



**TITLE: JACK LAW**

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**You were well-known in town and made a name for yourself as somebody who had a lot of business savvy, successful, and you were probably the most openly gay person in Hawaiʻi.**

Yeah, you know, one of my first interviews in uh, Honolulu Magazine, actually, they tried to put me into a category as a gay businessman, and I said, no, please don’t do that. I’m a businessman who happens to be gay. There’s a big difference, you know.

**Knowing nothing about running a bar, he and a business partner opened Hula’s Bar and Lei Stand, a nightclub where everyone could come and feel safe. Meet this entertainment entrepreneur who is also known for his civil rights advocacy, 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. Jack Law says he always knew he wanted to be in the entertainment business, but he didn’t know how he was going to make that happen. Coming to Hawai’i as a college student, he happened to meet some influential people who led him on his path to becoming a successful, longtime nightclub owner in Honolulu. Starting with Hula’s Bar and Lei Stand.**

**Law says he really didn’t know he was gay until after he left his home state of Michigan and moved to Hawai`i. Growing up in Detroit, he knew he didn’t always fit in and he had a difficult time getting along with his father. He later learned that his father may have had issues other than trying to deal with a son who was different.**

He gave me his work-ethic, I can say that for sure, he was a high-school drop-out and a self-taught mechanical engineer and very, very smart, as my mother was, who was also a high-school drop-out. Of course they dropped out of school because of the second World War, as many people did but he didn’t take advantage of the G.I. Bill, I mean, he did not go back to school and learn, everything he did was self-taught. But he was a very, very, very hard person to be with. And um, and a hard person to grow up with. He wasn’t mirthful at all. My mother was the complete opposite of him, you know? I found out later, and my sister-in-law, my brother’s widow, worked around the hospitals and stuff and we’re still very close, and she lived with my parents before they died, she took care of them, and she told me that she really thought my dad has Asperger disease and uh, once she told me that, it really, sort of the sun came out. I realized that it was my dad was suffering from this wasn’t something that would be diagnosed in his, during his time, I always thought it was because of me, that he acted the way he did, but then I realized it was just because that was him.

**Why did you have that feeling?**

Well, I think a lot has to do with being gay...and I think, in the looking back at it, I was a typical gay boy at five years old until I graduated from high school or whatever, I thought I was straight, but I was uh, very as they say, well, they don’t say that very much anymore, but light in the loafers, you know? And I think I was a little bit of an embarrassment to my dad, yeah. And uh, I think that’s how, why he reacted the way he did. But my brother, who is not gay, and was a very much of a jock, he treated my brother worse than he treated me, so, so much for that theory.

**And so now that you believe your father probably had Asperger’s, the way he acted to you was probably the way he acted to everyone.**

Yeah, I mean, he uh, he, you know, he, you know, he never had a lot of friends, and uh, he just uh, he just was not very gregarious, you know? At all.

**But you grew up thinking you were less than because you didn’t have your father’s approval?**

He was a very good father as far as a provider goes, but uh, I mean, but he was not one that would take you out to the ball game or go fishing with you or almost anything.

**And your mom was a giver and an extrovert?**

Yes, yes, great sense of humor, you know, just uh, you know, and smart, smart, smart, smart, whatever my dad would have her do, she would learn to do. She taught herself to be a secretary, she taught herself to be a bookkeeper, she was a telephone operator, when they had telephone operators, and she was an Avon lady, and she was always uh, in spite of it, and she, she was, she was abused by him and not like you would think of being abused. He just was so mean to everybody that he, that he would be uh, he would shut her down all the time, you know? But she would always, you know, just be cheerful and happy and everything else and she would, it would just be like water on the duck’s back. And there were many times growing up I wish they would’ve gotten a divorce because um, I wanted my mother to have a certain amount of happiness. But it never happened. They were together all the way until the end of their life, which was pretty recently.

**You thought your dad held your being gay against you, when in fact he might not have, but, what was your struggle like?**

My struggle was really, why didn’t I fit in? I mean, I dated girls, I tried to fit in, but I just didn’t fit in. I couldn’t throw a ball to save my life. I remember my gym teacher calling me a sissy, you know? I didn’t think I was smart, at all, uh, because uh, I, I never got good grades because I would always freeze up when it came time for a, uh, taking a test or whatever, so I really didn’t think I was smart and I didn’t think I, you know, so it was all these things, but I just pushed on and uh, it was hard. It was hard being in uh, going to school and just thinking you were a second-class citizen and not knowing why.

**Did you have a dream that you wanted to accomplish?**

Well, you know, one of the things I did uh, when I, my latter days in Detroit is, I worked as a warehouse uh, boy, in a record company, and I would pull records and you know, pack them up to be shipping to the record stores and stuff like that, and that gave me a chance to be around uh, Hitsville, U.S.A., and all the excitement in the record companies in Detroit, and that gave me the bug of being in the entertainment business. I really wanted to be in the entertainment business, somehow, and that was sort of like a very loose plan, but I didn’t know what I wanted to do.

**What brought you to Hawaiʻi?**

I was going to community college and I met these three guys and somehow they found out that you go to University of Hawaiʻi and the tuition was really inexpensive for out-of-state students, there was no difference in the tuition for out-of-state, in-state students, and they said, let’s go. And of course, at that time, Hawaii was such an ex--, in ‘66 if was such an exotic, far off place, and certainly because I lived in Detroit and I was used to growing up in Florida and Michigan winters were so unnatural for me, and I had a paper route, which was really awful, to go to Hawaii was a dream, and I remember saying to my dad, I’m going to go to Hawaii to go to school, and my dad looked at me, put down his paper and looked at me very sternly and says, no you’re not. Well, you know, I did.

**Jack Law defied his father and came to the Islands with his friends to attend the University of Hawai’i at Manoa. As it turns out, his social life won out over school and that’s when doors started opening for him to pursue his dream of getting into the entertainment business.**

**Hula’s Bar and Lei Stand opened near the old Kūhiō Theater on the ʻEwa side of Waikīkī in 1974 and it later moved to its current home on the Diamond Head end of Waikīkī. In the summer of 2020, Hulaʻs marked its 46th anniversary amid the economic downturn and uncertain future caused by COVID-19.**

When I lived here and I was going to school, I lived in Waikīkī, and I still didn’t know I was gay, or if I knew I was gay I was fighting it terribly. And I met this pilot for TWA who was doing this flight between the mainland and Vietnam because the Vietnam War was still going on, and he literally picked me up at Perry Boys’ Smorgy on Lewers Street, I was having a cup of coffee, it sort of opened a brand-new world for me that I didn’t know, and it was great. Every time he would be in town, he would look me up, and but after about six months, he says, you know, there’s somebody I want to introduce you to that’s here in town, and he took me to The Kāhala, which was then the Kāhala Hilton Hotel, to meet uh, this gentleman and to have lunch, and it was John Lehman of Lehman Brothers, and he was going back and forth for banking during the war, and he says, there’s a guy down the street I want you to meet because I know he’ll, you’re a fine young man, I know he’ll take care of you, and he was talking about Bob Magoon who lived on Diamond Head Road, his family lived on Diamond Head Road, and on the way back, we stopped uh, we stopped at uh, Bob’s house and Bob had a copy of Billboard Magazine on his coffee table, because he was a songwriter, and we, of course I knew Billboard Magazine from the record stores and we started talking about that and that’s what started our friendship and that to, to, Bob was, uh, part-Hawaiian, part-Chinese, already had a Broadway musical starring Don Ameche, loosely based on his family history, called 13 Daughters, his Chinese history and uh, he wanted to write a new song, so we got together and started this band called uh, The Potted Palm, now this was the 60s, so we called the band The Potted Palm and the name of the song was This House of Grass. And it was a very psychedelic song about a double entendre about a house of grass, that Bob had wrote, and that’s basically what started it, and I was hooked. And at the time, the liquor laws required places of liquor establishments to have live music in order to dance and you had to have like a band of four members that played three hours in order...and between the band breaks you could dance to recorded music and that’s how my thing started with that, and then I started managing other bands and other things like that. But it was really wonderful at the time because it made live music really required in Waikīkī and you couldn’t swing a cat in Waikīkī without going into a bar with live entertainment. Every bar had live entertainment and it was a lot of bars at Waikīkī at the time, and it was uh, it was quite fun, and when they changed that rule, and then live music sort of died out and like I got involved into uh, having a night club of my own with Bob Magoon, Eaton Magoon Junior, and um, so, that’s how that is and of course, I went into...had Hula’s Bar and Lei Stand which was one of the first discotheques as well, and that’s what happened.

**Of course some of our younger viewers won’t know Hula’s Bar and Lei Stand in its original location which is under this large banyan tree with lights, that was just kind of a magical place.**

It was so idyllic, it really was, across the street from the Art Deco Kūhiō Movie Theatre, you know, it was, yeah, it was really special. I bless the fact that I came to Hawaiʻi, you know, that the stars lined up and I bless the fact that I met Bob Magoon, because he was somebody that believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself. He was somebody that believed in me when my dad didn’t believe in me.

**Why do you think he believed in you?**

He saw something in me that I didn’t see myself. And he was very good. He was a very good people-person and I think the reason for that is because he was, uh, he was just a child of Hawaiʻi and he just really, his parents were such wonderful people. You know, they knew that he was gay, and they didn’t care...Bob Magoon, who was a Yale graduate and a Hastings Law School graduate, they just let Bob be the way he was and they just nurtured him all the way through and that just radiated off of him.

**He had such talent and I know that many people probably won’t remember this, but he wrote Numbah One Day of Christmas, that we all still sing at family get-togethers at Christmas time.**

Yeah.

**And what was your goal...what were you looking at in terms of clientele for that uh, for that nightclub?**

Well, you know, it was on Magoon property at the time and the tenant that was on there, was actually a falling down house that used to belong to one of the Magoon aunties and then they turned it into a commercial thing, it was a laundry, and we were doing some real-estate, I had my real-estate license at the time, and he had his real-estate license and he was building Eaton Square, Eaton Square was named after his father, and uh, 1717 Ala Wai and...and he said, this property became available, let’s open a bar. And I said, Bob, we don’t know anything about the bar business. He says, oh, how hard could it be? You know, that was one of the wonderful things about Bob because details didn’t bother him, he just always looked at the-

**Were you the detail guy?**

I was the detail guy, yeah. And uh, and of course, after three years, I proved we didn’t know anything about the bar business.

**I understand you would go traveling to look at the latest trends and you would be the first to get them in Hula’s or the Wave.**

Bob Magoon brought me to New York my first time and we stayed at the Plaza Hotel...lower middle class kid from Detroit, that was just head-spinning, and uh...but then he gave me the New York bug, so I would go to New York at least twice a year every year and I would see what was happening in the club scene and I would, and I would...by bringing it back to Hawaiʻi, I was like 24 months ahead of anybody else. And we were the first ones to have video, video in a nightclub in Hawaiʻi...as a matter of fact, one of the very few in the world. But, but uh, we did cater to the gay clientele and that’s when Studio 54 was big in New York and everything else, but it was, Hula’s, until today, it’s never been exclusively gay. Everybody has come to Hula’s, and walked through Hula’s door of a certain age. And um, and it has made...it’s sort of like Hawaiʻi, you know? It’s like everybody is welcome and everybody comes and...

**And everybody’s different.**

And everybody’s different, yeah, and that’s what it makes it interesting because if you have the certain type of clientele or same type of customer or same type of visitor that comes to the islands, all of a sudden the place gets really boring, you know? It’s just like, what is the excitement? What is there?

**But how did you make everybody feel at home? Because really I think um, whatever one’s orientation was, everybody felt fine going in there for music, and drinks, and dancing.**

Well, we had a mantra that we’d tell the employees is create a safe space for everybody to have a good time, and you know, I think that was key. Just everybody felt safe. We made sure that the security at the door was, was, was good and...

**Security was good? What did that entail?**

It means make sure that the people that worked the door, because that’s the first face you see when you walk in, uh, knows their job. I mean, so many places similar to Hula’s, they don’t...the last person they train is their door-staff, and uh, that’s really the first and last person you see and that’s the person that makes you safe, you know? As a matter of fact, after we opened Hula’s in 1974, uh, about five years later we opened Wave Waikiki down the street, and it was a four o’clock club and it was a totally different vibe and everything else, but I made sure that the security, the guys at the front door, really know their job, and our main doorman was a Samoan Talking Chief, or a son of a Samoan Talking Chief, and everybody knew Mack. And he, he made sure that everything ran smooth and everything else and if anybody caused any trouble, they were 86’d for six months and everybody knew that. So, I mean, the safety is the first thing, and of course, once you get the safety thing out of the way, you gotta be able to entertain them. And the entertainment part is really, very, very...you know, part of it. And the entertainment isn’t just the music that comes out of the speaker. We were one of the first video bars, or the videos on the screen. It’s gotta be also the, you know, the palm tree in the corner and how the bartender looks, because what you’re doing is you’re creating a, you’re creating a live TV show, really, and you want people to be, you know, just part of this fun. And I think that that’s uh, you know, and it still works, that formula still works at the Hula’s today.

**And you still enjoy the nightclub scene?**

I do, I really do. You know, I say, it sure beats picking pineapples.

**Jack Law of Honolulu managed other bands in his early days, including such notable musicians as Al Lopaka and Ed Kenney, father of chef Ed Kenney. He also owned other successful nightclubs, including the Wave Waikiki and Malia’s Cantina.**

**In addition to his nightclub ventures, Jack Law has used his business skills to advocate for civil rights. He was a founder of the Life Foundation, a nonprofit organization that fought to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS and to improve the quality of life of people affected by the disease. He also created the Rainbow Film Festival, which celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in 2019.**

Adam Baran, who was one of my first employee, friends, who we hired as a video editor. He knew how to edit together music videos. He is the first person I know that came down with AIDS. And um, and he died and it was very tragic. And it was long before we knew anything about it. And I wanted to keep his memory alive, so I started the Adam Baran Honolulu Film Festival, and uh, and then it evolved over a period of time to what it is today, The Honolulu Rainbow Film Festival in Memory of Adam Baran. Even though I’m not on the Board anymore, and I’m just on the periphery, um, it’s still an organization that’s very close to my heart and it is one of the most respected LGBT Film Festivals in the world.

**I think it was in ’81 that the first case of AIDS was identified, although nobody knew what caused it, or what it was, but they knew something was happening and it seemed to be mostly happening to gay men, and there’s a lot of fear, including in Hawaiʻi, and there were a lot of people getting fatally ill.**

I really experienced this first hand, because when Hula’s would close at two o’clock in the morning, people would go down the street to the Wave, which is open ‘til four o’clock, and everybody just got along, it didn’t matter, everybody was dancing with everybody else on the dance floor. And then, when AIDS came out, all of a sudden, it was like someone took a switch and turned it off, because nobody knew why, what this AIDS thing was all about, I don't even think they had a word for it back then. You didn’t know if you were going to get it by someone sweating on you on the dance floor.

**And nobody had any idea how it was transmitted.**

Nobody had any idea how it was transmitted and so, my business really... it just cut in half, because people didn’t want to go out anymore.

**Were you personally afraid at that time?**

Oh, I was so afraid. I was...I remember one of my trips going to New York and of course, you know, New York was a hotbed of AIDS. And uh, and I was a typical gay man in New York, you know? And I remember flying to New York, reading Time Magazine and reading about this disease and you get cold, you get night sweats at night, and fatigue and all this other stuff, were the first uh, symptoms, and I remember my blood running cold, right there, I thought, oh my god, I got it. For reasons I’ll never figure out, I never got it. And um, but I lost so many friends, so many employees.

**How many?**

Well over a hundred.

**Wow.**

The one thing I can say about AIDS, is a positive thing, it brought LGBT out of the closet. Before it was so deep in the closet, nobody would talk about it. People who were gay, LGBT, unless they were a transsexual, who I think were the bravest people in the world that would go out in the street in dresses and stuff like that, but the people that, the regular people that looked like me, they could hide their sexuality and everything, this brought it out of the closet. AIDS brought it out of the closet because it just couldn’t be there in the closet anymore. And uh, and from AIDS is where our, uh, where everything started as far as our, uh, being uh, having the freedoms that the LGBT community has today. It’s too bad it had to start from such pain, but that’s where we are, thank god.

**Jack Law continues to be an influential advocate for gay rights in Hawai’i. In 2019, he was given the ‘Business of Pride’ Career Achievement award by Pacific Business News,’ for going above and beyond to make Hawai’i’s workplaces more inclusive.**

**Mahalo to nightclub owner Jack Law of Honolulu for sharing your stories with us, and thank you, for joining us. For PBS Hawai’i and Long Story Short, I’m Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.**

I came to the University and I did not graduate, but I took a lot of Business 101 courses, which really...I recommend to anybody, because what it did was it gave me enough education where I know how to read a balance sheet, but I also know when to call the CPA, you know? I know how to read a contract, but I know when to call a business lawyer, you know? I know how to put together an ad campaign, but I also know when to bring in the experts to do something, you know? So, that’s, that’s why it was so important. And the University of Hawaiʻi, even back in those days, they really provided a very good education.

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