

GUEST: NONA BEAMER

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Aloha! And mahalo for joining me for another wonderful conversation on Long Story Short. I'm Leslie Wilcox. We're about to sit down with Aunt Nona Beamer whose life as an educator and composer began simply enough – teaching hula to young, local girls in Kaka'ako and to America's first movie star, Mary Pickford. But, as a student herself, young Nona would be expelled from school – for chanting in her beloved language. And it was her love for that school – Kamehameha – that would lead her to write a letter as an adult demanding reform of... well, let's let Aunt Nona tell her stories herself. We got together with her at her friend's house at Diamond Head.

(Nona chants)

You wanted to do this interview near Kamapua'a. What's the significance?

Well you know, we are not here very often. And so much of our family background is mythology and legends and history and the Pele family and the love affair between Kamapua'a and Pele you know, and all that exciting passion going on. Here's a chance to see a replica of that symbol of the legends of the story; so I don't like to pass up the opportunity to come and say, "Thank you!" We are so happy to have the myths and legends to pass on to our children and have my daughter with me, and you know.

You mentioned passions. Look at you. You still have such a passion for life. Have you slowed down at all? I mean, I know you were sidelined in the hospital for four months. But there you are back at it again.

You know, I'm having so much fun and I am so grateful and I think, look where we are in all of this beauty and no matter where we look around us it is glorious. How lucky can we be? How lucky?

You're in your mid 80's now.

Sweetheart, I was 84 last week. Is that mid?

And a couple of years ago you were in the hospital for 4 months. You had a bypass surgery, you had a stroke and lots of people were very worried about you.

Bye bye Nona (laughs). I guess God had another plan for me and I thought, well I better get off my arse and do something. So I am trying to do something. Yeah, life is so beautiful. And it's so beautiful because of each other, you know? Our kindness with each other, our voices, our smiles, the way we touch each other's hands. It seems so corny but it works.

And you saw some of that when you were ill in the hospital.

Yes, and people that I did not know, reams of cards, school children. And I'm reading them and I had no idea who these people were, but the healing vibes were just so powerful and all the prayers. They'd come to the door and say a prayer standing in the doorway, and I'd look and couldn't make out who they were. And sometimes I couldn't hold my head up and somebody would be chanting at my door. I thought, isn't that wonderful that people would give up themselves and their healing energy is healing me, you know? This business of kindness and love, it's so, so real. And it works Leslie, in every aspect of your life. And we say to live pono. That's not very easy, pono spiritually, pono emotionally, pono physically in every aspect of your life. Moderato, you know? So you don't overeat, you don't get overemotional, so your blood pressure doesn't go, you do things moderately and that's a pretty good recipe for us, you know?

And that's exactly what you're doing with management of your diabetes. You are, you are, talk about structure, you are using structure to keep healthy.

My dear hanai sister has taught me how to do that. Yeah. And I have felt so much better since I've known the alternative, I keep to this rigid regimen because I know it's keeping me healthy. So there's no, no possible way to cheat. And I feel badly with so many Hawaiians, wonderful talent, beautiful people, stuffing their mouths, drinking the sodas. Oh the big uh, I forgot what you call them, with the rice, egg, hamburger, gravy. Loco moco, oh loco moco and I think so unhealthy, oh dear, if we could just get the Hawaiians to eat sensibly, they won't all die of diabetes before they're 20.

You are really watching yourself, you're measuring your water intake even.

Yes, because the kidneys are not happy if you don't give them enough water. Then I swell up if I give them too much water. So you just have to learn what that balance is, you know.

On the other hand, you were telling me that yours is now a life without laulau.

Yes, but I can have a half a cup of poi twice a week. So I'm happy about that. But no laulau. We make it with won bok. It's the luau leaves – that has too much potassium for the kidneys.

So you are motivated just to keep going. Your body may be slipping up a bit but you're all there in every other way.

I'm having a good time. But I'm looking for some mischief to get into. Do you have a grandfather for me? (laughs)

Having a good time and waiting for some mischief at age 84. You gotta love Auntie Nona. And there's much more to her story. Did you know that it was none other than Nona Beamer who coined the term "Hawaiiana" back in 1949? We'll find out how – and why – next.

You know, you've done so many things in your life. I mean it's, you're one of those "hyphen" people: educator, storyteller, hula choreographer, composer. How did all that happen?

Well of course we're a big family. So that we had to take care of the children, telling them stories so they would go to sleep. And then my mother was ill one summer. I was 12 and getting ready to come to Kamehameha. And my father said that your mother can't go to the studio, Nona. You have to go and your sister will go and help you, you know. I think my sister was 10 or 9, somewhere around there, so she was going to answer the phones. And I looked on the appointment book and the first student was Mary Pickford. And I said to my father, "Oh I can't teach this lady. She's a very important movie star. My father said, "Get in there." And she came with Buddy Rogers. I think they were on their honeymoon and he was so nice. She was tiny – she was smaller than I was. And her little hands, little feet, she was completely charming. Got me over the fear of teaching because we were talking and singing and doing lovely hula hands, graceful as the birds. And I got over my fear. Well I get to Kamehameha in September and there's a notice on the board. "Any girls interested in teaching at the Kaka'ako Mission, sign up." I thought, I taught, I know how to teach, so I signed up. And here were little preschool children at Kaka'ako. It was a very deprived area, you know? And they didn't know about soap and water. So the children had sores all over their legs. And they smelled bad. And ah, so the first thing we did was get big washtubs and bathe the children with tar soap, smelly brown tar soap. And I'm crying and trying to sing and then the children would say, "Oh, come to the singing lady. Come to the..." So my line gets long as the children were waiting for their baths and nobody at the other tubs. I thought, "Hmm, singing is the way to interest children," you know? So the first class I faced I started telling them stories and then began chanting about the kahuli and the kolea birds (sings a bit). "Spooky, spooky, spooky!." And they were frightened. So then I put one note in the song (sings a bit more). And they smiled and weren't frightened anymore. I thought, "That's how I'm going to teach. I'm going to teach them little songs, tell them the history and they'll be smiling and learning their history all in one fell swoop."

You composed music that stands forever. Every school kid, virtually, in Hawaii knows *Pupu Hinuhinu*. You wrote it. How does that feel? I mean, virtually every child grows up knowing your song.

Well it's a sweet little simple thing, you know. But I think that it's appealing to all levels, children and grandparents, just the sweetness of it, you know? I think we are very lucky, if we can sing sweet little songs it kind of calms us down and maybe we're not raising our voices, maybe there is more calmness in the family, you know? So I think it has a lot of uses.

So storytelling is really the basis of so much of what you've done and what your family has done as well.

It is, yes. Well we didn't have books, we didn't have you know, lot of authors writing about Hawaiian culture. In fact, I didn't even know about the overthrow until I was on the Native Hawaiian Study Commission. I didn't even know about the politics of those times, you know?

Where do you get your knowledge of Hawaiianess? From your family experience?

Yes, well it was from grandparents, grandmother.

But you don't speak fluent Hawaiian?

No, no. We were not allowed to. And then the suppression at Kamehameha. I think psychologically it caused a lot of damage among a lot of Hawaiians in my age group, you know? Because we were forbidden, we were punished. Yeah, it was a psychological block.

And yet, as a teacher you had to have structure?

Well you know we didn't have textbooks. We didn't have curriculum, you know? We didn't have a term Hawaiiana until '49 when I coined it. And it was at a workshop with the department of education teachers. Well it was called Department of Public Instruction then - D.P.I. So I wrote on the board "Hawai – glottal i – dash – ana." So I turned around, I looked at the teachers.. I said, "I'd like for us to study this word 'Hawaiiana... Hawaiiana.'" Now the "ana" is the root word "to measure, to evaluate, to determine what is the best." So we're going to concern ourselves with that and teach only the best of Hawaiian culture in the classroom. And that was my reason for that word "Hawaiiana."

You made it up.

Yes. And I didn't mean "-ana" like Americana, Mexicana like a conglomerate of things, you know. But I meant to measure everything that we're going to teach, and offer the children the very best in the culture.

That's one of the many one-of-a-kind things you've done, firsts you've done. What about when you were a student at Kamehameha Schools and got briefly expelled?

(Nona holds up two fingers)

Twice you got expelled?

Well it was strange. The first time, the President of the Trustees, Frank Midkiff, was having a tea in the pink garden, in the bougainvillea garden - so pretty. And so he asked me, I had started the Hawaiian Club and it was simply because my friends had said, "Can we learn a song? Can we learn a chant? Tell us a story." So we'd gather Monday after school and we would learn a chant. Unbeknownst to anybody else, but Mr. Midkiff was a champion of mine, a personal friend and hero. So for him I would do anything. So we came into the garden chanting (sings the chant). And we finished our chant and we bowed to everybody and we walked out. And then my principal said, "Winona you may pack your bag and leave this campus." It was a sacrilege that

I committed – to chant and do motions as we were walking.

Because?

Because it wasn't allowed. No language, no chanting, no dancing, no nothing.

But you could do western dancing?

Oh yeah, we could do anything else, yeah.

But that's how it was in those days at Kamehameha Schools.

Absolutely.

Because everyone was on this western path.

Well, it was just the mindset of the time, I think, you know? They were there to school good and industrious men and women, you know? And there was no further look about advancing us, as students or Hawaiians! I wanted to go to college. "Winona, there's no reason to go to college." I mean, my principal! I thought, what kind of principal would tell you not to think about going to college? So it kind of hurt me that they wanted to keep us so subservient.

Have you had kind of a love-hate relationship with the school since you were a kid?

You know, I've loved them all my life, all my life. In 1927 my grandmother took me to the old chapel where Farrington School is now and I heard the voices of the Kamehameha men. Oh, the stone walls were just vibrating with these wonderful voices and I fell in love with Kamehameha. Didn't know anything about it except just a name, you know? And I knew later on about the campus where my father had lived as a child. And then later on when I was hired we were given living quarters there where my father was when he was 6 years old. He was in his dormitory, you know? So there was a lot of joy in my heart for Kamehameha just from that initial love of the sound of their voices, the men singing. Of course, my grandmother was a graduate and my parents had attended. Of course all of us in our family had attended. And now it was time for the grandchild, and you know, they have been as close to me as my own blood family.

The school which expelled you twice was the school where you dedicated 40 years of your teaching life.

And \$87,864 scholarship money I have raised in 35 years for scholarships for Kamehameha. Yes, I love them like my family. Well now they're coming into the sunlight.

And you were part of that. You were part of bringing back the Hawaiianess into the school.

I like to think I was, but there's a whole faction of us. Class members, students, they were asking. Why can't we have Hawaiian? Why can't we be what we are? Why do we have to be who we are not?

And the school was acting in what it thought was your best interest?

Yes, and yet they said Princess Pauahi, in her will, stated that we were not to speak, we were not to chant, we were not to dance. So when they hired me, the first thing I did, "Could I see the will? Please may I see the will?" Nothing in it about Princess Pauahi saying there would be no language, there would be no dancing, there would be no – they lied to me, they lied to me all those years. So my estimation of administration went (motion of hands going down).

Well and then what happens many years later, your idea of the administration had again fallen. You wrote a letter to the State Supreme Court in the late 1990s, in which you said, "Mrs. Lindsey, Mrs. Lokelani Lindsey, a trustee's micromanagement methodology is an utterly diabolical plan of a self-serving egoist."

Oh, I didn't know her at all. But it was just an abomination that had happened.

In your letter, you were expressing what had been an inner angst, many people upset with what was happening at the trustee level at the old Bishop Estate. But so many people didn't want to lose what they had and you were the one who brought it out.

Well, you know they were afraid of their jobs. The students were afraid of their scholarships. I didn't have anything to lose. I had no children in school. I had retired. And I thought this was just not right. So when my hanai son Kaliko Beamer Trapp came home and told me that Lokelani had sent a directive to the University Language Department that the vocabulary they were developing could not be taught at the Kamehameha Schools, you know? So I just felt that because if it was spoken during Pauahi's time we could have spoken it. But I thought ah, we're back to the middle ages. We can't speak it 'cause Pauahi didn't speak it 50 years ago. Something's wrong, you know? So that really sort of capsulated it from there. We had to do something about it. That was the straw.

And there was a firestorm after you wrote the letter.

True. Well, I think it gave other people the courage to speak up too.

And that triggered an overhaul, a reform of the old Bishop Estate.

It was about time, about time. Well, I wish it were as lasting and as meaningful now. But they aren't there yet, they aren't there yet. I think they have to do more on campus with the old guard. I love them dearly. We're all good friends. But they have to be more mindful of Hawaiianess, you know? Not to be thinking of all the business and the dollars and the cash register. Think about the students. That's why we're there – for the students. Not to amass fortunes in the bank.

The woman who coined the term "Hawaiiana" – lives it. Aunty Nona Beamer stands up for what she thinks is right – what she feels is pono. We don't have much time left, so we'll make the rest of this long story, short. Stay with us as we continue "talking story" with the irrepressible Nona Beamer.

Are we going to see you in future years standing up again, doing the kind of things that got you expelled, that triggered reform in the old Bishop Estate?

(Laughs) You know I am getting a little more outspoken and Keola says, "Ma, you're swearing more these days." I used to say dammit, but now I say dammit to hell. (Laughs) Well I think that's one of the perks of the elderly – that we can speak up, that we've been there and we have the courage 'cause we know what it feels like to be denied your language, denied being a Hawaiian. So there's no, I don't think there's any guilt. It's just positive affirmations.

You've done it before and perhaps you'll do it again.

Do it again? (laughs) Thank you honey.

You know, you have so much love, so much aloha and yet you believe in principles and standing up even if it ruffles feathers and makes people lose their jobs.

Yes. Well it seems, if it's right, if it's reasonable, it's good you know, you should try to keep as much goodness as you can. And sometimes we just need a little help from one other. Just hang on to one another and make it better.

But I think what you're telling us is it's not just about being nice nice. It's about following principles, and values.

True, true, yeah.

Let me ask you one question – this may be dicey so let me know. One of the things that we do is we ask viewers what would you like to ask Aunt Nona? One of the questions that people always ask about and you may not want to talk about it, I understand. A viewer in Hilo would like to know if you see any mending between your sons Keola and Kapono Beamer?

Well you know there doesn't need to be mending. They have diverse careers.

So your sons had a personal and professional parting of the ways. Does it hurt or is it something a family deals with?

Well I miss them together, I miss the sound of their singing. At my father's funeral I was just weeping because I heard them singing together when I hadn't heard them for a while. I miss the mellowness of their sound. But I see it coming in my grandson now. And I think of all the good things we've done. So if their direction is different, so be it. We can't just stagnate in our same place. We got to grow or we die. So I don't see that there's a lot of mending because the love is still there. I don't know that they'll sing Honolulu City Lights together again. I don't know.

But they both came to see you when you were in the hospital?

Yes they did.

Must have been nice to see both of them at once?

The same room – we were all talking together. Yes, yes. And I'm glad that it happened before I "make die dead"! (Laughs)

Well I do think that they have a lot to contribute. I don't know what direction. But I think we're going to see something through Kamana. And his generation will probably mend the fences that their parents have knocked down.

They're the next Beamers.

I think so. I think we are going to see some interesting things from him.

So what do you, what do you look ahead to? What's ahead for you?

Well you know, I want to keep the Hawaiianess in things as much as possible. And it doesn't seem as though it's that important. In fact, it's kind of corny when you say, "What is the Hawaiianess?" you know? It's this aloha feeling – the kindness between people. You know, speaking nicely, looking at each other smiling, you know. Oh, it seems like so little. But it's a gargantuan concept to keep this aloha in the world. And that's what we all have to do in our own hearts – to keep this aloha. Not easy.

You know when people who've known you a long time and know you well describe you, the personal qualities they tend to talk about are: courage, stubbornness – and they say you're full of aloha. Are they right?

Well, you know I'm very grateful and that's a big stabilizer in my life – that I'm so grateful for all the things, the goodness of family and everything you've had behind you, you know. But you're not here by yourself. Oh, my great-grandmother's here, my grandmother's here, everybody's here behind me. And I think oh this is part of our aumakua, our belief in our guardians that are around us. But we have to listen. We have to be in tune because they're all here to help us. But sometimes we get so busy we just run rough shot over everything. And life has so much beauty underneath it. If you just be quiet enough to listen to it.

Passionate, intelligent, talented and truly "Hawaiian" ... just a few words that describe Nona Beamer. It was a pleasure sharing stories from Aunt Nona – and sharing them with you. I wish we had more time. But we have to make this Long Story Short. Mahalo for joining me. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou!

(Nona sings and plays the ukulele) Silly, but good fun!