

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: HAWAIIAN LANGUAGE MASTERS

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Larry Kimura: This is what my passion is, and this is what I'm gonna be working in, whatever it's gonna be called.

Sarah Keahi: I said, Well, I'm thinking English. He looked at me and he said, English? [CHUCKLE] English? He said—he said, What about Hawaiian? And I said, Hawaiian? There were no schools teaching Hawaiian.

Puakea Nogelmeier: I went and declared a second major for Hawaiian language. And the counselor laughed out loud. And says for what? You know, and What do you think you'll do with it? And you're not Hawaiian anyway. You know, why would you ... I said, Well, I'm interested. And that's really all I was, was I was just interested.

Amy Kalili: I worked in the Hawaiian language center at UH Hilo. And having those venues where you can actually apply your language learning, instead of just keeping it confined to 50 minutes day as a language course, I think that's what really helped me acquire my fluency.

By the 1960s, the Hawaiian language was scarcely heard in Hawai'i—mostly when elders talked to each other. Today, 'Ōlelo Hawai'i is thriving. Children are speaking it. Next on Long Story Short, we revisit conversations with some of our guests whose passion for the language led to its resurgence.

*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. Hawaiian language can be heard in conversation in many places in Hawai'i—in airports, on football fields, on television. It's not just a few words here and there. People are speaking Hawaiian. Yet 50 years ago, Hawaiian language was on the verge of extinction. Previous generations had been admonished against speaking Hawaiian--and the only people left speaking it were kupuna who had refused to give up their native tongue.

Over the years, we have had guests on this program who have dedicated their lives to perpetuating the Hawaiian language. For Larry Kimura, Sarah Keahi and Puakea Nogelmeier, their interest started back in the 1960s and 70s, when they were captivated by kūpuna who spoke the language. It was the beginning of the Hawaiian Renaissance, when young Hawaiians were starting to realize that if they didn't start practicing their culture, it would be lost forever. A generation later, Amy Kalili took the revival of the language a step further by hosting a first-ever Hawaiian-language segment in a local TV news program.

We start with our 2016 conversation with Larry Lindsey Kimura who used to listen to his Hawaiian grandmother speak to her friends in Hawaiian. When he went to Kamehameha Schools in the 8th grade as a boarding student from Waimea in north Hawai'i Island, he took a Hawaiian language class that he says he almost flunked because it didn't sound like his grandmother's Hawaiian. In high school, he had another opportunity to take a Hawaiian language class.

Colonel Kent, the president of the boys' school, I didn't know was interested in Hawaiian, and he convinced this person who is a native speaker of Hawaiian—she had just retired teaching her whole life in Hawaiian music, that is Dorothy Kahananui. She retired from the University, she—he convinced her to come in my sophomore year, and she was to teach Hawaiian she's never taught before, and write a textbook for high school. Uh, textbook to teach Hawaiian. And she was there just for those three years I was there, and I happened to have a free homeroom period when she came, enrolled in the class, and just loved it. And that's how I got to be uh, trained enough to speak it to my grandmother when I got home during the summer breaks that we—we went home, you know, after—

What did your grandmother say when you came home speaking?

I was kinda—of course, I was a bit hesitant and frightened what she would ... her response would be. But luckily, I had been writing to her in Hawaiian, in letters. And she responded. And so, she had this idea about my becoming ... well, she thought I was just becoming interested in Hawaiian then, but actually, I was interested in it way before. And uh ... so, actually, it was v—it felt very um, comfortable using Hawaiian. And with my granduncles and grandaunts at the—you know, that group of people back home, they um ... they were not critical at all. They were very supportive. So, I was lucky. Maybe Mrs. Kahananui taught me well enough, so ...

So, you were loving Hawaiian at Kamehameha, talking with your Hawaiian grandmother in Hawaiian, but you still didn't see how this would be of benefit to

you in a profession. There was no such job that you knew of, right, to move along to.

No. I was just, you know, engaging it as much as I could, to learn as much as I could.

And was there anybody else around you who wanted to do this?

No.

Buddies of yours? No?

Everybody thought it was a crazy thing, I'm sure. I just didn't want to discuss, I didn't know how to talk about my interest with anyone. Because at that time, people would probably think I was crazy.

And even your grandmother didn't know how interested you were.

No; she didn't know. Until she saw the letters that I wrote when I was in the tenth grade, eleventh grade, when I was taking Hawaiian.

So, just a personal consuming interest that you kept to yourself mostly.

Yes.

It was on to UH?

Well, I didn't know. You know, counselors at Kamehameha didn't counsel you to go into Hawaiian, actually, back then. There was no place to go, first of all. So, the only thing left for me to do was to stay at home, which I did, and I went to the two-year college at Hilo. Back then, it was only a two-year university campus. And then, you finished up here at Manoa. So, when I was in Hilo, luckily, you know, that gave me the opportunity continue meeting up with my grandparent generation, my grandmother and my aunts and uncles on weekends. And they were my teachers that helped me to become more fluent. And I was brave enough to begin to try and record some of our speakers of the language, older people. Yeah. And in fact, I saw that when Mrs. Kahananui brought this tape recorder, this huge seven-inch tape recorder to class and played this Bishop Museum recording of an interview of a native speaker with Mrs. Pukui. And I said, When my grandmother comes for my graduation, I'd love for her to be recorded like this person was recorded by Mrs. Pukui. You think Mrs. Pukui will do it? Oh, I'm sure she would. Why don't you just ... well, I think we could ask her. So, I did; I

just found out where she lived, and introduced myself. And I said in Hawaiian, My grandmother is coming, would you interview her? She said, Of course, I would.

Wow; that was a big step forward.

Yeah.

She was the reigning authority.

So, that gave me, you know, this whole interest in understanding the value of trying to record as many of these people as we could.

And what did they think of you trying to record them?

They probably thought I was pretty weird to be interested in what they would want to tell me in Hawaiian. And so, they were pleased to have somebody to actually take an interest in what they knew.

Larry Kimura went on to become a co-founder of 'Aha Pūnana Leo Hawaiian language immersion schools and as of 2020, had been teaching Hawaiian language for more than 45 years.

Our next guest, Sarah Patricia 'Ilialoa Kwai Fah Ayat Keahi, is better remembered by her students as Mrs. Quick, her previous married name. She was the only Hawaiian language teacher at Kamehameha Schools when she started teaching there in 1966. By the time she retired 37 years later, there were 10 fulltime Hawaiian language teachers and a mandatory Hawaiian studies curriculum. I spoke with Sarah Keahi in 2015.

My grandmother spoke Hawaiian with my mom sometimes. And I was fascinated. You know, I would talk to my grandmother a lot, ask her zillions of questions, and I really did want to learn Hawaiian. And it wasn't until I went to the University that, you know, I saw Hawaiian 101, and I'm gonna take this. But my mom spoke Hawaiian with my grandmother, and my dad spoke sometimes. The only time we spoke Hawaiian was when they were scolding.

Scolding

Scolding; they would scold us.

And you would know what it meant?

And we knew all the scolding. Like, you know, kulikuli, and you know, some of those things.

What does kulikuli mean?

It's the not-so-nice way of saying, be quiet. It's more like, shut up. You know. And so, we knew those kinds of things.

You were spoken to in Hawaiian as a way of scolding you, but it was also kind of a secret language too, among the adults.

Well, yes. 'Cause like, when friends would come over, or my grandmother would talk with her friends, it was all in Hawaiian, you know.

It was the adult language.

Yeah. They never really sat down and taught you anything, because that's not how they do it. You know. If you're interested, you would sit down and listen. But it wasn't until I was in college and when I started studying Hawaiian, and then you know, I think the day when I could understand my grandmother was just like, Oh, yes. You know?

She was a manaleo?

Yes; she was a manaleo.

And you were learning textbook Hawaiian.

Right. But I had my grandmother to practice with. I was really fortunate, because when I was at the University, I worked in the recording lab at the Bishop Museum with Eleanor Williamson, who was like my second mom to me. And Ele worked with Kawena Pukui, and they went on the road and they interviewed native informants. So, I got to go. And Kawena wanted to interview my grandmother, 'cause she knew my grandmother; they were in the Royal Society together. And she said, I haven't seen Grandma for a long time, I think I should go interview her. So, I went with them up to my grandmother's house, and did the interview. And so, on the way back to the museum, Kawena said to me, You know, Grandma used so many words I haven't heard for so long. You know, it's so nice to hear those words again. I said, They're probably archaic; right? [CHUCKLE] Only native speakers know those words. And you know, my grandmother was a really fascinating woman because she was born when Kalakaua

was King. And she lived through the Provisional Government, she lived through the Republic, Territory, and ten years into statehood.

Was there a Hawaiian major when you entered—

No.

--UH?

No, in fact, I had to go see the dean. It was Dr. Elbert who actually um, encouraged me to—to consider Hawaiian.

This is Samuel Elbert.

Yes; Sam Elbert.

Who co-wrote the Hawaiian Dictionary.

Yes; and everything else.

And he taught you your first Hawaiian language class?

He called me up one day after class, and he said, Now, what—what do you want to do when you—when you um—in college? I said, Well, you know, Dr. Elbert, I'm gonna be a teacher. He said, Oh, maika'i, maika'i. And I said—he said, Well, do you know what kind? I said, Well, I'm thinking English. He looked at me and he said, English? [CHUCKLE] English? He said—he said, What about Hawaiian? And I said, Hawaiian? There were no schools teaching Hawaiian, you know.

It seemed like bum advice because you couldn't get a job.

Yeah, I said, Dr. Elbert, there's no—nobody that I know, except the University. And he looked at me, and he said, There will be a day.

And he was right.

And he was right. When it was time student teach—teach, I got this call from a um, Donald Mitchell from Kamehameha Schools. And he said, um, You don't know who I am, but I know who you are. And I said, Oh, really? And he said, I uh, would like to—I know you're gonna be ready for student teaching next year, and I would like for you to come to Kamehameha and student teach. I said, Really? Wow. I said, I'm already

assigned to Farrington, you know, with Marion Lee Loy. And um, he said, Yes, I know, and I talked with the University people, and they said if it's okay with you, it's fine. [GASP] So, I got to student teach with Dr. Mitchell. And that was just transformative.

What was there of Hawaiian language at Kamehameha when you went there, I think, in 1966?

Yes. Nothing. We proposed a requirement in Hawaiian culture and history for years. Seven years, I think it took. Nothing happened, nothing happened. Then the Hawaiian community, you know, got involved in it. But I think when they did a graduate survey, and the graduates said—the five-year graduate survey, that they were deficient. The school prepared them well for math and science, and all, but they were totally deficient when it came to anything Hawaiian. And as they were in college on the mainland and people would ask them questions, they couldn't answer them intelligently. Like, where did the Hawaiians come from? Or, could you say something, could you speak your language? Or, is there a language? I mean, they were embarrassed. So, the graduates said that they were really deficient, and finally, the requirement materialized.

The name of our next guest was Marvin Nogelmeier when he arrived in Hawai'i from Minnesota, on what was supposed to be a stopover on his way to Japan. He ended up staying and is known today as Dr. Puakea Nogelmeier. He's a Hawaiian language scholar, UH Professor Emeritus and Executive Director of Awaiaulu an organization that bridges Hawaiian knowledge from past to present to future.

He didn't grow up knowing anything about Hawaiian culture, let alone that a Hawaiian language even existed. After finishing high school and landing in Hawai'i in 1970, he moved with friends to rural Mākua Beach in West O'ahu. During our 2009 conversation, he told us that while living and working at Mākua the late kumu hula Mililani Allen invited him to join her hālau. Mililani Allen taught the Aunty Maiki Aiu Lake method of hula.

With dance, in the Maiki school of dance, you have to do research, and you have to do—

I see.

--tra—attempt translation, and you have to write notes for all your dances. You have to keep notebooks, there's quizzes. It's like an academy of dance, right? So we did that. So I started to learn um, language just sort of randomly. Then we started to learn chant. There was project in 1975, 76 maybe, called The Mele Project. And Keahi Allen

and uh ... well, it was the board she was on. They felt that chanting was gonna go away, 'cause the only ones who knew it were ... elders, and nobody was teaching it and it wasn't seen. So they set up to have Edith Kanaka'ole and Edith McKinzie teach chanting to young people. To you know, people that are involved in halau. [COUGH] And on Maui, I think they got Hōkū Padilla to do it. So anyway, these classes start up. I end up in a class. That's fascinating stuff, the chants. They come from everywhere. Some of them are really ancient, some of them are more recent. That's what led me into language. And there's ... there's—actually, there's an epiphany that happens, 'cause I have a good short term memory, so I could look at a chant and memorize it. And under pressure, I could keep that for a while, you know, so we could memorize these things. And um ... I'd have to memorize the Hawaiian, and then memorize the English to make sense out of it, you know. And get these—the payback for these classes was, we had to do presentations. You had to go out to schools and what not, make it living practice kinda thing. So we did a presentation, it might have been at McKinley, I don't remember. This old gentleman walks up to me and talks to me in Hawaiian. And I was stunned. [chuckle] I said, Oh, sorry, Uncle, I don't speak Hawaiian. And he looked a little crestfallen, and he—you know, he said, Well, but how can you understand what you're chanting? I said, Well, I memorized the English. And it sounded dumb. You know, it still sounds a little dumb.

[chuckle]

But uh, he says, But how can you tell how well you did?

How can you tell how well you did.

Yeah; this is—you know.

Who was this man?

Well—and I didn't know who he was, you know. He walks away. And I thought ... You're right. You know. And then I thought—right there, I just thought, You're right. Why would I engage if I'm not trying to learn what this is about. So then I started to try and learn Hawaiian language. Now, it's not ... it's probably ten years later that I realize who that old man is. He's Auntie Edith's husband, Luka. Yeah. Tall, handsome man. And you know, I was so blown and intimidated, I never even asked, Who you?

M-hm.

You know. [COUGH] Excuse. So we started—we went back to Auntie Edith McKinzie, who was running our class with—Auntie Edith Kanaka'ole would come teach us, but

Auntie Edith was the main one. We want to learn some language. Well, she was a student herself, really. She wasn't a native speaker. Her mother spoke it, and her grandmother, so she had a good handle, but she'd gone to classes. And she says, Well, I'll teach you what I know. So we started with a class on her back porch. You know, I wasn't in school or anything. This was just—

M-hm.

--you do these things 'cause you're interested. And then I met Mr. Kelsey, Theodore Kelsey ... just kind of randomly. Was brought up to meet June Gutmanis. She researched Hawaiian stuff, and she had written a number of books. Na Pule Kahiko, Kahuna La'au Lapa'au; she would assemble Hawaiian language material. And she could do that 'cause she had this old gentleman living with her; he was eighty-eight, I think, when I met him. And he was fluent in Hawaiian. And he would help translate. You know, he would translate all her things, and then she would make sense out of it. So when I met him, and I asked him, Would—would you be able to teach Hawaiian? He said, No. [chuckle] He said, I'm not a teacher. He says, There's some books on that.

M-m.

But with what Auntie Edith was doing—see, I'm a highly motivated [chuckle] character. If I want something, I'll usually, you know, figure out a way to try and make that happen. So I would take what Auntie Edith was teaching us, which was pretty simple Hawaiian, and I would talk to him when I went up to visit, and he'd talk back in Hawaiian. He wouldn't teach me Hawaiian, but he'd—he'd engage. You gotta imagine this, right? I'm ... what—I might have been twenty-something, twenty, da-da-da. I'm thirty-five pounds less than I am sitting in front of you. So I'm this skinny, little rail of a guy, hair down here, very flippant, very—you know, I'm—[SUCKS AIR]

[chuckle]

See, I'm a pothead, I'm a silly guy. I'm fun, you know. And um ... I can't imagine that I hit his spot as the perfect student. And it was after a few years that—you know, I mean, he knew I was seriously interested, but I—I had to be as alien to him as he was to me.

Mr. Kelsey had become kind of a pivotal part of my life. He was like a window on another world. You know, he was an adult photographer at the funeral of Liliuokalani. And after a couple of years, June had told me, she says, You know, Mr. Kelsey said something about he thinks you'll keep up his work.

Aw.

And I just—I was—

That's a great compliment.

--so—well ... and it was a ... uh, I mean, it actually really touched me. 'Cause I also thought, Oh, god, now I—you know, now I'm on—in debt sorta. I mean, now—now I have to be serious.

Amy Kalili was born in Mobile, Alabama around the time the Hawaiian renaissance was starting. Her family moved to Hilo when she was eight, but it wasn't until she attended Kamehameha Schools in Honolulu that she started to feel a connection to her Hawaiian culture. Her mentors were those who had learned from the kupuna. At the time of our conversation in 2009, Amy Kalili was the executive director of 'Aha Punana Leo, the Hawaiian language immersion pre-schools. She also hosted a Hawaiian language segment on KGMB's morning news program.

I was a boarder at Kamehameha for four years. Um, and while I was there, I took a Hawaiian language course. More so, because it was a requirement, you know, and it was that or, I think, Japanese and Spanish at the time, and French. There weren't a lot of choices. So that was kinda my first exposure to Hawaiian language in terms of acquiring some kind of working knowledge of the language. Um, but after I graduated from Kamehameha, I went away for a year. I went to uh, a small college in California in Orange County. And I came home and went to UH Hilo, and I had a bunch of friends who were actually friends who I'd taken language with at Kamehameha, who were taking language at UH Hilo. And it was more like, Oh, you gotta come take 'olelo, it's so fun and—

An—and UH Hilo was, and is a hotbed of Hawaiian language.

Yeah; definitely.

Didn't UH Hilo have the first uh, p—provide the first uh, MA in Hawaiian language?

Yes; specific um, directly relevant to Hawaiian language and literature. Yes. So yeah, I was really fortunate to um, end up there, I guess you could say, and to have the opportunity to continue my language learning there. I had some wonderful mentor...one thing that really helped was, I was able to get a job while I was in college. While I was at UH Hilo, I worked in the Hawaiian language center at UH Hilo. And having those venues where you can actually apply your language learning, instead of

just keeping it confined to fifty minutes day as a language course, I think that's what really helped me acquire my fluency.

So you're a professional storyteller.

Who would ever have thought that this little girl that grew up in Mobile, Alabama would somehow get back to Hawaii, get involved with the Hawaiian language movement, and then be arguably, as you said, the first person who's been given an opportunity to report on stories in the Hawaiian community, in our own Hawaiian language? We had a crew that flew down, up, from Maori TV from New Zealand, um, to do a story on us for one of their news programs. What the Maori people of Aotearoa have been able to do with Maori TV. Um ... for me, that—that's a goal; it's a goal to shoot for. It may—definitely wouldn't be the end-all, be-all, but having content that covers that gamut, from news, drama, comedy, um, documentaries; having all of these things being done in the Hawaiian language, from a Hawaiian perspective, I don't see any reason why we can't get there. You know, the financial resources to do so are always gonna be an obstacle, but you know, it's something that we'll overcome. And just finding the right people, growing a cadre of people who have the skill and who have the perspective to um, make it happen, I think, is—it's—it's a wonderful opportunity that's out there on the horizon, and we just gotta keep moving closer to it, day-by-day, one two-minute story at a time. (laugh)

Today she continues to be an advocate for the Hawaiian language.

Mahalo to Amy Kalili, Puakea Nogelmeier, Sarah Keahi, and Larry Kimura for having shared 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.

There were still people in the late 70s and 80s. There was—you know, that's when they started to predict language death.

M-hm.

The main age of um, or the median age of language speakers was ... they were in their seventies. There were very few children outside of the Ni'ihau community. So they said ten, fifteen years, there will be no speakers left. Well, that's where the language revitalization that kicked up from the 70s has just—it's never lost its stride. It's never lost its momentum, it's still, you know, extending and growing. That has kept me entertained for three decades. You know, ever since it—um, I launched into language, there's been a dynamic force moving forward.

That's right. And how many people now speak the Hawaiian language fluently, do you think?

Oh ... different levels of fluency. I mean, there's, you know, a lot to discuss—

Enough to carry on their life at home. How's that?

There are people, there might be ... might estimate ten thousand people today, who can work with Hawaiian language, who have different levels of fluency where they can utilize Hawaiian language either as a uh, conversational tool or as a writing, or reading, or listening tool. You know, it's a usable level of it. And probably twice that, that have at least an insight into it.

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