

GUEST: RICHARD HA

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Aloha no, I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. Welcome to another *Long Story Short*. Today we get to meet a man who wears many hats: visionary farmer, Vietnam veteran, college graduate, innovative small business owner who offers his employees profit sharing and who's found a way to generate electricity on his property, community activist who initiated an adopt-a-class program at a local school, and Hawaii Island grower Richard Ha.

Farmers, in order to be successful, need to understand complex issues of diversification, sustainability, resource management, land use and planning, even global economic cycles, as well as farming. Hawaii Island farmer Richard Ha even follows the worldwide price of oil, advocates native Hawaiian practices of ahupua'a and writes a blog on his website. Interested in meeting him? So was I. Let's start our conversation on the farm. Richard Ha is a farmer partly because his father was. But his father only became a farmer when he received 40 acres of farmland outside of Hilo through the GI Bill.

What kind of farming did he do to start off with?

Well, I remember him growing tomatoes, and cucumbers; and small kid time, we would go pick the tomatoes and have tomato fights. [chuckle]

So much for that harvest.

Yeah. [chuckle] Yeah.

And had he been trained in farming, or was he picking it up as he went?

No; he didn't have any training in farming. It was pretty much, you know, back then I think a lot of people understood about farming and gardening, and it was kinda second nature. It wasn't difficult to do.

They were closer to the elements, weren't they? They noticed the cause and effect of the winds, and that kind of thing.

Oh, yeah. Tutu folks were taro farmers down at Maku on the ocean. But what I remembered about that time was that they had few pigs. But the big deal about it wasn't that they had few pigs in the pen. There was a stone wall around the property, and they'd leave the gate open. And what would happen is, the wild pigs would come in. So they—

And they'd catch them?

Yeah. [chuckle] Yeah.

When you saw your dad farming, and you were playing with tomatoes, did you think, I want to grow up and be a farmer?

No. Actually, what happened was I ended up wanting to go into business or into having some kind of organization to be in charge of. And the reason that happened was because Dad used to tell stories when I was about ten years old. We had this kitchen table that was like a picnic table; bench and everything. And he would tell stories about impossible situations; you know, a business situation—he had all kinds of different situations. And it would come down to—he came up against a stone wall, there was no way to figure it out, and he'd pound the table, and the dishes would all fly, and he would say—boom! “Not, ‘No can.’ Can!” [chuckle] I remember that pretty clearly.

Not, ‘No can.’ Can!

Yeah.

It's about problem solving and the will to overcome the problem.

Yeah; it was just a given that you just don't come up to a problem, and look at it and say, Oh, that's it. You know, there was always a way around it.

Was it hard working the farm in those days? Was that a tough way to make a living?

The chicken farm was really tough; yeah. And the reason for it is because he had too many chickens for the Big Island, and not enough volume to supply Oahu. So he was caught in between there. But yeah, it was kinda tough.

So would you say you were middle class, poor?

Oh, I thought we were—later on, I found out we were real poor. [chuckle] But at the time, you don't have a concept of being poor, yeah? But yeah, later on, I found out we were actually pretty poor. I think you're pretty

poor if your mom is making pancakes, and then you can't—I don't know which is baking powder that would make it rise, and get fluffy. We didn't have that. [chuckle]

Were you conscious that you didn't have what you needed?

You know, not really, except for maybe Christmastime. And at Christmastime, my aunts from uh, Oahu would send us toys. And that was something you looked forward to all year long. You know, and it may be just little toy plastic soldiers. You know, so we didn't have very many Christmas presents, but that was extremely, extremely valuable to us small kids.

Well, normally, what did you use as toys?

Make your own.

Like what?

Make sugarcane rockets. Cut the sugarcane leaf, and peel it back a little bit, fly 'em as far as you can fly 'em. [chuckle]

Make swords out of, you know, the hedge, and fight sword. All kinds of stuff like sling shot.

And that was good fun, right?

Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And I don't know if anybody was any happier having anything more than that, actually.

Richard Ha's father didn't teach him, "If can; can. If no can; no can." He taught him, "Not 'No can.' Can!" – meaning that every problem, no matter how impossible it seems, can be solved. And Richard embraces that *can do, make do with what you have* attitude. Although he was raised on a farm, Richard didn't go into farming until much later. Straight out of high school, he went to college to study business.

Well, actually, you know, I didn't know what I was going to do, exactly. I knew kind of that I'd like to get into business, and so if I was going to college, it would be good to major in business. You know, so I went to college, and I spent two years, and I finally flunked out. Just too much things to do, people to see; stuff like that. [chuckle] And it was at the time when uh, if you flunked out of school, you would get drafted and go to Vietnam.

You flunked out?

Yeah; flunked out. And got drafted, went to Vietnam. But then, you know, I had the opportunity to apply for officers candidate school, which I took. And I eventually became an officer. Yeah. So then you have to really get serious, because you know, end up in Vietnam—you know, in the situation where it's life and death. And what I learned in Vietnam was really important to me in later life. I was an artillery officer attached to a infantry unit. And the rule was—and it didn't have to be spoken; leaving someone behind is not an option. Not even a consideration. It's, we all come out, or nobody comes out. Kinda like that. And it's a good lesson.

Did you ever have to take a lot of risk in order to make that happen?

Some. You know, more than you'd like to. But you know, it's just something you have to do. It's not—you don't even weigh it. Yeah.

And when you were in Vietnam, were you concerned about what you were hearing from the U.S. about the objection to the war, and the protests against the war?

No; uh, actually, you know, I looked upon the thing as a patriotic thing to do and just assuming everybody was doing the right thing. And so my main concern was the people we were you know, responsible for, and we had to take care of each other. And beyond that, I didn't go there.

In a sense, well, you were leading a group meant for business. You know, life and death business.

Kind of, you know, yeah, when you think about that. Yeah?

Did you have any close calls, personally?

Actually, yeah. And probably because of what Pop taught me. The situation was like this. We were in a rice paddy, and we were coming to this village. And then we got incoming sniper fire. So we all ran into depression. And I looked around; I said, Holy smokes, this is not a place to be. So I grabbed the radio operator; I said, Let's go. So we jumped up and ran about fifty feet or so, and bullets flying and everything like that. And a few seconds after that, a grenade landed just where we left. But it was kinda like well, Pop taught us a lot of lessons, and it had to do with survival. Just do what you gotta do, and plan for the future, and if it—you know, make decisions. You gotta do it, do it now. Kinda thing like that.

Ad not no can; can.

[chuckle] Yeah; absolutely.

So you came back alive from Vietnam.

M-hm. Yeah; and then at that time, I had some time to grow up. There was six years in the military as an Army officer. You know, things are pretty serious. It gave me a lot of time to think about going back to school. And going back to school, I knew I wanted to go into business. But this time, I figured, I'm gonna major in accounting, because accounting will help me keep score.

M-m.

And then, that's what I did. And it worked out pretty good.

You liked it?

I like keeping score. I never did work in accounting.

You didn't?

No.

But you liked learning it.

Yeah.

But what were you gonna do with your accounting degree?

You know, actually, I didn't really know. I just knew that I had an accounting degree, if there was anything came up, I was gonna do it. But it just so happened, Pop asked me to come back and run his chicken farm. I said, Okay, well, I don't have anything planned; I'll do that. So I came back, helped him run the poultry farm. And in the course of that, met the supermarket people, learned how marketing and that kind of stuff worked. And—

And you learned from the ground up on that end, right?

Yeah; yeah. Didn't have—I mean, we raised chickens when we were little. But the business end of it, it was different. You know, and with accounting degree, it helped me to analyze stuff. And so what happened was, we had forty acres, and twenty-five of it was in the chicken farm. So we had some extra land. And so we needed to find out what could we do with no more money, 'cause we—I only had a three hundred dollar credit card, back when it was hard to get a three hundred dollar credit card. [chuckle] So started doing some research, and found out that there was about six million pounds of Chiquita bananas being imported into Hawaii. So I said, Ho, man, if we could get into that, we should be able to do okay. So we started trading chicken manure for banana keiki, and started two acres. But you know, we didn't have a tractor, we didn't have anything; just had my Toyota Land Cruiser. So we'd make lines by driving down, knocking the California grass down, get a sickle, cut a hole, get a 'o'o and shovels, and planted bananas. That's how we started. [chuckle]

Wow. Hoeing by land cruiser. [chuckle] Was that a success the first time out?

Well, you know when you only got two acres and you're actually working in the chicken farm, there's not that much risk. You know, it was all labor. You know, so it wasn't too much risk. But what it did was, it helped me learn.

At what point did you have your own farm?

Well, yeah; that was my dad's farm, and we made it into a four-way corporation with my brothers. And then from there, I went to Kapoho to lease some land over there. And that's when it started; maybe two years after we started the first banana farm. And then when the sugar plantation started closing down, we were able to move closer into Hilo at Keaau. So we moved the farm there. So there was little bit more soil. And the time we got into big business was, I had an Opal station wagon. It's a small, little thing; maybe you can hold five people. And as long as our employees were only five, that was fine. But as soon as we went to seven and eight, we went into big business. Because it was communication, people were thinking you know, that they weren't getting the right information because they weren't the car with me. [chuckle] And then we started realizing, you know, you want to be good to everybody, you want to be liked and all that; but the best you can do is be fair. And once I realized that, then that was pretty important. Yeah.

And then you got two vehicles. [chuckle]

We got two vehicles, and we got more workers—

More land?

And more land. At Keaau, we ended up with—expanded to three hundred acres. And by then, we became the largest banana farm in the State. Yeah, but you know, we were still basically local boys.

Local boy Richard Ha is more than just a farmer. He's also a blogger, operating a website he updates several times a week. He recently gave the keynote speech at a local college graduation. And he orchestrated a community effort to help students at Keaukaha Elementary School. Located on Hawaiian Homelands with an underserved population, Keaukaha faced federal action under the No Child Left Behind Act – until a new principal, Lehua Veincent, stepped in – and invited in – community support.

Keaukaha Elementary School; a Hawaiian Homelands community, and a school that was in the academic basement for twenty years. You adopted a class there.

Yeah. What happened was, I volunteered to be on this thirty-meter telescope subcommittee on the Hawaii Island Economic Development Board. And so when you talk about telescopes, you automatically talk about the culture; Mauna Kea. You need to talk about the culture. If you talk about the culture, and you end up at Keaukaha. It's a seventy-five-year-old Hawaiian Homes community. And so that's where I ended up. Yeah, so I went over there, talked to Kumu Lehua about telescopes, and had to learn a lot about the culture. I didn't know as much as I do

now. I was mostly worried about farming. But you know, the more I got into it, the more I needed to learn. But so talking to Kumu Lehua, I invited them to come to our farm to—you know, just an excursion. And in the course of the discussion, you know, I asked him, Where else you folks go on excursion? He says, We don't go on excursion. And you don't go; how come? Too much money; three hundred dollars for the bus, we cannot afford that. So what we do is we take walking excursions around the school in the neighborhood. I couldn't believe it. I thought every kid went on excursions. But they didn't. And then what was ironic was, here I am on the thirty-meter telescope subcommittee, and you're standing in Keaukaha, you look at the mountain, there's hundreds of millions of dollars of investment up there. You look back at the school and the community. So you know, there's nothing here of tangible relationship to that. And but whatever the case; we decided, this no can. We had to do something. So the simplest thing that came to mind was adopt a child thing.

It's amazing. This is a Homelands community that really is right in Hilo, right a walk away from Ken's House of Pancakes. But um, they had been kinda shut out, and they felt like they didn't have anything going for them, and the school was in disarray for many years.

Yeah. But you know, Kumu Lehua is a special guy. What he did was, he brought the community together, and tied the community and the school together, and then the relationship with the business community made the community and the kids see the bigger world. They're part of a bigger thing now.

We've talked with Kumu Lehua at PBS Hawaii, and uh, we know he looks at everything through a prism of pono. You know, what's—

Yeah.

-- not who's right, but what is the right thing to do at this time.

Yeah. Yeah; and he's real consistent that way. And it's a wonderful thing.

Do you hear young people say, I want to be a farmer?

More and more nowadays, because I think a lot of people are starting to see that this is a serious business.

We're about feeding people. Yeah.

Yeah; and they can really identify with hunger, and with the need for food. You're a Hawaiian who knows the issues. The community has been split over the use of the mountain, which is a considered a sacred mountain for astronomy purposes. What do you think; what are your thoughts on that?

Well, you know, I think with the oil crisis coming up now, the world has changed. You know, several years ago, when the oil—our supply prices started going up, and we didn't really know what was going on. But after researching it a little bit, we found out it was related to oil prices. As the oil prices went up, fertilizer, chemical, everything else went up. And so we started looking around; gee, now—and I went to the Peak Oil Conference in Houston, and we found out that the world oil supply is not gonna be able to keep up with the world demand. And if you think about that a while, then you realize all these different things will follow. You know. Planes are gonna have a hard time flying, people gonna have less discretionary income, fertilizer costs are going up, and all these different things. So we needed to kinda change the way we're doing business. So as soon as we came back, as soon as I came back, we actually had thought about making our own electricity, but when I came back, it was like, Boy, we gotta get going soon.

We have to.

No more choice; we have to.

How are you gonna make your own electricity?

Well, we have a flume that runs through our property, and it was for the plantation.

Yeah; and for those who weren't around during the plantation days, it's a water line.

It's a waterway, Yeah. And what they do is, they take water from the stream, and just divert it to where they want it to go. And in lot of cases, it was to throw the sugarcane in and run it down to the mill. So it was one of those kinda flumes that we have; and it just was sitting there. So we got a consultant, and sure enough, we could put in an eighteen-inch pipe about this big. And we could generate enough electricity to power fifteen forty-foot reefer Matson containers. So that's quite a bit. Which turns out to be about twenty-five percent more than we use. And our electricity bill now is fifteen thousand dollars a month. So we're gonna be able to pay for all that electricity, and still have twenty-five percent extra.

What are you gonna do with that?

Well, we've got all kinds of plans. We're thinking that with the excess electricity, we can do a plug-in thing so that our workers could plug in their hybrid cars in the future, as a benefit for working for the company. That was the first thing we thought of. Another thing is, because fertilizer prices are going up, we want to take the waste bananas, feed it to fish, use the fish waste, run it through a biofilter, convert it into fertilizer, fertilize the plants, and pump it back up with free electricity. And then even, you could fool the plants into thinking it's winter, when it's summer. [chuckle]

Wow. And so pretty soon, you won't have a fifteen thousand dollar a month electricity bill?

Yeah; that—

That's on the way?

That's true. Now, all the farmers and everywhere on the island in the State face the same situation, rising fuel and fertilizer costs. And everybody's talking about food security. Now, how do we do that? And uh, the answer is, if the farmer can make money, the farmer will farm. So it doesn't get much more complex than that. So in an effort to figure out ways to help farmers make money, we went—you know, with the help of the Department of Ag, and the legislators, and a bunch of people, we pushed through legislation so that farmers could get cheap loans, low interest, long term loans for renewable energy projects.

And does that mean your problems are over?

Oh, no.

Your challenges are pau?

No; no, no, no. We know that one day, the boat not going come. Like, you know, you talk to a lot of the Hawaiian people; it's a given that sooner or later, there will be supply disruptions.

What is the stat I heard, that because we depend so much on imported food, if we don't get a barge in for ten days, we'll be virtually out.

Oh, yeah. Yeah. We're talking about probably seven days worth of food supplies. But if there was a hint of something disrupting the supply, people would just go down and clean the stores out in two days. My thought. So it's a tough place to be. So what we need to do is we need to have more farmers. We need to support farmers more, we need to have more food security. So that's really what we're reaching for. Now, the objective is to feed people. So now we have to have a calorie—we have to have the concern about what is the mix of calories. So that's why we're thinking of doing aquaculture for protein, and leasing land to other farmers so they can do what they're good at, and we do what we're good at. We all bring everything down to the farmers market, and people won't have to travel as far.

Are you confident that local people will buy local produce, even if it's more expensive?

Well, you know, it's really what we need to do, to support our local farmers. Because to be food secure, farmers gotta make money. And come the time when we feel like this is really a serious situation, it'll happen. I'm confident it will.

Do you think we'll be motivated to do the right thing, go in this direction, without first a disaster? Usually, we learn from disaster. Usually, we're not really good about looking ahead and saying, Let's prevent a disaster.

You know, actually, I'm pretty optimistic that it'll start happening. As a matter of fact, I see it happening already. You know, so it's just gonna be a matter of time. Yeah; I'm pretty optimistic.

Farmers, by their very nature, plan. They plant and plan. And then plant again. So it's only natural that Richard Ha would consider the future as much as he does. And it's refreshing to see his optimism and activism looking toward Hawaii's future.

Sustainability means basically surviving for the long run. And how we look at it is how it affects our workers, our community, and the environment. So our workers, I just mentioned a little bit about, you know, every Thursday, our workers can come and just pick up all the different things we grow; bananas and tomatoes, and whatever. You know, as much as they need for their family. And we have profit sharing, although it's been tough the last few years. We have profit sharing, and we want to look, you know, toward—whatever we can do to help them with the food side of it end. Because it's hard for us to raise our workers' salaries, because we can't raise the price; everybody's having a hard time. So we have to figure out other ways to help our workers.

Do these look like particularly bad times for you? I know that tourism is down, and I mean, everybody's talking about soft economy. How is it affecting you? Flowers have had it rough lately, anyway.

Yeah. It is pretty tricky. But you know, we always plan five, ten years out. We're always looking for where we need to be in the future. And we already know that this is happening, it's gonna get worse; so we're already moving in that direction. So I think we're gonna be okay.

What do you see yourself doing in ten years?

You know, it's hard to say what it'll be; but I'm pretty sure it'll be something. What, I can't imagine now. Because we always end up doing something that's new and different. Yeah; so I expect that it'll be something new and different, but it'll be something, for sure.

And it'll be in farming?

I can't even say that. [chuckle] Yeah; I don't want to just say one particular thing. But it really has to do with where our society is going, what our circumstance will be. And it has a lot to do with alternate energy, I think.

How that's gonna shape our future?

Yeah. Yeah.

Well, like it or not, the future's on its way! And the best we can do is prepare for it. Mahalo to Richard Ha for growing our awareness of what the future holds and showing us what one farmer is doing to prepare for it. Mahalo to you for joining me for this *Long Story Short*. I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii, looking forward to seeing you in the future. A hui hou kakou!

Video clip with production credits:

I read a review of your fruit that said that, if you've gotten used to these cardboard tasting tomatoes that you buy at some places, you gotta taste Richard Ha's tomatoes 'cause they're just full and juicy, and ...

Yeah.

Is that true?

Yeah; it is.

[chuckle] I suspected you—

Yeah.

--you were gonna say that.

And there is a reason for it. We actually test the fruit every week for sweetness. Because it's about value to the customers. And so what we try to do, if you think about value, really, it's about taste for tomatoes. So that's what we do. We spend a lot of time monitoring that. So; yeah. [chuckle]