

GUEST: BRIAN KEAULANA

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Aloha no, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Welcome to Long Story Short. The Keaulana 'ohana of Makaha is a family of watermen and women who've grown up in and around the ocean. It's infused every cell of who they are. Our guest is Brian Keaulana who, at age 46, is following in the wake of his dad "Buffalo" as a living legend. Brian is carving out an international reputation as a big wave rider, Hollywood stunt man, ocean risk management expert, inventor and businessman. Let's drop in on my conversation with Brian Keaulana.

Tell me, where exactly, did you grow up on Makaha Beach?

Dead center; right on Makaha Beach. Used to have a two-story house that my father was the park keeper at that time, in 1960. And then I was born in '61. And as far back as I can remember in that picture window is, looking out, seeing the sand and ocean and giant surf and you know, growing up. The ocean was my background right there.

The ocean's always changing. How do you make sure that you cover yourself in the water?

Yeah. I guess it's like, for anybody, you got computer techs; they understand every single component in that computer. And it's the same for us in the ocean. We understand the creation cause and effect of the ocean and what water does, and why it moves in certain ways, and how the undertows work, and all those kinda things. It's not even second nature; it's like firsthand information for us. So we know how to relax, we know how to be comfortable, which makes us confident. So it's our home, it's our playground, it's a place where I can deal with a chaotic day and jump in the ocean and just release all that bad energy and come back fresh and new.

And I bet you know the underside of Makaha Beach like I know the back of my hand. I mean, you know what it looks like, every nook and cranny down there in the reef?

Pretty much. I think that's the thing that my father taught all of us guys—was, make it your home. As well as, you know, people can close their eyes and find their way to the kitchen blindfolded; it's the same with us guys. We know every single crack and rock and currents and swells, and direction of the swells and wind. That was a playground for us guys. And I remember when I was one small kid, my father was a park keeper, but we used to play in the rip and make it like fun. And then the tourists would follow us guys, and they end up getting sucked out in the rip and my dad would rescue 'em. And we thought that was fun, how much tourists would get caught in the rip, both me and my sister. And then my father kinda caught on, and we got a dirty spanking. [chuckle]

I guess it could have been a really daunting experience, having a legendary father.

Yeah. My dad, it's like you get people all the time—it's going to be hard you know, following your father's footsteps. But Dad was one where, he doesn't force you to follow his footsteps. He always plant us and said, Walk in the side and make your own footsteps. You know, learn from me, but you're on your own path too.

Are you different from his as a waterman?

I think we're all different. Me, my brothers and sisters and everyone, in our own individual ways. We all come up with our own different identities. But Dad's a hard act to follow. You know, all the common sense and the knowledge that he has. I think it's great that we got nephews and nieces and my kids that he's passing on that information. He just bought two sailboats because he taught us a lot about canoe paddling and diving, and how to survive in the ocean, how to have fun in the ocean, how to work in the ocean. And he's still passing it on to all his grandkids. And it's just legacy, I think, for all of us guys.

When you were growing up, the ocean was not just your recreation; it was probably a food source.

Yeah.

It was entertainment, because money was scarce.

You know, money wasn't one item for us guys when we was growing up. If we was hungry, we was always fed, we was always full. My dad—you know, the ocean was one supermarket. He would go out and when he said you was the bag boy, that was hard work, because you would be out there and freezing, and you know, picking up all this fish, and squid, and whatever out there. And he would feed the whole beach; you know, whoever wanted to eat. So guys would go, and you get the wood, you make the fire, you get this, and prepare whatever. And everybody would just eat and have fun, and play music and surf. And I think that's the great thing about where I live still to today, that it still exists down on the Leeward side. We still practice our family values, we still practice our culture—you know, the ocean is our icebox. But we also teach the younger generation to respect the ocean and don't pollute the ocean, because you get what you give and you give what you get.

And you see people littering the ocean, and littering the land. You know, right near a landfill, they'll dump stuff nearby. Why do you think people do that? Especially in their lands.

You know, I think they disconnect themselves, people. They don't think they affect the outside world. They think they're just isolated within their own yard or house, or whatever, and don't think about what's being flushed in the storm drains, or what's going into the ocean and what's affecting the stuff too. You know, they might go to the supermarket and buy one fish, or buy something, and then end up that piece of plastic they threw down, you know, they're eating themselves. But I think it's a lack of education and I think that's one word that I teach some of the next generation, of respect. Respect is another word of education. You won't go and fight the greatest, next martial art guy without studying his strengths and weaknesses. That's not giving him respect. And same with the ocean; you won't go in the ocean and not understanding all that's beauty and the beast, all its dangers that exist out there. That's not giving the ocean respect. That's why we always say don't turn your back to the ocean. Really, what we're saying is, understand the dangers. Don't, just let it go and you go in la-la land. Because you're gonna get looped for one, yeah, and whacked into reality.

And you've rescued people who showed none of that interest in respecting and studying and learning more. They just got taken in by a beautiful ocean, a nice day, and then got into big trouble.

Yeah; yeah. And like I said it's a lot in the mind of people of what their fantasies and their dreams are. You know, they come from far off places, and they fly on a plane, and they're looking at beautiful girls and beautiful beaches, and swaying palm trees and hula girls, and perfect surf, and they want to fulfill their fantasy. And when they come here and they jump in the water, and they get whacked with reality. You know, they don't understand the dangers. They don't understand the abilities or have the right equipment. They don't have respect. And then that's what happens, and that's when they get in trouble. And then you have to get lifeguards or educated people. And not just the lifeguards, but the great thing now is a lot of the surfers now participate in assisting in rescues or pointing dangers out and trying not to get into one bad situation.

Lifeguards know how fast the day at the shoreline can go from pretty to pretty ugly. Brian Keaulana tells an amazing story about a rescue effort in high surf and rocky sea caves near Ka'ena Point.

You're known for a lot of things, but one of the things that really put you on the map is that jet ski rescue in the Ka'ena Point area; a guy trapped in a sea cave. Can you tell that story?

Oh, god. [chuckle] How I can make 'em short. Well, you know, we got one call from 911. I was working at Makaha Beach.

As a lifeguard?

As a lifeguard. And we responded; you know, swimmer in distress. So we're thinking, okay, big surf, but it's probably one easy rescue. That's what we kinda thought. Went there, and it turned out not—not easy at all. This guy was trapped in a lava tube, a sea cave, and he was in there for two and a half hours. And dodging between the giant surf and swells, and tides coming up, and you know, the emotion of, Help me, help me, and you can't get him, and everybody's yelling at you, Get him, get him. And it's—I think the emotional rollercoaster, and I think also getting to the part where you trained yourself so much that you block off the emotion side. Don't let your emotions control your actions; you know, kinda let your body go on auto pilot. And that's kinda what protects us guys; the common sense of what can be done. 'Cause the worst is escalation of how you can you make matters worse. Where we could have one person calling for help, we could have two persons, three persons calling for help with one, you know, 800 pound jet ski inside of the cave. So I think that was going throughout our minds, and also realizing making an opportunity of when we can get him. And it was just lucky that when he came out, it was a microsecond that we could grab him. Because if we was any later, we wouldn't have got him.

This trapped guy wasn't anywhere close. There was some swimming that needed to be done in the cave; it was a big cave.

Yeah; there's like three different chambers in that cave, and he was in the furthest chamber on the right side. And actually, he was under water in every wave that pushes through.

And he was all cut up.

He was all cut up; yeah, he was in bad shape. And I think what really saved him was him being naive enough of how bad of a situation it was, but him also being young enough to hang on.

And if you were—if it was later, then what would have happened to the rest of you?

It's a fine line of knowing what you can and cannot do. And that's what happens in the ocean, is just—there's no room for mistakes. You know, it's kinda do or die of what happens.

Did you consider, You know what, I'm really good, but this is an impossible situation; some things you cannot save?

Yeah; you know, I think for us guys, knowing of what we can do, it's running that line. And we train to run that edge, run that line.

Did you think in that case, Okay, maybe this is a situation that is not meant to be handled?

No, not really. Because you—if you got any doubts, that's when you get hurt. You know, if you got any doubt in your ability, any doubt in your partners, any doubt in your equipment, then that's when you're in trouble.

After that rescue, with a split second to spare, what did your rescue victim say to you? What did the survivor say?

[Chuckle] Oh, god. I think he said everything just in his eyes. I know he said thanks. But it's funny, 'cause after so long, you know, words kinda die out, but the emotion's still there. And just the feeling of actually grabbing him, and taking him out of harm's way. Because once we had him, it's like this big weight lifted off, and all the adrenalin was pumping, was—just finally kind of released. I think I never sleep 'til like two o'clock in the morning, just buzzing from the whole thing.

What was the margin of safety on that one?

Oh; none. Yeah. I mean, it was that fine line; you know, it was just running that fine line. Yeah, I think on that day, it was you know, it was luck, knowledge, and a lot of God watching out on us guys.

Have you ever gone under for so long? Have you ever come close to just never coming up again?

Yeah, yeah; many times.

Many times; you say it so casually. [chuckle]

Yeah, well, you know, it's part of the thing. I guess like we was just training today, just doing breath holding exercise, underwater rock running with couple of my friends. And you know, surfing's easy; surviving is hard. It's all that, you know, learning about wiping out, learning about your body, learning about how to relax, how to control your breathing, you know, all those kinda things. And I think it's at that level that you kind of have a lot more confidence in yourself, so you can bring people out of danger when you gotta make rescues.

So I know you're a waterman, which means you're at home in the water no matter what; you always know how to react.

Are some watermen mostly surfers, or is a waterman the kinda guy who does anything?

You know, I think it's like my father put it best; if you can fend for yourself, feed yourself and other people, have fun, and make it to where it's just a enjoyable thing, and then you're truly one waterman. But if you're rating yourself that, you know, I surf a six-six surfboard and a body board, and different type equipment, then you're basing 'em off the equipment, not off the knowledge that you have or the values you have. And I think one true waterman is really on the values that they have.

An abiding love for the ocean, a steadfast connection with his 'ohana and family values. These things are at the core of who Brian Keaulana is and, as we'll see, they form the foundation of his professional life as well.

You've always made your passion your livelihood. Your learning has always revolved around the ocean. And first, you were a lifeguard, but then you parlayed your skills into other businesses and other realms. Can you list a few of the things you've done with your water skills?

[Chuckle] Well, I think the biggest thing with me is my greatest strength is knowing my weaknesses. And whatever I was weak at, I would strengthen. You know, whether in sports or in—like I like challenges. If it was one test, I like, I wanted to ace the test.

So what was a weakness you had to work on?

Anything; you know, anything I would find. If I was weak in short boarding when I was young, then I would strengthen myself in that. You know, I think one of the key points in me who I am today was, you know, I had one teacher before. And he told me, he said, Brian, if you really like make out in life, that you would write down your goals. And I was like—when you're young, you're not really thinking. So he would write down goals and dreams, and he would say, Okay, this is on long range goals; let's shorten it and make attainable goals. And then he would say, What would you like to do? Well, I like be on the cover of Surfing Magazine, I like travel around the world, I like do all these kinda things. And he goes, Well, let's start off with, okay, what does it take to even surf? How about one bar of wax? And so okay, write small things. So he gave me one bar of wax, and said, Here, you know, you got the first attainable goal. And just check 'em off. So things I would write down, like I wanted to win one contest on every surf spot around the island. And then as I was growing up, I started knocking off all those goals. And then started seeing like, wow, actually I can move ahead and get into pro surfing and travel, and do all these kinda things. And then the same with work. You know, and also too is with me, is it's not about working hard, it's about working smart. Realizing, you know, let my money work for me. Why should I conform and put nine to five and work and do all that. Why not just stay in the ocean and enjoy, and let the work come to me. So that was the kinda things. And I started figuring out well, here's my strengths, then I can turn all this, you know, like the moving industry, for example. When I started, I was like 17 years old, and I was modeling and doing small little lifeguard jobs. And then I would see other guys getting higher pay, and then I would research what that guy does for that pay. Then I started researching on the whole production and what each person, whether from the smallest little PA to the director, producers, and all that kinda stuff, and then finding out their pay scale and duties and responsibilities and so on and so on. And then I started tapping onto all these different things.

Was your goal the money or excelling, or both?

I think both. I think I like the challenge and stuff too. But I also like that I get into one position where I can spread money around. I can hire people, I can teach people and stuff like that too. So like getting into the stunt world was an easy thing. A whole bunch of us guys, me, Terry Ahui, Buzzy Kerbox, Laird Hamilton; we got invited over for Water World. And we was filming on the Big Island for like eight months, and making unbelievable money back then. But also too was for us was like play. You know, jumping jet skis and fights and shooting guns, and diving under the water and doing all this kinda stuff which is natural to us guys. You know, and fun, and getting paid. So I started learning more about that and then getting more into the filming of how they capture that and learning about camera, camera angles and speed, and all the different things of the respect of the guys working behind the camera.

Boy, the patience required to do movies must be tough on you, because you like action.

Well, yeah; I like action. And I think the challenging thing too was, I got the opportunity of acting too. Baywatch, North Shore, couple other things too. So, working as one actor, I think everybody at first is like, Yeah, great, being in front of the camera and getting lines and stuff. But it's an art, you know. It's not easy. And I think the first year when I did Baywatch, they gave me one-liners, where a guy would say, Help, and I would say, Okay. So I think the second season, I wanted more dialog to build up my

own character, and they would give me pages. And then I was panicking, going like, Oh, my god. So then I had acting coaches, and I would trade, like I had the top actors on the set, and I would say, Okay, your character is to be the top waterman; I'll train you to be one top waterman, you train me to be one actor. So vice versa. So it's understanding your strengths and weaknesses. And the whole thing is having fun. I think I started learning more about that when I started having fun.

I'm just thinking that you had a lot of skills, but one of the biggest skills to be successful in any business is the ability to work with people. And at Makaha, you were working with very humble family values, and then you go to the Hollywood scene. How was that?

Yeah. I think Hollywood and places can change you. But I look at it like, I can change them. Like we did different shows and stuff like that. You know, Blue Crush and Pearl Harbor. And when they come into our element, in the ocean, and then, I as well as we, my partners and friends; I just lay the law down and tell 'em this is what it is. And we talk about risks, like I talk about cultural risks, community risks, social risk, physical risks, all those kinda things. And I'd list 'em on paper so they understand. And that way, gives me the latitude to say what goes on and what doesn't go on. You know, and I try to—it's a hard act to balance, but I try to balance all sides and get people involved and put the proper people in the proper channel, so everybody's communicating. And really, what it is too, is also bringing out like ho'oponopono values and making 'em understand why we ho'oponopono, why we talk, why we communicate, you know, those kinda things and stuff too.

And you have a new business; a relatively new business called C4. What does C4 Waterman mean?

C4 Watermen is my two partners, Mike Fox and Todd Bradley, and also with the big help of Dave Parmenter, who shapes all of our boards. It's a company on a core values, core four. And it's balance, endurance, strength, and tradition; those four values that we hold dear. And really, like people say, we're in the standup market, with standup paddling, paddling a surfboard with a long canoe paddle. And it's probably the biggest rage right now, but what it is, is it's like a combination of being a waterman. There's canoe paddling, there's surfing, there's balancing. It's like standing on an exercise ball inside of the water, and you're working all your core muscles. With surfing, you paddle out and you sit and you wait for the set. When you standup paddling, you're paddling and you're gauging all the small little muscles firing. And even when you're waiting, you're still balancing, and then you're surfing. So it's 100% of your muscles engaging the whole time. And really, I think the biggest market that tapping us in our company is the fitness market and the paddling market. Rather than the people that just surf. But yeah; the company has grown, and it's growing, and it's getting bigger and bigger. But again, the biggest thing that we're marketing is really like our core values.

Who do you think are some of the greatest watermen with whom you've worked or lived, or known?

Well of course, everybody—we all talk about Duke Kahanamoku. And I think, really, of his values that he shared around the world, you know, and teaching people and bringing surfing to where it is, and Hawaii on the map, and all of his Olympic achievements. But I think, really, a lot of my heroes and stuff is like my dad, and a lot of the Waikiki beach boys of how Waikiki used to be. And also, there's pockets that I feel that it's kinda like how Waikiki used to be, in Makaha. If you give 'em anything, they can sail, they can surf, they can dive, they can pretty much—you know, water is a natural thing. I think that's the thing with watermen. You know, it's not one selective thing that makes you who you are.

And waterwomen; how many?

Waterwomen. You know, I think the waterwomen really is like Rell; you know, Rell Sunn. Rell, to me, was probably one of the best divers. You know, people knew her for her surfing; but god, she could dive, you know, and she could hold her breath, and she would bring up some big fish and just like my dad, and feed everybody and stuff too. My father has always taught us guys that the ocean is the fountain of youth for us. You know, my dad, he's 72 going on 17, I think. You know. Still swimming, still diving, still running, still playing. And I think that's the thing with the ocean; it keeps us guys young.

We live in an island culture. Rarely a day goes by that we don't some in way interact with the ocean. Even if it's simply knowing that we are mauka or makai. For island people, the ocean is our touchstone. For watermen like Brian Keaulana, it's something deeper. The ocean is a way of being. Or, as Brian puts it, it's not second nature; it's first nature. Mahalo for joining us on *Long Story Short*. I'm Leslie Wilcox with PBS Hawaii. A hui hou kakou!