

GUEST: MAMO HOWELL

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Aloha! And mahalo for joining me for another Long Story Short. I'm Leslie Wilcox. If you know the name Mamo, it's probably because Mamo Howell is one of Hawaii's most successful fashion designers and retailers. Quite an accomplishment for a woman – half Hawaiian – who started her business in her 40s. But that's not where Mamo's story began. As a teenager she danced hula in Waikiki to help support her family and later became a high-fashion model, strutting on runways in New York and Paris. Hawaii's first top model. That was 50 years ago. Let's catch up with her today.

We know you today as Mamo Howell, the designer, the business owner, the retailer. But in the 1950s, Mamo Howell was known as a high fashion model, all over the papers. And you were even described in one caption as 'Polynesian Goddess.'

I was?

Must have happened a lot to you because you were just the slinkiest, most beautiful model. And you'd already had three children.

Oh yeah; mm. I'm in reverse. My life is reverse. No, but—

How did all that happen?

You know, I was dancing at the Halekulani Hotel. I was a dancer before I became a model. And I was seen dancing and offered a contract to go to New York to model. And when I got there I accepted it. It was a very good contract. And when I accepted it and went there, they insisted I lose weight. And I thought I was all right. You know, I thought I was hot stuff, huh? I don't have to worry. No, no, no. So I could only eat—they watched my diet. I could only eat, you know, melon and foods that were not full of calories. And I got down to—I mean, my goodness. Today I'd be a size four. At that time it was a size eight.

How did the size of the models then compare to the size of the models now? We keep hearing models get skinnier and skinnier and skinnier.

Well no, we were skinny then. We got skinny then. But it's just that it wasn't called—a size four today was a size six or an eight then. That's the difference. Somehow, the numbers changed. And I don't know why. If it's because it makes women think they're thinner by the size being smaller; but actually you know, it's the same. It's just the numbers changed, you know. And that's how I got into modeling, was really through dancing, through hula.

You got discovered.

Yeah, I guess so. But I was already married and had my three children. I was very, very young.

That must have been really unusual at the time to go away to New York to model, and your three kids were home.

Well, yes, but thank God for my wonderful family and my mother. You know, mothers, wonderful mothers. And then I took them with me from time to time. They would come fly with me to New York, and especially summertime. Then come back here, and my family took good care. My husband was here, so it all worked out very good.

You're half-Hawaiian.

Half-Hawaiian.

And in New York that constitutes being a woman of color at the time.

I guess; yes.

Were you the only one?

Yes, I was. I was. All the other girls were from throughout the country. But there were—there were no Black models then. You know, that I don't remember any Black models at all.

You didn't just model in New York; then you hit Paris.

Well, yeah; then I was discovered there, and I was sent to Paris. And off I went there. And I loved it. It was like — I liked the language too, because I'd had a lot of that in school. You know, French nuns in Sacred Hearts Academy.

In Kaimuki.

Kaimuki.

And you never lost yourself when you were a high fashion model in New York and Paris.

No. No, no, no, no. Never. I always came right home here. This is my home. And not that there aren't in many you know, temptations all over the place. No, I always came home. It's the place to be.

And went to your Hawaiian roots, right back from Paris.

Right; right.

Did you wear real avant-garde or scanty clothing on the runway?

Very. Clothing I'd never seen before. I mean, the chiffons and the beautiful velvets, and what have you. Very, very high, high fashion. I was working for a company called Nettie Rosenstein at the time. She was like the Coco Chanel of America. And she was famous for her little black dress. And she did a lot of poir du soir. That's what she loved. Poir du soir was her thing. And so we did a lot. The lines were pretty big, large. Like we had four models, we did showroom shows every day at ten and another one at two. And the buyers from all over the country would come. But it was very high fashion. We did a lot of the shows at the Pierre Hotel and the Waldorf. It was fabulous. It was a great, great experience for a girl coming from Hawaii, who's only who's got as far as Kona. You know what I mean? So it was — it was quite an experience.

Hawaii's first high-fashion model. The first Polynesian to go global in the fashion industry. That was in the 1950's. Amazing. From that heady start, Mamo Howell reinvented herself to become a leading Hawaii designer and entrepreneur. We'll find out how that came about – next.

How do you go from model and hula dancer to fashion designer, business entrepreneur?

Well, you know, you're much like a model, dancer. Much like an athlete. There's just so much time you have. The time span for a dancer or a model is very — it's really short. It's not a long span.

Does somebody have to tell you, or do you know?

No; I knew. I wanted to start before they stopped asking me. So I was talking to David Eldredge at Punahou. And he offered me a job during the summer to do an enrichment course for summer in the fashion thing and the modeling. And so I did. And I just kind of transitioned right there to maybe having a course now, and then I looked around the market and decided that what we had on the market was not of our culture – the prints and everything. They were lovely, but they were not of our culture at all. They were just florals or ...

Mm hm.

And then I thought what they don't have on the market is something I grew up with, and that was a kihei pili – which all Hawaiian mothers made for their children. The little blanket with the flannel on one side, and that.

Mm hm.

There wasn't any on the market. So I designed on those. And I really started with that baby blanket, that's what. I had a hard time selling it too. It took time. And then with that – and oh, the quilt – the Hawaiian quilt. That was another thing I didn't see on the market at all, which is our, you know, the art of what Hawaiian women were doing. My mom, my grandmother; they were all quilters.

And you started when you were in your fifties, right? That's when Mamo really took off.

Just about; yeah. About mid-forty, forty-five. Right; yeah. Which is crazy. Nobody starts that at that age. But then you have to, because again, you can't go on dancing and modeling forever. It's a young woman's profession. You have to think something else. I didn't want to be a, maybe a clerk in a store, 'cause I didn't think I'd be happy doing that. And so I went into designing. But I did have the background, which you know, with Nettie Rosenstein and Dior. So I had that background, which is what pushed me on. And then I'd been modeling here—

Mm hm.

—in Hawaii for all the — most of the manufacturers in town, you know.

So you knew the market.

So I knew the market. Shaheen's; you remember Shaheen's?

Alfred Shaheen.

Alfred; did a lot for him. And all — Kahala Sportswear, Nat Norfleet; I worked for him for a while in his office, as well as his model, showroom model. And so I was — I'd been in it for quite a while, you know.

You didn't start with dresses at all; you started with blankets and quilts.

Blankets. Dresses were not even in my head. Started with the quilt blankets and all of that. And before you know it, I had a hard time selling that. So ...

So things aren't going very well.

Not the — things are not flying. No. So then I thought, well, what I have to do, then you know, it's done; the print was done, the screens were done – of two prints that I had, of the quilt. So what do we do with it? I decided, well, I'm gonna make a muumuu with it. Okay. And that's when it started. That's when it happened. The muumuu. Carol & Mary, Nancy Lang — you remember Nancy Lang?

Mm hm.

Well, Nancy was really the first one to buy my muus. She bought two. And then Carol & Mary right after that bought some also. But Carol & Mary told me with my blankets — they bought the blankets too. They said to me, we'll take your blankets, your kihei pili, if you give it to us first, and you give it to us, we'll have it for three months before you give it to anybody else. Well, what they didn't know was that I'd been out there trying to sell, and nobody would buy it. So I said, Oh, okay, you can have it first. And I had to make an appearance on the floor, and help customers, and put it in the paper. That's what happened. It started with that. But I really had no intention of doing dresses at the time. It just evolved that way.

And your concept was high fashion muumuu, and nobody really thought of muumuus that way.

No. No. No. And they still don't, really, you know. I find today that not too many women are wearing muumuus too much.

Oh, there was a newspaper article one day that said, you know, if you want to be taken seriously as a businesswoman, nix the old muumuu.

That's right. That's right. So when I came on the market, I did two regular muumuus. The regular, you know, the non-fitting fitted ones. And then I decided, you know, there's so much more to fashion than just the muumuu. And I gleaned some of the — my thoughts and ideas from Dior and Nettie Rosenstein and some of the big designers, and put them into fashion. Made skirts and tops, and different things. And that's where we are at now. Because really, you don't really see a lot of muumuus being worn. You know? But it's more the older people wearing muus.

So as you continue with your business, you can't continue to concentrate on muumuu, long muumuu, traditional style.

No. We will never stop making the muu. We always will. We'll still do that. But we progress with style and fashion, and how things are going. And I subscribe to a magazine that's like the Bible of the industry, Women's Wear Daily out of New York. And you see the trends that are way before, you know, six months ahead of time. But even so, Hawaii is still different from the mainland. I mean, they may say green is in there, but it's not green—I mean, it's not in here in Hawaii. Hawaii is different. We're totally kind of by ourselves.

What are some of the other ways we differ from mainland buyers?

Well, the mainland buyers are more gutsy. They take chances. They're right out there. They're demanding something new, demanding something different. They don't want the same thing. Here, they want kind of the same, safe things 'cause their heads are on the block. Doesn't sell, they're in trouble. But that's the big difference I see in the buyers here and the buyers on the mainland.

Did you ever have a huge flop in terms of a dress design?

Oh, sure. Oh, yeah. There were a couple of things we've made, I thought, Wow, this is going to be really hot. And it's not. But there again, you know, people who come into the shop to my shop, they still have this idea that we are just Mamo muumuu, and this kind of unfortunate stigma that's with Hawaiian wear, that it somehow is just not quite up to par, it's not quite good enough. Some of our broadcasters don't wear Hawaiian wear on Fridays. I think you might know who, a couple, some of the—

I know a few of them.

Some of those. Yeah. But that's okay. That's how they feel. It's not dressy enough, it's not it's just too casual.

I heard one say, 'How can I report on the war in Iraq when I'm wearing flowers?' That was one of the comments I heard from a newscaster.

Yeah. I think that's ridiculous. See, we're in Hawaii. I mean, what do you do in New York? I mean, if you're gonna be living in New York in December, of course you're not gonna wear the flower stuff. But in summer, why not? Well, we are in Hawaii. I think that's the main thing. That's where we are. We're Hawaii; we should be with something of our islands, of our culture, of the coconut trees and the beautiful oceans and the colors, and the flowers. And how can you not, you know, be wearing something of Hawaii. I can't see it.

Look at you in your slinky black tee-shirt.

Oh, thank you.

You're well past conventional retirement age. I'm sure most people don't realize that, but—

Oh, aren't you nice. Thank you.

You're closer to eighty than to seventy.

Soon; soon.

So how long do you go on working in this very challenging and dynamic business?

Well, you know, if I didn't love it so much, I think I would be gone already, long time ago. I do love it. But I do. I do feel that I have to start thinking realistically. And I've never taken a vacation. And I'm thinking — and even my doctor says, You know, you have to start taking off and don't go in every single day from nine to five or whatever. And he's right, because I do think that there's a lot of stress going on. And if I didn't love the business so much, oh, I'd be in — what would you say when we were kids? We'd be in Room 13 in Kaneohe.

I remember that expression.

In Room 13. Remember that? That's where I'd be.

That's a reference to the State Hospital on the Windward Side of Oahu. Coming up next, Mamo Howell shares stories about adversity, success and legacy – and perhaps how she'll start planning her first vacation.

One of our PBS Hawaii viewers remembers that you had humble beginnings, and wonders, 'Of all the obstacles you've had in your quest to achieve, what's been the toughest adversity to get through?'

I think the toughest is convincing the buyers that our culture is not to be pushed aside. I think – I mean, I've been battling for like five years, when I first came out with my designs, with like Liberty House. I couldn't get into Liberty House because the quilts. They never saw that before – they didn't want that. So I had a hard time convincing any buyer I went to at first. It took me five years before I could get anything on the market at all.

Was it your product, the type of product, or was it the fact that you're a former hula dancer, model, woman?

Well, I think all of that. But mostly the product. But I think all of that. They didn't take me seriously. You know, hula dancer, you know, things and the model, and you know, the frivolous kind of thing, and that also, my designs weren't what they thought would sell. And it did not seem — see, it was too different, so the buyers have to be safe. They feel they have to be safe.

Well, how did you convince them? Or was it that one — Carol & Mary saying, 'Yeah, I'll take it.'

Well, that one Carol & Mary thing did start me off with the blankets. Exactly right. And I got going there, then Nancy Lang. But the really big start was with a fellow by the name of Fred Hasegawa. He was at Liberty House. And he was, I think, he was a rural manager or one of those. Anyway, he came and he recognized — local boy, part-Hawaiian, Japanese. And he recognized what I had. And he came to my home. He came to my house.

And you had seamstresses at your home, right?

Only one. I had one seamstress, one cutter, and me, you know. And he came to my home, and looked around, and that's — that's how I really — I mean, the orders really came in big. I mean, I was really doing, wow, you know. So that's what happened. But that was my toughest thing — was trying to get us out on the market. We had a hard time. When you're up against the big boys, you're up against the Hilo Hattie's and the Tori Richards, whom I used to model for when I was young. And all of them — lolani and all the big companies, you know.

And then you became so successful, you had to worry about knockoffs here and there.

Well, the interesting thing about that is I was so naïve, I didn't know about knockoffs. I didn't think about it. One of the buyers — she's no longer there — she's retired long time ago. But she said to me, 'Do you know, Mamo', she said, 'What you should do,' she bought my stuff. She says, 'Oh, I love it.' She says, 'What you'd better start thinking of doing is knocking yourself off.' I said, 'Well, what does that mean? What do you mean by...?' She says, 'Because you're gonna be copied. You're gonna — people are just going to — there'll be like an avalanche coming down.' And I said, 'Really?' And she was right. Because everybody after that came out with a quilt. It's on every hotel and stationery, and it's everywhere.

You know, in any business, but particularly I think the fashion business, you can't just start and everything goes along.

You always have to sustain the business by reinventing it as you go along.

Always. You have to keep going. And somebody said that to me once a long time ago, 'Mamo' — my blankets, you know, she says. I said, 'Oh, thank God.' She says, 'No, no,' she says. 'You have to keep going.' I said, 'Oh yeah, I guess so.' I didn't think about it.

Find something else, do something differently.

You have to. Or you're dead in the water. Then quit.

Have you ever felt dead in the water, or like you should quit?

Never. I think that's another thing about — if I wasn't so positive I wouldn't let anybody talk me out of anything. I mean, they said, 'What?' They said, 'You're gonna compete with the big boys?' 'I'm not competing with the big boys; I'm coming out with something that nobody's doing, no one has, no manufacturer or designer out there is doing my look, quilt, the Hawaiian—nobody is. So I'm not competing with them at all. I'm bringing something on the market that's brand new.' And that was part of my problems too, 'cause that's when they all got on the same bandwagon, you know. But you can't let anybody — you have to be focused and stay there. Yeah.

Do you have a succession plan for the business?

Well, you know, I did. My daughter was supposed to take over. Now she's on the mainland, she can't. But you know, something very interesting has just happened recently. My grandson who's out of college, he's with a company on the mainland called Cerbae, C-E-R-B-A-E. And he's been there with them for three years, and he's learned an awful lot. And what he's interested in doing is fusing some of my kind of looks with that look, and doing another label. His name is Tautua. And he was here for a little while, talking with me. And it's very, very encouraging, because this is where he, I — it's going to him. I think I think he'll do a good job with it 'cause he's enthusiastic. He loves — he loves it. And he's an artist. He's young.

And he's family.

And he's family. And he's handsome. And I think — I think that's what is gonna happen with him. So that makes me feel a little better 'cause I need an exit plan. And I have to start to thinking of it now. You know, as age comes on, I have to start thinking — it's gotta go on. And I want my legacy to be there, and I want this to continue. I want the — our culture and Hawaiian prints and all that to, to go on. Because I don't want to do the hokey Waikiki corn things that's on the market. A lot of it is on the market now and has been for years. That's not Hawaii, that's not Hawaiian culture, that's not where I'm coming from. And I think that's where Tautua will take it — into the cultural side.

So what if your grandson takes your designs and makes them into something that you would never put up with?

Well, that would be interesting.

And you're out of the company by then.

That's gonna be interesting. But he's already shown me some things that he's done, and I think he's — I think he's on the right track., I mean. But that would be interesting, wouldn't it? 'Cause you know how these kids are. You don't know what they're gonna do. I mean—

I think you'd be one unhappy tutu.

Yeah. I have faith in him. I mean, it's gotta be something that's gonna sell. You know, it can't be so far out. But the company he's with is a very good company and they might — he's thinking of probably some kind of a merger maybe. That'll be very good. I'll be very comfortable with that. 'Cause it's a tough business to handle by yourself. Not easy.

You know, you've done so much in your life, and you've accomplished a lot. You helped to support your family when you were a teenager by dancing hula when you've raised children. You're a world traveler. And you mentioned legacy. Of all the things you've done, is there one particular thing you're most proud of and would like to be remembered for?

My design. I think the fact that I'm bringing out the culture of Hawaii in our motifs and all of that. I'm proud of that. But starting very young and earning money – I remember dancing, yes, and helping my mom. Because you know, when my father died, he was only forty-two years old and left her with seven children. Us. So when I was dancing I remember making two dollars and fifty cents a show and coming home and giving it to my mother. And that was good for me. You understand things then.

Tough to lose your dad at such a young age. How old were you?

Oh, I might have been eleven. And I was the youngest in the family. So you know. And you know, all families have something going on. My mother moved to the Big Island and we went over with her – my two brothers and I. We were the youngest ones. Went over on the Humuula. We went steerage. [

The future model was in steerage.

In steerage. But you know what? It was — we had more fun on steerage 'cause we could run all over the place. Go into those little rooms, claustrophobia time. No, no, no. That's what we did. Then you get to Kailua-Kona and then they have to send the boats out to take you in, I mean. But it was nice. It was a nice time.

So your whole life, you've just kept going. No matter what hit you, you kept going, and you kept believing in yourself.

You have to. Yes; absolutely. You have to keep going.

How do you know you're right?

Well, you know, if you let too many people steer you, you won't — you'll never — you have to just go straight ahead. I mean, this wandering around – somebody will tug you this way, somebody will tug you thisther way. And you can't – I mean, you should believe in yourself all the time. Not that you always – not that you're always right. You make mistakes. You make wrong decisions sometimes. I've made many. You know, the thing is you just get back on track as fast as you can. And go on.

And she keeps going. This daughter who helped support her widowed mother as a teen...this mother of three who traveled through Europe as a high-fashion model... this designer who started a business in her mid-40s. Mamo Howell keeps charming us today. Mahalo to Mamo – and to you – for joining me for another Long Story Short. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou!