

**GUEST: MARY BITTERMAN**

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And I think the future of our state, the future of our republic, and the future of our world has got to be people understanding people, people respecting people, people respecting the diversity of people's backgrounds and interests, and insights. And I think that Public Broadcasting is going to play, increasingly, an important role in bringing the people of the world to a better understanding and appreciation of one another. The stories must be told.

**For four decades, a leader in public broadcasting, Mary Bitterman, has had a meaningful impact on how Hawaii sees the world, and how the world sees Hawaii. Her story on Long Story Short.**

***Aloha mai kakou*, I'm Leslie Wilcox. In this edition of Long Story Short, we'll catch up with Mary Bitterman, the first woman to lead a PBS television station. Which happened to be *this* station—PBS Hawaii, called Hawaii Public Television during her tenure in the 1970s. Mary Bitterman would go on to run a larger PBS station, in San Francisco. She would become PBS national board chair, and receive public broadcasting's most prestigious award for lifetime achievement. She still calls Hawaii home, returning to Honolulu every month from her offices on the west coast. And she takes Hawaii with her everywhere she goes. In Washington D.C. I've heard her explain to large national groups the meaning of "*ohana*" and the Japanese principle she learned here, "*okage sama de*," which means, "I am what I am because of you." Fate brought this fourth-generation Californian and Ivy League scholar to Hawaii. Her husband, psychology professor Jeff Bitterman, was offered a short-term job at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.**

And he was asked to be a guest professor for a year. And so we came to Hawaii for a year. And that was 1971, and we—

**You thought it would be one year, I bet.**

Yes, we never left. I mean, even though I work off island, and have for several years, Hawaii has always been our home and permanent residence since 1971. **What made you feel at home here? Because, you know, there is a great deal of *aloha* and hospitality on one level, but on another level, it's sometimes hard to get into the culture when people are busy, and they have things to do, and they think you're gonna be leaving in a—**

Exactly.

**—year, anyway.**

Exactly. And I just can't tell you how many instant opportunities were made available to me. I mean, I know exactly what you mean. And when people say to me, Oh, I'm going to move to Hawaii, I really want to make sure that they understand how important it is to exercise curiosity, and not just to come fully shaped and imprint themselves somehow on Hawaii. When I first came, I taught several courses at the University of Hawaii. One of the students in class was an older woman who was returning to finish her degree. And she said to me after class, my husband is doing a special project with the Ford Foundation, and I would like him to meet you. So I said, I'd be very happy to meet your husband, and how nice that he works for the Ford Foundation. All right; but here's what he wanted. He said, what we want is someone to do a history of Hawaiian landownership and land use, so we have a baseline for the development work that we're undertaking.

**Now, that's a—**

And I said—

**—fascinating issue.**

I said, Here's the problem. The problem is, I think the idea of doing historical research on Hawaiian landownership and land use is fascinating; but I'm not competent. I'm not competent, because I don't know the Hawaiian language, and because I have not studied Hawaiian history in any really significant, deep fashion. And he said, Well, we really would like you to take on this enterprise, and so on and so forth. At any rate, I was hired to do some basic historical research dealing with a great number of texts. What I did was, I published a series of papers that began with the ancient Hawaiian land use forms, going on to the *Mahele*, going on to the various uses of the land, especially when we had the development of sugar and pine, then moving on to the period of military installations on the *aina*, and then really ending up with the visitor industry after the second war and the development of resort properties and the rest of it.

**That's a great way to get to know Hawaii, isn't it?**

Now, this, when you said, How did you, coming with this modern European background, come into Hawaii and have a chance to be involved right away? And it's because I worked on land. It just gave me a chance, I would say, to leapfrog and to arrive, say, by year five, at a place that might have taken some other *malihini* ... twenty, thirty years.

**Well, you could have blown it big time while you were doing this. But you didn't.**

I had so many teachers. I had so many people who opened themselves to me. It was just extraordinary.

**But you were a teacher who was willing to be taught. I think that's one—**

Insatiable curiosity; that's the only way to learn and I think even when one reaches a point where people say, Oh, you know a great deal, one must never

be led to believe that one doesn't have still so much more to learn than one knows.

**What did you do when the study was complete, or when your role was done?**

Well I'm very committed to the Buddhist principle of impermanence, with all things changing all the time. It's become my way to explain nearly everything that happens in life. After I served as the historian for the regional environmental management project, which was called HESL (Hawaii Environmental Simulation Laboratory), and the simulation part involved the Fujitsu Corporation providing us with wonderful computers and computer specialists, so we could take the data that our development colleagues were aggregating, and run different scenarios of development. And the focus of our study was the Kaneohe Bay watershed. And we did a number of public hearings in which Oceanic Cable helped us to record some of the public hearings, and really get the public involved in, how do you want the Windward side of Oahu to develop, how precious are the taro fields, what will be the cost of capital facilities to support a much larger population, what will the erosion from development, soil erosion, what kind of damage might that cause to the Kaneohe Bay. And the final thing I did for Ford was to write a history of the Hawaii Environmental Simulation Laboratory, which is on file at Windward Community College Library.

**Okay; so now you're pau with that, and—**

So now I'm—

**—what are you gonna do?**

—pau with that.

**So far, by the way, I notice you've gotten two jobs, not because you went after them, but because people went after you.**

Well, the opportunities proved to be incredible. The man from the Ford Foundation, Bill Felling, with whom I got on very well, became very interested in Hawaiian history as I shared with him some of what I had read, and introduced different books to him that he began reading. Everything from John Papa Ii to Kuykendall, David Malo to "On Being Hawaiian" by John Dominis Holt. Just a whole wonderful range of things— and serving as the Ford monitor brought me in touch with more people from the Ford Foundation, which curiously, was the major foundation underwriter for Public Television across the United States. The Laboratory also had an advisory committee of extraordinary people, including Phil Gialanella, who was the publisher of the Star Bulletin then, Kenneth Brown, then chairman of the State Senate Committee on the Environment, people like Minoru Hirabara who headed Del Monte operations, and Bud Smyser, also from the Star Bulletin. Several members of this advisory group said, when the position here at PBS Hawaii became open, You should do this. I don't know the difference between a transmitter and a translator, I replied; I think jobs like that should really go to people well schooled in technology, engineering, production, and the rest of it.

**Just like you'd said before, I think the job should go to somebody—**

Exactly; to somebody who is competent.

### **—Hawaiian history.**

Yes, to somebody who is competent. And so the argument of Minoru Hirabara, who became one of my dearest friends and Kenny Brown and others was ... Here's what you do have. You've told us what you don't have; what you do have is a real love for Hawaii and the people. You do have an understanding and a growing knowledge of Hawaiian culture, and the cultures of the people of Hawaii. You have been connected to a very big foundation, which supports Public Television; and who knows, maybe you could get them to send some money to Hawaii for Hawaii Public Television. You have testified before the State Legislature, and in those days, PBS Hawaii was part of State government, and we received our appropriation from State government. So being able to go before the leaders of the Legislature and testify was considered very important, to do it effectively and to do it respectfully, and all. And so that's how I became the youngest general manager in PBS' history, and the only woman to head such a station.

### **Two historic distinctions ... Mary Bitterman says Hawaii's multi-ethnic culture was quick to accept a young woman in this leadership role.**

I think everyone who has come to Hawaii, whether ancestors came from Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Madeira Islands, Scandinavia, Ireland, Mexico, Puerto Rico, wherever, has been affected by the indigenous people, our host culture. They have had a very special effect, a softening effect, on all of us and have influenced others to have women be seen as potentially very competent. I mean, if we read Hawaiian history, we know the place of enormously powerful, gifted women who played very important roles.

#### **Queen Kaahumanu.**

Kaahumanu ... Liliuokalani. I was on St. Andrews Priory school board, and we know all the incredible things that Queen Emma did. Princess Ruth Likelike and Princess Bernice Pauahi Bishop. So I think the examples of outstanding leadership by Hawaiian women, coupled with the fact that our governor, George Ariyoshi, gave opportunity to women, made a big difference. Once we came to Governor Ariyoshi, more and more women were appointed to cabinet positions, and doors of opportunity opened in very significant ways. So I had great opportunities which has made all the difference in my life. This is really where everything started.

#### **For example?**

Well it's when I came to Public Television, that in addition to continuing my study of Hawaiian history, that I really became increasingly imprinted on Asian history, Asian culture, and becoming a host family for East West Center. It was through working with people here at the station, and being taken into so many *ohanas*. Our dearest friends were people that I met here; the Konno family, Melvin Kim

Farinas, and Akio Sakata, who was our chief engineer. The world became very special for me here. I had never had friends, as I had here.

**Why do you think that is? I mean you had a—**

I think—

**—family in California, you had—**

But a small family.

**—college experiences.**

A small family. So many of my friends here had much larger families. I had two older brothers, and my oldest brother passed away. When I came here I was able to meet so many people with deep roots and many generations in Hawaii, that opened up many new doors of opportunity. I mean, just through my dear friend Melvin Kim Farinas. Mel was the art director here at Hawaii Public Television for many, many years, and I think, gave the station its great reputation for artistry. He was half Korean, half Filipino. His father, Francisco Farinas, was the first Filipino radio broadcaster in Hawaii. Melvin's wife, Ronnie Mae, was half Chinese, half Japanese. Her maiden name was Fujii, her mother's maiden name, Goo. Just with Melvin, I became involved in serious multicultural outreach. Everything seemed to connect me to more and more pieces of a mosaic. So if this whole table were these incredible facets, each one of them sparkling, I began to have connections to so many of them, and every day my life became more interesting, more challenging, because the more I would learn about things that needed to be done or people that we could bring together, and make things happen, it was just terrific; absolutely terrific.

**Using all of her skills as a team builder, Mary Bitterman took over a troubled TV station and launched an era when Hawaii Public Television became nationally recognized for its programs.**

**So your personal life was developing, and your knowledge of Hawaii was growing. What were you doing professionally here? What did you see needed to be done, and what did you get done?**

Well, it was a very exciting time. And I think sometimes when entities are in a distressed situation, which we were—

**You were invited to lead a distressed organization?**

Yes. But I have to tell you, the only distressing thing was that we were short on funds. We had a modest amount of financing, and we were a little overdrawn on our State account, so we had to go bare for a while. What we did have was an extraordinary group of people. We had forty-eight student helpers from the University. Everybody, as we both know, trained in television in Hawaii was trained here in the good old days. And we just had a staff of people, thirty-six people, who were just absolutely incredible. But we had to find out how we were going to do things on almost nothing. That's why we wanted to find a way, even without resources, to better serve the community. We started a

program called Hawaii Now, which was a stripped program, five days a week, in which we could put different segments. And so International Kitchen was one day a week. So how did we start out? This is just an example. We took our fabulous administrative officer, Sharynne Nakasone, and said, Sharynne, you make great Okinawan donuts—you know, *ondagi*. Why don't you come and cook them in the studio? Sharynne said, I've never been on television, I don't know if I'd want to do this. But she was just such a great girl; she said, Okay, for the cause, I'll do it. So she came in, and she was our first cook. And then we began. We weren't online, but we would send people copies of the recipes from International Kitchen. So people would write in, and then we developed a membership group so they could become members. And it was terrific. So we started off with Hawaii Now. But then we did—everybody wants sports, and you have your wonderful Leahey & Leahey program now, but we did something called Sports Page 11, with Marv Vitatoe.

**With Jim Hackleman.**

Well, Jim Hackleman afterwards.

**He came later.**

But it started off with Marv Vitatoe from the University, and then went on to Jim Hackleman. But it was really fun, because we did everything from women's sports, which weren't being covered then, to kids' T-Ball. I remember we did one program featuring a T-Ball game over in Waimanalo, and we had more reaction from the community. People were just—

**Right.**

—charmed.

**Totally support that.**

Absolutely, absolutely wonderful. And then we began an arts program, Spectrum; we had Dialog which was our Friday night public affairs discussion. And we interviewed many interesting people.

**This was when Hawaii had only a handful of viewing choices, before the proliferation of cable channels. Mary Bitterman found the funding and gave the green light to a production that would, arguably, become the most nationally acclaimed of Hawaii's locally-produced TV programs.**

Obviously, the jewel in the crown was Damien, about whose reintroduction to public television audiences delights me ... I can't begin to tell you. It is so personally meaningful to me that this extraordinary story, this exquisite play, written by a most wonderful woman—I just wish everyone could have known Aldyth Morris. Brilliant, sensitive, compassionate. Everything about her was very special. If you read the script, you would know that somebody very special wrote it. And then to have that combined with a brilliant actor, who became Damien in Terence Knapp, and a gifted producer/director, Nino Martin, and a gifted art director, Melvin Kim Farinas. It was a combination of assets, including the videographer, Wade Couvillan, that was magical. It's just extraordinary. But

we did other programs as well. We did a three-part series with John Nathan, an independent producer, called *The Japanese*. And those were films that he shot in Japan, and we did local follow-ups. For example, based on his film called *Farm Song* on a Japanese family living in an agricultural area, we went off to Maui and covered the Uradomo family in Kula. And when he went off and did *Full Moon Lunch*, a bento operation, we went down to Liliha Street and filmed *Nishi Catering*. So it was a combination of trying to take the wonderful things of our own community and setting them into the context of a larger world. And then, of course, *China Visit*, which was able to cover the travels of a group of Hawaii residents in 1977, the year after Mao's death, was a terrific thing.

**You were one of the first groups of Westerners in China.**

Exactly. But I think it really stands the test of time that you're able to look at that film, that is PBS Hawaii's film, and you're able to go back and see what China, now the tenth largest economy, was like thirty-two years ago. It's very exciting.

**You hosted that documentary in pigtails.**

Well, I have to tell you. It's very interesting. When we were in China in 1977 people will not believe it; they just won't believe it, because China has just moved so quickly forward. In 1977, there was not one woman to be seen wearing anything but a navy blue or a gray Mao suit and whose hair was not cut like this [hands indicating a short cut with bangs] or who had pigtails. And because I had rather long hair then, it was decided that the best thing for me to do was to adopt pigtails.

**Later, Mary Bitterman was asked to take the directorship of "The Voice of America" which she saw, in part, as an opportunity to bring Hawaii's spirit to the rest of the world.**

And so a door of opportunity opened for me to become the youngest and the only woman ever to serve as director of *The Voice of America*, and all because the people of Hawaii gave me the opportunity. And I worked very hard at *The Voice*, and really tried to introduce the *aloha* spirit to a larger audience. We opened our relationship with China, arranging for the first exchange of broadcasters between *The Voice of America* and China. We made some wonderful progress and, as you can imagine, it was my work at Hawaii Public Television and the trip to China arranged by Koji Ariyoshi, that had already put me in touch with Chinese broadcasters and with the Minister of Propaganda in China. So that when I went to *The Voice of America*, I was able to build on those relationships and arrange for those exchanges.

**And by the way, was that the actual title, the Minister of Propaganda?**

Yes, Minister of Propaganda Deng Lichuan.

**If we could skip ahead just a little bit. I think you were recruited for another job at a Public Television station.**

Yes.

**It was another distressed station, but much more distressed, much larger jurisdiction.**

Yes. And that was an opportunity which arose in 1993, and it was an organization [housing both public television and public radio stations] in distress; it was in a near bankrupt situation.

**And the viewers were extremely upset that local programming had been yanked from them.**

Local programming was gone.

**Which is something you had brought back to Public Television in Hawaii.**

The organization also had a recent labor strike, and there were very antagonistic feelings between union members and the management of the station. There were a huge number of problems.

**Your good relations with unions must have helped you in—**

They helped me a lot.

**—San Francisco.**

Because before I went there, people on the KQED staff had called people in Hawaii at HGEA, Charlotte Simmons and other people, asking, What is this person like, and so on and so forth. Those discussions proved enormously helpful to me. At KQED, I tried to do two things: One, to put the stations back on sound financial footing, promising to be responsible stewards with the community's investment in us; and two, to deliver the greatest possible content.

**Years after reviving the San Francisco PBS station, KQED, Mary Bitterman became the president of a funding organization that helped her rescue that station. The Bernard Osher Foundation is one of the nation's largest supporters of higher education and the arts. It's given millions of dollars to the University of Hawaii. At this time in 2009, the Osher Foundation is Mary Bitterman's paying job. But she has never stopped contributing to PBS, serving in many unpaid leadership positions, including National Board Chair and head of the PBS Foundation. I'd like to thank Mary Bitterman for joining us on Long Story Short, and for upholding traditions of teambuilding and excellence here at PBS Hawaii. I'm Leslie Wilcox. *A hui hou kakou.***

Video clip with production credits:

History was biographies of admirals, generals, and kings and queens. But the real richness in history are all of these other people, and the way in which they



shaped our lives. And I think Public Broadcasting's niche is in bringing more people on the stage, and letting them all be heard.