

GUEST: H K LANI HOLT  
LSS 324 (LENGTH: 25:16)  
FIRST AIR DATE: 6/8/10

I come from a family of very strong women who believe that you need to make a contribution to your community. And in order to make a contribution to your community, you must work there in your community.

**Strong, yes, but also kind, generous, and self effacing. Her community is the island of Maui, but her influence as a *kumu hula* and Hawaiian culture and language specialist is felt throughout Hawai'i and beyond. Meet Hōkūlani Holt—next, on Long Story Short.**

**Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox** is Hawai'i's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in High Definition.

***Aloha mai kākou.* I'm Leslie Wilcox. Hōkūlani Holt was born in Honolulu to a family steeped in the traditions of hula. Growing up she divided her time between O'ahu and Maui, and for over thirty years now she has led a respected *hula hālau*—Pā'ū O Hi'iaka. She juggles her life as a *kumu hula* with her position as Director of Cultural Programs at the Maui Arts & Cultural Center and plays active roles in a long list of community organizations. And she does it all with a great sense of humor and calm determination.**

**Your name; don't have four names all beginning with H? What's your—  
What's the story?  
—entire name?**

What's the story on all those Hs? Well, the story is, my father wanted our initials to be HHH. So my oldest sister, myself, and my half brother, my father, my grandfather, all have the initials HHH. So [CLEARS THROAT], it really was so that you don't have to change the monogram. [CHUCKLE] No, I'm sure it wasn't that. But, he wanted the Hs, and so it was. In the course the fourth H being added, when my Grandmother Holt, just before she passed away, she told my mother that she had always hoped that my oldest sister and I would also have my father's Hawaiian name. So that's what my mother told us, so both my sister and I added it to our names when we grew up.

**What is your whole name?**

It's H k Iani Haila Hi'ilealii Holt.

**When you were a baby, you lived with your grandparents?**

Yes. I was *hānai*'d, which is a kind of a Hawaiian behavior of taking a young one into your home. So I was *hānai*'d by my maternal grandparents on Maui, and lived with them from baby time until I was five years old, continuously. They missed having children in the home, so I was the next one up. My mother was pregnant with me, so they came to ask if they could have this baby. And at first, my dad said no. Several times, he said no. But finally, he agreed.

**Do you remember the first time you danced the *hula*?**

I don't. But my mother has pictures; my mother has pictures of me about, I don't know, maybe about three or so. I don't remember that time, but I guess it happened, because she has the pictures. So it was quite young.

**Do you think you just were like osmosis, picking it up and doing it?**

Well, during the younger years, definitely so. When I got a little older, probably somewhere about seven, eight, or nine, then I went to classes. I was taught by my auntie and my grandmother, that I remember formally. So it wasn't until then. It's a little different when you have *hula* in the home. I lived with my grandparents, and my auntie lived in the same household, so when she had the neighborhood children over for *hula*, I'd go to that class. But because I lived there with them, when she got inspiration to dance, whether it's Saturday at four o'clock or Monday at nine o'clock in the morning, or whenever, you just get up and dance.

**Hōkūlani Holt graduated from the Kamehameha Schools in Kapālama and went on to study Travel Industry Management at UH Mānoa. She ended up graduating with a degree in Organizational Relations, but shortly thereafter her life would be dominated by *hula*.**

**Who were some of your mentors outside of the *hula* world?**

M-m; outside of the *hula* world. Do I have a world outside of *hula*? I don't know. I do know that for chanting, that was Pualani Kanahēle. She was my chant teacher. But outside of *hula*, what do I do outside of *hula*? I think *hula* is mostly my whole life.

**And it's your whole life now, but you didn't see it that way before. When did you decide you're gonna be a *kumu*?**

I didn't decide. My mother decided for me.

**And why did she decide?**

After I graduated from UH, I was married, had my first daughter, my oldest daughter. And we were living in an apartment on Beretania Street. And I thought, I don't want to raise my children in an apartment on Beretania Street. So the only place that I knew of was Maui. So I moved home to Maui to raise our family there.

**You would have two more children after that.**

Two more children after that. When I went to Maui, I was still a dancer, so I went to look for a *hala* to belong to. And there was not a lot of *kahiko* being done on Maui at the time. And so I was moaning and groaning to my mother, and so

she said, Well, I think it's time for you to begin teaching. And I went, No, that belongs to other people, that doesn't belong to me. And she said, No, I talked to your auntie, and I think it's time for you to begin teaching. I went kicking and screaming, but I went anyway. So in 1976, I opened a *h lau*. The name of the *h lau* is P ' O Hi'iaka. Literally, P ' O Hi'iaka means the skirt of Hi'iaka. When I began thinking about what to call *h lau*, I had long conversations with my mother. And I knew I wanted a plant name, I knew I wanted a plant that lived near the ocean 'cause I always lived near the ocean, and so the P ' O Hi'iaka plant was one of those that has always been around where I was. There's a story about its getting its name from Pele, as the plant protected her sister down at the beach, Hi'iaka I Ka Poli O Pele. But also in *hula*, Hi'iaka's *pā'ū* or her skirt was magical, and could defeat enemies and create storms, and bring people back to life. More importantly for me is, I wanted my students to be like the P ' O Hi'iaka plant. It grows in really inhospitable places, Makapu'u, Ka'ena, the top of Kaho'olawe, South Point, and still is a beautiful flower that's no larger than your baby fingernail. So I wanted my students to be like that too, that no matter what's going on, you keep chugging away, and you still look beautiful.

**What kind of a *kumu* were you and are you?**

I believe that I'm pretty strict. I hope to instill in my students a love for *hula*, but also a love for this place that we call home, and for all the many generations of people that came before us that created the chants and the songs, and the movements that we use.

**When you were a young woman beginning teaching—**

M-m.

**—was it hard to have the authority to—**

Oh, yeah.

**—to teach people who might have been older than you?**

Yeah. As a matter of fact, let's say I'd open class or I'd be standing outside, or sitting inside, and people would come in, and they'd go, Where's the *kumu*? And I'd go, that's me. You're the *kumu*? Yeah, that's me. [CHUCKLE] So it was a little difficult at the beginning, but they either accept that this twenty-six-year-old is going to teach you *hula*, or you just find someplace else to be. I pity my first classes, 'cause I was a little wishy-washy. Okay, we're gonna be like this.

Oh, no, no, no, no.

**[CHUCKLE]**

That's a little bit too hard. Okay, let's try this. Oh, no, no, no, no. I think I'm gonna change it to this. Oh, yeah, okay, we'll do it like—so I pity my first classes. I was a little wishy-washy.

**But you found your way.**

Yeah. Then I began to then understand how I wanted to be, when I became a *kumu*.

**There are so many *kumu hula*, and one of them is Keali'i Reichel—**

M-m.

**Who sat here and said—**

M-m.

**I'm a control freak.**

A lot of the times, that's what a *kumu hula* is, is we want things our own way. And we demand that. It is my world. I always tell my students, This is the world according to Hōkū within these four walls.

**While Hōkūlani Holt has dedicated her life to perpetuating centuries-old traditions, she is very comfortable making use of twenty-first century tools to navigate through her extremely busy lifestyle.**

I enjoy technology. I have two laptops, two desktops, I have a Blackberry, iPod, but then I love taking photographs, so I have cameras. But I do all of that because I love being in Hawai'i. I take my camera and I take pictures, because I want to keep that with me. One of my favorite things to do, though, is to just sit. Sometimes that's the best thing to do too.

**Just to be alone, or to look at other people? What are you doing when you sit?**

Look at other people. I like driving to some semi-solitary place and just watching our environment. I'm very much a morning person, so I get up early. I like to get up early to watch the sun come up, and those bits and pieces of time, I enjoy a lot.

**And over all this time of living on Maui, has that pleasure ever been—I mean, do you still get that? I mean, I know there's traffic, I know there are a lot more people, but you still find that peace?**

I find that place on my ancestral lands where I grew up. I still have a cousin that lives in the same place where I grew up, so I go down to their house, I go sit on the beach, park at the park; any little place.

**But Hōkūlani Holt doesn't need to go anywhere to get in touch with her ancestral roots. A veritable road map of her heritage is with her ... all the time.**

The tattoos that I have, the first one has to do with my grandmother. She was a shoreline gatherer. And we lived down at the ocean in Waiehu. And so these items have to do with the sea, and most especially the close shoreline. This is the *h 'ue'ue* or *h ʻuke'uke* and is gathered among the rocks where we lived. And this that goes around here is called *pū'ili halua* which has to do with the two meanings of the word *pū'ili*. One, it means to grab on and to hold on tightly to something and the other is the *hula* implement. Both of these things remind me that I need to remember that my grandmother was *hula* as well, and that I need to hold on to the things that she taught me.

**In 2007, Hōkūlani Holt was the artistic director, writer, and choreographer for *Kahekili*, a hula drama about Maui's premiere chief, thought by some to be**

**the biological father of Kamehameha the Great. Because the story takes place in pre-contact Hawai'i, Hōkūlani and her collaborators faced the challenge of filling in unknown details of life in Hawaii from that era.**

I was very fortunate that there were fellas that wanted to come down the road with me and so we sit down, we read what we knew of the research that we gathered, select the parts that we wanted to talk about, and then think about, well, what chants we want to use, what is the look, what do you want to see when the audience looks at it. So then there's the look.

**Did you take creative liberty with the look?**

Somewhat; somewhat. Partially because we don't really know everything. We don't know everything about what their clothes was like when they went to war, or what they may have worn if they were going into a particular ceremony. We know some, and we made some of those creative leaps within there, but there was some choice as to staying completely *kahiko*, or bringing in possibilities of other things.

**How much creative license do you allow yourself as a *kumu hula* who upholds tradition?**

I think for me, the guiding principle is, no matter what I do ... if it were to continue as such, would it be recognizable as *hula* a hundred years from now? Because now, a hundred years from when the turn of the century was, we can still see *hula is hula*. So a hundred years from now, is what I do recognizable as *hula*? And so that's usually my guiding principle, that it must be *hula*. Can it incorporate—like in parts of *Kahekili*, we did dances that are reminiscent of warfare. Can it include things that look like warfare? Yes, it can, 'cause it still uses *hula*. Some of the costuming, perhaps ... a bit more than what it might have been, maybe. I think our giant leaps were not too far off the cliff.

**So what were some of the other things you decided in making *Kahekili*?**

That we will expand our look at warfare, 'cause that is something that people don't know too much about or think about. And to know that, sometimes people only think of Hawaiian culture as only *aloha*. We were a very competitive people, and we had warfare like we have warfare today. So sometimes, people don't like to look at it, and we thought, no, it is where we came from, so it's important to have that as well. I loved highlighting about the chiefesses. For me, that's one of the greatest things that Maui contributed to the royal lines, is it's females that created all the royal children. And so, some of those things are not commonly seen, so we decided to bring those out into the open more.

***Kahekili* received the prestigious American Masterpieces Dance award from the National Endowment for the arts and has toured Hawai'i, California, Arizona, New York, and Germany. Between her job at the Maui Arts & Cultural Center, her *halau*, and productions like *Kahekili*, Hōkūlani Holt has found the time to be**

**a Director of Pūnana Leo O Maui Hawaiian Language Preschool; the first Maui Site**

**Coordinator for Nā Pua No‘eau—that’s The Center for Gifted and Talented Native Hawaiian Children; Culture and Education Manager for the Kaho‘olawe Island Reserve Commission; and, on occasion, a judge at hula festivals.**

I think competition in *hula* has created a phenomenon in which perhaps some, not all, but some *kumu hula* forget that the competition ends at the stage, and when they get off the stage, it sometimes continues. And for me, I like to always remember that we all love *hula*, that’s what we do. We love *hula*, and because of that, we have that commonality with each other. What I try to do when I judge is appreciate where that particular *kumu hula* is coming from. That maybe their style is not my style, but you can appreciate excellence in what they do, no matter what they do. Because this little pea brain cannot hold all the different performances that went on, so I only judge what I see on the stage at the moment, and never compare one to the next. I compare it to what is in my head as excellence, and I compare what I see on stage to what I believe is excellence in *hula*. There is always fallout, because you don’t go into a competition not thinking that you want to win, and you try your hardest, and you’ve practiced your hardest. And when you don’t win, it’s a great disappointment, and you want to know why. And so sometimes I remember, and sometimes I don’t.

**But people come up and say, How come?**

Right; they do. And I say, sometimes I don’t remember, because I’m judging one performance at a time. And when that’s finished, I drop it out of my head and I look a hundred percent at the next performance that is in front of me. All I can say is, Did you do *hula*? Did you bring excellence to what you did? I tend to be a foot person, which means I watch the feet, because—

**I thought you’re supposed to keep your eyes on the hands.**

No, feet.

**Oh, that was a composer from latter day. [CHUCKLE]**

Feet for me, because if the feet is good, then the rest will be good, I believe. And then, there’s interpretation, there’s how they have expressed the words that they’re trying to dance. So I believe perhaps it’s because I try to be fair, and I try to always be consistent.

**As a *kumu hula*, who gets to join your *hālau*?**

Oh, I take anyone. I take anyone who would like to come. I don’t teach children well.

**M-m.**

I don’t teach children well, so I don’t have children’s classes, but I do have adults. And I take anyone who is willing to learn.

**And what does it take to get them kicked out?**

Don’t listen. [CHUCKLE] Don’t listen. If you don’t listen to the *kumu*, there’s no excuses, and out you go.

**It's not a democracy?**

Not at all.

As I tell my early classes that come when you first come to be a new student, I tell them that I am goddess in the *hālau*, and if you think I'm the crazy woman, don't come back next week, 'cause it is my *hālau*. [CHUCKLE] So that's how we approach *hula*.

**And when somebody's not very good at *hula*—**

M-m.

**—but has a good heart—**

M-hm.

**—do they get to stay in?**

Oh, absolutely. There's always a place; there's always a place. And you're never too old to start *hula*. The desire must there. But just like anything else ... your abilities are your abilities; it's not the same as the next person. It is who you are. So maybe if you're not in the advanced class, it's okay. Because where you are is where you can flourish. So sometimes people need to remember that *kumu* knows best, and *kumu* will put you where she thinks or he thinks is the best place for you. But I believe *hula* is for everyone.

**Hōkūlani Holt seems to believe that there is something of value for everyone in the Hawaiian culture, and while she cherishes and preserves Hawai'i's past, she also embraces Hawai'i's present, and is hopeful about its future. We'd like to thank Hōkūlani Holt for taking time out of her very crowded schedule to share her story with us. And we'd like to thank you for joining us on Long Story Short. For PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. *A hui hou kākou.***

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and *all* episodes of **Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox**, visit [pbshawaii.org](http://pbshawaii.org).

Video clip with production credits:

**What did you mean when you said that in *hālau*, you learn to appreciate little things?**

M-hm. Little things for me from this week to next week, you have learned where to put your eyes. That's enough. Because we have progressed from this week to next week, where to put your eyes. The little things like that are as important as where to dance your feet, and where to dance your hands. The little things.