GUEST: BEN CAYETANO 1
LSS 306 (LENGTH: 27:16)
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Eventually, it dawned on me that, Listen Cayetano, you better go get an education. Because I'd worked as an apprentice… electrician apprentice, I drove a truck, I worked in junkyard. Each time I worked, I said, I can't do this forever. So I ended up going to school.

Born poor in Kalihi during a time in our aloha state when there was an ethnic pecking order, he rose to become the first Filipino-American governor in the history of Hawaii—and the nation.
Benjamin Jerome Cayetano, next on Long Story Short.

Aloha mai kakou, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Welcome to "Long Story Short."
Gruff, tough Ben Cayetano left political office in 2002, and you might think he mellowed in retirement. Not much! In his 560-page biography, *Ben: A Memoir, from Street Kid to Governor,* published in 2009, he doesn't shy away from personally or politically sensitive subjects. And he writes with unflinching candor. One reviewer, Joseph Napolitan, called the book a must-read for all who want to understand how Hawaii really works.
Author Ben Cayetano starts at the beginning, as we do on *Long Story Short*— in Kalihi, with a father raising two sons. And he shares a childhood shock, something he rarely spoke of as an adult—that the father who raised him was not his birth father. As for Cayetano's mother, she had left the household.

Well, tell me a little bit about your childhood. You lived on the second floor on Silva Street.
Right
With whom?
My father. My father raised my brother and I.
Where was your mom?
Well, they were divorced. My mom was living someplace else. So I grew in a household of males. My father worked at the Outrigger Canoe Club. And often, he'd go to work early in the morning. And because he worked a split shift, and he didn't know how to drive, he didn't have a car, he would come back maybe nine-thirty, ten o'clock in the evening. And so in between, my brother and I had to kind of fend for ourselves. So at a very early age, we learned how to take care of ourselves.

How old were you when you started spending so much time alone? Or with your brother.
Probably maybe nine, ten years old. Before then, my father used to actually come home during his, you know, break; in between uh, uh, shifts. And then when we got older, it was always a strain on him to come home.
On the bus.
On the bus, yeah.
In between shifts.
M-hm.
How long did it take him on the bus?
Back then, it probably took him over an hour. 'Cause he had to make at least two transfers, I think.
Wow.
Yes.
So—
So—[CHUCKLES]—but it wasn't that hard, because like I said, we felt safe. And the neighbors, our neighbors, kinda helped out. Our neighbors knew us. So they would kinda keep an eye on us. But interestingly, on that street, there were other guys who were raised by their fathers as well. So I didn't think I was anything really unusual.
You didn't find yourself saying, you know, How come I don't have a mother living with me? Or did you feel cheated somehow?
I don't know if…I don't think I felt cheated. But I wondered why my mother wasn't home.
And you said that there had been a decision that your dad would take care of you.
M-hm.
Why not your mom?
Well … I'm not sure, frankly. But, I think my mom found somebody else.
M-m.
And that person didn't quite want us there.
M-hm.
M-hm.
And then there came the day when you found out the dad you had was not your, quote, real dad, your biological dad.
Right. And I found that out one day, the ice cream man was coming, up the road. So I went to my father's dresser, pulled out a drawer, and um, looking for some loose change. He wasn't home. I found his life insurance policy. And even though I was only maybe nine or ten, maybe eleven, I knew what a insurance policy was for. I noticed that my name was under the beneficiary. And then I began wondering; but I never asked my father. But I asked my aunt. I was close to her, and she said, Well, you're old enough to know that your father, Ansen [PHONETIC], is not your real father, even though his name is on my birth certificate. What had happened was, my mother was married to a guy

named Jerry. He divorced her while she was carrying me; you know, expecting. And back then, there's a stigma if you give birth and you're not married. And so she married my father, and his name got on the birth certificate. So finally one day, my aunt said, I'll show you who he is uh, because he comes here for the cockfights all the time.

And you'd never seen him before?
Never seen him. I didn't know what he looked like or anything. And then one day, I was staying with her, and 'cause I used to stay with them often. And she said, Boy—that's my nickname—come, come. Her bedroom was on the second floor. She said, I want to show you who your father is. And then she pointed him out. And I took one look at him … I said, Yeah, that's my father. I can somehow sense it, you know.
He looked like you?
Yeah, unfortunately. [chuckle] He was short. I'm five-six; he must have been about five-five or five-four, fair-skinned and um … I just sensed that this guy is my father. And so I used to walk around during the cockfights, and I'd watch out and—watch him. And he never paid attention to me. It's like I thought maybe he doesn't know. And then one day … somebody tapped me on my—on the back. And I must have been about twelve or thirteen at the time. And I turned around, and it was him. And he looked at me and he says, You know me? Just like that, you know; kinda cold. And I was a Kalihi boy; nobody talks to me like that. And I said, Yeah, I know you. And that was it. [chuckle] Never spoke to each other again, but I didn't feel any emotion, because my … father, my stepfather, Ansen, he had raised me as if I was his son. And so … I loved him. And that's why when people say blood is thicker than water, I'm not so sure, because … I think interpersonal relationships have a lot to do with who you love. And even though this guy tapped me on the back, he was my father, I didn't feel anything. Now had he been warm or something like that, I think our relationship would have probably grown. But he wasn't.
Did you tell your stepfather?
No.
Did you ever talk to your stepfather about knowing that he wasn't your birth father?
No.
Never?
Never; never. I didn't think that there was a need to.
What about your mother; did you ever tell her that you knew?
No. It's interesting, 'cause my middle name is Jerome. And one day all these years, I've been—uh, after I found out, I was trying to get my mother to tell me, you know. And finally one day, I asked her; I said, Mom, why is my name—my middle name Jerome? And she said, Oh, there's a famous lawyer that I really admired, and I gave you that name.
So you knew she didn't want to talk about it?

No; I'm named Jerome because my real father is Jerry. You know, his name is Jerry. And so she didn't want to talk about it, and we never talked about it. We never discussed it.

And what about the Ben Cayetano we know, the blunt—
[chuckle]
—uh, you know, go for it guy? You didn't want to talk about that with either of your parents?
No, because I was developing as a person. And our family never talked about anything like that, never discussed the reasons why my mother and father got divorced. And later on, when there were issues with my brother, we never talked about that. We just never discussed those kinda things. And as far as I was concerned, it was okay.
I would think it'd be hard to live with. I mean, just not seeing your name on the life insurance policy. Nobody really bellying up to the bar and telling you, Here's the way it is, and here's why.
Well, my father, when I say my father, I'm talking about my stepfather. I understood. It hurt at the beginning, but my brother is younger than me; he's very fragile. You know, he's smaller. And I always felt that I can take care of myself.
M-m.
But later in, my father changed it; he put my name too.
He told you, or you found out?
No, I found out.
Once again, he didn't tell you.
[chuckle] My father didn't tell me anything. The only time we talked about anything was, usually we went to a boxing match or something like that.
Where did you live?
I lived on Silva Street; Silva and Mokauea Street. The corner, almost. And as a kid, I was more afraid of ghosts than strangers. [chuckle] And the—the neighborhood was basically working class, but there were some people there who were like teachers who lived in the area. The neighborhood was different, mostly homes. Not many businesses like it is today. It was a good place to grow up, actually, because … everyone knew each other. We didn't lock our doors. You felt safe.
Everybody likes to say, Oh, Kalihi is a tough place. Was it tough?
It was yes and no. I mean, compared to other places, Kalihi could be real tough. But I think Kalihi, in my book, I write that Kalihi is like … Brooklyn, New York. It's kind of a special place, but it produced four of our six governors after statehood. Now we have a mayor who's from Kalihi. So it produced people who accomplished things, Rhodes Scholars, great entertainers.
Why do you think it produced people who excelled in their field?
I think when you grow up in a place like Kalihi, at least, when I was growing up there, just the circumstances under which you grow up, I think help you develop

character. When you live a life where you don't have everything handed to you—although I have to say that … I never really thought I was poor. [chuckle] I think most kids who grew up in a place like that don't know. But when you grow up under the circumstances, you see some people struggle, maybe your own family struggle; I think it develops you. And so if you write or you create, like music, or you write a novel, or whatever, I think that kinda experience really is helpful. Because it helps you understand the dynamics of what makes people tick.

When Ben Cayetano served as lieutenant governor, he established the popular A-Plus program, a statewide government-sponsored after-school program that accommodated children of working parents. This tremendous help for families…from a former latchkey kid.

What did you do for fun as a latchkey kid? I don't know if the word latchkey existed then.
Yeah.
But what did you do?
We'd go down to Sand Island, and we'd catch crabs, and fish, swim. It's amazing when I think about it. The way I learned how to swim. I didn't know how to swim, and so I'd just dive in the water and stroke like crazy until I hit the next boat. [chuckle]
That could be risky.
Yeah. Then I developed into a really good swimmer. We'd do things, like we'd make canoes out of corrugated iron and wood, and tar. Okay. We'd put it all together, and we'd try to paddle from the shore to Mokauea Island. You know where Mokauea Island is?
Right.
Yeah.
It's not too far offshore. What is it; about—
Maybe about three hundred yards.
Okay.
Yeah. And uh usually, the boat would sink at about the middle, because you know, the tar would give way and all that. And then we'd go back, and we'd do it again.
[chuckle] And did you really want to get to Mokauea?
Yeah.
Was there something to see on Mokauea?
The only thing on Mokauea Island back then—and you know today, these revisionists, historians say that, the island is sacred and all of that. Well, back when I was a kid, the only thing on Mokauea Island were three or four elderly Filipino men living on huts on sticks. I mean, on stilts. And these guys were really, really poor. There was nothing Hawaiian going on on that island. [chuckle]

What else did you do?
I learned to pump hole. You go to Sand Island, and they have mudflats there. And used to have a lot of crabs, and the crabs would live in a tunnel. So what we'd do is, one guy would get the scoop net; he would go to one end of the tunnel and would spread the net like that. And then the other guy, with his foot, would … push—
Pump hole.
Pump hole.
[chuckle]
And the pressure would shoot the crab out.
Oh, and they were edible crabs, or it was—
Oh, yeah.
—just for fun?
Oh, yeah. No, no, these—
You would eat them?
Yeah, yeah, white crab, red crab. They're all gone now, because of the pollution and all of that. But those were the kind of things that I did. And then when I got my bike, we would go to, Kalihi Valley, and we'd go to a place called Tin Roof. Still there today, Tin Roof.
Where's Tin Roof?
Way up in Kalihi Valley. There's a reservoir up there. And there's a water tower, and the roof is tin. That's why they call it—made of tin, corrugated, right? And that's why we used to call it Tin Roof. We'd go over there, we'd catch crayfish and catfish. And then uh, using our bikes, we'd go to Waikiki, all the way from Kalihi, bodysurf at uh, at the Wall, which still stands today. And then a couple times, we went out to Kahala side to go and spearfish. And then that's where we had some memorable experiences.
Okay; what happened?
We'd go down the public right of way, uh, park our bikes.
And you found all these places on your own?
Well, we'd hear about it. I was maybe like about … twelve or thirteen at the time. So there were about four of us. And so we go into the water, we got our spear guns, and we got, a net and a inner tube. So we were in the water; we're about fifty yards or so from the shore. And this guy comes up, and he starts yelling us—like yelling at us, and telling us to get out of the water. He said, Get out of here.
Where'd he come out of; the right of way or a house?
No, we were in front of his house, obviously. And back then, if you were Asian, you couldn't live in Kahala.
M-hm.
That's the way it was. So this guy come out, and he starts yelling at us. Get out of here. ust like that. So I'm looking back, and our guys are saying … Well, what's the matter with this guy? So we go deeper into the water, further out.
M-hm.

And he starts yelling; he says, I said get out of here. And he starts to swear; goddamn it. So pretty soon, we start to leave. So we leave, and then we say a few choice words to him ourselves. And we had packed lunch, Spam and rice and some, Vienna sausage; —that kinda thing. And so we're sitting at the public right of way, leaning against a chain link fence; and a cop comes down. We see this cop coming down.
M-m.
Parks his car, gets out. He walks up to us, and he says, You guys gotta leave. So we're looking at each other; Why do we have to leave? You're making too much noise. Oh, we'll be quiet. No, you guys leave right now. Don't give me a bad time. Why do we have to leave? Because the lady wants you to leave. And he's nodding toward the fence. And on the other side of the fence, there's a lady, and she's standing like this. You know, elderly lady, all white hair, and her lips are pursed. That's why you—you gotta leave, because she says you gotta leave.
Yeah.
And that made an impression on me. So we left.
I noticed in your book, you always describe people by their race.
Yeah.
And you continue to do that as an adult.
M-hm.
Why is that?
Ethnicity and race were big issues when I was growing up. When I was in college, I graduated from UCLA in 1986. It was, almost the height of the Civil Rights Movement. And so I had a chance to write about this in my book. I had a chance to see how polarized the races were. And so I grew up in that kinda atmosphere. Here in Hawaii, when I was growing up your race and ethnicity made a difference where you were in the social order.
How did it stack up?
Well in the 1950s and the 1960s, when I got out of high school, you would pick up a newspaper, and it'd say classified ads for jobs. And it would say, Caucasian only, Japanese only, or Chinese only. You never saw any ads saying Filipinos only, because we didn't own anything.
M-m.
So when you grow up in that kind of atmosphere, I think that it becomes part of your psyche. So when I write about people, I write about Donna Kim, for example. So one of the—the Advertiser columnists, David Shapiro, he told me, Well, I could have figured out that Donna Kim was Korean, just by looking at her name. I said, Yeah, but could you figure out what else she was? 'Cause Donna Kim is Filipino-Korean. So even though that's part of the way I look at things, it's not in a negative way.
It's just being aware, not …
It's being aware.
And not biased?

No, I don't think I'm biased.
You were born and raised in Kalihi, had never been to the mainland. But at some point, you packed up your wife and your kids, and off you went to LA.
Yeah. I'd never been off the island. Never been to any of the neighbor islands. And I was working for the State, Transportation Department, and I was a draftsman, and I wanted to get this job, a promotion, in this one certain department, which we used to call it structural. The drafting was much more sophisticated, and technical, and I wanted to get into that department. So when they gave the test, there must have been a hundred guys taking the test with me. I studied really hard. And when the results came in, I was number one on the list. Ninety-nine-point-something was my score; almost perfect. The test counts for seventy percent. Thirty percent is the personal interview. So I really prepare, make sure that I have my work samples, try to anticipate what kinda questions I'm gonna be asked. And I go for the interview. And this guy, you know, he's interviewing me, and after about two minutes, I know I'm not gonna get the job. His body language and everything; he's just going through the motions. And so he tells me in the end, he says, You know, Ben, I want a guy who's fulfilled his military obligation. And I always felt bad that I hadn't been in the service, because a lot of my friends went, to serve in Vietnam and all that. So I said, Okay, I can accept that. Gave me back my samples; he said, You know, you got a terrific score, and somebody will pick you up. And somebody did. About a year later, I'm in the Department of Transportation building; we're in the copy room. Back then, the copy machines were so big, they put them all in one room. So I'm making copies, and this young kid is in there, and we start talking. I found out he got the job.
M-hm.
And I found out that he had never been in the service; he was 1A, which meant if there was a war, he would be the first to go. I was 3A; so my conclusion was, the guy lied to me.
And why would he lie to you? Was it a racial thing?
Well, I don't know. I mean, it just so happens that the guy who lied to me was the same ethnicity as the kid who got the job. But, it could have been that, it could have been because I didn't have any connections, in State government. So I was very upset. And when I got home I told my wife then; I told her what happened. And after a few days, I told her, You know what … I want to get out of here. I'm talking about leaving Hawaii. Never gonna come back, I said, unless I don't have to work for anyone. That's the way I felt. I never experienced any discrimination on the mainland, you know. But here, I did. Because on the mainland, I was like…I mean, Hawaiians are no threat to anyone, because there are not enough of us. So I was like a locker attendant and listening to people talking.
That means they dismissed you. Doesn't it?
Huh?
Doesn't that mean they dismissed you, like you weren't there?

Y—yeah. I was kind of invisible. I'd hear the White guys talk about the Blacks, and the Chicanos, the Mexicans. Then I'd hear the Blacks and the Chicanos talk about each other and the White guys. And all of this stuff going back and forth. And that's when I said … Hawaii is very different. Because even though we're not perfect, we—we get along better than this place, anyway.
So you know you didn't want Hawaii, because you knew it wasn't being good to you, or fair in the concept of hiring; but why did you think it would be better in LA?
I had no experience. I didn't know what the mainland was like.
You were just willing to try something different.
Yeah; I was so disgusted and I said, Let's—let's go. And we did. So when I went to Los Angeles in 1963 … I'm standing outside of my apartment, and I'm waiting for a carpool ride. And I see this garbage truck coming down the street. Just like the garbage trucks we have in Hawaii. And you know, we call those guys rubbish man, right? I looked; the rubbish men all White. They're all White guys. It's a shock; I never saw that before. You never imagine that in Hawaii, you see a White guy, a Haole, picking up rubbish. So the—the truck comes by, and this guy sees me smiling, and he waves at me. Good morning; and I wave at him. That was the beginning of a cultural experience for me. Because I had never seen a lot of Black people in one place in as I did on—on the mainland. Farrington High School, student body was almost three thousand; one Black guy that I knew. [chuckle] And his skin was lighter than mine. Burl Malone was his name; he became, a football star and a track star for, for Farrington. So I go to the mainland, and all of a sudden, I go to Boyce Market …Crenshaw. And we're the only non-Black people in the market. That's an experience for a kid from Hawaii. Then when I go to East Los Angeles, I never met a Mexican before. [chuckle] All of a sudden, I find myself among all these, you know, Mexican people. So Los Angeles was a real cultural experience for me. I didn't know whether I could get into a law school. Because uh … I gotta say that, I hadn't been prepared as well as, others. I wasn't sure my grades were good enough. But when I got out of UCLA, my grades were plenty good. And I did okay on the law school admissions test. And from then on, I thought, Okay, I can do this.

Did you know what you wanted to do, what kind of law you wanted to do early on?
Back then, there were a lot of television programs about lawyers. The Public Defender; you remember that TV program? Street House Lawyer, or something like that, and the mood of the country then was that lawyers would help the poor, they would defend people who were accused of crimes, and that kinda thing. And so when I went to law school, I never wanted to be a corporate lawyer; I wanted to be a criminal defense lawyer.
So you didn't have um, visions of dollars in your head. It was—
[chuckle]
It was about service, not money?

Well, I wanted to make a good living so I could buy a home. But I never thought that I would go into it just for the money. And when I practiced law and opened my own practice, money was never the issue. I'd help people. Once I represented a guy who was charged with a crime and he didn't have money pay me, so he built a gate at my house. [chuckle] I needed a gate for my back yard, so he came and he built it.

The call of home brought the Cayetano family back to Hawaii. And after all of his hard-won education, Ben Cayetano found he wasn't entirely satisfied with what he could do for people in the courts of law. He wanted to bring about social justice too. Next time on "Long Story Short," Ben Cayetano goes into politics. I hope you've enjoyed this half-hour of frank talk from the former governor of Hawaii. He retired in 2002 to east Honolulu.

For PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

Video clip with production credits:
I told my father, retire, and then come and live with us. Because when I left in 1963, the next year, he followed us up to the mainland. But he couldn't find a job in Los Angeles, so he went to live with his brother in Las Vegas. And then I told him, Dad, when you retire, you come home and live with me. And so in 1973, he came back and he lived with us. And he lived with me until he died in 1994.

LONG**story**SHORT
with LESLIE WILCOX

PBS Hawaii

GUEST: BEN CAYETANO 2
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I told Lorraine, let's leave Hawaii. We started to save money. And one day, football season, I won two; so thousand dollars apiece. And that was like … somebody up there likes me. And that accelerated, our ability to move to the mainland.

That's right, gambling money helped to fund the future Hawaii governor's pursuit of higher education on the west coast. It was a twist of fate in the lives of Ben Cayetano and his wife at the time, Lorraine. More on the life of former governor Ben Cayetano, in his own words, next on *Long Story Short*.

Aloha mai kakou, I'm Leslie Wilcox. In this edition of *Long Story Short*, we continue our conversation with former Hawaii Governor Benjamin Cayetano. He's retired from politics, but maintains the same tough mindset he had while running our state for two terms. In his book, *Ben: A Memoir, from Street Kid to Governor* his candor is fascinating, and he is no less so here on *Long Story Short*. He complains about Hawaii politicians who have little life experience, narrow horizons, and no appetite for making the tough calls.

You say something in your book that really surprised me.
[chuckle]
I wonder; is this true where you say … I think it was time for your second term as Lieutenant Governor. I mean, everybody knows that lieutenant governor is often, not always, a stepping off point or spring pad for governor.
M-hm.
But you never thought about it before that, seriously?
When I was in the Senate, I was part of the dissidents. Neil Abercrombie and I were close, and 1986, I told Neil; Neil, I'm leaving the Senate. And he said he was gonna leave the Senate also. And so he told me, Ben, I'm gonna run for Congress. And I told him, I think you'd be a good Congressman. And he said, What you're gonna do? I said, I'm gonna quit, I'm gonna go out and make money, buy a nice home for my family and all of that. And he told me, You know, Ben, after all we've been through as—as dissidents, because we both got into the Legislature in 1974, and here it is twelve years later. He said, We can't leave this place to them. And he's talking about the guys—

M-hm.

—you know, the establishment. And I thought about it. But politics is funny, because once you get a taste of it, if you really believe in public service, you sometimes say, I can't leave this. Because I gotta do the job this way, and there are not enough people in the Legislature who believe as I do. And so Abercrombie, me, Toguchi—part of the dissidents, we all decided to stay in public service. So I ran for lieutenant governor, only office that was open at that time. Because I didn't want to go to Washington, DC. And what's interesting is that when I was a Senator, I introduced a bill to abolish the office. [chuckle] So I didn't think much of the office. And all of a sudden, here I am, running for lieutenant governor. These things happen. You never figure out why, but it happened.

And the lieutenant governor's office, as you pointed out in your book, is sort of what you make it.

Yeah. It's what you make of it, and it's what the Governor allows you to do. John Waihee was very good to me. So when you mention lieutenant governors running for governor, I'll never run against him.

M-hm.

Because for all of the people had issues with him, uh, but I never did.

Did he actively encourage you to be the next governor?

No. We were both elected in 1986, he came to my office and he said, Ben, I was lieutenant governor for four years, I know how frustrating this office can be. So I want to work with you to get some things done. And I did the A-Plus Program for him.

You know, coming from a former latchkey—

M-hm.

I always thought that was your idea. But in your book, you say, no, wasn't your idea.

Well, what happened was one day Waihee called me. Ben, can you come over to my office; Charley Toguchi is here. And Charley was the superintendent of education at the time. So I go into the office, and we meet, three of us. And Charley says, Frank Fasi is thinking about developing an after school program in the city parks. Now, Waihee was thinking about the election. [chuckle] Because Fasi was a perennial candidate for governor. So then John asked Toguchi, Is this a big problem, latchkey children? And Charley said, Yeah. About half of the kids, about thirty thousand estimated, after school, they're wandering the streets, they go to the libraries, they go the shopping malls, or they go home, and nobody's caring for them. So how come we didn't do anything about it? That was Waihee's next question. Because we decided to leave it to the private sector. So then, Ben, can you put, a program together? Well, I know how important it is, because I was a latchkey kid myself. So I said, Okay, we'll do something. And Charley and I, because we're close, I knew that we could do something.

And you came up with a name for it right away.

Yeah. Well in the end, he said, What will we call it? I said, How about A-Plus? And then we called it the A-Plus Program. It was not easy to set it up, because I found out how rigid and inflexible the DOE bureaucracy is. They were all opposed to it.
Because?
Because they didn't want us to use the classrooms. See, the teachers are very territorial about their classrooms. The thought of it being open for an after school program didn't sit well with many of the teachers. And so we had to get over that. And if Toguchi was not the superintendent, we would never have done it. Now, where I think that Waihee and I had a different approach was, he said, Let's start a pilot program. And I told him, No, I don't want to do a pilot program, because I know what's going to happen. You do a pilot program, even if it's successful, the rest of the schools will oppose it. So I said, Let's do the entire system. And he looked at Toguchi, and he asked Toguchi, How many elementary schools are there? Hundred and forty, or something like that. Charley, do you think we can do it? I think we can do it. If not all, I think we can do most of it. And we did it; six month, we did it.
It was a little messy.
A little messy. [chuckle] A little messy. Some of the legislators and the Board of Education got a little bent out of shape, because here was the lieutenant governor and the superintendent doing this by themselves. So Francis McMillan, who was a member of the Board of Education, publicly criticized Charley. He said, Since when does the Lieutenant Governor run education in this State? You know. We had some challenges from the Legislature. But as soon as the idea got out this is what I find. You gotta communicate to the people that you're doing something. Because if we didn't, this program would never have gotten off the board. Because it didn't have any support. I mean, the parents didn't know about it. It had only opposition. So once we said we're gonna do this after school program, we're gonna charge, I think was a dollar a day or something like that, some crazy amount, uh, then the parents started taking notice, you know. And pretty soon support for the program developed, because we were able to show people how great the need was. And myself, once I found out how many kids were at risk, it motivated me and Toguchi to put the program together. And we did.
That's a perennial problem of politics, isn't it?
Oh, yeah.
You try to do something that you think is really good, and instantly, so many people have a problem with it.
Well, what had happened is that the teachers and principals who were opposed to have their classrooms being used would complain to their legislators. And then the legislators would re—would react. The edge that we had was, the superintendent, Toguchi, was on board. And because we knew each other, we worked well together. The Governor asked us to put a committee together, and we did; and even the people on the committee were

reluctant. So finally, it was a two-man committee; me and Charley Toguchi. [chuckle] And it was one of the most rewarding things that I was ever involved in politics. Because the first year, twenty thousand kids; the next year, the program grew to twenty-eight thousand. And the reviews by the parents were ninety-eight percent approval rating. Can't do better than that, man.

Ben Cayetano grew up in a working-class family on the hard edges of old Kalihi. His mother left the family when he was a young boy, and his step-father worked tirelessly to support Ben and his brother Ken. Living in the shadows of Ben Cayetano's life was his biological father, a man who never made an effort to spend time with or get to know his son. All of this toughened the Kalihi kid and helped shaped his no-nonsense style as Hawaii's governor from 1994 to 2002.

How do you get used to any position of leadership, being able to stand your ground? I mean, were you always like that, willing to defy or deal with opposition, or did you have to learn it?
I think my nature and personality kinda made it easier.
What about in political decisions, where people who are opposing you may have a point? I mean, you're not always right, or you're not completely right.
M-hm.
How did you handle that?
Well, if they had a point, and if they persuaded me that I was wrong, or you know, it wasn't feasible, I'd back off. I've done that at times. I don't mind when you talk about the merits, you debate the merits back and forth. What really used to get me frustrated was, even though we'd make an argument for this or that proposition, the other guys, it's when they say, Well, we can't support it because the union is against it, or We can't support it because this one group is against it. Tell us what the other side of the coin is; it's all political. That's very frustrating.
And yet, that's the job you had for decades.
Well, I had, especially for eight years.
As they say, it's lonely at the top.
But it's a great honor to be at the top. You got selected out of a population of 1.2 million people to be Governor for eight years. There's honor in that, and you feel obligated and duty bound to do what you think is right. Now like when I was a criminal defense lawyer, my own client this one guy charged with a crime. When I was Governor, my client was the public. And so I remember when the teachers wanted two hundred and forty million contract. We couldn't give it to them, because I tried to explain, if we agree to this, I'm gonna have to cut all these programs for poor people. And they basically said, Well, we're gonna strike. Well, you're gonna strike, you strike. So they struck. And we finally settled the contract for like half of what they wanted. And I think you cannot be effective if you covet the job. You know what I mean? If you say, I want this

job, and I want to be here forever, because this is the biggest thing that happened to me; if you feel that way, you're not gonna be effective.
You always have to be willing to leave it.
Right. You gotta be willing to leave it. Like, I'm gonna make a decision, and that's it. It's like, playing professional football. That one day your day your playing time is gonna be up. Well, while you're in there, you just do the very best you can. And that was my philosophy.
Well … you're a guy who has clear ideas and likes to execute; but politics is all about accommodation and—
M-hm.

—group. How did you get through that? How did you get good at that?
Well most of the guys that I served with, they were reasonable people. Some of these guys had tremendous life experience. Guys like Jack Sua; they had gone to war, so they lived through some hard times, and they had all of this experience. They were also people who you could sit down and really talk about the merits and demerits. Today, it's different. These kids in the Legislature—and I call them kids because many of them have never worked at any job what they're doing today.
M-m.
They were former staff members of a Senator or a Representative, decided to make politics a career, and they're in it. What frustrates me about government, and which is why I wouldn't want to be in it today; you can't talk to these people, you cannot reason with them. That's why there's very little debate in the Legislature. Senator Les Ihara made a comment a couple days ago on the Civil Unions Bill. He said, You know, it's such an important bill, but there's so little debate; people just voted. They vote, they vote on alliances, they vote on anything but merit. Whatever works for them politically, they'll vote that way. Now, I can't put up with that. We've always had that, but it's more pronounced today than ever.
Why do you think that is?
Well, one reason you don't have a lot of debate is, these kids don't have any experience. They can't get up or they worry about their pet projects. I had one guy, a former newsman, come in one day and talk to me, and he said he didn't like what was going on with the leadership. So I said, Why don't you say something? He said, Well, otherwise they're gonna kill my pork. Meaning the projects for his district. Well, if you feel that way, you shouldn't be in the business. You gotta do what's best for everyone. I tried to tell him that. He still doesn't say anything. Just sits there and, Do I get my swimming pool for my school? If I get that, that's all I want. That's how limited the horizons of these young legislators are today. Very limited.
H-m; h-m. So you think it's a function of simple experience and having a broad outlook?

Well, I think events shape people. And if you were, like Dan Inouye, and you were in a war, those kind of things shape you in terms of what's important. The guys who went to war, like Dan Inouye, Tom Brokaw called them the greatest generation. They came back from the war, and they built this country into the most powerful and richest nation in the world. They had a goal. These kids today, they never had to struggle for anything. Because my generation gave them everything that they wanted. There's a book called Generation Me, written by a couple professors, and it talked about how this generation is different. If you don't run into adversity, if you don't struggle, if you're not forced to postpone instant gratification so that you can accomplish something later, when you come up and face adversity or face failure, it's harder to deal with it.

Some of Ben Cayetano's other political stories in his book—*Ben: A Memoir, from Street Kid to Govenor*—are real grabbers. He names names of politicians who he feels let down voters. And Ben Cayetano isn't the only one in this political town with a long memory. He doesn't make it on all of the A-list social invitations.

What's been the reaction to your book? I know a lot of people—
[chuckle]
—at the Legislature thumbed immediately to the index to see if you wrote about them, and what you said. But you did skewer a few people in the book.
Oh, yeah. But you know, one thing that I tried to do was, I said to myself, I'm gonna be honest and candid in this book, and critical of people, but I'm gonna really make sure that my facts are correct, that what I say is not out of pure spite, but is borne by the facts. And not one of those guys have complained publicly about what I wrote; the ones that I criticized. Because they can't complain. That's the way I look at it. What they said in the newspapers, what they said on the Senate floor or the House floor, whatever they said publicly, you know, to make my point.
I've heard a couple of people say about your book; Just when is Ben gonna mellow out? Why does he always have to carry this chip on his shoulder? He's been the governor; why does he carry this stuff around with him?
[chuckle] You know, someone asked me if I miss holding office. I said, No; the only thing I miss about it is not stopping some of the foolishness that these guys do. Because too many things that I see today are being done for political reasons, because people want to get from here to there. And if you're so ambitious that you're always thinking about politics, then you're always gonna be conducting yourself as if you're walking on eggshells. As far as my family is concerned, I'm a mellow guy. But when it comes to public service, people need to hold other people accountable, because there are big stakes involved. So when people say that, I want to ask them, Well, what did you do for the people? You want everybody to shut up and not say anything? And that's why you don't have debate today, 'cause they don't want to say anything about

each other. They complain privately, but that's about it. When I wrote this book, one reason I did write it was that I wanted to give people in the future, especially, a glimpse of what life was like at least during my time. And there's some big issues in the book, like the ceded lands and the Bishop Estate. I'm not comfortable with the amount of scholarship that goes on in this state anymore, and if someone were to write about it, ceded land issue, I want to make sure that they knew another side of the story. Because I was right on that issue when I was chairman of the Ways and Means Committee in 1980. And Dennis O'Connor and I. And I didn't like the way it was set up. And sure enough, the concerns that I had are shown today.

In fact, you say in the book that you think the time for Hawaiian sovereignty has passed, because of a previous court ruling.

Well, when the Supreme Court ruled in the Rice Case, the OHA elections had to be open to everyone, everyone could vote, because the OHA law violated the 15th Amendment, which prohibits ace-based voting. I thought that there's no way that the Hawaiians are gonna get the kind of sovereignty that they want, because they want a nation that's only for Hawaiians. And how do you choose? How do you choose such a nation? Congress would have to go pass a law that gives them the power to do it. Supreme Court says Congress cannot do it. You cannot have elections under United States law which are race-based. And so I think that the whole sovereignty movement has developed a life of its own, and it's very difficult for the leaders to kinda say, Let's forget about the idea. Unfortunately, young Hawaiians are gonna have to figure it out for themselves. So I wrote about those things because I want people to understand I'm not comfortable with the economic inquiry that goes on in this town, whether at the Legislature or the newspapers. The newspapers are terrible today. Maybe it's the business. I don't know.

And they weren't always terrible?

They were better in the past. I mean, they would investigate, follow up on leads, and things like that. Today, basically, regurgitate the news. That's basically it.

So what's ahead for you?

[chuckle] Yeah; I told my wife, Vicky, that unless we were, in the poorhouse, I didn't want to go back to work as a lawyer. I've been out for a long, long time, and the only kinda law that I did was trial work. And that's very stressful. I don't want to be a consultant of any kind.

What about boards and commissions?

I'm gonna be serving on a board. It's unpaid. I forgot the name of the organization, but basically, it's an organization that sets up programs in the schools for intermediate school children; after school program like A-Plus.

M-hm.

So I'm sitting on that board with quite a few people that are well known. So I'm I'm catching up on my reading. I'm learning a lot about different things that I—that I didn't have the time to pursue when I was in office. I have a ton of books at my house that I haven't read fully, and I'm doing that.

Ben Cayetano didn't pull his punches growing up in Kalihi and he doesn't pull his political punches even well into retirement. I hope you've enjoyed this conversation with Hawaii's gruff, tough fifth governor and author of a candid 560-page memoir. At this time in 2009, he's comfortably retired and living in east Honolulu. For *Long Story Short* and PBS Hawaii, I'm Lesie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

<u>Video clip with production credits:</u>
Neil Abercrombie—
M-hm.
—your friend and ally, wrote a foreword for your book—
Yeah.
—in which he quoted Shakespeare, saying, Every man has his fault, and honesty is his. And he said, your virtue is your vice.
[chuckle]
Ben played the game straight, he said. Is there any other way you could have played it?
I don't think that holding office would be worthwhile if I had to make all these accommodations, just to keep the office.