

GUEST: SOLOMON ENOS
LSS 301 (LENGTH: 27:46)
FIRST AIR DATE: 7/14/09

What Hawaii really is, you know, I—I think is—we're still coming to understand that. You know, I think there's a much—much deeper layers of meaning that we have yet to tap into. And that's pretty exciting stuff. [chuckle]

Wow; and you plan to be right there when—

Hopefully, hopefully.

--when the meanings come out.

Yeah.

A painter, illustrator, forest preserve groundskeeper, educator, and futuristic storyteller; he might best be described as a Hawaiian renaissance man. His storytelling canvas stretches from the beginnings of Hawaiian culture to forty thousand years into the future. And while he's only in his early thirties, he seems to possess the wisdom of a very old soul. His name is Solomon Enos, and you'll meet him just a moment on Long Story Short.

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Like father, like son might be the best way to begin the story of native Hawaiian artist Solomon Enos. Solomon's father, Eric Enos, also has a background in art and is the cofounder and executive director of Kaala Farm in Waianae, a nonprofit farm that promotes sustainability based on the Hawaiian ahupuaa system, and is also used as a cultural learning center. Solomon is a groundskeeper of a similar organization deep in Kalihi Valley, Kokua Kalihi Valley Comprehensive Family Services. His parents and his other family members supported Solomon's decision to pursue a career in art, but the gift of artistic ability was something born to Solomon Enos.

All little kids love art; they love fooling around. At what time did you get a sense that maybe you had a gift?

H-m. Well, I remember my um, kindergarten teacher pulled my parents aside one day—I think it was during a uh, parent-teacher night. And she said, Solomon, when he draws people, he doesn't just draw circles with lines; he draws their heads, he draws their bodies, he draws their pants, and the buttons, and everything. And I remember that; I remember that affirmation at such a really early part of my life. And I just thought, like, Oh, cool, okay, uh, I think I know how to draw, I think I'm a—think I'm gonna be a drawer. [chuckle]

An—and your parents encouraged you.

Yes. All throughout, all throughout my life.

How did they influence you?

My grandfather, to begin with, Joseph Enos, always wanted to do artwork, always wanted to draw; actually had a big collection of art supplies. And he could never really sit down, he never really got into it, but he always encouraged me to draw. And whenever he—I drew pictures of anything, of like monsters and robots and things like that, he would post it up inside the house, and my grandmother would roll her eyes—Oh, no, my goodness. But he was always—he'd always say, Whoo, ah, I've always wanted to draw, and I'm so happy that you're drawing. Oh, good, good, good. And my mom was just an amazing support, because she gave me a lot of really interesting ideas, interesting ways to look at life. You know, sometimes um, she would tell me, You know, Solomon, whatever you put your mind to, you—you really do it. You know, and that an—well, and that kind of encouragement, I think, really helped to, you know, form up my—my process. 'Cause whenever I start a project, I'm like, at the end, I know it's gonna be great. You know, I'm gonna put my mind to it, and it's gonna—it's gonna be awesome. And my father had received uh, a masters of fine arts at the University of Hawaii in 1969; he was really quite a profound influence on me as well. And there's one painting which um, he did which shows a person lying down at the bottom of a valley, and—and his body kind of opening up, and all of his entrails kinda leading out and becoming the landscape. And it's not gross at all; it's actually quite beautiful. And that—and that's that kind of interesting kind of a uh, paradox of, you know, internal organs and landscape, those are the kinda thoughts that really influence me at an early age of my life.

Of course, your father uh, is also a cultural heavyweight on the Waianae Coast, having started the Cultural Learning Center at Kaala, and using um, the farm and life to—to help drug abusers an—and people who've lost their way find um, stability again.

Yes.

How did that influence you?

In the beginning, it was always a bit rough, 'cause I—[chuckle]—I'd rather—I wanted to be at home, you know, drawing or uh, watching cartoons and things like that. And so my father would be pretty adamant about taking me and my brothers up to go and work up in—in the taro patches up in the back of Kaala. But what I was able to do was look at how my father helped—with all the other folks that work at uh, Kaala Farms, uh, to help to engage um, different kinds of people, you know, from folks, you—you know, folks from universities, you know, school children, um, uh, to talk about the deeper significance of the back of the valley and the deep—deeper significance of, you know, what the role of Hawaiian culture has to play within uh, the future of Hawaii. And I think um, all of those are—become uh, I guess, themes for my artwork. And I think that—uh,

looking back, i—uh, I was really given quite a uh, enriched experience, uh, an enriched uh, childhood.

And here you are now, living on a forest reserve. So you've got uh, some of the same elements you had when you were a kid.

Yeah.

Except in another form.

M-hm; m-hm. Uh, everything that I'm doing in the back of uh, Kokua Kalihi Valley Nature Preserve is really like an artistic process.

What is your actual job? There's none like it—

Yeah.

--anywhere else, I don't think.

Well, uh, it's interesting, interesting. Um, I'm actually a caretaker uh, at the nature preserve. There's actually um—the nature preserve is divided into two different uh, uh, ili or subsections of the ahupuaa. And uh, different ili within the ahupuaa are almost like different organs within the body. And the—uh, which is actually very appropriate, because the nature preserve is a department of Kokua Kalihi Valley Health Center. And so we're actually a health center that is uh, you know, uh, has adopted a nature preserve. Uh, the hope is, over time, this—these areas that we're—we're managing up here in the uh, back of Kalihi can become resources for members within the community.

To get to the preserve, or the reserve, you go all the way back Kalihi—Kalihi Street, right?

Yeah; yeah.

Very, very back.

Yeah.

And you have devised the nicest No Trespassing sign—

[chuckle]

--ever, which says nothing about trespassing. What is it?

I took out the Keep Out signs, because um, when you—when uh, I think when working with youth and working with individuals, uh, who have challenges with authority, you know, they're gonna look at it as a way to say, Oh, you know, I'm gonna go in. I'm going to go in, and I'm gonna do what I like. You know. And so I took out the Keep Out signs, and there was one Keep Out sign left, and I didn't—I couldn't take it down, uh, 'cause it—it was um, a sign that said Violators Will Be Prosecuted, you know, a five hundred dollar fine. And about six months ago, it got some graffiti on it, and there was graffiti on some of the other signs on some of the other properties, uh, adjoining out property. And so I went and took a little paintbrush, and I cleaned up some—my neighbors' signs and things, touched it up a little bit. And when I came to that one sign that said Keep Out, you know, Fine, I covered it over and I wrote ... This Land is Your Grandmother and She Loves You. And ... it's a little bit, you know, sappy. But it's amazing, because I think it causes people to pause and to think about what is their relationship to their grandmother, what is their relationship to this land, and it even um ... and I kind of touch on—tou—touch on this a bit in some of my

other work; it—it kind of encourages this thought that this land is a sentient being. It's—in fact, we may just be figments of its imagination. [chuckle]

And it will always be there, whereas we won't.

[chuckle]

The deceptively peaceful looking forest preserve where the Kokua Kalihi Valley Comprehensive Family Services resides is a bustling learning center for a wide spectrum of organizations and people of all ages.

I um, work with uh, Farrington High School. Uh, they have a uh, environmental sciences class. I do—we actually have Halau Lokahi Charter School; uh, two of their classes are based up at the preserve, so we always have children around all the time, which is an amazing, amazing blessing. And we have community workdays where we try to engage co—community members from Kalihi Valley in—in part of the whole ... the story, which is the—which is the preserve. I—also, I'm able to do a lot of work with patients from the clinic. And um, the clinic is really kind of a core for a lot of the programs that I'm—that we hope to be expanding into, particularly—

And what kind of patients?

Well, uh, initially, patients through the nutrition department at Kokua Kalihi Valley Health Center, and these are elderly uh, Samoan uh, Trukese, uh, Filipino, and Hawaiian patients who have dia—you know, diabe—diabetes, uh, heart disease, and other kinds of chronic uh, illness. And my understanding is, you know, looking to a source of illness, you know, so much of it is related to displacement from culture, land, family, which leads to depression and stress. And—and um, so the opportunity for us to open up garden areas where these elders can come outside, and start to plant their traditional foods again, and um, become a community. 'Cause in this community, you have different peoples in the same area, different cul—customs, but sharing ideas, talking story. They'll come outside, they're a little stiff, they're—it's a little rough to get going, and they'll get out, and the—the sun is out there, and it's a nice breezy day. They—they start to straighten up a little bit, they look at the gardens, they look at the soil, they—before you know it, they're tiptoeing on the logs, and they're teasing each other, and they're translator is saying, I can't translate that.

[chuckle]

I shouldn't. [chuckle] Being—and out of the corner of my eye, I'm just—they're like little children again. And I think that's really coming back to, you know, trying to figure out what is the source of illness, and what are—where can we—where can the real healing uh, begin. You know, and I think that—you know, it's very much an artistic process, you know. Because it's watching how people evolve from b—from the inside, and it's providing the—the environment for that.

So for you, it's—it goes beyond health to art.

Yes. Yes, yes. And it's um ... uh, understanding health as almost like a medium, almost like uh, uh, a—a transformative process. Plants like ilima and um, uh, popolo berry, um, and uh, alaala wainiu all ha—all—it's almost like a um, a pharmacy, you know, an organic pharmacy. And I think that uh—you know, you take—you take the leaf, and that's your prescription. And you say, Okay, this—this—this leaf and I get this medicine. So instead of uh ... instead of pills, we have berries, you know. And I think that uh, that's kinda cool. Um—This nature preserve can help to become sort of the future health center, you know, and future clinics and future hospitals. I mean, in a sense that—or future pharmacies, actually [chuckle] when you think about it.

In the sense of medicinal gardens?

Medicinal gardens; yes, yes. And it makes sense, because that's how it's been for millennia. [chuckle] Is that living healthy, you know, um, to keola pono, to live well is, you know, you— isn't really limited to your health centers. You know, it's—it's everything you do throughout your life, you know.

You know, all of this sounds very inspiring and very physical in part.

M-hm, m-hm.

How do you do your art in addition?

Um, well—

Your personal art.

Lately, I've really been having to channel a lot my energy into doing the work on the land. And I actually ... will take down some trees, and drop them into the ground, and build up the soil, and cover it with mulch. And it's almost like that is the artwork. [chuckle] And so instead of painting pictures of gardens, I'm sort of building them. You know, and actually, that—that whole process is—is um, I guess, where I'm putting a lot of my creative energy into. Um, but to translate it a little bit more directly, I hope to be doing some carving and painting, and uh, even uh, digital media classes with uh, youth from the housing areas in Kalihi. And that's—that's where I think I'll be able to link it up a little bit more closely. Because we do actually have um, classrooms and um, other facilities up at the preserve there, where we can bring people, take a walk through the forest, um, get really inspired, and come inside and try to capture those uh, those ideas in—in—in some form of media.

What's it like at the preserve when the school children go home, and the—the health center patients go home, and it's—it's just you and your family uh, alone on ninety-nine acres?

M-m. You know, it's—there's almost a s—I hear a sigh of contentment from the land.

Sure it's not you?

No, it's—might be me; it might be me. And I—but [INDISTINCT]. But uh, it's—it's—it's a sigh of contentment. Because what we try to do is think about how we're trying to translate what the land is telling us, and what—and—and uh, you know, we're trying to listen to the land, an—and—and—and try to—we're trying to, you know, humbly to speak for it. And one of the things that um ... I know it's

been telling me is that it's missed all these—all the children, it's missed the families, it's missed the elders, it's missed the jokes and the laughter. 'Cause it's—it's had to put up with a lot of junk, a lot of rubbish, a lot of pain—

It was a dumping ground for—

Dumping for—

--a long time.

--for cars, and—and for people, really. I mean, maybe not—well, not entirely literally, but you know, in—insomuch as people who ha—having a lot of issues or problems, going up there and having to ... self—you know, I guess self medicate, I guess you could say. You know. And um ... but—so uh, from a lot of that pain, you know, we're hoping to transform that place. And again, it's—it's the people who are—who are always there, you know, this—the energy that's there, that's um, that's really been asking. That sentient—sentient grandmother [chuckle] landscape that's been saying, Oh, where's the—where are the babies, where are the children? And they say, Oh, oh, they're coming, they're coming. You know, bringing back the voice of the children to—bringing back the—the breath is something that uh, it just—it just makes so much sense, and it really does seem to be what the land is—is asking for.

You know, so many people of your generation, or—or almost any generation today, no longer count on having one job for their lifetime. They figure they're gonna have six, seven, eight careers.

Yeah.

But you're saying, the—the next thirty years, this is where I'll be.

Yeah; yeah. Um—

And it's not—it's not a cakewalk. I mean, you're—you're—you're felling timber, and creating—

[chuckle]

--mulch and all that.

Yeah; yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah; and actually, I feel very content. And I mean, it's—it's I guess um, who's that guy; Joseph Campbell who says, you know, you follow your bliss. You know, and it's definitely—I—I'm—I'm following it. [chuckle] And I feel very, very content to be doing so. And—and actually, what I hope to do is to kind of figure out, you know, if I do a really good job up at the preserve, that I can help to create more of these kinds of opportunities for other, you know, youth and families to become caretakers, you know, to open up more areas of land in the back of the valleys. Um, uh, because there are so many different benefits, you know. Particularly, the hope is to partner up with, you know, Board of Water Supply, because they own the back of Kalihi Valley. What we're doing is excellent watershed management, you know, 'cause we're putting back natives, uh, we are opening up areas for composting and mulching, you know, putting up gardening and—gardening and farm areas. And these go, you know, really far to help to uh, retain water for—and to help to um—for the health of the entire aquifer, entire uh, watershed. And—and that can become a model for the back of every valley in Hawaii, you know. And

that' what we hope to do, is kinda create a—uh, what you call ohe kapala or like a bamboo stamp; create a template. You know, get a—get a really good design, and then you go [CLUCKS TONGUE], right across. [chuckle] And so ...

How has your artwork changed since you began living in the back of Kalihi Valley?

M-m ... well ... well, well. You know ... there's just a lot more rain in the back of Kalihi than there is in Makaha. [chuckle] So uh, rainy days are great days for me to sit inside. Um, I have uh, I've converted my—our—our dining room table into a s—par—partially into a studio area. [chuckle] And uh, um, so I'll sit there. And it's great, 'cause I have—my children are playing around, and family's around all the time. So I do get a lot of in time—uh, inside time, you know, to sit and to render, to draw. Sunset and morning times, amazing light. Just the—the light—

And different light in different parts of—

Oh.

--the island. Sure; that makes—

Yeah.

--a lot of sense.

Oh, it's amazing. And just stepping outside and watch—and looking how that layer of light is ... it's—just washes over everything, and it just unifies the entire landscape with beautiful amber hues. And so um, yeah. So if I'm ever at a loss, or if I'm not—ever don't feel inspired enough, I just sort of open—open my door for about forty-five seconds. And I go, Oh, okay. Close the door—

[chuckle]

--and get back to it.

Have you looked at the history of the back of Kalihi Valley—

Oh, yeah.

--to see what happened there before you?

Yeah; yeah. That's actually right where we are in some of our discussions at the preserve, about doing research that—that tells the story of the back of the—or that'll help to tell the story of the back of Kalihi Valley. And one of the persons that I hope to really engage ... more is uh, Puakea Nogelmeier. Because he is also a Kalihi resident, and he lives on—right off of Kalihi Street as well. So yeah, yeah. And so uh, hopefully, we'd like to translate some more stories about Kalihi, and um ... throughout the preserve—I'm really excited about this, is actually looking at creating installations that uh, could be carvings and different things, and at the base of the carving will be a story. And it could be a story of—you know, one of the many stories of the back of Kalihi Valley.

So this—the—the installation, the art would explain, introduce the valley to the people—

Yes.

--who come along?

Absolutely; absolutely. And uh, even, there could be some uh, pathways that move through the ninety-nine acres of the preserve where each different section of the pathway would be like a page from a story and—where it'll be a different scene from a story. Uh, it would be a stone with a different figure carved into it, or it could be carved in certain shape. And so um, and it kinda ties into this idea of uh, when we take groups through the preserve and we talk about all the different volunteer groups that have gotten involved in different areas, what we're doing is we're—we're actually walking story.

While his current lifestyle seems utopian and far removed from the highly competitive world of commercial art, Solomon Enos has enjoyed success as a book illustrator, muralist, CD cover artist, and cartoonist, starting from a very early age.

[chuckle]

Do you remember the first time you ever got a check for your artwork, you ever got paid?

Yes; yes, yes. Actually, the first time was—uh, and it was actually my very first commissioned project. And I was honored that my first—the first offer I've ever had to collaborate with was Auntie Pua Burgess. And so—amazing, amazing, amazing woman. And it was curriculum for fifth grade at uh, um, Makaha Elementary School. And actually, I think it was used for a broader uh, range of schools through the DOE. I was sixth grader; so I was a sixth grader doing artwork for a fifth grade textbook. And uh, you know, the images are raw, you know. But there's one uh, experience that I particular remember from working with Auntie Pua, which um, you know, I like to draw upon that was, you know, quite a lot of fun. And this—it's a story about this boy that daydreams a lot. And so he's helping his mother unpack groceries from the car, and he drops the eggs, so the eggs spill. And his mother is—you know, she's got other—other things going on in her life, and she's really upset. And she picks up an egg, and she throws it at him. You know, and then she [GASP] realizes what she's done. And—you know, and she feels really ashamed about it. And so Auntie Pua says, Okay, for this part, here, put on this old dirty tee-shirt and let's go outside. So we went outside.

[chuckle]

And she gets an egg and she goes—she even makes this mean face. She goes [GROWLS], throws it at me. I go, Ah. And for one moment, for three seconds, I was that boy within the story. And I was like, Wow, why did she—oh.

[chuckle]

[INDISTINCT] And—but I think it—it—that kind of immersion into the character, into the story, has really helped to influence everything that I've ever done since. And so—anyway, so my first—my first paycheck, I think it was like uh, I think it was like a thousand dollars. Like at the time, I was like, Wow. And my mom goes like [WHOOOSH] [chuckle], I'll be taking that. [chuckle]

Don't want to get too used to you spending it.

Exactly. [chuckle]

What kind of art have you done as a—as a paid artist since?

Well, all the book projects I've done have been uh, quite a lot of fun. Kimo Armitage; two stories in particular, the uh, Na Olelo Noeau No Na Keiki with uh, through Island Heritage, and Na Akua Hawaii. And that was um, through Bishop Museum Press, and those are gods and goddesses of Hawaii. Every project that comes along is um, an opportunity for me to do research, to—that ... or that research that comes out of those projects actually help to inform everything else I do after that. And on the other end, I guess, would be the work that I've been doing uh, for Polyfantastica, uh, which is very much more of a conceptual uh, project. You know, it's really thinking about, you know, broad an—and long ranging ideas that tap into the meaning of our—or the role of our, you know, our uh, human beings within the—within the universe, you know. So it's pretty far out kinda stuff. [chuckle]

Is it—is it Star Trek meets Hawaii?

Uh, yeah; yeah, yeah. That could be; that could be one way to look at it. And uh, you know, but honestly, I think my influences are more folks like uh, Kurt Vonnegut and uh, more uh, folks like uh, Carl Sagan. You know, folks that uh, kinda challenge what's accepted as normal, you know, and helps to provide ... helps to make the thing everyday become much more significant.

So you're quoting a writer—a writer and a scientist, rather than another artist—

Yeah.

--as having been—

Yeah.

--your models.

Yes, absolutely; absolutely.

And you translate.

Yes; yes. And it's that inspiration. In fact, I'm thinking of—there was one line from Vonnegut where, uh, he asks uh, uh, the characters in the story, you know, there's—What is faster than light? And they don't have an answer. And he says, Okay, you see that star? Okay; you see that star. Okay. Awareness. So wow, okay. So an idea can be extremely powerful; it can be faster than light, you know, consciousness.

Polyfantastica began as a weekly comic strip for the Honolulu Advertiser illustrated by Solomon Enos, and written by his wife, Meredith Desha Enos. It has since grown into plans for a graphic novel. The ever evolving epic is filled with philosophical parables stretching tens of thousands of years into the future.

In this story, um, a father and son, they're—they're strapping themselves onto this great big kite. And they're in the middle of this great, beautiful valley, gardens going as far as your eye could see. And they launch themselves up

into the sky, and the fa—the father tells his son, I'm taking you to a special gathering today up in the sky. And this gathering is—we're gonna tell you a story about a time when human beings used to kill each other. And the son can't—you know, What? Wha—how do you—how—with the world full of wonder and beauty, how would anybody ha—how could you even do that? The whole concept is lost to him; violence and war is lost to him. And he says, Well, when we get there, you'll understand, you'll hear the story, and um, we're gonna go to this place. And what it is, is they break through the clouds, and it's this great big kite city. And this kite city, all these kites are parking, you know, drifting up to the top. And they go, and there's this knowledge that is put up in that kite city that never touches the Earth again. But it's put there, and the children go there to understand that human beings can destroy, human beings have had a hi—has this history, but we've moved—we've evolved away from it. But we still need to tell that story, so that we never make those mistakes again.

You've set yourself a huge task with the preserve, and forty thousand years with Polyfantastica. That's a ... where'd you get forty thousand years, an—and how are you gonna do that amount of work?

Uh, well, um ... I hope to be able to build a—or help to foster a um, moololo industry, a storytelling industry here in Hawaii. And uh, it can happen at many different levels, but it—we're gonna need a whole host of researchers, of artists, of writers, of creative thinkers to tell the traditional stories of Hawaii, and also tell—um, and to help to look at what the role of Hawaiian people have been as navigators, as people who m—when sitting on their island, looking at the currents, watching the birds, saying, There's something else beyond where we are right now. And I'd like to create a theme that talks about there's something else beyond the way the world is now. It's here, but we need to get there somehow. And so how—what are we gonna do, and how can we use the stories that we tell ourselves to change reality?

If you looked at Solomon Enos' resume, you might conclude he's a guy who can't decide what to do; artist, illustrator, groundskeeper, environmentalist. But there is one job description that ties everything he's about together; storyteller. His tools are material things; paints, pencils, computers, plants, land, students. But the stories he tells with these materials are of another realm, one that traverses tens of thousands of years. We wish Solomon Enos the best in his storytelling endeavors. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Ahui hou kakou.

Video clip with production credits:

[chuckle]

And as you raised your hand, I saw a tattoo.

Oh.

And—and since you're an artist, I—

Yeah.

--I want to ask you what's—what's the image?

Oh, I'm not sure. Um, I'll probably figure it out later on. [chuckle] I actually um, was just experimenting a little bit with—

Did it yourself?

Yeah; yeah, yeah, yeah. I just was sort of making things up as I went along. I—I do have a few other tattoos on me, and I'm just actually kind of like a uh, a sketchbook, really, a live sketchbook. [chuckle] So not—not a lot of—

Since you can't erase. [chuckle]

Exactly.

You can't blend it out.

[chuckle] So not—not a whole lot of things [INDISTINCT] some of the artwork that I um, that I have uh, uh, on me.