LONGstorySHORT
with LESLIE WILCOX

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I tried to marry a woman that was Hawaiian but when I dated the girls on Molokaʻi my mother said "That's your family. That's your family." [LAUGHTER] Right, or, that the values of that girl's family was not in line with my mother's and my parents' values and so that was discouraged.

Okay. [LAUGHTER] So once you were out of the nest…

When I was out of the nest I said this "Well, I'm going to have to find a woman and my mother is going to have to accept that."

This full-blooded Hawaiian spent the first 14 years of his life growing up in a remote valley on Moloka'i. Combining traditional practices with his western training, he has dedicated himself to a career of education and healing through Hawaiian culture. Earl Kawaʻa, next on Long Story Short.

> *One-on-one, engaging conversations with some of Hawaiʻi's most intriguing people. Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox.*

Aloha mai kākou, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Earl Kawaʻa was honored in 2019 as a Living Treasure of Hawai'i, in recognition of his work as a teacher, counselor, peacemaker and Hawaiian leader. Trained as a social worker, he's known for successful work in building bridges to understanding and resolution, as he works with families and individual youths, and steps into organizational disputes. He's one of a few remaining manalea or native speakers of Hawaiian language who learned from their elders. Uncle Earl, as he's often called, was born in Hālawa Valley on the east end of Molokaʻi, just after the start of World War II. It was a tough time in general for people who had to deal with food rationing and shortages, but his isolated community was largely unaffected by what was going on in the rest of the world.

We had no idea what poverty meant. People said, "You folks are so poor." We had no idea what the word "poor" meant. We thought we were rich. We had everything – I mean, the open ocean, the rivers to play in, the mountains to climb and the trees to hang from to be Tarzan. I mean we were everything. We made Tarzan famous long

before he became famous. [LAUGHING] We held out that cry for Tarzan long before he had that cry because we were falling for real.

And while everybody was in this western war, you were speaking Hawaiian in a valley on Moloka'i.

Uh huh, uh huh.

Everyone spoke Hawaiian?

Uh, the adults spoke Hawaiian and so I grew up hearing Hawaiian. So my first language was Hawaiian and English was also a part of the family, and school, and church. But the churches were also – a good portion of our churches in Hālawa, which was on the east end of Moloka'i was Hawaiian. And so we heard it and we sang in Hawaiian and we had to do memory verses in Hawaiian, so there was a lot of Hawaiian because the teachers were of Hawaiian ancestry. So that was perpetuated.

I just think that was the generation of adults who really, um, in the larger Hawai'i were saying, you know, "We're Americans now, we speak – we don't speak Hawaiian. We speak English." That was about that time when you were born.

It was about that time and my mother and father were not affected by that. It was not something that they said that "You have to speak Hawaiian or you have to learn English," it was a non-issue for us.

Your childhood was spent doing work and playing and it was all very physical.

All physical. Yeah, yeah. And there was a time for school. Sixteen of us in the entire classroom from first grade to eight grade.

How many were you related to?

All.

[LAUGHTER] All, everybody was related?

Everyone was related. Biologically related and related by virtue of close relationships of the family. But in the valley, we were all related. So we're all cousins.

Did you see strangers very often?

Um, there were some brave tourists that used to go out into the valley. [LAUGHTER] And we were intrigued by the tourists because, they were so different and they were so curious you know, and it’ – it’s, we enjoyed having people visit the valley. And every now and then there would be tourists, not many, but enough to have fun and we would take them to the waterfall and go swimming with them. We’re kua‘āina – farm, farm children and so it was just a joy having visitiors. And then there would be people from other parts of Moloka‘i that would go to the valley to fish, to camp, and it was always fun.

What were you mother and father like, besides your father being The Kalo King?

Yeah, yea, yeah. My father was Kalo King, I mean, he planted taro. But during the war years, my father tried to enlist to go into the military, but he could not cause he was a farmer and so the country needed food. And so, he stayed at home and my sister tells me that he is called “Taro King” because at one point when it was time to harvest, he harvested one hundred bags a month. One man from his lo‘i. One hundred bags a month. And that was not just for one month, he could sustain that for several months at a hundred bags.

That’s very impressive.

That and the bags at that point was three, five gallon buckets per bag.

Were the kids helping him?

Oh yeah, I mean, my father wouln’t call it help because we were so little at that point in time. But we called it help.

And then he got a different job later, right? I don’t know if he was still doing taro at that time, but he worked in Kalaupapa on Moloka‘i.

He went to work for Kalaupapa – in Kalaupapa and I think, tried it for a year and didn’t like it and quit and went back to being a farmer. And courted again, and he went back the second time and then he stayed and then worked for thirty-five years in Kalaupapa.

Doing what?

I guess he started as a laborer and became a foreman, so he said he had to fix houses and pave roads, and cut trees, and milk the cows, and cut meat, so they had to do – they were responsible for taking care of that community.

What was your mom like, cause I understand that she was a very forceful figure in your life.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. My mother was my worst nightmare growing up. [LAUGHTER] So I thought back then. In – and times passed and now at an old age I can appreciate how hard she had to work to – to save us, to hold us together, the family. When my father left, I don’t remember my father saying “Goodbye, I’m leaving you folks.” Like, he just left! And there’s no trauma that he left. And I wasn’t traumatized that much, maybe I was too young to know that. And so my mother became mother and father. Mother love and disciplinarian. She was everything to us, everything. So, educator, cook, wash, disciplinarian as well. [LAUGHTER]

Strict Disciplinarian.

Strict, strict, strict.

In addition to the many roles she took on to raise her five children, Earl Kawa‘a’s mother, Georgina Ka‘opuiki Kawa‘a, had another important responsibility in the Hawaiian community. It was a calling she inherited from her parents that would later have a significant influence on her son’s life and career.

She was also someone who was very involved with ho‘oponopono – reconciliation, problem solving.

Yeah, she inherited that from her mother and some of that from her father. My mother became an equally powerful kahuna and, and, and for all Moloka‘i and others who needed particular kind of help at a different level soughted her out throughout the state.

What kind of things did they look to her for?

Spiritual problems. Taking something that didn’t belong to you, the doctor said “There’s nothing wrong with you, but there’s something wrong with you.” And so they would go to my mother and says “Oh yeah, there is something wrong with you. You went to a place and you took something.” “Yes I did.” “That something that you took does not belong to you. It belongs to someone else and it has mana in it. And anyone who takes it, suffer from the effects of it. Whatever that illness may be.” And so that individual would say “Yes I did take it!” “Well, that’s your problem. Ask for forgiveness. Return the item.” And they were okay.

It sounds simple but it sounds very deep about what you’re talking about. So what is, tell me more about ho‘oponopono as your mom practiced it. And as you learned to practice it too.

Yeah, right, right. So we grow up – see, my father did ho‘oponopono before my mother. Uh, and my mother, uh, came from the lineage, but she saw the downside of my grandmother’s skills and wanted no part of that practice called “ho‘oponopono,” which are the dark sides to it.

What’s the dark side?

The dark side is that, uh, one uses that power to benefit oneself. Or may not be right, but it’s used improperly. Yeah, and so my mother wanted – did not want that kind of power to do that. And uh, as time went along, she realized that others needed help and so she, she, she studied. Uh, but because it’s in her lineage, uh, she’s afforded certain privileges and became very powerful in that sense. And so many would seek out help from my mother. And uh, like a man went into a cave on another island and brought home something that didn’t belong to him and became very ill and tested – came to O‘ahu to be tested for a number of reasons. And the illness perseverated, and it continued, and it was affecting his work. And so the older Hawaiian men and women who knew this man said “Eh,” said to him “Eh, you have Hawaiian sickness. You better go see Georgina.” And so he did, so he did. And so my mother did a ho‘oponopono case and found that he did. And he admitted it without, without any malace, he was just attracted to a rock, and he, he wanted that rock and so he brought it home. Well that rock belonged to someone else from another generation, another time and that individual who owned it before placed a kapu on it and said that he/she who takes that will suffer the effects. And so he suffered from the effects of that kapu that was placed on it.

But he didn’t know that?

But he didn’t know that.

Oh, so it took her to find out what it was.

To find out, to find out. So she goes through the process, she goes through the process and she uh, has a process that is uniquely her and-or like few others that had the same, the same process. My mother is just one of them.

I'm sure that was an honor but also for a family, I mean, to have people coming over with problems, was that fun to have a mom who was always sought after by others for problems?

Well what was good about it was that there weren't many people who came to see her and, and many times people would come to see her and she says "You don't need ho'oponopono, go and see a social worker." [LAUGHTER]

Well that's interesting because you do ho'oponopono and you're a social worker!

Yes, yeah.

Are those – is that the western and indigenous spectrum there?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Ho'oponopono is spiritually-based. Ho'oponopono is about spiritually realigning. Uh, what does that mean, spiritually realigning? So the Paipala, the Bible, says "Thou shall not lie." So if you lie, you're spiritually off-kilter. You are no longer aligned spiritually. And so you say, "I'm sorry, yes, I did lie about it." That's making it right. So spiritual aligned means to live a life that is spiritually correct and morally right.

Under Hawaiian gods, or Christian God, western ways?

It's a good question. There are things that are right under the old gods and there are things that are correct to do under the new God, the Christian God as well. Whichever God it is, there's definitely right and wrong. Whether you're kahiko or modern. There are definitely things that you can and cannot do. Right and wrong can also be things to do and things not to do.

For example, a crime by ommission. You didn't do something you should've done.

Yes. Or you're not supposed to do something that you did. Yeah. And, and, and that can be stealing, uh, lying, or someone could've caused – could, could, could cast a spirit on you to make you ill because – for whatever reason. So my mother could identify what – who the source – where that came from.

So you continued to do ho'oponopono and in addition in your life you used the values of your social work master's degree.

Yeah and I operate on that ho‘oponopono principles all the time. And when I am in meetings, I’m also guided by those principles as well, in my meetings. And I try to conduct them – not I try, I conduct the meeting in that manner as well.

You mean sometimes you have to take a pause and do a little spiritual realignment?

I’m always bossy! [LAUGHTER] I’m always bossy in meetings, you know, but I like to think that I’m bossy in the meeting because I want to achieve what that meeting was designed to achieve. And so I hold everyone accountable and that holding everyone accountable is a requirement in ho‘oponopono. Stay on the topic, don’t wander off another topic. In ho‘oponopono so often uh, the individual who is on the fire wants not to talk about the issue, wants to talk about something else. So ho‘oponopono is to say “We will get to that one, we’ll finish this one first. Did you take Alex’s potatoes yesterday afternoon when he wasn’t home?” It’s either yes or no. So ho‘oponopono is about admitting to the truth.

Right, and that clears up some things?

And that clears up –

Opens up some good air there.

Yeah, yeah. And then it’s admission and then ask for forgiveness. And then once you’ve done that, then they’re spiritually realigned again.

How often is this that the person who was wronged will not accept the forgiveness, the offer, or the request to forgive?

In some situations they won’t accept it. Then that individual continues to carry the kaumaha, the burden. And the individual who asked for it, who in the first place was the perpetrator and asked for forgiveness, that person will be forgiven.

I see.

So that burden that person has, the one that causes it, if he asks for forgiveness in ho‘oponopono session with me, then I will ask Ke Akua to forgive him. And what that does, is because he admits to it, he no longer feels the guilt, because I admit that I was wrong and I asked for forgiveness. Now it becomes the other person that has to. So he has – he or she, has to be freed as well by forgiving.

When Earl Kawa’a was 14 years old, his family moved outside their sheltering valley to the town of Kaunakakai, so that he could be closer to school. After finishing high school, he had no idea what he wanted to do--other than leave his Island home.

It was troubling for me to leave the valley cause I’m a kua‘āina, I’m a country kid. I’m comfortable in the country. But also, I hated going to Kaunakakai because it was just an awful place to live. It was – it’s so hot. And it’s almost – moving to Kaunakakai was almost like being put in prison. Even though there were no bars around, I was confined to the house, I was confined to the property, and uh, in Hālawa I had the whole valley to my – at least I had the upper half of the valley that I could, I could work and play, fish and hunt, and chase down wild horses. And in Kaunakakai, in that area, I had nothing. I was so confined, I was miserable. I was miserable. What helped was that I was able to – going to school was a break in monotony.

You continued in Kaunakakai till you finished high school?

Till I finished high school and after high school, what was I going to do? And then lucky, lucky that the Vista program – there was a man from Maui that went to Moloka‘i to talk about Vista and I went to the, I went to the meeting and he encouraged me to apply and I applied. And I was called.

And you ended up volunteering at an Indian reservation in New Mexico.

In New Mexico, yeah.

Pueblo Indian.

Mhmm. So when I was accepted we were – there was another gal from Moloka‘i that, that I come – two of us, from the east end of Moloka‘i called Mana‘e, that was selected and we trained at Arizona State University. And that was a three month, ten hours a day training. Intense training and that was to prepare us to live independently on a reservation.

And your job would be what?

I did recreational work. Built two baseball fields and held the first all-Indian little league tournament in the state of New Mexico, all-Indian on the reservation, on the baseball field that I built.

It sounds like you changed their lives. Did they change yours?

Oh yes, I was changed as well. And that change comes is that uh, that I had a lot to offer, but there was more to offer. Yeah, and so at that point, I began to start thinking about going back to school. School never came easy for me, but knowing that, I decided I was going back in school. And that's where I met my wife, Patricia.

You married a Caucasian?

I married a Caucasian.

Do you ever think of oh maybe I should've married a full – a pure Hawaiian?

Well that's a good story. I tried to marry a pure Hawaiian, well I tried to marry a woman that was Hawaiian but when I dated the girls on Moloka'i my mother said "That's your family. That's your family." [LAUGHTER] Right, or, that the values of that girl's family was not in line with my mother's and my parents' values and so that was discouraged.

So they weren't after you to keep up the full-blooded Hawaiian lineage?

Uh, to marry well.

Why did you choose social work to get a master's degree in?

I didn't know what I wanted to be when I was growing up. I had no idea, I mean, it's a – it's a small world for us on Moloka'i. There's – the possibilities of work are – it comes about by what you see people doing around you and it's just – You've got doctors and nurses, but that's not plentifull. A lot of truck drivers, and you know, road workers, and so you kind of, kind of grow up around that and you think that that's the world. I uh, but I went back to school, that was the training point. I went back to school and completed my education at Hawai'i Pacific College.

What did you major in for your undergraduate degree?

I have it in psych. So there's a nice marriage within the two – between the two there. The kind of work that I did was teaching and working with alienated youngsters.

You've developed a reputation over the years, you know, of being a revered teacher, somebody who can get through to troubled youth and just change their outlook, change their – change what they do. And also, you've brought back so many um, uh values of old that fit in a new world.

It fits in a new world, yeah, and that gives me a great deal of joy. Listen, I've always enjoyed the work that I did, I've always enjoyed. And I always enjoyed it because I invested in it. It is – it's not just a job. It's a way of life. It's like working in the taro patch: you invest in it and at the end of the day, you clean an entire taro patch and you reap the rewards. And the rewards in Hawaiian, it's called "makaluhi."

Makaluhi.

Maka luhi means "tired eyes." Saiety.

Done.

Done.

Full.

Full. And you look at it and your eyes are soft and you say, "Wow, look at that!" That's makaluhi.

How do you relate to kids who grew up very differently from you and that they had different temptations and you know, the different laws at work, you know, drugs and all kinds of things that have gotten into the lives of young people that you didn't have to worry about?

The clinical perspective tells us to start where they're at. If they're in the pits, go there and start in the pits with them. So the professional world tells me how to do that. But also from the cultural one, the understanding is that that person in the pit cannot stay in the pit, because you're going to have to feed him in the pit. You want that person to come out and feed himself. So it's also embedded in cultural practices well. And so for me, because I'm trained in Hawaiian, I'm grounded in Hawaiian, and I have a formal knowledge/western knowledge, I can bridge the two. And so that's helpful when I am in therapy or I'm in a teaching mode because I can blend both. I'm comfortable in both worlds.

Did you – was that organic with you, you just made that connection?

Uh, it became more organic and it became more professional and it became deeper over the course of the years. Yeah, it's uh, fine tuning through the years.

So when there were, when there was – when there were classes where kids were just not making it, having a hard time, resistant, people would call you.

People would call me, yeah they'll call me. Or I will go or I would be assigned a case to handle the cases. Lili'uokalani Childrens Center, I handled the difficult cases.

But the problems are very diverse though, that you run into in a child's life.

Very. Not only in a child's life, also in family life as well.

And you work on family resiliency.

Family, family life – family realignment.

Now that can be very complex, I imagine.

Very complex, very complex. A lot of attitudes and behaviors, a lot of issues. And I like, I like, I like working with dads also. I like working with dads. And so, I take on issues with Dad about being gruff, about being mean, or being too assertive and things like this. And so, so in my class, I would deliberatly uh, use humor. And I know that, I know that it is humor – I know that it is funny, there's no question about it, and men don't laugh in my class. And I would say "Ahh, the mothers are laughing, so the children are more likely to learn the importance of laughing from their mother, but not from their dads." Pause, pause, pause. "Because dads don't know how to laugh." It just slipped into clinical.

So your point was you gotta loosen up?

You gotta loosen up. And so the next line comes "Dad, if you don't laugh, your son won't laugh. "Is that what you want for your son? Dad!" and I point the dad out, "Is that what you want for your son?" and they say "No."

Wow.

Change.

**At the time of our conversation in March 2020, Earl Kawa‘a was 75 years old and working in the Strategy and Transformation office at Kamehameha Schools.
His skills in bridge-building between people and groups are even more valuable at a time of increasing polarization.
Mahalo to Earl Kawa‘a of Kailua, Windward O‘ahu for sharing his stories with us, and mahalo to you, for joining us. For PBS Hawai‘i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.**

I think you understand people well.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. All those rough times I spent with my mother and father, and members in the church, like that, I could carry that as baggage, but I choose not to. I choose to see those as pearls for learning experiences and for teaching and I use them and I bring them into the classroom all the time. And it helps families and individuals connect.

But somebody doesn't decide to have PTSD.

You have the choice to remain in trauma or to get out of it. You have that choice.

You simply decide?

Yeah. And, and, and, getting help is important. Getting help and changing a circle of friends is also helpful. Uh, making changes in life. Those are things that you need to do to be able to help yourself.