

GUEST: ROY SAKUMA 1

LSS 127 (LENGTH: 26:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 7/15/08

Aloha no, I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. Today's *Long Story Short* features Roy Sakuma – a name that belongs to an ukulele studio, an ukulele festival, summer zoo concerts, an award-winning record label, Hawaii's foremost ukulele teacher, and a man who's lived his entire life hiding a family secret.

When I sat down with Roy Sakuma, I thought I had a pretty good idea how the conversation would go. Roy would tell us about his family and his school days. And we'd find out how he became a teacher. It's no secret that Roy Sakuma dropped out of high school. And, as the story goes, he went to work for the City Parks Department and came up with the idea for an ukulele festival while cleaning restrooms at the Kapi'olani Park Bandstand. But I had no idea why Roy Sakuma dropped out of school. Or that he'd reveal, for the first time publicly, that he was raised in a home with serious, untreated mental illness.

When you were little, was it obvious to everyone around you that you would go into music, and you'd be a teacher?

Oh; absolutely not. In fact, I think it was the opposite, because I can remember as a child, all the way through my years in intermediate school, I never listened to music. Now, you know, people may think that's weird, but I was always outdoors. And being outdoors, you're never listening to the radio. So for me, that was the last thing that I ever thought I would get into, would be music, and to be you know, teaching the ukulele. I was always involved in sport. That was my number one thing that I enjoyed the most.

What were your growing up years like?

Uh, it was difficult. You know, I went through a lot of pain, and I didn't realize it 'til years later, but you know, when I was born, my mother was diagnosed as—you know, she had paranoia, schizophrenia. And she had it severe. So I didn't have a normal childhood. And growing up, it was difficult, because I couldn't distinguish, you know, what was right and what was wrong; and so I developed a lot of misconceptions in life. And as the years went by, it only got worse, because my brother at nine years old also had a mental breakdown. So you know, our home was filled with a lot of difficulty. And so it was a struggle for me. And I think for that reason, I was always cutting out of school. I mean, you know, who cuts out of kindergarten? But I started cutting out from kindergarten and all the way through first through sixth grade; I was always cutting out of class.

What did you do instead of going to class?

I would just go down to the river and just hang out there, or I would come home and hide in the garage so that my mother wouldn't see me.

By yourself?

By myself; by myself. Because um, I realize now that I was going through a lot of struggles. And these struggles naturally come up later in life. But at that time, you don't understand it; so the only thing you do is, you're more comfortable being out of that environment of school, because you don't know how to relate to your peers. And so it really was difficult for me, but it turned out to be a blessing later on in life.

Was your dad in the home?

My dad was home, but because my mother and brother were both mentally ill, it was hard for him. I didn't expect him to be home, because it was hard. You know, there was never any logical communication, so my father would go out every night and, naturally he enjoyed drinking, so he'd be drinking seven nights a week. I was happy for him, knowing that he was enjoying his life. I was struggling, it was okay; but I was happy for him.

Paranoid schizophrenia today is a very treatable disease. Was there medication available for your mother?

You know, at that time, way back, from what I understand, my father told me that they didn't have or—what's the word I'm trying to say is that he couldn't take my mother to get any help, because at that time it was shameful. If you had this type of mental illness, and people around you knew what it was, it didn't look good. So my father had to just, what's the word? He is just to live with it. He did tell me years later, though, that he tried to commit her. But what happened is that no one would help him in the family, because my mother's mother would not allow it.

I see.

She felt that was taboo.

That means your brother was also untreated when he had his—

Uh, no.

--problem?

We—my father sent him to the Kane'ohe mental institution, where he received treatment. And he would get these uh, medications where they would release him. But the problem is that every time they released him, he had to go back in, because he would get another breakdown. And so it was a struggle, because—I remember when he was young—when I was young, he tried to kill me one time with a knife. And so ever since then—I was only like eleven years old—every time he came home, I would be—I couldn't sleep in bed. You know, I'd be shivering, because I'd be afraid that, you know, in my sleep, he was going to do something to me and harm me. So it was a struggle, those years; it was very painful.

When you said you didn't know right from wrong, how did that translate?

I think because there was so much anger in me, there was so much frustration, I felt like I was the only weird kid in the neighborhood, and how come I have all these emotional problems, and everybody around me looked so normal. And so it would be all this anger in

me, and I would do things that were totally unacceptable, like you know, just things—not to hurt people, but things that were not appropriate.

Like?

Like, once a neighbor was yelling at me because we were making too much noise, and I cut down part of his tree. [chuckle] You know, because I was so upset. And yet, I didn't realize that I was doing these things that—you know, it was just the anger in me that had me doing these things. And it was a very difficult time for me, because I didn't know how to control this. And I think more than anger, it was the hurt I was feeling, the pain.

And there was no adult you could speak with about it?

There was no adult. And that's why I developed all these misconceptions in life, and it wasn't until I became a young adult—I think I was like nineteen years old; I decided that I needed to do something about this. So I went to a psychologist and talked to him. And that was a turning point of my life.

I'm sure it wasn't easy for this local boy and successful businessman to speak openly about the family secret of mental illness. It took courage. Now that it's no longer a secret, Roy Sakuma wants to use his story to help others. He wants people to know it's good to seek professional help. That's what he did, to help make sense of the impact that his mother and brother's mental illness had on him. I hope Roy Sakuma's story – which he's revealing here for the first time publicly – will have a positive impact on other people's lives.

Let's back up a little bit.

M-hm.

You went through school cutting out.

Yeah.

Getting into trouble. How did your school career end?

[chuckle] I think I was in the ninth grade, and in February, I got caught for—you know, I was tardy a lot, I was cutting out of class. And so the principal, not suspended, but ejected me from school. So I was left out of school from February. So I missed the last four months of school as a ninth grader. And when I went back the following year to repeat, he actually told me, You're going to high school; we're gonna promote you anyway. So despite missing four months of school in my ninth grade year, I went to high school, which was Roosevelt High School. And I'll never forget, because while I was there, the principal told me; he says, Roy, one of us has to go, and it's not me. And that was the end of my high school career. [chuckle] That was it.

And all of this time, your mom remained untreated and—

Untreated.

And getting worse?

Yes. She was, you know, she was just talking to herself, and my brother, too, was—they both were talking to themselves. So it was hard for me. If you're at home trying to do something, and you have one person walking behind you talking, and the person sitting

across from you talking, it—you know, I learned to shut my mind off. I learned to shut—you know, in other words, I went into dreamland—

Uh-huh.

--so that you know, physically I was there, but mentally you know, I was somewhere else, so I didn't have to hear all this. And yeah, I realized it years later that, you know, these were things that I had to cope with. And going to this psychologist helped me.

Did you get yourself ready for school, and kind of self managed?

[chuckle] Well, you mean, during those—

During those long years.

Uh, yes, but you know, when you say get ready for school, I was never in school, actually. You know, I would go, but I would cut out; go, and cut out. And it was just too much of a struggle for me. And I can share this now; I mean, before, I didn't talk too much about this, especially being this deep into the pain that I had. But it was a really big struggle, and luckily, as the years went by, through this therapy, it helped me a lot.

How did it help you?

Well, I was able to share with him the misconceptions in my life. And I'll never forget this, Leslie, because at the end, when I had spilled my beans out to him, you know what he told me? He says, You know, Roy, of all the people that have sat down across from me, you are one of the most sanest people I've ever had to talk to.

That must have felt good to you.

Yeah. And I say, Well, how can you say that? And he says, You were giving me the answers to your problems. And that made me feel really good. That really helped me. I realized that you know, I had all this misconception that I was totally mentally ill or crazy, or my thoughts were not normal thoughts. And so I was able to put my life together.

Well, how were you feeling when the Roosevelt High School principal said, That's it, buddy, you know, one of us has gotta go, and it's you?

[chuckle] Actually, inside, I was happy. [chuckle] Only because uh, I had such a diff—and see, now I realize the reason I had such problems in school is, I didn't how to relate to people my own age; you know, 'cause I felt so insecure about myself. So when I left school, it forced me to look for a job. And when I had to work, I felt that I could relate to adults, and I could pour my heart into whatever I'm doing. And that was a way of dealing with my pain.

Do you worry that you might get schizophrenia, that you might become mentally ill?

At that young age, yes. And I realized years later when I was talking to my sister, she felt the same thing; that sooner or later, we were both gonna fall into this mentally ill. But you know, fortunately, we didn't; both of us were fine. But it was that fear that actually brought a lot of more pain and this so-called misconceptions, 'cause you're worrying about things that you shouldn't be thinking like that, but there's on one to tell you, Hey, it's okay. You know, don't worry, you'll be fine. And so I didn't get that reassurance that I needed.

And how's your brother who had mental illness too?

Uh, he committed suicide. He jumped off a building. And so again, you know, you think, Okay, I'm next. You know, you worry about that. It becomes such a big part of your daily

life, thinking about it, so you're not very functional. Though on the outside, people think you're okay. But it's what on the inside, is that what I had to deal with a lot of these issues.

Did you feel you were putting on an act; I'm okay, for—

Oh, yeah.

--everybody?

Oh, yeah; definitely, definitely. I was good at that; I was good at that.

But I just wonder if people who are listening to this program, who have issues with mental illness. I wonder what you have to say to them?

I would say that if in your darkest moments that you can see something positive, which I know is hard; but if you just look around, if you look at the whole world, the devastations that's happening, and you look at where you are; there's hope. And as long as you have hope, then you have the first step of helping yourself get better. And I think too many times when we're—see, when we have a happy moment, we take it for granted. You know, we're happy; we're happy. But when we have something that goes against us, that makes us a little sad or hurtful, we tend to dwell on it. And that's what I try to teach people not to do. And that's why it's so important to have hope. Once you have hope you have the building block to help yourself in your life.

And your brother ran out of hope.

Yes; he ran out of hope. You know, I was much younger than him, and he was so smart. But you know, he didn't know how to deal with his life and the pain that he was going through, and so you know, he did what he felt, which, had I known that, had I been older, I would have been able to help him. But I was too young when all this happened.

It's estimated that mental illness touches as many as one person out of every four, which means it could affect nearly every family in Hawai'i. But, for cultural reasons, financial reasons and other sensitivities, some families choose to keep their mental illness a secret. And for all these years, Roy Sakuma did just that. But now, he's chosen to share his very real emotions, and offer his message of hope.

What are your thoughts, looking back at the mental illness that governed your life, on the part of your mom and your brother? You know, I keep thinking how treatable schizophrenia is, if the person has access to and is willing to take medication. What are your thoughts now?

Well, I realize that it is treatable. Because what happened is, I had to make a choice in my life once, and I wanted my father's life to be better. And so I took it upon myself to committing my mother to the Kane'ohe Mental Hospital.

Once you became an adult?

Yes. And it was very difficult, because you know, no one wanted to get involved with this, and rightfully so, because it was a very difficult thing to do. We had to actually have them come over and strap her down. Because I knew she wouldn't go willingly. And I'll never forget; as they wheeled her out of the house, she told me, I hate you, I disown you, and I will never talk to you again. And then they took her away. And I was devastated. But I knew

this was something that I had to do. So, what happened is, through the medication that she took, eventually it came to the point where we could have conversations between each other, and with my sister, and she really changed a lot. I mean, the change was significant, where we actually had a mom that we could talk to. She wasn't totally there, but she came a long way, where we could actually have simple conversations. So I'm very grateful for that. I'm very grateful that despite—you know, it was painful then, but the reward was twenty times greater, 'cause now I could talk to my mother on a—yeah.

Were you able to share with her what you've been able to do with your life?

Yes; and you know, to some degree, she understood some things. But I had to keep it simple. But I think for me, the greatest joy was to see how much love she had for us as her children, and how much she, you know, respected our new family life. Like my sister was married, I was married to Kathy, and how she could enjoy that. She could enjoy not just us as her children, but the people that we committed our lives to. And I think that was really wonderful for both my sister and I.

It sounds like your mom probably said some really hurtful things to you, right?

Yeah; she said hurtful things to me. And um, she babbled constantly of things that weren't relevant to life. And it was things that, you know, a person that's not sane would say, like you know, and I don't know if I should even say some of these things. But you know, our icebox, for instance, was empty. So all we had was a hotdog and eggs; that's all we had to eat, every day. And she would cook the same thing for me every night. I mean, it was so difficult. I mean, she would wake me up two o'clock every morning to have breakfast. And so at eight o'clock, I gotta go to school. But you know, by then, my stomach's churning, so I'd be embarrassed, and I'd cut out. Because I didn't know how—a simple thing like my stomach churning embarrassed me, because no one told me it was okay. So I'd be cutting out of school in the first grade. But you know, it's those types of weird things, where your whole life is out of balance, because she went by according to what she felt, which was totally—she wasn't capable.

And did you hear hurtful things about yourself from her?

I did. You know, I'm gonna share something with you that I've not told anybody. In fact, only my dearest family knows about this. And you know, when she was trying to—well, maybe I should share it later. [chuckle] Okay; that's okay, that's okay.

No, no; I—

Yeah.

--understand. You gotta make choices as you go.

Yeah.

You know, all this time, you've been very positive, and you've spoken of how you've made something positive out of something that could have sunk other people.

You've turned it around. Do you have any regrets?

No; I have no regrets. You know, I look back on my life many times, Leslie, and I look at all the pain I went through, I look at all the sorrow, I look at all the hurt. I look at all the, you know, just things that were so painful to me. And I wouldn't trade it; because through all

that pain, today it's given me an insight to people and children that I can help. And I have this strong yearning to help people, to want to always help. And I hope that I never lose—that's something that I see in my wife too, and we have that. And I hope that we will never lose that love of wanting to help others.

So when you tell people, Oh, yeah, I was a kolohe boy—

M-hm.

You really weren't kolohe; you were just in terrible pain.

Yes; yes, yeah. You're right. Uh, through that pain, sometimes I did things that were naughty. But the important thing is that I never hurt people. And I think I learned that from my father. I mean, as much as my father wasn't around—

M-hm.

--he was a great man; because everybody in the neighborhood respected him. See, we had a big porch; so all the kid—neighborhood kids would be on our porch all the time. And when he came home for a little while, they would all say, Hi, Mr. Sakuma. And he was always nice to everybody. He would bring home abalone and cut pieces for everybody. And so I just knew my father as this really nice man to my friends. Little did I realize that when he passed away, is when I find out all these things, where people that came to pay their respects says, Oh, your father was you know, this great man; he always treated people with respect. You know, Never did I hear your father say a mean thing.

And he lived with a lot of sadness too.

Yeah. And he taught me something at a young life. Number one, he told me two things. He says, Number one, you know, don't listen to your mother, because she's mentally ill; she doesn't know what she's saying. So that helped me to some degree, but still, it was still difficult. And number two, he told me, Whenever you're in a situation where someone is to get hurt, as much as possible, you take the pain; but you never give out the pain to someone else. And I've lived by that. And when he passed away, one of the elderly gentlemen who came up to me says, Do you know your father's in the book, *The Battle of Iwo Jima*? And I didn't know that. He says, Yeah. So I bought the book, and I went to his passage, and it was so inspiring to me. Because as much as the Iwo Jima was such a hurtful battle, many people died, and all these comments about the bitterness of war. I read his comment, and he says—he talked about—can you believe this, the beauty of Iwo Jima. He says, Look how beautiful this paradise, look how beautiful. He saw past all the war, now; he saw past all the pain. He was talking about this beautiful place on Earth. And I realized, you know, that even in the dark times, or even for himself, he could see things that, you know, normally, we wouldn't even comprehend. And you know, I was just so in awe that he could see these things in the midst of war.

Roy Sakuma is still learning to cope with the mental illness that shaped his life. Through the Roy Sakuma Ukulele Studios, Roy has taught thousands of students, young and old, to share the joy of music and camaraderie. The Ukulele Festival, which he started in 1971, has grown into one of the largest events at the Kapi'olani Park Bandstand, with hundreds of participants from Hawai'i, the mainland and

around the globe. As the story goes, Roy dreamed up the international festival while cleaning bathrooms at the Bandstand as a City groundskeeper. I asked him to tell us the story behind that story.

My first job, I was a stock boy for Wilder Food Center. And I was a hard worker, and I put the groceries up, I mopped and swept the floors; and you know, I was totally happy. I was so happy doing that type of work. I thought I could do that my whole life. You know, little did I realize that later on, I would find the ukulele. But I went from stock boy, I went to—I can remember once I went to Kaimuki Typewriter, and I wanted to be an apprentice. So the guy says, Well, you know, you know anything about typewriters? I say, No. He gives me a thick manual and he tells me, Well, take it home and study it, and then we're gonna test you the next day. So I go home; there's no way I can read that. So I look at my old Remington—I think it was Remington typewriter, and I took it apart, figuring out how to take it apart; and then I put it back. So the next day, I go, and he says, Well, did you read the book? I said, Yup.

[chuckle]

He says, All right; pick one of these typewriters and let me see if you can take it apart. So I went to the Remington [chuckle]; I took it apart, put it back together. I got the job. So that's how I became a Kaimuki Typewriter apprentice. But you know, I somehow thought of that. You know. I'm not gonna read, but I'm gonna practice taking apart a—

And as it turns out, typewriters couldn't be a lasting career.

Yeah; that's right. That's right. [chuckle] You know. But you know, it's just going through these stages, it helped me. Helped me to mature, because eventually it led me to working in the City and County of Honolulu. I was twenty-one years old, and I went to apply for the City and County. Not having an education, the only job that I could get was a parks keeper. And I applied, and fortunately I barely passed the test. I became a groundskeeper for the City and County of Honolulu, and I was so happy.

Did you work in Kapi'olani Park, where you would later have all of these decades of ukulele festivals?

That's how it started. As a groundskeeper, every day we would have lunch at Kapi'olani Park Bandstand, and you know, we'd be looking at the bandstand, having lunch. And one day, out loud I say, You know, I'd like to put on an ukulele festival. And the person next to me was a white collar worker at City Hall, and he told me, Dreams come true. And that inspired me; those words inspired me to go after work, go down to City Hall and inquire, How do you put on an ukulele festival? That led me to Mr. Moroni Medeiros. And Moroni would help me for the next fourteen years. He became my mentor in my life. He was, 'til this day, the greatest man that I've ever met.

Finding inspiration and a mentor are two of life's lessons Roy Sakuma has learned. And he's gone on to teach many life lessons as a gifted ukulele player, instructor and business owner. I'd like to thank Roy for sharing stories with us – especially the ones he hadn't told before, about growing up surrounded by serious mental illness.

If you'd like information on mental health resources in our community, simply dial 2-1-1 or log on to pbs-hawaii-dot-org and download the transcript from this program. We'll include some information there for you.

And please join me next week as we continue Roy Sakuma's *Long Story Short*. I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. A hui hou kakou.

When I go to schools nowadays and I talk to children, and I talk to intermediate school kids, I can kinda sense if some of them are having similar issues that I have, and you know, I can kinda talk to them in a way in which I can bring up some of these things so that they can relate to it, you know, bring it out where I'm not coming out too strong, and yet it gets them thinking, Hey, you know, there's an option to how I feel. You know. And I try to do this in schools now when I talk to children.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES: Mental Health

The mission of PBS Hawaii is to inform, inspire and entertain by sharing high quality programming and services that add value to our diverse island community. We encourage lifelong learning on a variety of issues. Since this program cast a spotlight on mental illness, which can be a serious concern for individuals, families and our entire community, we're providing a brief list of resources you can use to begin to learn more about mental illness. This list is not comprehensive and PBS Hawaii does not endorse or recommend any of the following organizations. Please explore these and other community resources, including your own family physician for complete and accurate information.

Hawaii Psychological Association

www.hawaiipsychology.org

The mission of the Hawaii Psychological Association is to enhance the quality of life for the people of Hawaii by encouraging, integrating, applying, and communicating the contributions of Psychology in all its branches.

Mental Health Kokua

1221 Kapiolani Blvd., Suite 345
Honolulu, HI 96814

www.mentalhealthkokua.org

(808) 737-2523

We believe that all citizens should have an opportunity to live and participate in and contribute to their communities.

Through specially designed services and settings, Mental Health Kokua assists people with mental illness achieve optimum recovery and functioning in the community.

Mental Health America of Hawai`i

(formerly Mental Health Association in Hawai`i)
1124 Fort Street Mall, Suite 205
Honolulu, HI 96813

www.mentalhealth-hi.org

MHA-O`ahu: (808) 521-1846

MHA-Hawai`i County: (808) 966-8736

MHA-Maui County: (808) 242-6461

Mental Health America of Hawai`i provides information to the public about mental health, mental illness, and where to get help, and advocates for better mental health services for people with mental illnesses in Hawai`i.

The Mental Health America of Hawai`i is a volunteer, nonprofit citizens' organization which works to promote mental health, reduce stigma, and prevent the problems associated with

mental illnesses; and aims to improve the care, treatment, and participation of children, adults, and the elderly with mental illnesses through public education and advocacy.

NAMI Hawai'i
770 Kapiolani Blvd., Suite 613
Honolulu, HI 96813

www.namihawaii.org
(808) 591-1297

NAMI Hawai'i is a partner in educating, advocating for and supporting people in our communities who are living with mental illness and its effects.

NAMI Hawai'i is proud to offer programs of education and real-life recovery evidence both for families and the general public. We strive to raise public awareness and concern about mental illness. The more people know about this illness, the less likely they will hold prejudiced, stigmatizing opinions.

GUEST: ROY SAKUMA 2
LSS 129 (LENGTH: 27:16)
FIRST AIR DATE: 7/22/08

Aloha no, I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. "A terrible student." That's how ukulele master Roy Sakuma described himself on *Long Story Short* last week as he recalled his childhood attending public schools in Honolulu. He started cutting out of school in kindergarten. He was smoking at the age of six and drinking by the sixth grade. He spent time in Juvenile Detention and he dropped out of high school. Today, the internationally acclaimed ukulele teacher and business owner Roy Sakuma visits schools to share his love of music and his message of hope.

For the first time, on last week's *Long Story Short*, ukulele impresario Roy Sakuma revealed why he didn't bother much with school as a kid. He explained that his late mother and brother suffered from serious, untreated mental illness. Roy, his father and sister lived with the family's secret. Before we continue Roy Sakuma's *Long Story Short*, let's revisit his childhood in Makiki.

What were your growing up years like?

It was difficult. You know, I went through a lot of pain, and I didn't realize it 'til years later, but you know, when I was born, my mother was diagnosed as—you know, she had paranoia, schizophrenia. And she had it severe. So I didn't have a normal childhood. And as the years went by, it only got worse, because my brother at nine years old also had a mental breakdown. So you know, our home was filled with a lot of difficulty.

Was your dad in the home?

My dad was home, but because my mother and brother were both mentally ill, it was hard for him. You know, there was never any logical communication, so my father would go out every night and, naturally he enjoyed drinking, so he'd be drinking seven nights a week.

Paranoid schizophrenia today is a very treatable disease. Was there medication available for your mother?

You know, at that time, way back, from what I understand, my father told me that they didn't have or—what's the word I'm trying to say is that he couldn't take my mother to get any help, because at that time it was shameful. He did tell me years later, though, that he tried to commit her. But what happened is that no one would help him in the family, because my mother's mother would not allow it.

I see.

She felt that was taboo.

That means your brother was also untreated when he had his problem?

No. My father sent him to the Kane'ohē mental institution, where he received treatment. And he would get these medications where they would release him. But the problem is that every time they released him, he had to go back in, because he would get another breakdown. And so it was a struggle, because—I remember when he was young—when I was young, he tried to kill me one time with a knife. And so ever since then—I was only like eleven years old—every time he came home, I would be—I couldn't sleep in bed. You know, I'd be shivering, because I'd be afraid that, you know, in my sleep, he was going to do something to me and harm me. So it was a struggle, those years; it was very painful.

And there was no adult you could speak with about it?

There was no adult. And that's why I developed all these misconceptions in life, and it wasn't until I became a young adult—I think I was like nineteen years old; I decided that I needed to do something about this. So I went to a psychologist and talked to him. And that was a turning point of my life. And I can share this now; I mean, before, I didn't talk too much about this, especially being this deep into the pain that I had. But it was a really big struggle, and luckily, as the years went by, through this therapy, it helped me a lot.

And how's your brother who had mental illness too?

Uh, he committed suicide.

You know, I keep thinking how treatable schizophrenia is, if the person has access to and is willing to take medication. What are your thoughts now?

Well, I realize that it is treatable. Because what happened is, I had to make a choice in my life once, and I wanted my father's life to be better. And so I took it upon myself to committing my mother to the Kane'ohē Mental Hospital.

Once you became an adult?

Yes. And it was very difficult, because you know, no one wanted to get involved with this, and rightfully so, because it was a very difficult thing to do. We had to actually have them come over and strap her down. Because I knew she wouldn't go willingly. And I'll never forget; as they wheeled her out of the house, she told me, I hate you, I disown you, and I will never talk to you again. And then they took her away. And I was devastated. But I knew this was something that I had to do. So, what happened is, through the medication that she took, eventually it came to the point where we could have conversations between each other, and with my sister, and she really changed a lot. I mean, the change was significant, where we actually had a mom that we could talk to. She wasn't totally there, but she came a long way, where we could actually have simple conversations. So I'm very grateful for that. I'm very grateful that despite—you know, it was painful then, but the reward was twenty times greater, 'cause now I could talk to my mother.

So often, people who've found success have had to overcome adversity and have pressed tirelessly to achieve their goals. That certainly is the case for Roy Sakuma. He worked very hard to overcome the confusion and self-doubt resulting from mental illness in his family and his disrupted and limited formal education. And when he decided to play the ukulele, he practiced and practiced until he mastered his craft.

You know, I know in the hands of a master, what an ukulele sounds like. But I have to say that I can't play any instrument, even a kazoo.

[chuckle]

But I can play the ukulele. It seems like it'll adapt to whatever level you bring to it.

Yes. I agree with you; the ukulele, to me, is one of the easiest instruments to learn in the world; it's perfect for anyone. And you know, like I've seen so many people that say—tell me, I cannot play, I am tone deaf.

M-hm.

And you know, I can prove them wrong. There is not a person in the world that I don't think I cannot teach. And that comes from my upbringing. You know, because I struggled so much, because I had no musical sense, and I had to learn everything from phase one, all the way up. So you can come to me with ten problems, or you know. And as soon as I see you touch the ukulele, I can make the adjustments, just like; because I know already. Because I think that was the foundation for me; being so junk on the ukulele. So when I see students that struggle, you relate to it; so you can work them through it. Had I been a gifted student, then I don't think I would have been a really good teacher. Because I think a lot of—I wouldn't be able to comprehend why are you having so much trouble.

M-m.

So it turned out good for me that I was a lousy--[chuckle]--I think I was the worst student, ever.

[chuckle] You turned out very good.

[chuckle] Thank you. [chuckle] You know, a lot of people thought I was such an outgoing, friendly guy. But uh, they didn't know that inside, I was really hurting. And I think this was right after when I got kicked out of school, um you know, I heard a song; I heard a song on the radio. And it was a song recorded by Ohta-san. And that song was the turning point in my life. Because what happened is that I went to see him to learn a little about the ukulele, and that took away a lot of my pain. 'Cause now, I was focusing on something that made me happy.

Why did you go to see him based on a song? What was the song?

The song was called *Sushi*. I don't know if you recall this; it was recorded in 1963. It became the number one hit in Hawaii; was for the Tom Moffat Show.

How did it go? I vaguely remember.

Oh, are you gonna ask me to sing? [chuckle] Oh, no. [chuckle] [HUMS]

That's right.

And it was an instrumental. And I went to see him; I was sixteen years old at this time. And the wonderful thing is that—I want to share this with everyone; is you know how they say never give up your dreams? Well, at ten years old, I tried learning the ukulele, Leslie; I couldn't. At twelve, I tried again; I couldn't. At fourteen, my sister tried to teach me to hold G; I couldn't hold the chord, I couldn't strum. I had no sense of rhythm; because as I mentioned earlier to you, I never listened to the radio. So I couldn't do it. So she told me, Give up. But when I heard that song, I was sixteen; I decided to seek out Ohta-san. I

asked him to teach me; he started teaching me. And so I think I wouldn't be teaching the ukulele today, had it not been for that song, *Sushi*.

Well, that took guts; a sixteen-year-old kid who'd been kicked out of school going to this ukulele virtuoso.

Uh-huh. One thing that I had, I was never afraid, though, to approach people, as much as I was insecure inside. 'Cause that's how I survived.

M-m.

By not being afraid to talk to people, reach out and ask people questions. And yet, inside, I was just so nervous, you know. But I learned to deal with that and it's been a blessing for me today, 'cause I can help children.

I was gonna ask you; are you good at sensing when somebody is undergoing pain?

Yes; yes. I sense it. I sense it all the time with children, and even sometimes with adults. I don't know why, but I feel it. And I can tell you stories where children were abused, and I would ask the children, you know, How's your life? And they would say, It's fine. But inside, something was telling me that they were hurting. And I would you know, kind of push the issue and talk to the school teacher or the counselor, the principal, and sooner or later, these children would come out and say, yes, you know, there were problems. And it's just something—I think now I understand that because I went through so much pain, you can actually somehow sense pain in other people; you know, especially in children. Yeah.

When you started playing ukulele, I understand you practiced so much, you wore out the frets?

I wore out the frets. I practiced. This is like when I was sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old; I practiced eight hours a day, sometimes ten hours a day. Now, people think, Now, how can you do that? I could do that; I would practice and practice, and practice. And my goal was to beat Ohta-san; I was gonna become the best player in the world. But the funny thing is; the better I got, the more I realized how great the master was.

M-m.

And I thought, Well, you know, he really is something special. And he told me one day; he says, Roy, do you want to come to the studio and just help me? I'm gonna teach this adult class. I said, What do I have to do? He said, Oh, just tune the ukuleles. And he comes in, teaches the adults lesson number one. And then he tells me, Oh, by the way, I'm going to Japan next week; you're teaching. And I was petrified. I said, I don't know how to teach. He says, No, just da-da-da-da-da, da-da-da-da-da. Leslie, I went home and I applied the same technique that I used to learn the ukulele, and practiced for hours and hours every day. I would talk to the walls, I would talk to the kitchen, I would talk to the carpet, I would talk to the mirror, as if I'm talking to those adults. And you know, by the time I went in front of them, I was totally comfortable; and I taught them. And the interesting thing is when Ohta-san returned, Ohta-san asked me, Would you like to continue teaching those students? And I was so happy. And the students were happy, because they were comfortable with me too; so it was a win-win situation. That's how I got into teaching. So my second mentor in life was Ohta-san.

And was it different teaching children, when you decided to expand and teach children as well?

It was a natural for me. Because I realized that I had such a deep love for children that once I was teaching children, there was an instant—like an automatic connection; I can't explain it. But when I'm around children, it's so easy to bring them up. You know, I can just walk in a room, I can walk into my room of instructors with students, or I can go to a school, and automatically I can feel the energy rise. And so I'm happy for that, that I can, you know, have this relationship with kids. But you know, adults; we have a lot of adults now. I find that there's a great connection with adults, because they need this outlet where they have fun and just sing, and play and laugh. And so you know, it's working both ways for us now.

Roy Sakuma and his wife Kathy have partnered in a number of successful enterprises: Roy Sakuma Ukulele Studios, Roy Sakuma Productions, the annual Ukulele Festival, summer zoo concerts, CD, DVD and book sales, and school visits. It all began when Roy was an ukulele student himself.

All this time, you were taking ukulele lessons—

I was taking—

--from Ohta-san?

I was taking ukulele lessons after school. And in fact, I started teaching by then. I was teaching two or three times a week; I had about eight or nine students. And the love for teaching was getting stronger, and stronger in me; and that's why I wanted to put on this event called The Ukulele Festival. Because people don't realize, back in the 1960s, you know, if you asked people about the ukulele, they would say, Oh, that's a toy. I mean—

Yeah; it didn't get much respect, did it?

No. Ninety percent of the people thought it was a toy. And that hurt me, because Ohta-san was such a master.

M-hm.

And so the only thing I could do, and I thought was the best thing to do, was to put on an ukulele festival where we showcased the instrument. Little did I realize that now, the ukulele festival today is a big event; it's an annual event and it's been going on for years, and years and years.

It started in '71. And how many performers did you have then?

I had about fifty.

M-m. And how many today?

Last year we had over nine hundred performers.

Wow.

And a lot of students, lot of people from all over the world that come and perform in the event. And you know the beautiful thing; it's free. So it doesn't cost a cent to come down to Kapi'olani Park and see the festival. And that, again, was a dream that eventually, when my wife started helping me in 1974, the dream was to keep the festival free. And 'til today, it is a free event; and that is something that we are both so very, very happy.

I want to ask you something about your wife.

M-hm.

Here you are, doing well in the work world, but you're damaged inside, you're hurting still. I mean, you can't make that go away. So the essence of marriage is intimacy.

M-hm.

How did that work?

Wow, wow. You know, the word love is so important to me. Though I was growing up in so much pain, that word was so special to me. And I had like two or three girlfriends over a period of my young life; I never told anyone, I love you. 'Cause I felt love was such a special word. When I met my wife, she was nineteen years old, she was going to University of Hawai'i. And I knew this girl was special.

How? Where did you meet her?

I met her through a blind date [chuckle]. Somebody fixed us up where she came along with my wife, and then I met my future wife and my friend; and that was the first encounter.

What did they tell you about her before they set you up?

They just said that she was a nice girl. And that's all they told me.

And you didn't say, Oh, what does she look like?

No; I didn't say that. I mean, you know, I wasn't interested in that. And but she was really attractive, you know. [chuckle]

And did you, or she know anything about what was to happen when you met?

No. In fact, we just met. And then you know, she went back with her girlfriend to work, and two weeks later I called her up. And this is interesting, because the Harlem Globetrotters were town, and it was a Friday. And I called her up and I said, Oh, would you like to go out and see the Harlem Globetrotters? They're playing Friday night. And she tells me, Oh, I'm sorry, I have a date. So I says, Well, how about Saturday night? And she hesitates—

That didn't phase you?

No. She says, Oh, I have another date. Okay. So Globetrotters play Friday, Saturday, Sunday. So I said, Okay; how about Sunday night? And she thinks, and she tells me, Okay. I mean, you know, what—because my life was filled—and I thought about this at times—was filled with so much rejection and stuff like that, when she said she's busy Friday and she's busy Saturday, it still didn't hurt me. 'Cause that's not pain to me; that's just like, hey, what if she's honest, she's busy. So I asked for Sunday, and she said okay. And so that was our first date.

And did you ever find out what your friend and her friend had told her about you before the blind date?

No, I never asked; I never asked.

H-m. Gotta ask.

[chuckle] But I know that she was special. And the reason I know this is because I think we dated after that, eight dates. And I didn't—yes, I didn't even hold her hand. Because I had so much respect for her; I didn't want to do anything that would damage this beautiful relationship that was coming together. And so what happened is that as we were getting

closer, now I knew this was the girl I wanted to marry. This was the girl that I wanted to marry, and I felt, okay, but you mentioned this--what about all the issues inside of me.

M-hm.

So I decided to tell her everything about my past; all the misconceptions, all the insecurities that are in me. I wanted her to know this; I want her to know who she was really marrying, at the risk of losing her. So over the next two or three dates, I revealed everything to her. I revealed my heart and soul to her; from the top of my head to the bottom of my foot, I revealed every insecurity, everything in my life to her. Do you know what she told me?

What?

When all was said and done, she says, I never saw it as your weaknesses, I see it as your strengths. And it wasn't until last year, when I was talking to a friend and I mentioned this, what my wife said, did I realize that she probably saved me that day. 'Cause had she said, you know, we're not meant for one another, you have too many issues, you've got to get your issues straightened out; had she said that to me, you know, it could have gotten me spiraling the wrong way.

But you were doing very well on your own.

I was doing very well. But that was like the icing on the cake. I mean, when she accepted me for all the faults that was in me, I um, I was able to get through it. And do you know what is interesting now? Those inner weaknesses have become my greatest strengths.

She was right about that.

Yeah. It's helping people, it's doing things to help others. You cannot take away what you went through. But you can now switch it around; and rather than dwell on the hurt that you went through, use it for the good of children and other people. And it's something I think everybody that goes through this, when they turn it around, it becomes a really inner strength to help people. My wife and I always talk about this. If we have—and you hear this all the time—if you have nothing nice to say about someone else, don't say it. Because treat the other person how you want to be treated. And that's, that's our philosophy in life, you know. You know, 'cause I want people to treat me with respect; so therefore, I should treat people with respect.

Basic Golden Rule, right?

That's right.

So hard to do, but so simple and true.

It's so simple and true.

You know, you're somebody who didn't have a solid formal education because of the problems in your life.

M-hm.

But you've been able to become a teacher, an expert on a musical instrument, a business owner, and you're even a music producer.

M-hm; yes, yes. It just happened, one thing after another. I think my wife deserves a tremendous amount of credit, that she was the one in 1986 said, Hey, Roy, let's record Ohta-san. So that was our first record; and it won the Hoku for instrumental of the year. And she told me, Hey, we should open a studio in Kane'ohe, which we did; and we should

open a studio in Mililani, which we did. And so she had a lot of influence on where the studio was headed, both in the recording, both in the building of the studio where we could meet—we could reach now, more children. And so it just helped. In fact, we wrote a book on the ukulele. And I actually started it, you know, on my own, thinking I can do it. And it took me five years, and I couldn't finish it. And she says, Where's the book? And I said, Well, I'm still working on it. She said, Okay, give it to me; let me help you.

[chuckle]

Leslie, we finished the book in four months. You see?

Oh.

And that's—you know, my name is out there, because it's Roy Sakuma Productions, right? But you know, I can tell every person out there, honestly, that the success or whatever we do, it's the woman behind; Kathy. And she doesn't want to be in the forefront; she likes to stay in the background. But she is the, like the heart and soul of our company.

Did she have an ukulele connection before you?

No; not at all. But when I was dating her—and this is how small Hawaii is—she didn't tell me 'til months and months later that Ohta-san and her were first cousins.

[chuckle]

I didn't know. You know, so it was meant to be; it was meant to be. And so it's just so, you know, it's interesting.

You're embarking on something new, and it involves something old. Can you tell us about that?

In 1970, as I was mentioning earlier, when I was hurting a lot, I was struggling, and I picked up my ukulele. And I started—this song came out of me, and it was you know, I'm not a singer, but it was something like—wait, now. [SINGS] *I am what I am; I'll be what I'll be; look, can't you see that it's me, all of me. And it just poured out of me. And so I didn't have to sit there and write the notes, write the words; it just poured out of me.* That was 1970. And that song became a song that every single child in the '70s sang as an elementary school child. So you know, that was *I Am What I Am*. Little did I realize, this year as I go to elementary schools and teach that song, that the song has been a powerful tool for me to help children. 'Cause it's been my whole life to help kids; to help kids through their struggles. But it's more powerful this year than ever, because as I go to these schools and I ask these children, What does, I am what I am, I'll be what I'll be, mean to you? This is what I get from children. One child will say, It means it's okay who I am. Another will say, I'm special. But a lot of children will tell me this; It means that it's okay to be who I am, and I don't have to be who I'm not. And that is so powerful. And I realized that this song was meant for all—to share with everybody. You know, it's okay to be who you are, and you don't have to try and be who you're not. And I think that's a wonderful passage for everyone to kind of gravitate to. You know, so I'm very happy that I'm able to share this song with all the children today. So we got a concert coming up this summer where we do the Wildest Show in Town; it's every single summer. And the concept is laughter, love, and hope; and at the end of each concert we're gonna have the children and everybody, the audience, sing *I Am What I Am*. So I'm really excited about that.

And obviously, you've accepted yourself for who you are.

M-hm.

As you recall, Roy Sakuma says he was a terrible student growing up. Now, after learning so many important lessons in life, he's a teacher in more ways than one. Roy had not spoken publicly about the mental illness that shaped his childhood until he sat down with us for *Long Story Short*. I'd like to applaud him for his openness and for encouraging people affected by mental illness to seek professional help.

For information on mental health resources in our community, simply dial 2-1-1 or log on to pbs-hawaii-dot-org and download the transcript from this program. We'll include some information there for you.

Mahalo piha to ukulele master Roy Sakuma for sharing stories with us. And thank you for joining me for another *Long Story Short*. I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. A hui hou kakou.

Video over credits: Honolulu Zoo concert featuring hundreds of children singing, "I Am What I Am" to an audience of 1,500.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES: Mental Health

The mission of PBS Hawaii is to inform, inspire and entertain by sharing high quality programming and services that add value to our diverse island community. We encourage lifelong learning on a variety of issues. Since this program cast a spotlight on mental illness, which can be a serious concern for individuals, families and our entire community, we're providing a brief list of resources you can use to begin to learn more about mental illness. This list is not comprehensive and PBS Hawaii does not endorse or recommend any of the following organizations. Please explore these and other community resources, including your own family physician for complete and accurate information.

Hawaii Psychological Association

www.hawaiipsychology.org

The mission of the Hawaii Psychological Association is to enhance the quality of life for the people of Hawaii by encouraging, integrating, applying, and communicating the contributions of Psychology in all its branches.

Mental Health Kokua

1221 Kapiolani Blvd., Suite 345
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(808) 737-2523

We believe that all citizens should have an opportunity to live and participate in and contribute to their communities.

Through specially designed services and settings, Mental Health Kokua assists people with mental illness achieve optimum recovery and functioning in the community.

Mental Health America of Hawaii

(formerly Mental Health Association in Hawai'i)
1124 Fort Street Mall, Suite 205
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www.mentalhealth-hi.org

MHA-O'ahu: (808) 521-1846

MHA-Hawai'i County: (808) 966-8736

MHA-Maui County: (808) 242-6461

Mental Health America of Hawaii provides information to the public about mental health, mental illness, and where to get help, and advocates for better mental health services for people with mental illnesses in Hawai'i.

The Mental Health America of Hawaii is a volunteer, nonprofit citizens' organization which works to promote mental health, reduce stigma, and prevent the problems associated with

mental illnesses; and aims to improve the care, treatment, and participation of children, adults, and the elderly with mental illnesses through public education and advocacy.

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NAMI Hawaii is a partner in educating, advocating for and supporting people in our communities who are living with mental illness and its effects.

NAMI Hawaii is proud to offer programs of education and real-life recovery evidence both for families and the general public. We strive to raise public awareness and concern about mental illness. The more people know about this illness, the less likely they will hold prejudiced, stigmatizing opinions.
