

GUEST: MELI WATANUKI

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It's funny to me ... I get big family, and only me. Maybe God, they tried to tell me something ... better you stay, you know, prayer. Prayer, that's the only way you can do. So I think, I'm not too sure. Only God knows why they went make me sick.

She's lived what most folks would call a tough life: diagnosed at eighteen with Hansen's disease, a husband who left her and took their young son with him, surviving the passing of her second husband. But, with her deep faith in God, Meli Watanuki found comfort. Today, her enveloping smile conveys a sense of peace and happiness. She stays busy as manager of the Kalaupapa Store, and she has two homes, one, right on the beach. But, life in the settlement is not without controversy. Later, we'll also talk with bookstore operator, patient Clarence "Boogie" Kahili-hiwa, and compare the patients' thoughts on the longstanding ban against allowing children into Kalaupapa. But first, let's meet Meli Watanuki, on Long Story Short.

What was your early life like, before Hansen's Disease?

My early life, there was um ... go school. And those days, in American Samoa, is ... my family is poor. So I was in the school, a Catholic school in American Samoa. Then my father and my sister, you know, they cannot get money for pay my school. Those days, it's about fifty cents, those days. Then they went take me away from school, because I was just about in sixth grade. But they went take me away. So I go in the public school, after that, I never finish my school. So I stay home, to help my nephew and my nieces to clean ... wash their clothes, cook for them and I help my sisters.

How old were you then, when you dropped out of school?

I think I was about fourteen.

And when did Hansen's Disease enter your life?

Was 1952.

And you were how old?

I think I was about sixteen--was about eighteen. I was eighteen already at that time.

How much fear was there in your town about leprosy?

At that time, I thought--just like, when you go in the hospital, Queen's, and then it's just come out three--three, four days. And when I found out at that time you

cannot come out until maybe—according to the doctor, they tell me the first time, Maybe you going stay about few months. And that's why that went click in my mind, and I will start already cry, because you know, it's the first time, I get that kind sick, but I don't know how I went get. So my sisters, they come and visit me ... just like it's a jail. You know what I mean? And American Samoa so strictly ... when they get the cage, they get all around the hospital. When the doctor come in, to go inside the hospital, they get big kind tub. They get Pine-Sol. Whenever they go in the compound where all the patient.

M-hm.

And then when they go out, they take out their shoes, they go on top and they stand inside the tub with clean the feet.

How did that make you feel when you saw that?

That went make me more scared.

Was your family afraid of you?

No. My family, because when I came back from Western Samoa, they take me in the hospital. And then I found out that my sister, she died. So her kids had to come see me. They never get scared. They just come hug me.

In the days before there was effective treatment, a woman with Hansen's Disease had to give up her child, to be raised by others. In the 1960s, there was hope that you could be cured of the disease, and that someday, you'd be reunited with your child. In the case of Meli Watanuki, it was NOT her disease that kept her from re-connecting with her son...

So how did you get to Honolulu?

Okay. [chuckle] So when I parole, when—

They called it a parole?

Yeah, parole, just like you're discharged from the sickness.

M-hm.

Yeah, the Hansen's Disease. So my stepsister was here, and my stepmother. They know that I went discharge from October the 19th, 1958. So they told me to come here in Hawaii. And I said, Well, I'm not too sure, but they said, You come, come, I will ... you just come out from the hospital. So that's why I came Hawaii. And then I married, and then I moved out. So ...

You thought all your troubles were behind you. You got married?

Yes; yeah.

Did you have a baby?

Yeah. I have one child, and it's a boy. So 1964, I just see because when I come Samoa, I don't know where to go pick up my medicine. So I thought it's finished already. And they said you're supposed to go take your medicine. I said, No, I did not, because I don't know the hospital. So I went to go take test, and just few weeks and then they call me. I said, Yeah. You set up something with your baby, and your husband, and then you gotta go Hale Mohalu. I said, Oh, fine. And I feel that I better not stay there, because with my baby, I don't want my

baby to get sick, because he's too young, I think only three years old. So I set up things, and I talked to my husband. And my husband think, just like you go hospital, and few days come back. [chuckle] But end up that was not. Then he came visit me with my son, and they see all the fence around. But they get plenty other Filipino there too at Hale Mohalu. So they was talking about—and he say, They talk Filipino. And then end up that was the last day I see him and my son. They never come back. So ...

They saw the fence, they—

Yeah.

They heard the talk.

Yeah.

And your husband took your son away?

Yeah. He take my son away.

So you didn't see your son from the time he was three—

No.

—'til the time he was in college?

No.

Did you have contact?

Yeah; we never contact, because—

'Cause you could not find them.

—don't know how, you know. But that lady was so nice to me. And the mayor did send me his picture, and his address. When I look, was my son. But big already, the boy. So then I went go try to contact the social worker, the State social worker. Then her and I, we worked together. So finally, we contact him. I called him in Philippines. And end up, he wants to come back. So I told him, Fine. Uh, what I gonna do, so I ask what's happened uh, the father. He said the father went remarry, and they buy one house, and the father died. And end up the stepmother went kick him out from the house.

M-m.

I said, I think so that lady [INDISTINCT]. So okay, I try to bring you back. I bring him back here. And the social worker, we was work together that time, so he came. And then me and my husband, we tried to take him back to college to finish up here in Hawaii. But when you are not taking care of your son when small and grow up and just like they won't listen to me, because it's different life.

Did you ever achieve—

No.

—a bond with him?

No.

So you lost your son at three.

Yeah.

And even though you tried, he was never part of a bond again.

M-hm.

You seem so matter-of-fact when you talk about it. How much does it still hurt?

I know you've talked about it, you've had time to deal with it, but—

Yeah.

How are you with it?

I feel hurt. It's hard for me, trying to ... go help him and tell him, your mom love you. You know, that ... you can do whatever you want to do, but you find a job, supposed to work over here at that time. But ...

And now, nothing?

Nothing. He never come back, he never call, no write. So I just let it go.

Like other patients living at Kalaupapa in 2009, Meli Watanuki is free to go, but chooses to live there. She was deprived of her liberty for years. And when the cure came, she was exposed to the stigma, fear, and prejudice that Hansen's disease patients of the 1960s encountered. Out of that experience, patients came to view a life at Kalaupapa with state support—not as exile, but as refuge.

Now, why did you come to Kalaupapa? You weren't banished, you didn't have to live here.

Well, because I feel that ... I feel happy. Because when I came here, they was really good, and they tell me, Anytime you can go Honolulu, you can go, Las Vegas, you can call anyplace, but this is your home. So, oh, okay. And I really, really happy to stay here. Yeah.

And how's your health?

My health is okay. Only I have asthma. So it's taken care, you know, every time I go see the doctor, yes.

So the Hansen's Disease is not a problem?

Oh, no. It's finished already. Yeah. 'Cause nothing, just like how before.

So you've had so much loss in your life. Is that how you see it? Well, I really [INDISTINCT] happen with all these thing. I go—you know, I pray a lot when I came here. I pray so much, for set up me and take away all that sad to me. Yeah.

Because you had so much sadness, and you needed it to be gone?

Yes.

And did the sadness go away?

Yes. Now, I'm happy right now. Plus my husband there, and they're so nice to me.

'Cause you remarried another time.

Yeah.

This is your third husband.

Yeah, this is the third husband.

And he's not a patient.

No.

How did you meet him?

Over here. He came here, you know, '81. And '81, my husband, he died.

So your third husband was already here as a worker, not a patient?

No, no. He came over here eighteen—1981. So he just start work, and—

Oh, you had met him in Honolulu?

No.

Your third—

Because me, I no go around Honolulu. I scared.

Okay; so how did—

Yeah.

So you met him here?

In Kalaupapa, yes.

What was he doing? What was up?

Um, anyway, he in 1981, and he just start work. He just came work here. So him the one that was doing... my other husband's graveyards. And after that, they was helping me, uh other things for anything I need. And those days, when— 1981 when one kokua they come in patient's house, they gotta go in the office to sign. You know, I going be at a patient's house. And then gotta put the name, who's patient, yeah. That's how those days. Yeah, 1981.

So he happened to be the kokua—

Yeah.

—who was cleaning your husband's grave, and then who was helping you out—

Yeah.

—in your—

Yeah.

—transition.

And I never ask, because I don't know him. But I saw his work. He's a carpenter.

Oh.

Yeah. And so after that, uh everything, and then he said, Okay, if you need anything, I can come and help you whatever you need. I can help you. That's what he said. So you know, I no need help because they get the State workers. But he work in the State too. Yeah, at that time.

So when did romance blossom?

[chuckle] Oh, Leslie. [chuckle] That was um, '82 to uh ... 1995. Then that's why and I told him that, Okay, you know what? Time for me. Either you marry me or not, then you stay. You go, you move out, and I stay my house. And I never know that Father Damien was going be [INDISTINCT]. I really don't know, so and I told him, Okay, um, all this time, I never take communion, because I cannot take communion, and I live with somebody. I cannot do that. So ... 1995 ... the first week of April, I told him, Okay today is the day. Either you move out ... or we marry. If we not marry, you move out. If we marry, then you stay. That's all you know, I cannot do this, no communion, I only go church and pray. And then he said ... I want to marry you. No kidding? Are you sure?

[chuckle] And he wasn't kidding. [chuckle]

He was not kidding.

In May of 1995, the newly married Meli Watanuki and her husband Randy were accorded the honor of visiting Rome and meeting the Pope, and bringing back

home to Hawaii a relic of the beloved Damien. Meli and Randy had only just returned from their honeymoon, when they were encouraged to go to Vatican.

That was quite an honor, wasn't it? Were you chosen for that?

We never know.

The pope chose you?

Yeah. The pope was ... what the story uh, you know. After we came back, and I wanted to find out how we went come through with this. And so they said the pope went uh, tell the uh, the bishop ... you know, for take me and my husband, we just got marry. So I said, that's why I get all this thing? They said, Yeah.

And what was the relic?

The relic?

Yeah.

The relic was a nice koa. Was really nice. And they get his hand was inside. And when we stand over there with the pope and you know, all them. And then they bring, uh, you know, so just put our hand on top, me and my husband. I said, Okay. And then they went bless us.

What did you feel when you held the relic, which was—

Well, I—

—Damien's hand?

I really feel just—you know, all that time, just I only chicken skin. My face was funny, was all uh, you know. Because I never know is something is going be like this. I never know in my life I gonna, you know, see the pope, face-to-face with him. Oh, and ... I kissed two times, on his ring. Oh, the man is ...

You know, so many people have done good things at Kalaupapa for the patients. So many--just people have sacrificed. What does Father Damien mean to you?

Well, Father Damien's mean to me because he was a priest, and he work hard for the people. He work hard for the poor, poor people. And, you know, really love to God and take of the Hansen's Disease. He no care what ... either become sick, but that's how his ... his heart is for God, and take care of the people. Take care of the poor. Yeah. And I know he, just like he is a local boy in Hawaii. Even though he come from Belgium.

Children are a very sensitive subject in Kalaupapa. At this time, in 2009, children under the age of 16 are not allowed in the settlement. This age-old rule was first put in place to protect children from the disease, and to save patients from ridicule and embarrassment. Times have changed, with some patients pressing to hear the sound of children in their midst. Meli Watanuki and Clarence “Boogie” Kahilihiwa are on opposite sides of this debate.

BOOGIE:

I'd like to see the children before I pass. I'd like to see the children come here and visit, and stay like a normal visitor, like if they say, Well, you have your own

house, you can stay in your ... whoever invite. They're gonna be your sole responsibility, because anything go wrong, everything gonna fall on you. And I'd like to see that. Not only for the patients, but for everybody who's working here.

LESLIE:

We were talking about the controversy that broke out when one of the patients wanted children to live here.

BOOGIE:

Father Damien loved the children especially. And to ban the children over here, maybe their own thoughts. You see, before, couple years back, we had people who just followed the next friend; they couldn't think for themselves. If you said no, then I will say no. I don't look at it that way. I look it as for myself, how I see everything. And the majority over here say no, well, I'll go along with that. But not in my heart.

MELI:

When I came here, all the old folks, they talk about, they no like children to come here, because some of the kids, they no understand the sick. Even though, it's no more sick, they still might get scared of the people. They might... they going make fun on the people. And another thing—the kids, they get sick, and there's no more medicine here for the kids. No more doctor. And over here, they no more school for the kids. What they gonna do over here? They no more nothing here. That's why we went block that. And they was going take us to court. Yeah. She was going to take us to court because of that. And we said, No. So what's happen, she went call her niece to bring her baby down at her house. But I don't know who when the reporter that went take the pictures. And the little kid, they was on the carpet. We be careful on that. And that's when show on the TV, I feel myself that was not right. Because no can tell there might—the kids, they going get the sick. Even though they no more the sick, but they gotta remember that so long they get the person to sore on the feet, gotta be watch out. If they get the kids, because the kids is soft, the body, and the blood is. And that's why that is no-no. And that's why they was told us they going take us to court. I said, Okay, that's fine.

Very rare for Kalaupapa to have this—

Yes.

—kind of division.

Yes. How many times they threaten us. And we said no.

Yeah; the folks who didn't want children here—

Yeah.

That long-time rule prevailed.

Yeah; that's right. Because when I came over here and I hear a lot about all the rule about the kids, they no allow that here. I forget what year after that, they went open up, went open up one year. The couple was a patient here, they went bring the kids. Just about ten years old, ten and nine. So what they do, right in the front our house ... they use that dakine, the skateboard. And one of

the old man, they coming from the other side, up, they go, pick up the [INDISTINCT]. You what's happened? The kids went go right in the front of my house. They went go like this. The old man, they went go straight to the stone, he went cut up.

M-hm.

And smash his car.

Yeah; and we were advised when we came to be very careful in—

Right.

—driving, or watch out around you, because patients may not have good visual or they—

Right.

—they may be slow to react, because of—

Right.

—physical impairment.

Right; right.

If you go to Kalaupapa, where gravestones are never far away, where history is alive, you can imagine St. Damien walking the same pathways, seeing the same, beautiful views, breathing the same ocean breeze. In a life full of twists and turns, Meli Watanuki's faith never wavered. Faced with so much tragedy, she found comfort in god. And with the canonization of the priest she always regarded as a saint, Meli's faith is made even deeper. Thank you, Meli and Boogie, for sharing. For Long Story Short and PBS-Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

Video clip with Production Credit

MELI: Yes. I'm happy, and just like I come more close to Father Damien. Because I pray a lot for him, every day, every morning. And I go over there, just like I go talk story with, you know, Father Damien. I just say, Father Damien, please to um, help this settlement, people gotta behave themselves and be kind one another.