

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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I became much more comfortable in the classroom, and I began to get a little bit tired of football. I don't think I succeeded there in the—on the football field as much as I would have liked to. I succeeded, it paid, for school, and all of those things. But there was a sense—there was still a sense of—of—incompleteness.

Life is a challenge, but you accept the challenges for what it is, and how it's presented to you. How you encounter and how you handle that, uh ... you know, it's all up to the individual.

For me, athletics is definitely my success in my career. And I think it's just there are so many things; you learn, you—you take risks, um, you fail but you get right back up. You know, there's challenges to be had, there's discipline, there's um, others to be considered on the team, but each person has to do their responsibility in order to make the organization work.

I enjoyed uh, the—the teaching and the coaching. I'm walking downtown, and hey, somebody—Coach, how you doing? Yo know. And—and this kid I taught thirty-something years ago, and they don't forget you.

These exceptional athletes all excelled in their sport and later succeeded in the game of life on their own terms. “When Their Playing Days Were Over”, 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. They were all standouts in their field of sport: Michigan State All American football player Bob Apisa, Farrington High School football coach Skippa Diaz, University of Hawaii Wahine Volleyball player Mahina Eleneki Hugo and Punahou School football great Al Harrington. When their playing days were over, they each faced and met the challenge of transitioning to a new life, after sports.

Hard work and tenacity are words often used to describe our first guest, Samoa-born Punahou School star and Stanford University football alumnus Al Harrington. In a Long Story Short conversation in 2012 Harrington remembers returning home, in the mid 1960s to work on the feature film “Hawaii”. A series of chance encounters launched a variety of career paths as an educator, an actor and Waikīkī showroom headliner.

And we do the movie, and we make good money. And Heather is pregnant. So, I gotta make up my mind whether the movie's over, and whether—I gotta make up my mind whether I'm gonna go back to Hollywood and an—and play the game in Hollywood, an—an—an—an—and read for parts, et cetera, et cetera, or uh, go back to law school. And I run into Dr. Fox. And Dr. Fox says, Eh, Al, good to see you. You know. He says, What are you doing? I says, I just got through with the movie uh, Hawaii, and I'm thinking of going to Hollywood. He says, Oh, no, no, no, no, this is what you're going to do now. You're gonna go back to the university and get a t—your teacher's credentials, and you're gonna come and teach at Punahou. And so ... the life changes again, you know. And so, I go to Punahou—I mean, I do exactly that. I get my credentials, and then I—I start teaching at Punahou. And I love it. Absolutely loved the process. And then ... while doing the—and while doing the teaching and the coaching, I'm doing motivational speaking for—for various schools. You know. For various teams. You know, they'd have their athletic banquet, and people would call me and say, Come and talk to our kids. So, I go and talk to the kids. And in the audience in one of those speeches that I ma—I do, is the casting director for Hawaii Five-O. Uh, de—Ted Thorpe was his name. Ted Thorpe. And he comes up to me after the speech and he says to me ... I have a script that you might be interested in. And he gives me the script, he says, Read the script over and call me. So I take the script, read it. And ... it's bad guy, you know, but it takes a lot—I mean, it takes good—bad guys to make the good guys look good. So, I get that part. And then, I'm—I'm—I'm—I'm uh, I'm in the door of Hawaii Five-O. And meanwhile—or I'm teaching an—and loving it, and then pretty soon they give me uh, a uh, a part every ... uh, every year, every season, for four seasons.

Different bad guys.

Yeah; different bad guys. Interesting, yeah? That I really wanted to be an actor at Stanford. Doesn't work out; the door is closed over there, or I closed the door. And then uh, and then—and then law school and all of this other stuff happened. And boom, we come back. My adopted father, he had this great sense of big picture. And I—if I—if I've learned anything uh, I think I learned to keep looking at the big picture. You know, wherever you are in—in the—in the scheme of things, look at the big picture an—and be sure you're moving in the right direction.

And you're always willing to work for it.

Yeah. When we got into the business industry, you know, no—who wanted to see uh, a Polynesian guy with a with a Irish name, an—and uh, and—and he's doing a Hawaiian show. I had to analyze the market and figure out how am I gonna get so that I can get as many people in my showroom as Don Ho got in his showroom. Or, Danny Kaleikini got in his showroom. I looked at the—the what you call, the marketing process, and I—and I found out that when the tourists come, they come on these big planes or beginning, they come on these big planes now. They would have a briefing for them. And in these briefings, they would sell them the tours. So I go call on a tour company and I said, I'll come in an—and do your briefings for you, help you with your briefings. I can be—I told them, I can be a ... a celebrity in your briefing. And I'll come in, and I'll pitch all of the—pitch all of the sales that you have in there, and then

I'll pitch my show. You don't have to pay me to be there. So they said, Okay, we'll take a chance. And one guy that took a chance on me was—uh, was uh, was uh, St. Louis graduate uh Cal Lui, who owned Hawaiian Adventure. So I—I call on Cal Lui, and Cal Lui happened to be in my same—same time at Punahou, and he was at St. Louis. So he said, Okay, brah, I'll give you a chance. So, I go to his briefings, uh, in the morning at—'cause the had their briefing at seven o'clock in the morning. And I go down there, I pitched the—the whole briefing, and sell more tickets than they would have sold if I wasn't there. But I sell more tickets on my—on—on my show at the same time.

So, rising tide lifted all boats.

Right. Exactly.

Al Harrington later volunteered in the community, enjoys reading and retains an agent to find voice over jobs in the entertainment industry.

Our next guest was known as the “Bull of Kalihi.” The late educator and sports figure Skippa Diaz was the head football coach at his alma mater, Farrington High School, where he was an all-star lineman. The history and business major would earn all-conference honors with Oregon State University and later played professionally in the Canadian Football League. His crushing handshake and aloha spirit were often remembered by those who were influenced and inspired by the coach with a big heart for Hawaii's youth. At the time of our conversation in 2008, a recent 4-year relocation to Wisconsin demonstrated how Diaz's life of service extended beyond the playing field and the classroom. This time it was for family, to help care for his wife Mary's elderly parents and special-needs brother.

My wife uh ... found out that, while we were here, that Mom, Dad, and Butchie were going to be put in a home, because Mom and Dad couldn't take care of Butchie.

They were in their nineties.

They were in their nineties. Yes; ninety-four—Mom was ninety-four, and Dad was ninety-five. And uh, we went—my wife told me, You stay here, because I—I had a pretty decent job with the City and County.

Deputy Director of Parks.

Right, right, right. She said she's gonna go up there and take care all three of them. You know, she was always with me. So I figured, I can handle. Mm-mm. I couldn't handle. [chuckle] So, it took me a month, and I said [chuckle] ... timeout. I cannot do this; I gotta be with my—my woman. I said, um, I'm going up too. So I retired, and then I went up, and—

How long did you have the city job?

Four years.

Four years. And you liked it?

Oh, I liked it. Yeah, I thought it was a pretty neat job, going all over the place. Taking care of the parks, but then I found out, no matter what job you got; if the person you love with all your life is not with you, it's a miserable life. So I went up there. Then that's when I—I guess had a tremendous re—revelation. Uh, that—that uh, you know, when—when you take care the people you care for, when they need the help, there is gonna be reward; not financial, but you know, your brain going—going stay right. You're going be able to go to sleep real easy, you know, when—when it's finished. But the journey took four years, four and a half years. [SNIFF] But um, Mom passed away in—in '06. She had acute Alzheimer's and ... and—and some of the other problems that you get when you're ninety-six years old. And then we thought, that we—Mom or Dad first, and Dad—you know, one of the two first, and then Butchie. But ... um, he—Butchie uh, in '08, this year, April, he passed away. And I was—I came home, and when I found out, I—I just flew right back. I was able to—to get back home, and before he passed away. And then uh, then just in Au—August, I came home, and—and Dad went down. I ... I just missed him; he passed away before I could get home. But uh ... it—you know, it's just something you do, an—an—and I—I'm very, very ... uh, I feel real good that I went and did that. You know, I had Butchie twenty-four/seven. Mom; Mary was taking care of Mom, and then we both could take care of Dad, because he was—you know, he was just using the two canes. He went from the two canes to the walker, from the walker to the wheelchair. And—and same thing with Mom.

M-m.

You could see in—in the tail end of their lives, they have uh certain things they're gonna do, and that ... that digression is gonna end up with them leaving you. But the—the—the twenty-four/seven, the time you get just changing their diapers, and making their meals, and just sitting and looking at the stars, you know. Who; couldn't beat it.

Yeah.

I wouldn't accept—all the money in the world wouldn't—wouldn't make me want to do something other than what I did these past four years.

There's this great picture of you and Butchie.

Oh. Yeah, yeah. This one—this one has ... always ... [chuckle] ... this guy, he used to smile, and he used to tap me on my shoulder when I was going too fast. You know, while we're swimming in there with ... yeah; this guy was ... he was just uh, the—the—the apple of my eye.

Downs syndrome, autism.

Yes.

Uh, he was in a wheelchair.

Uh, he broke his hip and he was just confined to a wheelchair. This one here, he was something else. Dad was something else too. The guy was ninety-nine years old, and he could remember stuff. We're playing cards, and ... and—and he tells me what my score is, and I thought I—I said, I got this much. We were playing uh, cribbage. [SNIFF] He says, No, you got two po—points. I go, Hah?

[chuckle]

And he—he's correct. He was a darling; he was one good father.

You know, sounds like you live your life so that you don't have regrets.

Oh, yeah; yeah. Y—you going get small stuff in the way, but ... you gotta put your heart in—in one position, and find out where that buggah aiming, and you go that way. And—and it comes out pretty good.

You think after being married for decades already, you got to know her better then?

Oh; yeah, yeah. That's the part that came—came full circle. I says, Hey, this is the right one I got, you know. I don't know if she's saying that about me, but [chuckle] as far as that is concerned, it's really uh, really something I ... boy, if—if I had to pick a thing I did that was pretty good, was that. To take the—to be part of my—you know, be—be ... with my wife for now 'til the ... whenever. I'm—I'm—I'm totally involved in—in what she does, and—and I know she is in mine. From—from day one.

Coach Skippa Diaz passed away in 2014.

University of Hawai'i Wahine Volleyball player Mahina Eleneki Hugo fulfilled her childhood dream of playing under legendary coach Dave Shoji and was part of the 1987 national championship team at the University of Hawai'i. The discipline, teamwork, and leadership skills she learned on the volleyball court were key to charting a career path that included heading La Pietra Hawaii School for Girls in Honolulu for 10 years. In our 2015 conversation, Mahina Eleneki Hugo shared details of her journey from champion athlete to head of school.

I had a friend who called me one day and just said, Hey, there's a P.E. position at La Pietra, and the only thing is, the resumes and things are due today. And this was kind of in the morning, and I hung up, and I said, Yeah, P.E., that sounds like something up my alley that I would love. And so, got off work and put together a resume, and drove it to La Pietra, and turned it in. And so, that sort of was the next phase when I obviously got the job at La Pietra. Teaching girls something that I love, working out every day and getting paid for it, um, having my summers off, thinking, this is pretty good life right here, and being able to catch up on some of the things. And so, I thought for a while that might be something that I—I might do.

But then, the lure of paperwork attracted you.

No!

[CHUCKLE]

I think what attracted me was um ... the opportunities. Because w—when you're at a small school such as La Pietra, we wear many hats. And—

And how big is La Pietra in number of students?

We have two hundred students, and we're Grades 6 through 12. All girls school. And so, um, even as teachers, you wear your um, your class advisor hat, your regular class teacher hat. You have—there's a lot of opportunities that exist. And so, I started getting more involved with either the different clubs, and then—um, or leadership programs that we have there. And so, through the various opportunities and doors that opened up within La Pietra, I just enjoyed it. And I think administratively, um, did it pretty well, I guess. I mean, I—th—somebody obviously saw something in me, and um, I was able to develop those skills further. And then, you know, of course, it took me to assistant um, admissions director, and then dean of students. And so—

You got your master's degree along the way.

I did. Along the way, went back for my master's in education, and with an emphasis on um, private school leadership. And so, um, that was a great not only opportunity to get a master's, but to network with other leaders from other— um, independent schools. And so, um, those opportunities just kinda came up for me at each stage of the way, and um, here I am twenty-three years later at La Pietra. I've been with La Pietra for twenty-three years.

Well, you didn't really jump to apply for the head of school position, though, the top position.

I didn't. And it was quite incredible. I had been the uh, dean of students for a while, and um ... the—when our head announced that she was gonna be retiring, um, the board of trustees formed a committee, a search committee, and um, I was asked to be on that committee, and gladly, you know. And—but even prior to that, my—actually, my head at the time did ask me, Are you interested um, in applying for the position, or in the position? And I thought about it for a brief minute or two, and then I just said, No, I don't think so. I—as the dean, I already—I—there were long hours involved, and um, I just thought, you know, my family time, I'm—I'm very family-oriented, I still love to do a bunch of activities. And I thought, I'm already spending some long days, but I still want some me time, and um, thought, No, I think I'll pass. And I think when I was talking to our trustees, the third meeting I walked in, and I noticed they were sort of in a different arrangement on the table, and kind of got quiet when I walked in the room. And so, I was just waiting for the meeting to start, and they said, Okay, um, mm, Mahina, we need to talk to you. And I said, Oh, okay. You know. And long story short, it was

just sort of they said, We actually want to offer you the position as head of school. We've been listening to you, we know your record here, and we'd be silly to bypass somebody who already is on the job and knows the school, and um, has an appreciation. I mean, they said some pretty kind words. And at that moment, you're supposed to sound highly intelligent, of course, and being just baffled by this opportunity and what they have just presented me, it was like, Oh. I mean, I was very honored. And so, um, I went home, and of course, I talked to my husband, and um, you know, i—it was a no-brainer for him. [CHUCKLE] Well, you know, it's not just me taking on this role; it will be you as well, um, you know, supporting and sacrificing the hours and whatever needs to be done. And so, um, never looked back, and I'm happy I've—I've been able to have this opportunity.

In 2018, Mahina Eleneki Hugo joined the Lili'uokalani Trust as Educational Innovations Director.

Our next guest, Bob Apisa, came to Hawaii in 1952 when he was 7 years old. His family traveled by boat from American Samoa in search of better educational opportunities. Apisa excelled in baseball, football and track at Farrington High School. He later helped lead the Michigan State University Spartans to consecutive national titles in football and he was the first player of Samoan ancestry to be named All-American. Bob Apisa was drafted into the NFL in 1968 but injuries he suffered during his college career meant his playing days were over. In our 2015 conversation, Bob Apisa recalls what came next.

What I did with that time when I knew that I couldn't uh, pursue my c—career in—in uh, professional football, I went and got my graduate degree. And uh, then I um, thought about doing some coaching, but I didn't make enough to—to make a living, and so I—uh, then I got in the filming industry. In 1970, I think it was 1970 or 1971, I came back home from one of my visits to my family. It was just a couple of weeks, an—and uh, there was a gentleman at uh, the old Point After bar and disco down in Waikīkī. And I—my buddies took me there, and um, I sat there, and there was this silver-haired guy with a beard, and uh, he kept looking at me. And I'm saying, Well, maybe I owe him money or something.

[CHUCKLE]

So, he finally came over. And he says, uh, I'm Bob Busch, I'm the casting director for Hawaii Five-O. The original Five-O. An—and I—he says, You're Bob Apisa? I says, Yes. Uh, and he says, uh, uh, Have you ever done pictures before? And I says, uh, I—the only pictures I've ever uh, dealt with are Kodak cameras and stuff like that. But he says, No. Uh, so he said, uh, Give me your card. Why don't you give me a call tomorrow. And I had a few days before I went back to—to Flint. Um ... and so, I called him on a lark, and he said, Why don't you come in, I—I'd like to see you. Uh, so I went down to the uh, uh, the—the studio over by Diamond Head. And uh, as I'm walking through the door, Jack Lord exits his office, and he's looking right at me. He says, Oh, you're the guy I'm looking for. I turned behind, and I—I'm wondering if he's talking to the guy behind me, but there was nobody there. And then, Bob Busch came out and made the introduction. And so uh, Jack Lord said, uh, Can you uh, uh, come tomorrow and uh, do a little scene with us? I said, Wow, this—this thing is happening so quick, the dialog with—

between him and James MacArthur, Danno at that time. So, m—Steve McGarrett was saying this to Danno, and then it didn't make sense. So uh, Jack looks at me; he said, Bob, when I say this, just say, No, I didn't do it, or something to that effect. I don't quite remember. And so, when he said this, then I said, No, I didn't do it. Um, I was immediately Taft-Hartleyed into Screen Actors Guild.

[CHUCKLE]

Forty-eight hours later. No um, um ... experience as a—as an extra or anything. I went from Point A to Point Z.

Well, you were comfortable with yourself; right?

Well, I was comfortable with myself, because uh, you know, I thought it was a new v—adventure, and I said, Ah, why not. You know. Uh, and a week later, uh, just before I left, uh, or a couple days later before I left the following week, um, they asked me if I could take uh, jeep and squib it and drive it. I said, Hey, it's no big thing. And had bullet holes. I mean, squibbed it and came right up to the camera, and that was no big thing. And that's how my stunt career started. Uh, I've done uh, train falls, I've done horse falls, I've done horse uh, stampedes, I've ... motorcycles, uh, car chases, uh, falling off of uh, four-store buildings uh, into uh, water, and I had to—you know, it's all timing. But if you're an athlete and you have the innate skills to adjust, to make your adjustment. Before I go on a set and they ask me to do something, I'll den—you know, I'll turn 'em down too. I'll try something on a lark, and it works, great. If it doesn't work, aloha. Just move on to the next.

You'd already hurt yourself playing football, and here you are in a very dangerous stuntman position, which you made another career of. Did you—I mean, how was that on your body?

Uh, wear and tear. I could have done the acting part, and they probably would have had uh, um, uh, uh, a stunt double for me. But I—I don't want people to do my work, because they know the kind of work I do. And uh, there's a certain thing about—about uh, someone's pride in the filming industry, being in for three decades, that um, people say, Hey, if I'm gonna do the acting, you know, let me do the part so it looks like me. Tom Cruise does that from time to time. I know where I'm from, I know where I started. And uh, I'm—I'm given the ability and uh, the opportunity, but I don't ever abuse it. And I don't ever want to do that, and I teach that to my kids and my—and my grandkids. You know, be—humility an—and respect for one another is the—is the—the best thing that anyone can uh, employ.

Bob Apisa says he is enjoying retirement and traveling with his wife Arlena. In 2016 he released a documentary called Men of Sparta, the story of the Michigan State championship teams that helped desegregate college football.

These four athletes had more than competitive spirit and when their playing days were over, they moved on with determination, gratitude and grace. We thank Bob Apisa of

California, Mahina Eleneki Hugo of Waimānalo and the late Skippa Diaz, and Al Harrington of Honolulu for sharing their stories with us. And mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

You know, so much of life is being in the right place at the right time, one person moving in one direction.

But you were willing to take the chance.

Yeah. You gotta be open.

And go on merit.

Go on—be open on—on—on—on—for the opportunity. Be conscious, be conscious. It's—it's like—it's like ... he says, From the time of conception ... to the time that you're born in that nine months, you do nothing. Everything happens for you. You know. Why not let things happen for you also after you're born? S—sometimes, we try to make things happen, and we don't follow the pattern that is destined for us to follow.

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