

GUEST: SENATOR DANIEL AKAKA

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Aloha no, I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. You've heard the expression, "Nice guys finish last." Not true. Not when it comes to U.S. Senator, Daniel Kahikina Akaka. Except at the very beginning of his political career, he's been number one in the balloting for every elective office for which he's run. Political supporters and opponents agree on one thing: he's full of aloha – not a cheap, smarmy version, but real aloha. Join me in a conversation with Hawaii's junior United States Senator, next ...

Daniel Kahikina Akaka is the only Native Hawaiian and the only member of Chinese ancestry serving in the U.S. Senate as I speak. Since 1976, he's represented Hawai'i in Washington, D.C. – first in the House of Representatives and now in the Senate. Our conversation begins at his birth, through a story heard from his older brother, Abe, who would become the Reverend Abraham Akaka of Kawaiaha'o Church.

Well, when I first entered the world, let me tell you about what Brother Abe said. He said that I came before dawn, and that my dad helped to bring me into this world.

Was it in your house?

At home.

Where was home?

And home was in Pauoa Valley. And they cleaned me up, according to Brother Abe, and my dad called the family to the parlor, and we had what we called at that time, 'ohana. And 'ohana was a devotion. And it was an 'ohana to celebrate my birth. And when the 'ohana was finished, according to Brother Abe, Pa named me Daniel. And he said that Daniel will someday be in the lion's den. And in a sense, that was prophetic. Because when you think of what I'm doing now as a Senator, in a sense, we are in the lion's den, and that Daniel will prevail, as it is in the Bible.

What part of what you do now puts you in the lion's den?

It's the kind of issues that are raised by members of the Senate, in our case today, and the way in which they try to have people join them in some of the issues, and the way they try to pass it on the floor. And I will tell you, it's done in a procedural way, but the way it's done, it's tough.

What's the most ferocious lion you face?

Well, the most voracious lions are my friends [chuckle] who have issues that are dear to them. And the thing about me and coming from Hawai'i, I will tell you, I would say would really benefit others who are also in Congress, is that you can still be friends.

So the toughest adversaries are your friends?

Yes. And that doesn't sound right, but we are friends. And they're friends today, and it occurs today with me where, after we're done with the debate, and the bill is either passed or fails, they will come up to me and shake my hand, you know, which shows that the friendship was still there. And that's a good way to serve.

So there you are, a few minutes old, and your family's having a devotion, and you're being named Daniel. And then what happened?

Then I then took my place in the family, and I was number eighth.

Were you the last?

And the baby of the family—and I was the last.

But with eight kids—you know, it's hard for me to imagine supporting eight children. How was your life?

What was it like?

It was good—I would use that word, although, it was difficult, because of the situation and circumstances. When I tell you that we lived in a two-bedroom home, and we had a lanai that we used too, as an extension.

So who slept where in this two-bedroom house?

Well, most of the children slept in one bedroom, and some in the parlor, and some in the other bedroom. And Pa and Ma slept in one, and they slept on the floor.

No beds?

There were beds, but we slept on the beds.

And your parents let—

Yes.

They'd take the floor.

Yes. And we would have 'ohana twice a day in the family. So early morning, before my dad went to work—

And where did he go to work?

He was an ironworker. He worked at Honolulu Ironworks.

Was that in Kaka'ako?

It was.

That was a hardcore place. Lots of industry and—

Yes.

--tough folks.

Well, it's located right across the present Federal Building, where the restaurants are. And he worked there every day. He was a molder.

What does a molder do?

He would use sand to make patterns in which they poured the steel to create whether it was a gear, or whatever.

Oh, I see.

And most of the work was for sugar plantations. So whatever parts that they needed, they made there.

And your mom, did she stay home with eight kids?

She was a housewife. She was pure Hawaiian, and very, very gracious, loving Hawaiian woman; rotund. And I remember her as such a beautiful lady.

Did she speak Hawaiian?

Oh, yes; she and my dad spoke Hawaiian.

When they didn't want you to know what they were—

Yes, and—

--talking about?

--unfortunately, in those days when we were little, they would ask us not to speak Hawaiian; to speak English.

Learn English as best you can, because that's the language today.

Your dad was also Chinese, right?

Yes; he was Chinese, and his dad came from Fook Yuen, China, and married a Hawaiian girl. And they lived in Pauoa.

And in fact, his name, and your middle name, both refer to Chinese origins?

That's right; and in Hawaiian, it's The East.

Kahikina?

Kahikina.

What lessons did you learn from your mom and your dad, and how were they different?

My mom and dad, as I said, were very spiritual people. For us and the whole family, you know, the church was so important. And so Sundays for me, as I grew up, it was church day. In the morning, we would—there were times when we walked from Pauoa to Kawaiaha'o Church. And we'd be there for Sunday school in the morning at nine. And after that, then we went to regular church service, which was done about noon. And then we went home, and we'd have lunch at home. Then we went to another church in Pauoa Valley at two p.m. Then we'd go back home and get ready for church again at Kawaiaha'o, where we would have Christian endeavor classes, which started at six. And at seven-thirty, the evening service began, and we'd stay for that. And after the service we went home. That was our Sunday. But even with that, there was 'ohana in the morning and 'ohana in the evening for the family every day.

Devoted and devout. And headed for a life of service. Daniel Akaka would go on to graduate from Kamehameha Schools in 1942 (having witnessed the attack on Pearl Harbor from Kapalama Heights). He served in the Army Corps of Engineers during the War; and become a school teacher and a principal before entering politics. Dan Akaka followed his faith in God and in people who advised and supported him all the way to Capitol Hill.

Your brother, Abraham, would grow up to have a very prominent position as pastor of Kawaiaha'o Church. You were the choir director for seventeen years.

That's correct.

The family was so spiritual. Did you ever have a crisis of faith?

I can't remember that. I don't think so.

You never said to yourself, Where's God when I need Him, and—

No.

--maybe this whole thing I've grown up with isn't really —

Well, when we grew up, my mother and dad really—I mean, they talked to us a lot too, you know, and they were

sure that we understood that we could trust God. And anytime you need Him, He's there. And I must tell you that it has helped me all my life, including where I am now.

And when you don't get what you pray for?

Well, there's a reason. I mean—

And do you under—

--that's how they—

Do you—

--taught us.

--understand the reason?

That's right. And well, we may not at that time. But later on, when we look back, we say, Oh yeah, we didn't understand it that time, but things work out.

I'll bet you were under some influence to become a missionary yourself.

Yes; yes. And later on, I came to think that, you know, there are different ways of being a missionary. You don't have to be a preacher, like Brother Abe. And Brother Abe, for me, was doing so well, I thought, Eh, one in the family is enough; and so I would maybe do my work in other ways. And this is why I went into education, as I did, and that was to help people.

I presume you jumped on the GI Bill and attended college on that basis.

Yes.

Would you have gone to college otherwise?

No. You know, it was a blessing for me. The GI Bill, you know, helped not only me, but it helped Senator Inouye and Senator Matsunaga as well, and many others.

You went on to get a Master's in education as well.

Yes.

Was that also on the GI Bill?

Yes; yes. So we really benefited. But when you look at it, what we did during our time really changed the world. And in Hawai'i, it changed Hawai'i too, because many of them became leaders in the legislature as well, and leaders of the government. And so my feeling was, we gotta have a GI Bill for our latest veterans. And so I'm so glad we were able to pass it, as we did.

In 2006, Time Magazine ran a feature that called you one of The Hill's five worst legislators.

Yeah.

It said that you're living proof that having experience doesn't necessarily mean you have expertise, and it called you a master of the minor bill—minor resolution on the bill that dies in committee.

You know, they were very wrong, really wrong. And my colleagues told me that. They said, What? You know, this is wrong. For instance, one of the big bills that I just passed was the Filipino veterans. Sixty-two years, they haven't been able to pass it, and I passed it. That's really big. And there are other bills that I can mention, but these are important bills that I was able to pass. But I passed it, you know, using the Hawaiian method of dealing with my colleagues. And they appreciate it.

And I sense that you're not there because you're terribly ambitious to succeed in a certain way; you're there because you enjoy it.

Well, it's not only that, but I'm there because I can help people.

Because you—

That's the—

--you've been effective.

--real reason. And I'm not there for Dan Akaka; I'm there for the people of Hawai'i. And so whatever I do, as a matter of fact, many times, my staff would tell me, Eh, get up front. But I don't. I would rather stay back a step and ...

As a matter of fact, if you wanted to retire, you'd be under intense pressure not to leave, because of your seniority.

That's correct. And we're able to do so much for Hawai'i, and for our country. And we're doing it.

So you're—how old are you now?

I will be eighty-four.

So what do you see in the way of your future? How do you expect the future to play out for you?

Well, I look at continuing to have good health, and to continue to do all I can to help the people of Hawai'i, with my experience, with the way I work with people, and to help this country. And now with a new administration coming forth, you know, we need to transition into a Congress that can really produce and help our country and Hawai'i.

Speaking of producing; there is the Akaka Bill, which has been waiting and waiting and stalled and stalled. Do you think it'll pass?

It can pass, if we can get it to the floor. Now, I'm saying it that way, because this has been the problem.

M-hm.

That I've not been able to get it to the floor. It passed the House twice; it passed—this Congress. And the reason is that in the Senate, one Senator can hold up a bill. And that's what happens. And to get it to the floor, we have to use what we call cloture; we have to invoke cloture. And to do that, we need sixty votes, not majority. And so to get the sixty votes, it's really tough. The last time I did that, I ended up with fifty-six votes, and therefore, couldn't get it to the floor. But if we can get it to the floor, we'll pass it.

What's been dubbed the Akaka Bill is legislation to provide federal recognition of a Native Hawaiian governing entity. In the U.S. Senate, Dan Akaka chairs the Congressional Taskforce on Native Hawaiian Issues and the Veterans' Affairs Committee. On the Hill and at home, his life is about building and keeping relationships. He and his wife of sixty years, Millie, have five children, fourteen grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

Where does Millie enter the picture? When did she come into your life?

She came into my life before I went to the Pacific, into the Army.

Where did you meet her?

She met me. [chuckle]

She wanted to meet you? Is that what you're saying?

That's right. See, I was with what we called the Junior Hawaiian Civic Club. And to take members, we would have to interview them.

M-hm.

So I was interviewing members, and she was one I interviewed.

Now, was she doing that 'cause she wanted to meet you?

Well, I learned later, was she wanted me to interview her, and she was sure that she came to me. And that was the beginning.

You know, after six decades of marriage, your wife still comes to the office every day, and essentially puts in the same day you do and is so supportive of you. And you two seem like you've still got this very good thing going, very close.

Yes. She takes good care of me. As a matter of fact, she has that responsibility of keeping me healthy. And she comes to work every day. She's my only unpaid staff. I tell her that.

What does she do in the office?

Well, she comes in, and she usually meets with guests who come. And many of them from Hawai'i, or most of them from Hawai'i. And she's the type that, as soon as she gets in the office, she takes off her shoes and she walks around bare feet. And so some of the guests, they look down and they say, Ooh [chuckle], she's bare feet. And I always tell them, Look, you folks are welcome to take off your shoes in my office—

[chuckle]

--and be comfortable.

But you know, she could easily stay home at your condo in DC—

Yeah.

--or go meet with friends; but she's always there. Why is that?

Yeah. Well, she loves to do that, because she sees people, and she's able to talk to people. And I guess it's better than staying home. But she likes that style. And the other reason, although I've never said it, that she helps—we need three passengers in the car.

[chuckle] To get into the zipper lane—

To use the HOV.

--or something? [chuckle]

And without her, we don't have three. [chuckle]

Who's the other one? Who's the third?

The other is Jim Sakai, who is my administrative assistant, who picks us up, you know—

[chuckle]

--in the morning, takes us home at night. And so the three of us use the HOV.

You spend most of the year in DC, right?

About ten months. Yeah.

What do you like about living in DC? And why is it so important to you to continue working, long after a time when many folks would have retired, take it easy?

Well, there's so much to do there, and that's what I like too. The hours are long. I keep telling the young people; I said, Look, you never stop learning in your life. I said, I thought I was learning a lot when I was in Kamehameha; I thought I was learning a lot when I was at the UH. I said, But here, I'm still learning. I said, Every time there's a

new bill, there's something new to learn. And my health has been good. And Millie has been very supportive. So that helps me do my job.

She's completely herself.

Yeah, oh very.

Despite who she's around, right?

Oh, yes. And even my colleagues know that. You know, she's herself, and she says what she wants to say.

And there isn't a lot of pressure to kind of conform and be a certain way, and be accepted in a certain way? You haven't—

Yes.

--felt that?

Well, I've felt that. But she's one that does what she wants to do. And—

And you support her to—

Yes.

--being that way.

But—

Herself.

--you know, my colleagues like that. So whenever they see me, even today, they don't say, Danny, how are you?

They say, Danny, how's Millie? [chuckle]

Millie will say what she's thinking, won't she?

Yeah; oh, very much.

Has she ever told anybody off on Capitol Hill?

Yes. [chuckle] Yes; but she says it in a way where—that they accept it.

M-hm.

And you know, if you get hurt—

And you do the same thing too, don't you?

What's that?

I mean, don't—

Yeah.

Aren't you able to tell people things in a way that they don't get offended, even though it's counter to what they're thinking or what they want?

Yes; that's what I call the Hawaiian style of communicating. And it works, and I just hope that more people would use that. And people like you for it, and feel that you're a good friend, and they can trust you. That's the other word that's so important up there.

Tell me, what's—give me a course in how to disagree, Hawaiian style.

Yes. Well, one is to be sure that your friend, your opponent knows what you're all about, and where you are. And if you know that what you're trying to do is what he doesn't want, and you need to find out what it's all about. And try to present it in a way that is non-threatening. And that's a big thing. And to say it in a way where, you know, you're not yelling or screaming, and you're telling him in a nice way, or even say, You know, my friend, I disagree with you.

But first—

You know.

--you say you have to understand who they are, and what they want.

That's right; that's right.

Let me ask you this. And you've seen this in campaigns, you've been through it all. When one is nice and kind, that's often mistaken for softness, weakness, being less than smart. Tell me your experiences—

Yes.

--in running up against that.

When I first went there, many people told me that. They said, Eh, you can't be like that. And now that I've been there all these years, I've gotta tell them they're wrong. That you can be nice, but you've gotta be up front. You've gotta be sure they know where you are and what you're doing, and why you're doing it. And they appreciate it. And so that's something I think that more people in elected office need to do, and use that method of dealing with people.

You mentioned that, when you came into the world, you were called Daniel because your role would be in the lion's den.

Yeah.

Do you feel that has come to pass?

Yes; I feel, definitely, that the story about Daniel, of course, he was cast into the lion's den, and the reason for that

was for the lions to devour him. Which they didn't. And he lived through that, and became a leader after that. And I think, you know, the spiritual background and all of that, you know, helps you to survive.

But the difference is, you don't want to leave the lion's den.

Well, I hope someday we can calm the lion's den and make it more productive. But that remains to be seen.

This fascinates me, because it seems as though the thing to do when one has been very successful on Capitol Hill, is not to aspire to a wonderful retirement and take it easy; it's essentially to work as long as you're capable of working, and even die in office. I mean, is that what you foresee?

Well, I foresee working as long as I can. [chuckle] You know, and, being in that position I'm in now, you know, it's a great way of helping our country and the rest of the world.

Have you and Millie talked about that? Does she want to take it easy at all? Or is she completely happy with, this is how it is, well—

I wouldn't say she's completely happy, but she lives with it, and she—

But you've told her, This is me, I—

Yes.

--would like to—

Yes.

--continue on—

But she's supported—

--Capitol Hill.

--me; supported me very well. And that helps me in what I do. Yeah. So I'm so fortunate and feel been blessed too, with Millie and my family.

And what a high achieving person, what a high achieving life you've had.

Yes; and when I look back at my life, there was a reason for all of this, since I was born. And as Daniel, I'm still serving.

So you think that it was preordained, it was foreseen that you had this role in your life, and it was up to you to make it happen?

I feel that way; yes. Yeah; so when I think back, you know, on when I came to this Earth, I was destined, I guess. But I didn't know it. And I'm still on my way.

Still on your way.

Yeah.

An unknown author once wrote, "It's nice to be important but it's more important to be nice." The "Hawaiian style of communicating," as Senator Akaka puts it, will be conducted on Capitol Hill for as long as he's able to serve. Mahalo to Dan Akaka, and to you, for joining me this week. I'm Leslie Wilcox with PBS Hawaii. A hui hou kakou.

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The people of Hawai'i tend to work together so much better than other places. And as a result, they're able to be more productive. They're able to do more things and are able to do it in such a way where people enjoy it and not take it as somebody losing something. And I feel that that style is really needed in the Capitol and in the country. And I think the diversity of Hawai'i, the diversity of people has helped to bring that about. Hawai'i is Hawai'i because of its culture, its people, its diversity; and we need to keep that.