

# LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



**TITLE: Maile Loo-Ching**

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For many of us, hula is really a lifeline to our humanity, it helps us to stay grounded, to feel a connection to a place that's very meaningful, to feel connections to people that are very meaningful, to know we're part of something that matters.

**Using hula to connect people around the world. Meet a Stanford-educated techie whose life mission is preserving the hula. 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. What do you think the career path would be for a local girl who majored in artificial intelligence at Stanford University? Maile Loo-Ching returned to Hawai'i and made the job she wanted, co-founding the Hula Preservation Society, collecting precious moving images and photos. A Kāne'ōhe resident, she is also a kumu hula or hula teacher. And as an adult she became the hānai, or informally adopted, daughter of the late Hawaiian cultural hero, Nona Beamer.**

**Where were you born? I would assume Hawai'i, but I think I'd be wrong.**

No, I actually wasn't born in Hawai'i, I was born in Lansing, Michigan of all places, and it's funny because I sort of forget that, having you know, been in Hawai'i for so long, and I had to get a copy of my birth certificate recently, because I needed to get a passport and I forgot I wasn't born in Hawai'i, I was...oh wait, it's not State of Hawai'i Department of Health, it's Michigan. So, I had to...I said, oh yeah, I was born in Michigan. So, it happened because my dad went back to school, grad school, and you know, take my mom with him and they just had their kids there.

**How long were you there?**

I went through kindergarten there, yeah.

**Do you remember it? Do you remember the place?**

Just snow. Snow, snow, and snow. And having a basement because you had tornadoes there, and so all the houses had basements and so whenever there was a tornado warning, we'd have to run to the basement. And when you're a little kid, it's more fun, because that was

actually our playroom. But I do remember that, that was a big part of life. So, tornadoes and snow.

**Maybe we talk about your dad and mom getting together, uh, one's from here and one's not?**

Yeah, so my mom was from Grand Rapids, Michigan and had an aunt and uncle who had moved out here. Her uncle was a travel writer and he ended up settling in Ho'okena on Hawai'i Island. And so she came out here, she's quite adventurous, and so she came out here and she wanted to, you know, visit her family, and she ended up staying, and she went to UH, she joined the UH choir. And it took a while for her to sort-of blend in, because she was one of the few blondes with green eyes at the time, but she really, you know, bonded with the locals here and ended up staying and meeting my dad. And then, they got married in 1960. And of all places, where does he want to go back to school? Michigan. So, she was like, no, why, spent my life trying to get out of Michigan.

**But back she goes and has you and two other kids?**

Their first baby passed away, um, in 1963. It was the time when they didn't know so much about folic acid, so he was born with spina bifida, so he only lived for a month, and at that time, that was, I guess, the norm for babies born that way. Now, I think there's a lot, you know, more they can do. But my sister then was born in '65 and I was born in '66, and we spent our early years there playing in the snow, you know, just being snow kids, sometimes they thought she was our babysitter because we looked like these little Asian kids and here's this, you know, blonde hair, green eyed lady and you know, it's like, those are my children.

**And who wanted most to go back to Hawai'i?**

My mom, of all things, you know, my dad, he got into teaching at Lansing Community College after he finished school and he really loved it, and I mean, he was the one from here, but my mom just really, really wanted to go back. So, by the time we were, I guess, five, six years old, my brother, we had adopted in our family and he was three years younger than me, so he was a little guy, and just sort of trying to make the trek back to Hawai'i, it took awhile, but we did it. So, by '72, I think, we were back here...'72, '73, yeah.

**What were your, what was your growing up period like?**

I don't know, we were in kind of newish neighborhood in Kailua, it was um, Enchanted Lakes. Went to public school for a couple years in the neighborhood and then my mom started teaching at St. Marks in Kāne'ohe. And so, my brother and I started going to school there. My sister had gotten into Kamehameha at fourth grade, so she was going somewhere else. But, um, I loved Kāne'ohe. I mean, I still love it to this day, that's where our office is, but, um, we just um, yeah, we just mostly spend our life on the Windward side until then we got into Kamehameha, then we started making the trek over the hill every day.

**Your dad had trouble though, in your childhood, he was troubled by depression?**

Yeah, it kind of came out more as we got older. I know by the time we got into high school, I don't think he was really working too much anymore. And he really tried, but, it was also alcoholism and the relationship with my...I think the, the life here in Hawai'i was harder for him. I mean, he comes from a huge family, um, his immediate family's not so huge, but I think, you know, being the oldest in the family, being the only boy, you know, the pressures and there's, that probably was a part of it and not feeling like he, he was maybe taking care of his family the way he should have and being here on the islands probably exacerbated a lot of his, his troubles, yeah.

**Did you feel you had to go without at times?**

You know, when you're a kid, you only really know what you know. So, we didn't really know it was not, you know like that wasn't normal for everybody, I don't know, we just kind of were there for each other, us kids, you know? My sister being the oldest, I think, she was more clued into things, um, than me or my brother, and she tried to protect us from things, you know, and sort of redirect some of their, sort of their strife and in, redirect it on herself, which has its own ramifications, of course, you know, as far as her own, you know, well-being, but um, we just, we just knew what we knew, you know, so that, that was normal to us.

**And mom was the bread winner at the small church school in Kāne'ohe?**

Yeah, I mean, yeah, I think she made like twelve-thousand dollars a year or something, you know, it was a tiny little school, you know, how do you support a family of three kids and have a house and all that on such a small salary? So, we just, I mean, but amazingly they, they...we didn't really feel, you know, that? We, we didn't know we weren't rich, but we didn't feel poor, you know? So, I mean, they really did a good job of, of protecting us from that, and always trying to, you know, be good parents in terms of making sure we...we never went hungry and that kind of thing, I mean, we really didn't, you know. So, in the big scheme of things, you know, they did as best as they could, and we really, I mean, we knew they loved us, yeah.

**You ended up going to Stanford University...how did that happen?**

It's pretty cool. I always liked school, but I didn't ever have such sights, you know, that kind of thing, and I remember, you have your annual at the end of the year and you get your friends to sign it and you used to also get some of the teachers to sign it, and one of the teachers, um, she just wrote in there, on the back, she said, oh, I hope to see you Class of '88, and she listed, you know, Harvard, Stanford, and she, you know, some of those schools, and I read that and I said, really? Never thought about that before. And so, that's heading into high school, and I said, well, ok, you know? Because with school, so, when you have a crazy home-life, it sort of feels like quicksand, and so school was definable to me. If I did this, I'd get that, if I work this

hard, I'd achieve this. You know, so, it made sense to me and I could sort of control it, you know? Whereas at home, it was totally not controllable, you know? And you just trying to sort of, survive in the quicksand and um, and so I just really got into school and went, just went for it.

**You know, I noticed you majored in something that Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook says is the major of some of the most talented people in the world and it's known to be a tough major combining computer science, linguistics, and I think, psychology? Tell us about that.**

You know, it was, yeah, it's a really interesting field. It technically was called Symbolic Systems at Stanford, but it was essentially Artificial Intelligence.

**Back then, artificial intelligence.**

I kind of knew that there weren't really many jobs in that area. It was so new, as far as for someone, you know, at that time, coming out of college, um, but it just fascinated me, and the guy who wrote the book called "A.I." was a prof at Stanford and I thought, if I'm gonna study something, this is the place and the time to do it, you know?

**And what appealed to you about it? It was the combination of technology and humanity?**

Yeah, exactly.

**Understanding why humans do what they do and how?**

Exactly, yeah, because I wasn't so much interested in the engineering and all that aspect of it. Symbolic systems, or AI, was more about how do we think. And how might we have a machine think, you know? And how can a machine understand language? All of those things. So it was, it was linguistics, it was philosophy, it was logic, it was math, it was computer science, you know.

**Was it difficult? Especially at Stanford, I would imagine you were applying yourself a lot to it.**

Yeah, it was hard, it was really hard, but I just figured you know, just, it was interesting, and I kind of knew I wasn't going to work in that field but I was okay with that because I just thought, it's interesting and as long as I do something with technology, then I would be happy.

**After those years of being away from home, Maile Loo-Ching knew she wanted to come back to the islands. What she didn't know was that her return to Hawai'i would come with a family crisis: her mom had cancer.**

She was 56 when she was diagnosed and that was just completely devastating. I mean, now, looking back, I realize that, in her 30's, she had ulcers, and in her 40's, she had colitis, and in

her 50's, she had cancer, and they know now that all of those are tied to stress, chronic stress, those conditions.

**And the stress would've been caused by uncertain family situation?**

Yeah, just money, relationship, depression, you know, she actually had depression, too, you know, it turns out, so, just, you know, it was a real struggle, yeah, so...I, I see now that it was progressive, you know, but you don't know that as a kid, right, so. You just, now they also know more about chronic stress and its impacts.

**Did you take care of her, then?**

Yeah, I was, lived with them, and you know, just, I mean, it was a long haul, at first, we didn't know, they said three to six months and fortunately, she lived for almost four years. So, it was a blessing, but it was hard.

**And what were you thinking about, your plans at that time?**

I had met my husband right before she got diagnosed, is like almost our entire relationship, it was like almost the same time I met him and then she gets diagnosed. So that, we had plans to get married and everything, and she died like right before we got married, so, it was really, really hard. You know, but, life was just with, with her, really, she was still the priority even though I was trying to, you know, make wedding plans and everything, but she was, I just wanted to do whatever I could for her because she, she, it was, I just, it was hard to accept, hard to accept.

**That's a lot of sadness in your life.**

Yeah, but you know, you just, you carry on, you do what you can, and I lived to please my mom, you know, probably to unhealthy degrees, but you don't know, you just, you know, it's your mom, you just want to love them and make them happy in whatever way you can, it was really hard for her to be happy, yeah, so, just try.

**So, she passed away and you got married, it was already planned, and then where did life take you?**

Oh, well, uh, it was kind of good for a couple of years there, um, and then um, that was, you know, great, we, you know, we're married and um, you know, had just normal, I guess, normal life, you know, trying to work. I'd do consulting for teachers and technology and do teacher training in integrating technology. I was kind of happy doing that. I was doing the tele-school stuff with the DOE, doing TV shows for them, and, um, yeah, it was, it was nice, it was calm for a little bit after that and then, then, out of the blue, my dad gets sick, he's diagnosed with cancer, and that just totally threw me for a loop. Because he was in the water every day. He was so healthy. And again, I think it's just a manifestation of years of, you know, he. My mom's

passing was so hard on him, you know, because you have so much you left on the table, I guess, you know, and just weren't able to get out and it just continues to eat away, and he was a fast one, he was three months, yeah. So, in that time from when I got married and then, when he passed away, was when I did hook up with Aunty Nona.

**Aunt Nona is the late Nona Beamer, who was one of the most revered and fearless women in Hawai'i. Having never met her, Maile Loo-Ching sent Aunt Nona a letter asking if she could study hula with her. Little did she know that their relationship would be far more than just student and teacher and that out of it would come the Hula Preservation Society.**

**You had confidence, I mean, you, you, actually you had been told you should be a teacher but you said you wanted to keep being a student.**

Yeah, yeah, you know, I did, because I just, I don't know, I just didn't feel ready, and I wanted, I just loved being a student, too, you know. So, I wrote to her and of course she said, oh come dear, come, like she tells everybody, right? Because that's how she is, and so, I was like, ok, I'm gonna go, you know, and those were the days when you had coupon books, if you remember. No TSA, coupon books, you can show up 30 minutes before, fill in your ticket, it was so great, right? So, I used to just try to go to Hawai'i Island as often as I could and always were other people there because, she would tell everybody come visit her, because she loved company and you know, half of us would take her up on it, right? So, I met really interesting people out there when, you know, when I'd go visit her. But we just, I would just go back and forth as often as I could and this was like, um, from after my mom passed away, so '98, '99 time frame. It was nice, even though I was already an adult and you know, she was, could've been my grandmother, but um, we just really enjoyed each other's company and it was...

**To the point that she had a hānai ceremony for you, you're her hānai daughter.**

Yeah, she did, and she wanted to do that, and I really appreciated it. I mean, I didn't, I never experienced anything like that before and um, it was beautiful, yeah, I kind of just, it was sort of like sharing our connection to, to the people that were important to her in her family and then, my family and students and, um, it was right before my dad passed away, like literally like days before he passed away, and so, he wasn't able to come, but he knew, you know, because they spent time together and they knew each other, so, he knew that um, that I would have her, you know, after he passed away, so, and I was so grateful for that energy because I missed having a mom, I really did, you know, and she was, such a natural mom, you know, with just her love and her energy. Because my mom was sick and just a lot of the things in her life, she wasn't always, you know, that kind of nurturing energy, you know, and, I mean, everybody wants that, you know, it just makes you feel good and so, she was, she was that for me and I was always just really grateful, yeah.

**You bonded over hula, which she knew so much about and you were still, considered yourself a student, but you knew more than she did about technology and that turned out to be a wonderful combination, too.**

Yeah, it was...

### **What happened as a result of those two capabilities?**

You know, she had told me a story about all this um, research that she had done in the 50's. She had been trying to write down. So, at that point in her life, she was in her 30's, so it was about what age I was at when I was with her, and so, she had all this research and she had put it up on the walls of her study at the Waimea Ranch in Hawai'i Island in Waimea, and butcher paper and pencil and just making notes, you know, she had years, years of work, and then, the place burned down. Yeah. And everything was gone, and she told me that story and I was...nooooo...we need to try to recreate that. And you know, she's in her 70's and she's like, okay. I mean, she was always like, wanting to be nice about it, but I said, no, it's okay, you don't have to write it all down, we will put it in the computer and we'll make a database and you know, we'll do this...and she was game, she's like, okay dear, whatever you say. But I mean, I just didn't want it to feel like work for her. You know, so, what we would do is basically do this, we'd just talk, we'd talk through things, she had notes, she had her books by that point too, that she had published, and so we'd just talk through things, and because I was always the one in the camera with a...I mean, one in the family with a camera stuck to my face, whether it was a photo camera or video camera, I had, little, you know, point-and-shoot things.

### **You liked all kinds of tech.**

Yeah, right. So, I thought well, we're talking like this over her lauhala mat covered dining room table in Pāhoa, and I just would put my camera sort of off in the corner, you know, just for reference for me, because I'm trying to take all this in, and I can't remember everything, and I'm writing notes, but, it was just a reference for our conversations, and um, and then, that was kind of how we started being together, we would just...days, you know, I would just try to go out there, and we'd just talk and you know, notes, and just talk things through, just...so, for her, it was just about remembering, it wasn't that she had to do anything more than that, you know, so she could do that. So, that was what we did for several years, and then, in the middle of, you know, one of these conversations, she just was saying to herself, I wonder what Uncle George thinks about that? What does he know about that? And I said, oh, we should go talk to him.

### **Uncle George Na'ope?**

Yeah, because he's in Hilo, we're in Pāhoa, we should do that. You know, it seemed like, wow, we could, maybe, that would be so interesting. And so, one thing that I loved about her, she was always curious, she never wanted to stop learning, even though she could've easily, you know, in all her years and everything, everybody was, oh, put Aunty Nona, you know, up on a pedestal, but she was always right in there, wanting to learn, realizing she didn't know everything, everyone's path is different, she's like, I only know what I know, and so, that's how HPS started because it was simply the desire to keep learning and wanting to hear what his

journey was like. Did he ever see that kind of hula? Did he ever see that person do what she saw when she was with her grandmother?

**Did anybody else ever wear gold lamé when he danced the hula?**

Yeah, we all know the answer to that one. Not like Uncle George, anyway. Yeah, so it was really that simple but yet profound, right? Just have conversations.

**But it took a lot of follow-through and in your case, it's been years and years of very difficult work because you've had to uh, raise funds to keep this non-profit going, I mean, you've done the creative and the tech.**

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Lots, lots and lots of work to make it happen.**

Yeah, and honestly, didn't really know how involved it was going to be when we started, we just wanted to have conversations with people. It was just, it seemed so simple, you know? But we were like, well, you live on Hawai'i Island, I live on O'ahu, and maybe the kūpuna on Maui, and well, we really need a professional videographer, it's not gonna cut it to have the camera in the corner.

**Because you saw it as preserving these conversations?**

Exactly. Because they might never happen again and in most cases, they probably didn't.

**What was it about that particular timing of elders that uh, you say, we've gotta get them before they pass?**

Yeah, so they were mostly born in the 19-teens and 20s and maybe early 30s in those first years, and really when you look at them, as a collective, they were born in a time very close to after the overthrow and their grandparents were a big part of their lives, their grandparents were born in the time of the Hawaiian Kingdom, spoke Hawaiian. Then, they're being raised in a time when they're purposely not being taught Hawaiian, but they still understood it, you know, because that was the world that they lived in, with their families and everything. So, they're just really cut from a different fabric than we are afterwards, because of, you know, we're all a product of our time, but that time was so, just so dynamic and changing and you know, they navigated that as a part of, you know, being in that time and growing up in that time. So, their stories and their viewpoints and the way that they were in the world, it's just different.

**You talked about looking at life through the lens of hula and hula is very much a way of life, I mean, it is curious that people still see it as a dance, maybe because it's offered as**

**entertainment, but for somebody like you, and the women you're interviewing, and men, it's not that at all, is it?**

Right, it is really what Aunty Maiki's students always quote her as saying, hula is life, you know? And because it is a way, it helps you see a way to be in the world, that is beyond entertainment. I think hula in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was very much, um, relegated to entertainment, you know, because of the changes in Hawai'i.

**Cellophane skirts at times.**

Yeah, you know, and just for military, for tourists, whatever the case may be. That was how hula, and Hawai'i, were viewed. You know, and um, but then, at the same time, so, the folks that were studying hula, that wasn't all that they were about, but it was a means for them to make a living and they had to make a living, you know, it just cost money. It cost, not as much as today, but it still, you have, things you have to have money for. And so, I give them credit because they really were able to navigate their way through that, because they not only, figured out a way to make a living with something that they loved and were good at, and had so much talent in, but also to, at the same time, preserve, you know, and be a part of passing on tradition and making sure that we didn't just become that. And so, when you're in that hula world, you're really in a different mindset and so many of our kūpuna over the years that we've interviewed have talked about how hula saved their lives because of illnesses that they've had and all they want to do is get back to dancing because it puts you in a, just like an aloha mindset, you know? A way of being in the world, you cannot be ugly when you dance hula, they say, you cannot have those bad feelings, you know, you have to let it go and that's a good practice for all of us, right? Whether you use hula to do it or not, but um, it just keeps you focused on the positive and it creates those connections with people that are so important to having a, you know, a happy life, you know, and having those meaningful relationships and hula is a way to bring people together in meaningful ways, and even now, more so with everything happening on the Mauna, with people seeing hula in an even different light, you know, for ceremony, for protocol, people haven't necessarily had access to that, to the degree they have had in this past year, and I think during the time when our kūpuna were raised, that wasn't an acceptable way of sharing hula at the time, not to say they didn't do it, but it wasn't public.

**The year 2020 marked 20 years for the Hula Preservation Society but the work is far from over.**

**And look what you've dedicated your life to, that connection between technology and humanity, which you studied at Stanford.**

Yeah, I know, it kind of trips me out, because I mean, technology is so integrated into HPS. We always shot video, digital video from the beginning, because, you know oral histories, I think, the standard at the time was audio cassettes. We did video because we knew our hula people, you know? Their face, we wanted to see their expressions and they talk with their hands, right?

And so, we always did video, and then, you know, just trying to keep up with the technology and how can we use this technology to both preserve these interviews as well as share them. So, technology is, it's, it's, well, it's inseparable in all of our lives, but especially in the work that we're doing, it's, it's, there's no getting away from it, we are just on the computer all the time, just working with every aspect you can imagine.

**The public really hasn't seen that vast archive that you have, so there's so much to come out of the work you're doing for others.**

Yeah, right, and we, that's the kind of what kept us going in those early years when it was like, so hard, you know, just keep going, but we went, someday, we're going to be able to share this, just hang in there, you know, and so, we're slowly moving in to that realm now, where we're able to share more and we're focusing on how can we share in meaningful ways. And that's the push of most of our grants, nowadays is, sharing the materials that we spent all this time gathering, so...it's exciting and we look forward to being able to make more stuff available as we're able to, but it's all surrounding technology, but it's taking our beautiful kūpuna and sharing them in a way that, hopefully, they would be pleased, you know? Because they have no, probably no idea, you know, how it was actually going to happen. We'd show them some little clips we edited of them and they'd get a little kick watching themselves on the computer and see how their interview looked.

**But they probably don't know how important it is.**

No, because they just said they would usually end up enjoying, you know, talking story, because nobody was talking story with them about that kind of stuff.

**And there's a sense of humility about their role, they figured they were just like anybody.**

Yeah, exactly, so, why am I so special, and so, I think it did mean a lot to many of them to have a chance to share their stories, you know, and even though they don't ultimately know how, or who, or what, but they trust us, you know? And that, that means a lot.

**Mahalo to Kāne'ōhe's Maile Loo-Ching, the techie and Kumu Hula who runs the Hula Preservation Society, for sharing her story with us and thank you for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.**

**How far can hula take you?**

Well, I mean, it's limitless, really, you know, especially if you're haku mele and you're writing, and you're creating and you're, you're inspired by whatever's around you and your time. I mean, Uncle George always said, it's good to keep the chants from the past, but you got to keep writing, you gotta tell about now, because then that will be the past someday.

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