

**GUEST: CHA THOMPSON**

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**Aloha no, I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. We're about to get to know a woman who's comfortable in both designer clothing and puka pants; she's devoted to her big family and her sizable business; and she's articulate, eloquent in both standard English and pidgin. Who is she? Cha Thompson. A lifelong learner and high achiever. We're about to sit down and talk with her.**

**With her husband Jack, Cha Thompson owns and operates Tihati Productions, a family business in the entertainment industry. She's also a mother of 12 grown children, some of them hanai (a Polynesian tradition of adoption). She's proud that each of her kids has attended college and that she herself has recently earned a bachelor's degree. Proud – because her story begins in a public housing project in Kalihi.**

I'm a product of the tenement housing, and it was quite different from today. It was the kind of time where if you ran out of sugar, you could go next door and borrow a cup of sugar, and pay it back when the welfare check came. Yeah.

**How many people in your family?**

My mother raised eight of us. Four boys and four girls.

**And where were you in the mix?**

Number three, from the top.

**So that means you helped a lot with the other kids?**

I did; I did. For us, everything was sharing and caring.

**How tight was the finance?**

Boy. I'll tell you what; it's a miracle, what she did to raise all of us with so little; so little. 'Cause she was not a professional woman. I used to tease her and say, Mama, you're a peasant woman. Because she had all of us children, and she never really held a job. So the rest of us did. I mean, we all knew we had to help out; so we went to work.

**So as soon as you could, you started earning—**

As soon as you could.

**--money?**

I mean, we babysat, we mowed the lawn, we worked in the cannery; that was my first real paycheck kinda job.

**What did you spend your free time doing? You went to school, you tried to earn money.**

You know, we babysat; I mean, one another. I took care, helped with the younger ones. I remember helping my mother's kid sister take care of her children. I was all of eleven years old, and you already helped; you helped—that's why I love children so much, and if you did anything else, you cleaned the house. My mother made sure of that. And my daughters now; I mean, they all have their college degrees. But they would say, Mama would say, if you have any worth—if you're worth your salt, you had to learn how to clean the toilet, you had to know how to fight. And you had to have a college degree.

**What about the advice of your mother to you kids?**

You know, my mom, she allowed for her kid sister to help raise me, who's really one of my most favorite people in the whole, wide world. We call her Puna Dear and she lives in Waimanalo. The importance to them was that we would just be good people; be honest, you know. No shame in being poor; shame in being dishonest. And so that's kinda the way I grew up.

**You didn't feel shame when you had to wear hand-me-downs and same dress or clothes over and over?**

No; and the reason I didn't was because the two ingredients I got from Kalihi was compassion—I knew we were the underdogs; and humor. Anything that might make us less or make us ashamed, we made fun of. My god, we made fun of each other, a lot; and we laughed a lot, and we laughed loud. And so that was kind of the remedy of, Ah, I no care. You know. And I grew up thinking that; like, I don't care who was bigger, smarter, richer than I was. I was okay; I was okay.

**That helped you a lot, didn't it?**

That sure did. And you learned that from Kalihi. Somebody puts you down, and Ah, you know, I could do something better than they could; I knew I could.

**Did you grow up feeling stigmatized by welfare?**

I think so; I think so. I didn't realize it 'til later, but in the housing, what was important—I don't know how this is gonna sound, but what was important is, you gotta know how to beef, quite frankly.

**You can beef?**

[chuckle]

**You can beef? You're so—**

Yeah, man.

**--elegant.**

Yeah, man. [chuckle] At least, I used to a lot. And you know, when you come from a large family, nobody wants to beef with you. 'Cause in the housing, families fight families. I mean, I know it sounds imbecilic, but we did. I mean, that was—you know.

**Did you beef boys too?**

Yeah; yeah, yeah. Most of the boys didn't want to take me on, but I had brothers; big brothers.

**And they'd back you up?**

Oh, gosh; it was silly. Today, it's silly. Wasn't silly then, though. I mean, you know, we did crazy stuff. You fought over things that weren't important; you know. You call me one stink name or something; it was silly, but—

**When you were a song leader, they were known to be the—**

The cute ones, thank you.

**The prettiest.**

[chuckle]

**And the most social. Were you also very social?**

I think I was. And I think that was part of standing up, being recognized. Because I think that I saw so many people from the housing being pushed on the side, maybe not being able to express themselves, or knowing, oh, they're from the other side of the tracks. And so I think I deliberately did that.

**Did you grow up with standard English in your house, or not?**

No; no.

**All Pidgin?**

Yeah; yeah.

**And so you learned it in school? TV?**

[SIGH] You know, I must have mimicked people, 'cause I never studied in high school. I was a terrible student. And I think affiliation; I think my travels as a dancer. I think traveling the world allowed me to meet others that spoke differently from me, and I learned well. But the funniest thing is that you never forget; because a couple months ago, uh, four of my girlfriends from Farrington—we graduated together—came over to the house. I hadn't seen them in a couple—oh, maybe more than a couple years. I hope they see this. And they spent the night—my husband was out of town, and we all slept on the floor in my living room. And I mean, you want to talk about laugh; we got to make fun of one another. Because after you get older, you realize you're not all that anyway, and so you can talk the truth about which boys you liked and pretended not to like, or who you beefed and who you beat, and how we even had run-ins with one another.

**M-hm.**

Because we were either hiding something or we didn't want to be perceived as what you perceive me to be, and—

**M-hm.**

And it was a wonderful evening. We ended with prayer and hugs. But not before we made terrible fun of one another.

**You know, what was the most telling thing you heard about yourself?**

That I couldn't sing.

**[chuckle]**

The nerve. We would do three, four-part harmony, and the one girl, Phyllis Rodrigues, said, Ah, you could never sing. And I said, Shut up.

**[chuckle]**

She said, Yeah, we'd always have to start again, 'cause you'd follow somebody else's key next to you. You know.

**Was she right?**

I think so; I think so.

**[chuckle]**

I think so, I was the bossy one that said, No, no, just sing it that way; sounded great, just keep singing. You know. But the things that we didn't forget was, we had one of our real leaders; she won shot put one year at Farrington. And it was all about being strong, and so she was our leader; her name was Laverne Biven. We

called her Beanie. She passed away; but before she did, before she died of cancer, we went to the hospital, and Phyllis brought out her guitar, and we sang four-part harmony for her. And we sang the song that three of us won at a talent contest one night at Farrington. We sang that again. And I mean, I sobbed, because I thought it was like this was a gift we were giving to her. She was dying, and she still had the sweetest voice of all of us. And that is one of the memories I will hold close to my heart as I get older, and remember that they were good times; very good times.

**Cha Thompson is both gracious and grateful as she describes the direction her life has taken.**

**You have a very successful business; you built your wealth. How do you look back at your days in Kalihi Valley Homes and at Farrington? And have they interfered with relationships? Has your success interfered with relationships?**

In the beginning. 'Cause Kalihi kids think you're all that, when you have to leave them for a little while. But in the long run, we've all come back together. And it might sound tacky to some people, but for me, it was my faith as a Christian that brought me through the real difficult times of being [SIGH] so poor, and wanting to achieve, and not being able to, and feeling less. You know, you just gotta swallow your pride; you were less. You know, we were always hungry, Leslie; we were always hungry, I was always hungry. And so maybe that was it. Maybe I thought, you know, I'm never gonna let that happen to my kids; and it never did.

**What do you remember you wanted the most? What was out of your grasp that you couldn't have, and you always thought, I want to get, when I ever have money, I'm gonna get that one day?**

It might have been education. It might have been education, because I went back in my old age. But I think it was education; and it was because I didn't realize it until I got older—and having a successful company, I was asked to sit on many boards. And they all had magnificent degrees; and I thought, Jeez, you know, wow, there must be something I don't have; I should go and try to get this. And I finally did. [chuckle]

**What was Farrington like? I imagine it was—it's a lot different today. But what was it like then?**

You know, I sent all my kids to private schools; Kamehameha, Punahou, St. Louis. But for Farrington, I was so proud to come from Farrington, because at Farrington, I saw decent, good kids. I saw boys that didn't wear black jackets, and didn't have a ton of pomade on their hair, and guys that became like my brothers. They weren't all into swearing and fighting; they weren't. And so for me, Farrington was the first steppingstone to being somebody, if you will. Farrington gave me what I thought was class; because fair was fair at Farrington. You studied hard, you learned. Farrington will always be special in my heart. Farrington was the first real dignified place for me.

**So, didn't think of sending your kids to Farrington later, though?**

And I didn't later, because I knew that they would get a jumpstart; more than I did, you know. I made sure they knew that education was important. Nobody told me education was important; it wasn't to my parents. They weren't educated; they, they just knew hard work, and that's what we all did,

**In high school, you met your husband—**

Yes.

**--to be. How did that happen?**

Oh. I thought he was mahu, because he was a gentleman with manners. And I only knew guys that, you know, I knew just tough guys. My brothers are all tough. And—but he was a gentleman; he spoke well, and he tucked his shirt in, and he wore loafers, and I thought this guy—you know. And he tells the story of he thought, Eeuw, what kinda girl has a laugh that loud?

[chuckle]

So we really didn't hit it off, you know.

**This was what year at Farrington?**

He was a senior, and I was a junior. It was 1964. And I thought, Oh, what kind of Samoan is this? And it turned out where we started having group—we never dated, it was just group people. I mean, you didn't even hold hands in those days in public; you didn't hold hands. So we didn't. We were friends. And his parents were gonna move back to the islands. And I thought—and he told me that, and I thought myself, Well, what's gonna happen to you? You know, you're twenty-one now. Are you going back home to where he's from? He's from a little atoll in the South Pacific. And he was going back, and I said, Oh well, shouldn't we be thinking about marriage? [chuckle] Well, that sank me for the rest of my—

[chuckle]

--forty-two years of marriage. He told the children I asked him to marry him, and boy, I have to live with that.

**[chuckle] Now, you said he was very handsome.**

Yes.

**I remember you saying this.**

Yes.

**Do you still think he's handsome?**

Absolutely; absolutely. In a month, we will have been married for forty-two years.

**And you say you're different from each other. How are you different, and why does it work?**

Oh. I think that that man has far too many meetings; he wants to meet about the last meeting. You know. And he thinks I do things too quickly. I will decide in three hours what takes him three days; or I will do three days what takes him three weeks. And the kids will make fun of us 'til today—they did a skit at one of our anniversary parties; because they cannot believe there's any similarity between the two of us. How could we have been happily married all these years? Because we'll see something, and I will say, This is beautifully black. And he will say, Oh, no, it's white.

**[chuckle]**

We're that different. So by the grace of God, we have been happily married for forty-two years.

**How does that work? I mean, I don't get it.**

Wonderful; wonderful. I think part of it is because we're like two ships in the night. And so it kinda was like we're still really excited about one another; we really are. [chuckle]

**That's great.**

He'd better be.

**[chuckle] Now, did he start the nickname Cha? Your name is Charlene.**

No; no; no. I really believe—and Karen Keawehawai'i and I were trying to figure out when I became Cha. The kids in the housing never, ever called me Charlene. I don't think they could say the R; I'm telling you. I was always Chalene.

**[chuckle]**

Okay? So then I think some reporter first said Cha. And so she asked me one day, How the heck you did become Cha? I said, I don't know, but doesn't that sound exotic?

**[chuckle]**

Hey; hey, you know, I'll take it.

**Cha was a 19-year-old hula dancer who, with Jack Thompson, built Tihati Productions into one of the largest and longest-running entertainment businesses in Hawai'i, with Polynesian revues and customized events on O'ahu, Maui, Kaua'i and Hawai'i Island.**

**You were graduating from Farrington.**

Yes.

**Big achievement.**

Yes.

**Then what?**

Then I traveled the world. I was a dancer, you know, for HVB, for whomever.

**And that came easily, because people saw you dancing and said, Oh, let's hire her?**

Yeah. I mean, I would latch onto groups. I was with the original Puka Puka Otea group that Elaine Frisbee from Rarotonga ran, and we were the only one in the state to do Polynesian everything. And then when she was leaving, I was her lead dancer, and she simply said, Here; take it and run. And at nineteen; excuse me. I knew nothing about business. And so you know, when I married my husband, I was working in medical records at Queen's Medical Center, and he was working in reservations at Hawaiian Airlines. And people started calling us. And I'm telling you; it was so successful, because tourism at the time was The Thing, and everybody wanted a show.

**What year was that? What general decade?**

1969? '70? And if you said you were from Hawaii, that sold; you almost didn't have to do anything. And so we started traveling around the world, and when we came home, people wanted shows. We actually had to decide—We gotta get offstage. You cannot be producer, director, business manager, choreographer; which is what we did all—and Oh, God; try do the books. Hello.

**You danced; what did your husband do?**

He was the emcee. Yeah; and he didn't—his very first thing to do was he came to Canada when I was with the World's Fair, and I was a dancer. And he was one of the few Polynesians who could speak English; so when our emcee got sick, he said, Give it to Thompson. And he said, I'm not an entertainer. You know, and in fact, just before we left, he said, I'm part Samoan; surely I can learn the knife dance. I always thought he was too handsome to be a knife dancer; he didn't look as—

**[chuckle]**

--wild and savagery. But he learned it, and became a knife dancer. A terrible knife dancer in the beginning; can't

hold a candle next to my son, who's a world titleholder. But that's how we started. We had to get off stage and get a good attorney, get a great CPA, and we started—we gave up our careers to run the business.

**Well, you were singled out to be the one to take over the dancing troupe.**

Yes.

**Why?**

[SIGH] You know, I wondered, because I was always so—shucks, I was always vocal. Always had an opinion. I wonder. And many of the Polynesian girls were more reserved. They didn't always—I always had the plan; I always had the plan.

**And it was a good plan?**

It was a good plan. I think survival mode; always in a survival mode, you know. And I think that's what my children detect. Like, Mom, ho.

**[chuckle]**

You know. I always plan for tomorrow. Now, save, you know, the rainy day is coming, and always dress well. If you get into an accident [chuckle] make sure you have clean underwear. [chuckle] And you know, the house must be clean; visitors will come, they'll judge us.

**M-hm.**

I always felt like I was being judged; always.

**Now, you were busy negotiating contracts, and—**

Yes.

**--running shows, and running a tight operation. Including shows that went around the world—**

Yes.

**--in different places abroad. You were also having children.**

Yes. My Puna Dear in Waimanalo helped raise my children. And it was a place where they were always clean and always well fed, and always happy. And I could rest assured that they weren't missing me the way uh, other children would miss their parents that would have to take trips a lot. Because we'd always be on the phone, and she was like, Don't worry, Mama be home, Mama be home soon, and whatever. And she was the stabling force, and the reason I could travel the way I did,

**You know, somehow, I don't see you handing off most of your business and most of your childcare to other people. I just don't—**

[chuckle]

**--see that**

I did; I took care of them. Even though I traveled, a lot of times they would travel with me. And I'm telling you; if I was—my youngest son was about six weeks when I went back on stage. And I had him in a little basket back of the stages in Chicago, or New York, or Washington, DC. I did; I took my children with me. I did.

**You gave birth to five.**

M-hm.

**And then you ended up with seven more, somehow?**

Yeah. It's a Polynesian custom. And when I say hanai, I raised them from three weeks old. I don't only take the ones that, you know,

**Are almost ready to go. [chuckle]**

Yeah; almost ready—no, no. That's why the line between my natural children and my hanai children pales, because they're all brothers and sisters. They never say, Oh, this is my hanai brother, or this is my hanai sister. They're brothers and sisters, you know. And it was the best thing that ever happened to me. Because 'til today, everybody comes home for to'ona'i, you know. That's the Sunday afternoon meal, right after church. Everybody's there; and everybody's talking at the same time. And it's amazing; we all know what everybody's saying. Sundays are great for us.

**Cha Thompson, who's been recognized as Hawai'i Mother of the Year, clearly loves her family and her community. Among the many boards on which she has agreed to serve: the Hawaii Tourism Authority and the Honolulu Police Commission.**

People started taking us seriously when we would sit on business boards or when we contributed in a business fashion. You know. But yeah. I mean, you're Polynesian; surely, you can't be too smart. And entertainment, heavens; you must fool around, and you must do drugs. Well, we did neither, and it paid off; paid off for us.

**I sense you're a good negotiator. I'm trying to figure out—**

[chuckle]

**--what your style is.**

It's the Pake blood.

**[chuckle]**

Leslie, it's the Chinese blood. And the funny thing about it is, in entertainment, they will say, Oh, come and put on a show, or come and sing and dance for us, and you can eat all you want, and you can drink. I don't drink. I'm really thin; I don't eat that much. I need something else; and money was the thing I needed. But we had to earn it; we had to earn it. They didn't take us seriously, you know. Well, my kids are a little luckier, because they've had the benefit of our stories. And they went in with degrees, so they know that they can handle it. And we expect for them to give back; we always say in our family—and we were honored by a high school for this; much is expected from whom much is given. And man, nobody in our clan, nobody would ever start to begin to think that maybe they were owed this, or maybe they're kind of special. We make fun of everything, and man, we'd take 'em down. You know, that wouldn't happen in our family.

**So everybody's expected to do housework. No breaks?**

My son, who has a real thriving career on his own—he fronted for Fifty Cent.

**Afatia.**

Afatia; for Fitty Cents. And I mean, I remember him, he was June Jones' first running back, and won a ring, and you know, all state, all star, and, excuse me. By Saturday morning, that kennel better be cleaned, 'cause we don't have a yardman that's gonna clean the kennel. And he used to do it, and he'd say, Ho, Mom, can't you get—you know, I gotta be at rehearsal, and I got—yeah, we can, but you know, twenty minutes or half an hour, do your stuff first. And that's the way it is; I expected that of them. And you know, I'm really grateful that they're great kids.

**I know you brought in some major acts.**

Yes.

**And you developed major talent.**

I think we're known as a Polynesian revue. And I don't know that many people know that Tihati Productions has a vast department that brings in contemporary acts, like we brought in Lionel Richie and Cyndi Lauper. And we also do thematic parties. You know, we'll prepare a whole Raiders of the Lost Ark, or Aloha in a Volcano. So we do many things; but I think they still think of me as the hula girl. I mean, maybe, because they'll all say, Oh, you know, you run that halau. And I say, No, I'm not a kumu; I don't have a halau. But Tihati Productions, they think of as a Polynesian revue.

**You've had to really strike a balance between Polynesian authenticity and entertainment. How do you work that out?**

I decided early on not to educate them; rather, to entertain them. But, to not sell myself, and not give them what is real. Any Tihati revue that you see will have real flowers, we'll use real ti leaf skirts. We do authentic numbers and sing it in the native tongues; you know, Tahitian, Samoan, Fijian. And a lot of my instructors are from those islands, Hawaiian. So I never felt that uh, tourism was a threat to me. In fact, when some people might have thought, Oh, that's a sellout, she's worked in Waikiki for thirty-five years; you know, why isn't she with us. I would say, Well, tourism dollars sent all my kids to college. And I never felt that I wasn't doing exactly what is me. You know, I believe God gave me a gift in my roots and my heritage, and I share it, and lucky for me, tourism is Hawaii's number one industry, and they'll always need the hula girl and the steel guitar, and the fire knife dancer. And so I think I'm here to stay.

**Lucky for Cha Thompson, we'll always need the hula girl. And lucky for us, she's here to stay. Mahalo piha to Cha Thompson for sharing stories with me. And mahalo to you for joining in, this week and every week, for *Long Story Short* on PBS Hawaii. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.**

Video clip with production credits:

Surround yourself with people that can do things that you can't; 'cause there's always things that you can do, that they can't do. And then you get the completed circle, you know. But I have to say that for me, and just finishing college now, I realize that a lot of people do not take um, take God into consideration. For me, without that, man, I'd be a basket case. That's what I held on to. I said, Lead me, guide me, take me. And that's the only thing that I follow. I'm kinda bossy, and I think I can do many things, and I have a hard time not being the one to make the plan or to organize. But, but yeah, I can follow the scriptures; I can follow God.

**You defer to God.**

I do. I do; all the time.