

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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I swam out to this reef and I could kinda see some waves breaking on it. So, I knew, oh, there's a reef out there, you know, and I swam out there, totally freaked out, really, the whole time. And that was another lesson for me, too, is that I realized that all those years spent in the water with my dad, I think as a child, you have this sense of security. And every time I looked over and I saw my dad, I just felt like nothing bad could happen to me, no matter what. If I felt scared 'cause we were so deep, if I felt scared because of sharks, I would look over, I'd see my dad, and I would just know I'm safe. And so, one of the things I would have to do, even as a grown woman, when I would swim out and I'd start to like, feel a little creeped out, I would just imagine my dad swimming right next to me. And every time I did, it would just calm me down.

Kimi Werner often overcomes her fears of the unknown by recalling the life lessons and values that she learned early in life. This has given her confidence and courage in pursuing her dreams. Kimi Werner, next, on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Kimberly Maile Reiko Werner, better known as Kimi, is a national spearfishing champion, a chef, an award-winning artist, and a motivational speaker. In Kimi Werner's early years in rural Haiku, Maui, her family lived primarily off the bounty of the land and the ocean. And that laid the foundation for her passions in life.

My life was just one that was really focused around nature. We lived on this property where we had absolutely no neighbors in sight, and so, the only things that I really knew were just my family and the natural world that was right outside of my doorstep, really. Our house was like, a little shack, pretty much just falling apart at the seams. And I remember I could never really explain to kids like, what color it was, 'cause it just depended on what kinda moss was growing on all the rotten wood. But at the same time, it was just an absolute magical childhood. We spent out days outside, and gathering food with our family.

What do you remember gathering?

I mean, everything, really. My mom was such a forager, and she always taught me at a young age what was edible and what wasn't. So, any time I'd go exploring in the woods, I would just come home with like, you know, armfuls and shirt-fuls of strawberry guavas, or you know, even just like, white ginger and you suck the nectar out of it. So, anything, really.

How did your mom know how to forage, and what was your dad like?

My mom, she's kind of one of the only Japanese hippies that I know. But she was just like this very ... I mean, she's a hippie at heart, really. She didn't grow up with a lot of money. She grew up here on Oahu, the very strict conservative family, but later in life moved to Maui. And she just loved being resourceful. I think that's what it was that she got from growing up poor, was just the fascination with how you can be resourceful. And combining that with her love for nature, she was really good at just finding magic and finding resource in everything around us.

So, you say you didn't have a lot of money; you had these natural resources. Did you feel poor?

I never felt poor. I mean, I remember when I did start school in kindergarten, like kind of realizing then that I had less material things than all of the other kids. But I never felt poor. In those years, especially, I would say I felt so rich with just activity and fun. I mean, every morning, my job was to go out and gather the chicken eggs from under the house, and pick whatever fruit were ripe, and to spend the days underwater diving with my dad, and just watching him bring me up fish and lobster for dinner. Like, that doesn't feel poor.

You would float above him as he went way down?

I was just a tagalong. I was about five years old when he started taking me diving. And I would just float, and just watch him. My main goal was to keep up with him. And I remember, as long as I could see the bubbles of his fins, I knew I was going in the right way. And then, when he would take a drop, then I'd be able to catch up, catch my breath, and put in my orders for dinner, really.

And would he actually be able to get you what you wanted, the type of fish you wanted?

He would. He would pride himself on that, basically. If my mom wanted to eat octopus or if she wanted to eat lobster, or fish, whatever it was that she wanted, he always, you know, would see it through and make sure he got that for us.

You mentioned the year you started kindergarten. That was also the year, I believe, your mother started a different kind of class; college.

Yes; yeah. My mom, she was a waitress while my dad was a plasterer, a construction worker. And so basically, he was trying to kinda start his own plastering company, but it was a slow start. And my mom was pretty much living off of her tips as a waitress. But they saved up enough money to put my mom through nursing school at MCC, and so when I was five years old, she was forty-one, and that's when she went to college. It was such a memorable thing, because of how my mom just never took it for granted. You know, I think when she grew up, she did have a hard life and didn't, you know, have a lot of luxuries, and school wasn't an option for her then. And so, later in life, after having us and getting us to an age where we're now in school, and having just enough money saved up to finally pursue her own dream to become a nurse, when she went to school, I mean, she just aced it because she was so happy to be there. You know, it wasn't the privilege that I had. I went to KCC, but just going there straight after high school, you know, it was like thirteenth grade for me and whatnot. But for my mom, she took it really seriously, didn't take it for granted at all, and just learned everything she could possibly learn while there.

What did she do with her degree?

She became a nurse in the emergency room of Maui Memorial Hospital.

So, bye-bye shack that changes colors; right?

Right.

With money in the pocket, where did you move?

So, I mean, when she got her job at the emergency room, that was also around the exact same time when my dad's company actually flourished, and he started getting employees and started making more money. So, it was a pretty drastic change. You know, it's not like we were rich all of a sudden, but we did have a lot more money and access to material things than we ever had before. And so, we moved from that old little shack in Haiku to a subdivision in Makawao. And it was my first time ever living anywhere that had like a paved road, or neighbors, and first time ever buying eggs from the store instead of collecting them myself.

How did they taste?

They were horrible. I mean, that was one thing I completely remember, was just that that was always my favorite breakfast, and when we moved into this new house that my dad built, and my mom served me eggs, like, I just ate them and I was like, What's

wrong with these? Like, they don't taste so good. And she told me, Oh, they're store-bought. And I remember at that young age, I was seven, just thinking like, Oh, they're fake. You know. I just related store-bought to fake, and didn't really want them anymore. It's crazy what a shocking transition that was. And even though I knew we were happy to be making this forward progress, I could tell my parents were really proud of themselves and happy, I definitely just felt a really big sense of loss. I think we all kinda felt the same. I might have been the one that voiced it the most of how much I just wanted to go back and live there. But I do think my whole family, even with the advantages and the good we saw coming out of it, I do think we all did feel a sense of loss.

It's amazing how formative that experience of foraging as a little kid and diving with your dad, I mean, it seems to have shaped your life. That's what you do as a career, to a great extent.

It really has. You know, I think like anything, you adjust and you adapt. And I definitely did adjust and adapt to the new more modern life that was given to me, and I got bicycles, and nicer clothes, and friends, and you know, got used to the store-bought eggs. And we just evolved that way. But I think it was later in life when I was an adult, still kinda going through the motions of what seemed like progress, and was there with my, you know, degree and my job, and doing everything I could to kind of connect the dots of what should make a fulfilling happy life, but still, there was just something in me that just was longing in a way, for the past, and realizing that it had been that long, and there was still just something calling me back to those really early childhood memories. It is what shaped my life. I think for the longest time, I believed that you have to let go of the past, and you can't go backwards. And even though I did accept that, finally, when I was about twenty-four years old, I just kind of started to realize that, you know, maybe it wasn't something that's just left in the past; maybe it is something that I can incorporate into my world today.

Kimi Werner graduated with a degree in culinary arts when she was twenty-one. She took jobs in the restaurant industry, but soon realized that was not her calling. She left that career to become an artist, but that wasn't fully satisfying, either. She needed something that would bring her interests together.

My main connection to the ocean at that time was paddling canoe. And it was one day, when we were at a canoe regatta, when some of my friends, some of my guy friends from the club brought some fish and put it on the grill. You know, when I was those fish hit the grill, I did just get a sense of just like, nostalgic bliss. And I think at the same time, it served as proof that maybe this is something I can do, and if those are my most fond memories, you know, the diving with my dad, and whatnot, maybe it's time that I learn to just dive on my own, and know how to feed myself. You know.

Did you check with him about it? How did you do that? Did you broach that to him?

I did. He was living on Maui, and so it's not like I could just go jump in the water with him. But I remember just telling him, You know, I wish that I had learned that from you. I spent all those years cleaning the fish, you know, doing all the little grunt work, cleaning the fish, helping Grandma or Mom cook the fish, and tagging along with you and holding the fish. And you never even taught me to spear the fish, and now I want to learn, and I don't know where to start. And he just told me, like, Oh, no, I taught you. You know, you'll see. And he was right. I hate to admit it; I always do, but he was absolutely right.

Because you could see what he was doing down there. You know, I'm sure he had special places he hid, and positions he took.

Well, basically. So, I tried to reach out and find teachers, and ask people to take me diving. And when I wasn't really getting called back for that or anything, or getting invited, then I did just go get a three-prong spear, you know, like the one that I saw him have, and I just went for a swim one day.

Where?

I actually went for a swim like, towards Kahuku, kind of past Turtle Bay. But went for a swim in Kahuku side, and I just realized like, as soon as I started swimming, like, any fish that swam by me, I knew what fish that was. Like, I had my whole fish identification down, because as a kid, I knew what I wanted for dinner, and I knew how to put in my orders. And then, I remembered where they lived, how they acted, and all of those years just spent simply observing really taught me more than I realized. And I gave it a try, and I was able to just come home with just six little fry fish. I think it was like, three kole's and two menpachi's, and an aweoweo. You know, just a humble catch of fish. But the feeling of scaling it and cooking it, and sharing it with my roommates at the time, but just knowing that I went out with my own two hands, you know, and got this meal, and I'm providing for myself, it was more fulfilling than any cooking experience I had in my whole culinary career. And so, that was when I knew, like, this is what it's about for me.

It's a hyphenated career that you have now.

It is.

It's painter, it's diver, it's fisher.

M-hm.

What else?

Artist. I work a lot on productions and travel.

Speaker; you speak to groups.

Yes; a public speaker. Yeah. So, it's a mixed bag of tricks, really. When I was a little kid, whenever somebody asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, it was always a long hyphenated answer, you know, depending on whatever it was that I was into in that moment, whether I wanted to be, you know, a singer, veterinarian, artist. But it was always that type of hyphenated answer. And I think as I got older, I just started to realize that when it comes to, you know, being guided by adults, that you're not supposed to have these long crazy answers, you're supposed to choose one career and find your path there. And that's kind of how we were taught.

Well, you did try it; culinary arts.

I did try it. I definitely tried it. And I do remember even then, even when I signed up to go to college, knowing like, But I really also want to do something with art, and I don't know if this is all I want to do. And I put like a secret wish out there, you know, to the universe. Like, if I just go on this path, like, will you please just let something else fall in my lap and, you know, guide me along. And then, the next thing I knew, I was standing there with a degree, and there was nothing that fell in my lap. And I think feeling the unfulfillment, feeling just not satisfied completely, it made me realize like, you can't just wait for something to fall in your lap. Like, if you really want to do it, if you really want to be an artist, that's gonna take courage, you have to just go try. You know, if you want to try this diving stuff, like, stop waiting for it. Like, go do it. And if you fail, you fail, but you're gonna feel like this for the rest of your life if you don't try.

You know, you talked a lot about being very happy in those early surroundings and with your family when you were a kid. And then, I've heard you refer to unfulfillment, and you know, not quite happy. Tell me the difference between those things. I mean, it sounds like you spent much of your life trying to get that full happiness back.

Right; definitely. I think when it comes to me, I think the happiness comes from just the most simple things. And I believe that's why at an early age, I did feel so content. I mean, it's easy to say, Oh, you were just a kid, you didn't have all these responsibilities, it's easy to be happy then, you're an adult now, you know, you're not supposed to feel like that. But I don't really think so. I think that at that early age, I was content because I just had these basic simple pleasures that took hard work. You know, none of it came easy. When it comes to getting your own food, or not having a lot of convenience in your life, you have to work for everything. But I think that it is that hard work that ends

up becoming so meaningful, that ends up giving you values, and that ends up being so character-building.

A lot of it involves intuition and observing.

Yes; definitely.

You're learning a lot as you do it.

You do; you definitely do. And I think sometimes, I mean, maybe it really is just through these more simple lifestyles for me that you do get that much more in touch with yourself, with your natural instincts, with your intuition. I mean, those are most definitely things that you learn from hunting. And when you get to know the core of who you are that well, to the point where you are satisfied and can smile about it, everything else just seems to melt away. And I think sometimes when we get focused more on a life of just convenience and ...

And cramming in a lot of things to keep you busy.

Cramming it all in. Yeah. It can just complicate everything, and before we know it, we're chasing things we don't even need, and we're doing things that we don't even want to do. And why? You know, I think probably because of just the pressure that we feel from society, or from other people, and going through these motions of what we feel we're supposed to do with our life, rather than just really evaluating it at the heart and asking yourself what it is that you really want.

Kimi Werner's life lessons were not all learned as a child. When she trained to become an expert free diver, learning to hold her breath underwater for almost five minutes, she realized that her new skills translated into different values and life lessons.

How do you hold your breath that long?

It's all about relaxing. I mean, a hundred percent, I think that's what it's about. I can break down the physiology, and you know, talk about the hemoglobin and all of that within us and how it works, but really, what it comes down to is your brain. It just comes down to making that screaming voice in your head, the one that's saying like, I'm scared, you need to breathe, let's get out of here, you know, all of those things that go through your mind, it's about switching it off and just saying, I got this. And having confidence in yourself, and trusting the process that you're doing.

Would that work on land, as well?

I think so. I definitely think so. You know, everything about panic, about fear, it's not just the vibrations and the energy that's used up within that panic, and the adrenalin, and whatnot that takes away your oxygen, but it's also how your body starts reacting to it. Usually, when we start to panic, we start to do things a lot faster, you know, and you see it when you're late for work and looking for your car keys. And you're doing things, but you're not really making any more progress. Now, you're dropping stuff, you know, and it's the same with being underwater. If you start to panic, you're gonna start to kick faster, and it's gonna be counterproductive because you're using more muscles, which are using more oxygen, which there goes your breath. And so, really, for me, whenever I feel that sense of panic come over me, it's now become an indicator that just makes everything go numb, switch off, and just assess the situation calmly, and it makes me actually slow down. Like no matter what, when I feel that sense of panic, I slow down.

So, when you're late for work and you lose your keys, all of a sudden, you're moving slowly.

I try to apply it to land all the time. Or you know, or if something really gets you upset, for example. You know, if something gets you upset, a lot of times, we have this need to panic and to react, and that can come out in the way that we talk to people, the way that we react to, you know, the person that's trying to do their job, or trying to serve you something, or whatever. And it doesn't get you anywhere good, usually. It usually really helps if when everything goes wrong, if you just slow down and you just look for an actual solution.

I like your word, assess.

M-hm.

Kind of dispassionately take a look, a little three-sixty, and figure out what to do.

Yes. I think that's exactly it. You know, you have to look at the situation neutrally, and then, you can go from there. You know. But I think reacting out of panic um, it heightens things and oftentimes, just makes things messier than they need to be in any situation.

You have lost people in your life young. And you do take risks that other people don't take.

Right.

Has that affected your feelings about the value of life, or the fragility of life?

Most definitely. When I was a senior in high school, you know, my high school boy friend at the time, we were very close to his dad. And one day, I had a paddling regatta in Hana, and his dad had come out to surprise us, and it was just a beautiful day. But on the way home, he was hit on a head-on collision, from actually a cousin, a family member of mine, who was high on heroin at the time. And basically, that was my first like, true feeling of just loss, such a beautiful life gone. That's what really showed me the fragility of our mortality, and it did make me just start to evaluate my own life. I was seventeen and then, I turned eighteen; I just kept thinking about that and just realizing that even as a teenager, that I should be living a lot better and that I should be a lot happier, because if life can be taken just that easily, like my goodness, I want to make the most of it.

That's interesting, 'cause at that age, many people see success, worldly success as the goal, and not a conscious effort to be happy.

Yeah; and that's what it came down to for me. I mean, I kinda had an epiphany as a senior in high school, and just realized how silly it all is, the whole façade. You know, even in high school, I think there's just so much of it that's just built on image and expectation from the clothes that we think we need to wear or buy. And I would go to school and look around, and realize that these are the same kids that I grew up with since I was like, so little, and half the time walking around in school, we're not even smiling at each other or saying hi or engaging, 'cause we're all so afraid of just not fitting in. We're all so like, conditioned to be going through these motions of acting how we think we're supposed to act. Everything gets so based on image around your peers at that age that even just something like showing kindness, saying hello, those things get forgotten. We all do crave human connection, we all crave being accepted and connection, but we look for it in ways that maybe aren't really the true connection of it, and that life's too short to live like that. I mean, still, once you see the truth, you can't un-see it, and so, it is something that does just help keep me in line, and how important it is to really just know that as long as you're trying your best in life, you're giving love out there to this world. Then give yourself a hand and just, you know, love yourself, and let all the critics and all the insecurities fall away, because you're doing a good job.

Kimi Werner sees her way to happiness and can't un-see that, either. Mahalo to Kimi Werner, currently in 2016 a resident of Waialua, Oahu, for sharing your stories with us. And thank you, for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.

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Do you see this career as extending over a long time?

I think I do. I never really knew where any of this was going, whether it was art or spearfishing, or whatnot. I've never been like, the ten-year plan girl. I've been like, can I pay my rent this month? Yes. That's great; you're doing awesome in life. And now, it has become something that I can find a lot more comfort in, and I understand that because I'm making decisions that are truthfully, you know, holding true to my values, that's what's making it long-lasting.

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