

# LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



**TITLE: ROY YAMAMOTO**

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I tell them you know either you're gonna continue in this life if you don't make the change. You know, think about what going happen to you. You know, you going end up dead. You're going to end up in prison. You're going to end up losing your family, your mind and your life. And that's black and white.

**From prisoner to pastor. Meet this former career criminal who used his chance at freedom to turn his life around... 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.**

**The path to becoming a pastor was a steep climb for Roy Yamamoto. A troubled childhood, the shame of not being able to read, and as a young adult, the siren call of drugs. His addiction led to violent crimes, and arrest after arrest, court case after court case. And then, the prospect of 80 years in prison. With nowhere else to turn, he embraced a faith which took him on a new journey of hope and redemption.**

**So, tell me where you were born, what your parents were like? What life was like for you?**

Ok, I was born here on the islands. And I was raised in Pearl City, grew up in Pearl City. And, you know, as we grew up, you know we had loving parents, but there's, just a, my education wasn't so good. So from a young age I was put in a special-ed. And you know, I was so shame being in special-ed and playing.

**Why special-ed?**

You know I missed a lot of school and what happened was, I guess I probably had a learning disability. And you know, I couldn't keep up with the students, so I was put in special-ed. But it was hard yeah. Growing up you playing sports and being with all the people and I was so shame, you know. So I remember even in high school I was, I would have to like ah, lie to all my friends. I would tell them, oh I'm taking this class,

I'm in this class. And what happened, the bell would ring and everybody would go into class, then I would walk into my class. Before the bell rang I would run out of my class and go to the other side of the school, and just ashamed. Yeah, I never really learned how to read and write my whole life. So, it was hard. What kept me in school was sports. I was good in sports and that was the only thing.

### **How about home life?**

Home life, you know, we had a, you know my mom was really um, she was abusive and strict, you know Japanese style. She never showed much love but I knew she loved me. And my dad was very loving but very abusive too. And he was a big man, you know. So that was hard. So, yeah, it was a, it kind of was really hard upbringing in, in ways. But in a lot of ways my dad really spoiled and loved me, you know, and spent time with me.

### **Sometimes you lived with your grandmother.**

Yes, I was really close with my grandparents. They, they really loved me a lot and, so I would pretty much live with them. Even when I graduated from high school I lived with them. But um, you know my grandparents. My grandfather, we were really close and he would take me fishing everyday. And, yeah, I just loved being around him.

### **So, but you loved sports and you're a physical guy right? You did all kinds of things right, not just football?**

Yeah. You know I surfed from when I was young and I played football, wrestled, and ah, went to the world nationals for wrestling. And ah, went off and played ah, college football at Sacramento for a year. And that's when I got into the drugs. I got introduced to cocaine up there. And what happened was um, you know every year I played football. I played first string but because of the drugs I ended up playing second string that year.

### **And lineman?**

Yeah. Lineman. So when I got back, I was supposed to train and get ready for the next season but you know, I started hanging around with the wrong people again. And what happened was, when it was my time to go back and play football, all of a sudden my career in drugs was more important. So continued, and what happened was my girlfriend at that time got pregnant so I had to stay back and, and work and I had no education. So I became an ironworker like my dad and that was hard work. And, you know, it was really hard work. And I remember uh, at that time people were starting to do the drug ice, crystal methamphetamine. And I remember looking at them at work

and I said, man I would never do this drug because all of them were losing 28 – 30 pounds. They were losing their jobs, their families and you know and I said no. But because I was addicted to the cocaine, what happened was I was out one day and one guy when pass me the pipe and said hey, try this. And I did.

**You didn't stop and think about all those guys who were losing their jobs and families?**

You know that's, you know that's the part about addiction and drugs right? And so I took a hit and you know from that time and my life went crashing down.

**Roy Yamamoto says his drug use escalated to a one-thousand dollar-a-day habit. But he didn't have that kind of money, so he had to find a way to pay for it, any way he could.**

I was doing cocaine and ice. But you know mostly ice and what happened was, you know the, the drug was you know so addicting that it took over my life and you know, eventually, you know my wife divorced me and took my daughter. And you know I was going through so much more pain so what I did was, I did more and more drugs and that's when my habit became that big. And because of the drugs, came crime and because of the crime I went in prison five times in my life, you know. Convicted for you know, first degree extortion, kidnapping, robbery, bodily injury assault and attempted murder.

**Okay, so you were, you were the muscle?**

Yeah. Yeah, at that time.

**So you were beating people up?**

I was collecting money. I got caught in Ohio for, for first degree extortion, kidnapping and robbery.

**How did you get to Ohio to do that?**

So I got hired from somebody to go and collect money for them. They were working here and they wanted me to come up there because they had clients up there, so I did and I got caught up there.

**May I ask what did you do, what did you do to extort the money?**

Oh. You know I'm not proud of it, but you know, I had to go and threaten people and you know, beat them up and force them to give possessions and money and you know, that's what happened. You know one day the, we went and we, held the guy overnight and collect the money. He gave half of it and was going give the rest but, he set it up where instead of the, him coming with the money, the two task county task force came in and raided us and put us in prison. You know we were there and was in the news we were going to go, you know it was a big case so I thought my life was over then. But, you know, somehow, someway ah, God ah made a miracle and you know that's the year they ah gave me a deal. They gave me a 15 year, I had to plead guilty to 15 years in prison and they'll send me back to do probation. And they told me if I even, you know, get in any trouble, that they'll extradite me back automatically. Ah, without ah, without parole. And what happened was I came back, I was doing good. But I went back and started to smoke weed again and the next thing you know I was back into the drugs again. And I picked up the other big charges here. I got caught for second degree robbery and accomplice to robbery. And they indicted me, brought me in and they, I remember being there and my lawyer coming in and saying, Mr. Yamamoto, the state is looking to put you away for 40 years to life as a career criminal because of my record and my past. And so I said, what is a career criminal? He said, well they're giving you 40 and they're going to stack another 40 on top of it.

### **80 years?**

80 years in prison and it really hit me so hard thinking I'll never, all my chances are up. I'm never getting out of prison again.

You know anybody who will go in there, you know, it's not a place where you want to be. And you know, just thinking about going back to my cell crying, you know. Man, you're in this 4 by 8 cell and you're going to live in here for the rest of your life. You know, you're never going to see daylight again and your family. Man I was just crying in it. Going through so much depression and thinking man, thinking of any way I could take my life 'cause I didn't want to stay in this cell for the rest of my life, you know. So I was just thinking what I could do. It was then that this roommate of mines, he was a Christian and he invited me to go to this bible study. And I was like, you know what, okay. I had nothing else to turn to, so I said okay. And he gave me this big bible and I was walking to this bible study and I remember man, all my friends was looking at me and laughing, eh where you going with that bible Roy? I said you know what, you guys cannot help me out of this one. My family, my lawyer, my friends, nobody can help me out of this one. So, I don't know, I just going to see what the Lord can do for me. And we went to that bible study and...

### **And you truly had hope?**

You know when I got there, everyone that was sitting at this bible study had this different look in their eyes and this different spirit on them. And as the leader started sharing with me, then I was like, man it started to just comfort me so much. And at the end he asked if I wanted to accept the Lord. And I, I said the sinner's prayer and accepted the Lord and man it was just tears and crying. And I, from that point I knew I was a new person.

**Despite the skepticism of fellow inmates, Roy Yamamoto was revitalized. He took that hope with him to court when it was time to face his sentencing.**

**And you were still getting teased by all your, mocked by your fellow prisoners?**

Yeah, yeah. So I went and you know, I remember they saying, whoa, you're faith going to be with you? I said yes. But I went in court and you know I prayed and, and um, somehow, you know, the judge came out and said, you know what um, your victim didn't show up so we're going drop your charge. And I was, wow.

**And what was the, what was the case exactly? What happened to that victim?**

So, we went to collect money from this, this, couple guys. And what happened was ah, we went in, they were working in this hospital in the parking lot. And um, I guess we got, you know, we took uh, some of the items and you know, one of my friends beat up the guy. And we got caught for that. And we uh, went in, my co-defendant, you know he got, he got sentenced too. But uh, yah when we went in to court they, you know they, somehow they dropped the case. Went back and I, you know, told everybody, whoa God blessed me and went to see the parole board. They appealed my case again the second time. And so I wasn't getting out. And I was like, oh, but I just, you know, use that time to just really um, said to the parole board, you know when God ready he'll open the door and if he needs me to stay in here to learn about him more, you know, I going give him the key. I'll let him, you know, determine when I get out. Went to court again the same judge dropped my charge again. And um, this time they uh, they released me. And so I got out and they appealed my case and I knew it was, I wasn't supposed to get out. So I made sure I told my sister, whoa, make sure you pick me up, you not late, you know, they might take me back in.

**So, twice the victim, the witness didn't show up?**

Yeah, they had the witness then that day he didn't show up. So, they dropped it, you know, without prejudice, where they can bring it up later with more evidence. So I got out and you know, I just said, you know what I gotta promise God I going find the first church I can find, and I going go and just you know, give my whole life to the lord. And

I went to a church and God answered my prayers. The second week, I was sitting in the back and this guy went up and shared his testimony at church and I looked and it was the judge, you know, who cut me free from doing a life in prison.

**Because the witness didn't show up? What's the judge's name?**

Judge Elwin Ahu.

**Who had left, and then he left the judiciary to be a pastor?**

A pastor. Yeah, was amazing 'cause a, he dropped my charge and we became friends 'cause we coming to the same church. And, started to tell him about you know my past and yah we became close but, they appealed my case a third time. And I lost the appeal.

**So the prosecutors were really out to get you in prison?**

Yeah, they wanted to put me away and you know, I deserved it. And so they appealed it the third time and I had to go trial and went and see my lawyer and said, and he said the best thing I could do was plead guilty to 20 years in prison. Because if I take the deal, 'cause if I fight it and lose they going give me the life automatically. And I went back to trial. Elwin couldn't be my judge 'cause we were friends. And so I prayed for another Christian judge. And went to court and you know, a lot of people came to support me and God just showed up and went in court. I remember Mike Town was my second judge. He came out and said, uh Mr. Yamamoto you have a lot of support but people like you say they change but 2, 3 years down the line they fall back and create bigger trouble, get in bigger trouble. So you know I said, and he looked at me and said, you know but uh, I heard what you've been doing, you know, for the men and for the people, your friends. And uh, I believe that God changed your life so, your co-defendent got sentenced to 20 years in prison. He went and did the crime with you in the same spot you're standing today, but you know he said, but I know God changed your life. So instead I going give you 5 years probation instead and I going cut you free, without. So you know they closed the case and cut me free.

**By all accounts, Roy Yamamoto was a changed man. His new purpose in life was to help those still in prison and perhaps more importantly their children, so that they didn't go down the same path.**

Yeah, doing prison ministry and then went to the sister church at Diamond Head and shared one day. This man was walking up the street and he called me. So I shook his hand and turned around and looked, hey Judge Michael Town. And I said, where you

going? Oh, I going to the service. I said, oh I just talked about you in the first service. So he came in, got in touch and then, we started this camp for the children of the incarcerated, Camp Agape. And so we ah, he, you know, he'd been helping you know, this last 15 years with this camp that we did for the children. Usually at our camps every year. They come and we usually have about over 200 kids here. But they come and they, we share testimony together, our stories together. And ah, just to encourage the kids. You know when they come, they come so rascal. And they, I remember our first camp. The kids came and they were like, man, they were fighting with us, and they were like ah. Just, you know, they never knew about the camp, and but um, you know we just do the camp the best we can to break down the walls and let the kids have the best time in their life. And, just, put in a little bit Jesus here, more here, more on the next day. And at the end you see them all just crying and giving their life to the lord. And Sunday is about forgiveness and that's the hard part for the kids. They've been struggling with forgiveness and they've been hurt so much. But they learn to forgive and learn that forgiveness is not just for the one that hurt them, but it's for them. And they just get released from this. You see many of them become leaders in the camp and the church and they come back the following year to be a junior mentor. They're a blessing. They're at the highest risk right, to become criminals as adults and get into addiction and going into the youth facility. So we do a continue mentorship throughout the year for them so we can try to reach as much as we can.

**And I know so many prisoners say that, they're doing time, but their families are out there doing time at the same time.**

Yeah, you know, in prison you know, we go in there and we do the time. But it's our families that do the hard time. They ah, they don't have finances. They gotta relocate into you know, somewhere smaller. A lot of time a lot of them, go to foster parents. And you know, so it's a hard time for them. And so that's why we started to do big outreaches in Arizona prison and because ah, their families hurt so much because they cannot visit.

**And those are all Hawai'i, serves Hawai'i prisons.**

You got about 1,700 of them there. So you know, the families cannot afford to do visitations. And communication is hard because ah, they have to like collect calls. And so they cannot afford the bills, so you know, they cut the communication. And we just started the camp and, but, you know God wanted us to do outreach there to reach them. So we went up there and did a really big outreach up there. And, and, and we got to reach you know, the whole prison was just amazing. And we went up and before we went we made a deal with the warden that we'll provide a Christmas gift for all the guys. You know, with all the local treats. And being in prison I know you can't bring

nothing in to the inmates but through the warden and giving it to the staff and giving it to the inmates. We got back and just made the biggest Christmas bag that we could for every single inmate.

**So what were the local treats you put in there? That's important.**

So being in prison you know what you wish you could have. So we gave like kakimochi, cuttle fish, macadamia nuts, macadamia nut cookies and Maui potato, all the local, every local treat you could think of you know. Furikake, so they could make some musubis in there, you know. And, and you know, just like almost a \$80 basket, you know, gift for them. And we got to bring in and give to every single inmate. And they let them know that they're not forgotten, you know, they're very much loved. And let them know that their families miss them. So, yah, we've been doing like a really big outreaches up there. We bring like a, the Bruddahs to do a little loosen up. Cause it's hard cause they're in prison, they're are gangs right, so they cannot show weaknesses. And so when you go in there you can't just pull up there and think you going reach the guys. So we ah...

**For example altar calls? You don't do those?**

We do, but you gotta get to their heart too and you know bring them. So we bring the Bruddahs. So, bring a little laughter and joy.

**The Bruddahs, the two comedians?**

Yeah, you know and they miss that right? And bring like Henry Kaponu or a Hawaiian group up there you know, to play and bring that aloha spirit back. So they kind of bring them back to their roots. And then you know we bring this group Katinas, a really awesome Samoan group. And we have all the ex-inmates share. We got 6 ex-inmates from the prison now that are pastors at our church. And we bring all the ex-inmates and we bring some of the Camp Agape kids. And we show the video of the camp for the kids. So by the end when we do the altar call you see all the guys give in. They walk in so hard but they leave just, just a miracle happens, they leave crying and all accepting the Lord.

**Serving God was one part of Roy Yamamoto's transformation. He also needed to restore relationships with those he hurt as well those who hurt him, including his parents.**

**They were abusive.**

They were abusive yeah and but you know also always loving. But you know, ah, you know, God ah, you know, allowed me to forgive. My dad got saved too, he comes to the church and I got to baptize my dad. And you know, my mom passed away. And you know, and my, so God really rebuilt that relationship. We go to Alaska, we go fishing every summer. And you know, we, we always had a good relationship and you know but he was abusive and you know, that you know, kind of hurt me a lot you know. But you know that's how it was right back then right, was they were heavy handed.

### **What about your ex-wife?**

My ex-wife, you know, I got out and you know I wanted to see my daughter so much. I was a changed person, but you know, you know they were so afraid because the person I was. You know all the hurt I did to them. I called her and I asked if I could talk to her and she said no. You know and I said, oh, you know I just, you know I just wanted to come and make amends. I'm so sorry about my past and I want to tell my daughter how sorry I am. And she said, oh, you know let me talk to my parents. And then she said if I could come over and talk to them. So I did and I got to sit down and say, you know what I'm so sorry. Everything that happened was my fault. It was my fault that I took that first hit of drugs and I didn't mean it, but it took over my life. And I brought so much hurt to you and my daughter and I'm so sorry and you know. And I got to make amends with the family and you know they were so nice to me. And, and just say you know so sorry for the person I became. You know and if I could turn everything back I, you know I pray I could but I can't. But one thing I can do is to do the best I can from this day forward. And you know we made amends.

And I remember calling and asked if I could see my daughter and she said no. And I was like oh, I'm so sorry you know, didn't want to make you feel uncomfortable but when you're ready you know I going be here. I going try to do everything I can. And then she called and said if you want your daughter on the weekends you can. And perfect timing and you know where I could spend that time and teach my daughter how to surf. And now she got married and she's a radiologist now. And you know just a God restored it. And you know we're friends with my ex-wife and God just restored everything so it's a blessing.

### **And you found a new love, in the ministry?**

Yeah. My, I found, my, my new wife we're serving in ministry. She helped volunteer for the Angel Tree ministry that we do for the children at Christmas time. We get gifts for all the families you know of the incarcerated. She was serving and then I met her. Eventually we got married and we serve in ministry together today. So, yeah, we have our stepson, is like a such an awesome kid.

**Wouldn't be something you would have predicted, would it?**

No. But, you know God, God can restore and rebuild and bless you know. Like I said anybody and I'm truly blessed. Grateful for every single day you know that I get to be out and get to serve him. So, it's a blessing.

**His wife is Charlotte Yamamoto. And the church is one he established, after some 15 years with New Hope O'ahu. His church is Agape Christian Fellowship O'ahu. Mahalo to Senior Pastor Roy Yamamoto for sharing your story of recovery and new life. And thank you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.**

**And you never had anyone teaching you literacy right?**

You know, so when I was in prison, after I accepted the lord, God blessed with me with this wonderful guy, this guy, Ray Kishimoto. He spent most of his life in prison. And I couldn't read so he would get the easiest reading bible for me and he would help me pronounce words. And he kind of taught me how to read and you know.

**Aww, what happened to Ray Kishimoto?**

He's actually working at a church right now.

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