...and this is so true of many successful people, their trajectory is not straight, they, you know, there are different places they stop off along the way. What happened between high school and becoming the head of...the first female President of the Chamber of Commerce of Hawai'i and the youngest president ever...what happened in-between?**

Wow, yes, I was not a straight shooter [LAUGHS]. I thought ok, in high school, I'm going to be an attorney, uh, and my mom, for her, it was important for her kids to go to college on the mainland. She didn't want us to stay in Hawai'i, not because Hawai'i didn't have good schools, it was more for us to be independent, explore, and meet different people, learn different cultures, uh, so, ended up going to UCLA, and I think I just got lost. I just didn't know what I wanted to do because it was just an entirely different environment, uh, from small town to a big city, and so, uh, every city I went or moved to, my idea of what I wanted to be changed. So, in L.A., of course, I wanted...the entertainment capital, I wanted to be in the entertainment industry. I remember one time I wanted to be an actor. [LAUGHS] Because I appeared on 9-0—Beverly Hills 90210 and Melrose Place as an extra, and I realized, ok, now, this is not...this

is not me, this is not me. No speaking parts, but...uh, and of course, my mom said, if you do that, I'm going to disown you [LAUGHS]. Uh, so, yeah, and then I moved to New York and New York is all about finance and...

**What did you do in New York?**

I ended up working for Estee Lauder companies in the PR department, yeah. So that was interesting. Um, it was nice because you get to test all the different scents coming out. Uh, and so, I lived in New York about three or four months, and then at the end they decided to offer me a full-time, permanent job, but at that time they offered...uh, Sony was, Corporation in Tokyo was looking for someone. So, I moved to Japan and worked for Sony Corporation and my project was the Sony Open because Sony had just acquired the title sponsorship, uh, so, but it required me to live in Japan, and I said, why not? And again, because I understood the culture, uh, we used to spend some time there and visit there often, uh, but working for a corporation, uh, in Japan, is much different than working here, and so there were some challenges, because back then, there weren't that many women in leadership positions or even in managerial positions, there was only a handful, so women were treated differently in their roles, so that was, that was a challenge, and something that I couldn't quite adapt to.

**Because women weren't seen as coming along in the pipeline, there was no pipeline for them, I presume.**

At that time.

**At that time.**

Right, right, it's very limited, uh, and that was not a priority, uh, and so, that's when I decided, ok, I think two years...

**Two years sounds like a long time to stick with it, if you felt that way.**

Yeah, fortunately I got to come back and forth, because my project was based in Honolulu, so I got to come back and forth to Honolulu, so kind of get away from it. Every time I said, ok, I'm gonna try, I'm gonna stick it out, I'm gonna stick it out. Uh, but after two years, I said that's it. I don't regret it though, because it allowed me to uh, it helped me realize a lot that we do offer...a lot that being a US citizen and being here, and growing up in Hawaii, uh, that's so different in Japan, but also recognize the importance to understand different cultures.

**After working in different industries in Los Angeles, New York, and Tokyo, Sherry Menor-McNamara returned to Hawai'i and enrolled at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa in not one, but two, post-graduate schools.**

I decided to go back to school...went back to law school and business school, and it was during that time that I worked at the State Legislature.

**Now, when you say law school and business school, you took advantage of that...didn't they have a dual-program where you get your law degree and an executive Masters in Business?**

Yeah, so the first day in law school, I realized I did not want to practice.

**Why? Why did you decide you didn't want to practice?**

I don't know, it just wasn't me. It just wasn't me. I could feel that I didn't want to be a litigator, I didn't want to be an attorney doing contracts, it just...but it felt that this could be helpful.

**Was it because you wanted to pick your client?**

Uh [LAUGHS], I don't know what it was. Maybe it was all the readings. [LAUGHS] And the cases. But I just knew that it wasn't for me, so that's when I decided to join the JD/MBA program.

**But you...but you decided to finish law school?**

I did decide to finish. I figured one year down, why not two more years? And then that's when I learned about the joint program, uh, so I decided to invest one more year.

**How much work is that? I just can't imagine, because you also were doing jobs on the side, too, right? Weren't you picking up jobs?**

Yeah, so, for my final year, I went to law school, law classes in the morning and business classes in the evening. So in-between, I actually had two jobs.

**What were the jobs?**

So, one was working at the State Capitol and the other was working for ESPN Sheraton Hawaii Bowl.

**You don't have any trouble getting jobs, do you?**

Uh, I wouldn't say that. [LAUGHS] But I've been fortunate to be able to work these different jobs that provided great opportunities, I got to meet wonderful people.

**And one of those people was future husband, John McNamara, who was then an Associate Athletics Director for the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. However, their first evening together got off to a rocky start.**

We had an event at Murphy's Bar and Grill, and he walked in, late, I wasn't too happy about that because I was running that event, so...we walked to the...he came to the registration desk and I immediately said, you're late. And he knew I was not happy, but throughout the night, we ended up talking with each other and one by one people were offering me a ride home and he kept saying, I'll take her home, I'll give her a ride home. Uh, in the end it was just the two of us and so, he said, ok, well, I guess it's time to go, and he tells me, uh, there's something I have to tell you, and I went, okay, no, what is he going to tell me? Everything...all these thoughts were coming through my...going through my head...and he goes, I don't have a car. [LAUGHS] I'm like, great, he's lucky I didn't live on the other side of the island, that would've been expensive taxi fare, and I lived right down the street, so yeah, and the rest is history. Twelve years later, in fact we make twelve years uh, in a couple of days.

**You didn't hold that against him.**

I did not, yeah.

**What was it about him that made you think he's the one?**

I think it was his laid-back style. He was more mature [LAUGHS] and just a generally sincerely nice person, and so...sometimes you just know and we just hit it off and he's been the most supportive person of my career.

**It was also during this period of completing law school and business school at UH Mānoa, that Sherry Menor-McNamara found her professional passion.**

I found my passion when I worked at the Legislature, I found my passion, I knew that based on all the other experiences, this is what I wanted to do.

**How did you know that? What did you feel? What happened?**

I think it goes back to my childhood and the values of public service and helping others and when I work at the State Capitol, you just see how policy can impact the livelihoods of people and I enjoy the public policy making process and different stakeholders coming to the Legislature expressing their points of view. And so, I knew I wanted to do something in that arena, but obviously had law school loans, so...

**There's a lot of persuasion, because essentially, government relations, is it being a lobbyist? In this case?**

Essen...it's being an advocate, essentially, yes, a lobbyist advocate. And uh, so, I knew I wanted to do something in that arena and I graduated and applied to different firms that had government affairs posit...departments, but none had positions available, but this one firm did. One of the persons called me up and just wanted to meet, uh, and we did, and she said, oh, by the way, there's a government affairs position at the Chamber of Commerce. So I thought, ok.

**But you were looking for a law firm, right?**

Well, because for their government affairs, um, positions, but none were available.

**So there you go.**

There you go...

**You get...you have a government affairs position for the Chamber...**

Chamber...and had no idea what the Chamber's all about.

**And you had a business degree as well.**

I did.

**A Masters.**

Mm hmm...and then once I learned what the Chamber's role was, uh, I decided, ok, I'm going to take this. I had no idea what lobbying was all about.

**Isn't that interesting? So, the Chamber of Commerce wasn't on your radar, but you had...coincidentally trained to be...trained in legal and business matters and that's exactly the skillsets, you know, that're helpful for the job that you have.**

Right, so it worked out perfectly.

**But it wasn't a plan?**

It wasn't a plan. No, it was not a plan at all, it just came up by a-a-a coincidental meeting with someone who did work at a law firm and who told me about the opportunity. And my mom is a small business owner and so, she...I knew what she had to do to run a small business in Hilo, and she still has it, for more than 40 years already, and growing up, we saw her struggle, we saw the struggles of running a small businesses...the challenge, the trials, the tribulations and so, uh, to be able to...uh,



represent, be part of an organization that represents businesses of all sizes, but especially the small business community, uh, it's very gratifying.

**You did break a glass ceiling, there had been no female President of the Chamber of Commerce of Hawai'i, uh, and there had been no one as young as you. How did that happen?**

The Board was very supportive of having me as the next President CEO. I don't think they saw it as a first female CEO. I don't think some of them even knew that...but I think it was more of a recognition that they needed a succession plan, and uh, groomed me to be the next President and CEO of the Chamber.

**Was your, um, your gender ever an issue for you? Or for anyone else?**

Yeah, in Hawaii it has not...it's a very supportive business community and so I've been very fortunate in that way. Being...leading the business organization here, we're involved on the national level too, so I sit on different boards, and there's still a lot of work to do in the Chamber community. Uh, for example, the Council of State Chambers, State Chambers CEO, there's only five female women who are CEOs.

**Nationwide, five?**

Yes, and I'm the only Asian. So, there's a lot more work to be done on the national level, but they're recognizing that diversity and inclusion are critical to ensure that we can create a positive climate, uh, climate

**When you're one of the few women on these national, nationally oriented Chamber organizations, do you feel as listened to as the men on the panels?**

Not necessarily a type-A where I'm on the go, like to talk, uh, go to the meetings there, there's a lot of talking. My style is more just listen, I like to listen more than talking, and so, but when I do talk, I hope that I bring another perspective, coming to Hawaii, we're unique, we have a um, I think I have a different voice that is...important in conversations, and so when I do go to these meetings on the mainland, uh, I do speak up when I need to and I...my colleagues have appreciated that, so far.

**Have you had a mentor in navigating your way in this different culture? I mean, in Hawai'i you knew the landscape after working there for a few years but once you were President you were in another ecosystem, too.**

It is, yeah, and so, one of the mentors I look up to is Connie Lau, CEO of Hawaiian Electric, who broke many ceilings, and I remember sitting down with her and asking her...because at that time, I was just trying to find my voice, and asking her, are there

times when you just feel like...what we just talked about, about speaking up and uh, with work and being the only woman in many different environments, because she sits on a lot of national boards, she goes to a lot of national meetings, and she just said, Sherry, you just gotta remember: who you work for, what organization you work for, what's it's role, and if you're willing to do that, if you believe in the mission, then you need to step up and you need to be ensured that your voice is heard.

**Is there anything on this...on your strategic plan horizon that you see might represent a U-turn or a shift of some kind or dropping projects? Big, something big?**

Yeah, so one of the initiatives, and that's something that I am going to roll out at our annual luncheon, but just to give you a hint is, again, to play a more...ah, and this is nothing new, to play a more proactive, uh, role, and one of the areas or pillars that we're focusing on is on education work force development...and to help students recognize that there's various careers out there and not every student will go to college, um, some may go directly to careers, and that's ok, but if the business community can play a role in connecting education to a career path, then I think that's exciting because the work force is changing, the skill-sets required is changing, and business community needs to play a role in ensuring that uh, the talent pipeline is there and our future work-force is prepared for these constantly changing jobs.

**Sometimes the challenges get very um, that word again, complicated, because of um, because of relationships that have built up and uh, uh, people who are intractable in certain ways, have you ever faced that?**

Yes, definitely in our line of work, uh, I remember my dad and I having breakfast, at that time Sunrise Café is no longer there in Hilo...

**I know, too bad.**

I know, they had the best fried rice, uh, and I remember he ran into someone and I knew that they're both on opposite sides and I asked him, how can you still talk to this person? They don't agree with you. And he said, look, there's gonna be disagreements, but in the end, if you can still shake hands, give them a hug, that's all that matters, because you can agree to disagree, and so, while they're...not everyone may agree with our position, as long as we listen and hear what their positions are, understand their perspectives and respect them for their perspectives. We need that kind of constructive conversations, but equally important to have that kind of respect and then in the end, be able to shake hands or give each others a hug.

**You know, there's a long-time friend of yours who's been quoted as saying, you know, we know, we know what she's going to do eventually, but right now she loves the Chamber, eventually she is going to run for office.**

Oh [LAUGHS], well, you put me on the spot with that one.

**Well, election year is coming up, so I thought I would ask.**

I truly enjoy my job at the Chamber right now, um, I'm not to say that I haven't not thought about it, I think growing up in a public service family, it's something that I've always thought about and I know that at some point, I want to enter public service in some capacity, whether it's running for office or working for uh, a department, I don't know what that looks like, but...definitely...

**So, you're not thinking about certain public offices?**

Uh, we'll see, we'll see...

**Under Sherry Menor-McNamara's leadership, the Chamber of Commerce Hawai'i won national recognition as State Chamber of the Year in 2018. One of Sherry's on-going initiatives is Hawai'i On the Hill, a two-day event in Washington D.C., that showcases Hawai'i businesses and products to members of Congress and the Washington community. At the time of this conversation in 2019, representatives of 120 Hawai'i businesses had attended the annual event, which is a partnership between the Chamber of Commerce Hawai'i and U.S. Senator Maizie Hirono. Mahalo to Sherry Menor-McNamara of Kaka'ako, O'ahu, and thank you for joining us for this edition of Long Story Short on PBS Hawai'i. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.**

For some, they know what they want and that's...it's a straight path, and that's perfectly fine. But for those who think, well, I don't know what I wanna do and I'm already 20-something or now 30-something, or even 40-something, for that matter, it's ok, it's ok not to be on a straight path because along the way, no matter how crooked, curvy, circular, or whatever shape that path is, uh, every step there's something to learn from.

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