

GUEST: ROSE TSENG

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Hawaii should really unite the world through—I mean, whether it's culture, the political. We are in between East and West. If we could be the model for the world, then you will have better world peace. I think the world is one place. If people understand each other, there should be less war. And there will be less competition, but more collaboration. But Hawaii kids have to learn that first.

Rose Tseng is a product of East and West. She was a Chinese immigrant who came to the US as a college student, and came up through the academic ranks to become the first Asian American woman to lead a four-year institution of higher learning. In a dozen years, as chancellor of the University of Hawaii at Hilo, Dr. Tseng was a catalyst for innovation and growth. Her story is next, on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. If you don't live on the Big Island, you may not recognize the name Rose Tseng. But once you've heard her story, you're not likely to forget her. When Dr. Tseng became chancellor of the University of Hawaii at Hilo in 1998, she brought a can-do spirit, a collaborative approach, and a sense of urgency that would transform the school during her twelve-year tenure. She was born in China, and given the name Yun-Li. Both of her parents were medical doctors who took care of patients, regardless of ability to pay.

You started life in northeastern China, in the same province that gave us Confucius. What was that early childhood like?

Well, I was five when I left Shandong, which the Confucius was born. I have no relation with him.

[CHUCKLE]

But you know, I remember I was the third in the family. We have a pretty good house, but it's a courtyard with four quarters. We are the south quarter, and my family, four of us, and my parents, live in there. And the north quarter was the [INDISTINCT] for grandparents, and the relatives. And we were comfortable. But my mother was always working. Sewing, and things like that, even though she was a doctor.

Your mother was a professional who was raising her children at the time she was working.

M-hm.

Did she talk with you about the whole concept of having it all, and what her opinion of that was?

My mother came from a traditional family, so she also tell me, You have to be good woman and mother, and lady, and granddaughter, you know, whatever mother eventually too. So I had to learn how to sew, and I have to learn to—I mean, being a woman means you have to manage the house with little money. And she is pretty perfectionist, and she taught us that woman has even more responsibility than man. But still, you have to be good in the world. You have to compete with the world, 'cause she showed example. Because her skill, she was able to make the living, and carry the responsibility for the children, and for a lot of money in the family came from her clinic. 'Cause my father get—you know, public servant is very little money, beginning of Taiwan. So I am the second daughter. We have older brother, my older sister, and me. I would say ... come to me, she didn't have a really, really strong hope for me to be the best in the world or something. But she just feel like, you have to do your best, do your best, do your best. Contribute. [CHUCKLE]

So it was by position of child, what the expectations were?

Yeah. My older brother got the highest expectation. He has to be perfect in everything. By the time when I get there, I had to be good, but I don't think I have to be the first in my class all the time.

After World War II, Rose Tseng's family moved to Shanghai, and then to Taiwan, to avoid the spread of Communism.

What was Taiwan like for the family who had just arrived?

Taiwan was very rural and very tough that time. 'Cause right after second world war, Japanese moved away, and China, Taiwan is Republic of China. And there's nothing. No school, and nothing. [CHUCKLE] No economy. I mean, the agriculture was bad, everything was bad. So we move in, my mother is a pediatrician and gynecologist. And they found jobs. Yeah, they found jobs in a military hospital first. And my mother finally, with four kids, she couldn't work, so she had a clinic in the house. We had to help out. No babysitter, nothing luxury, but we get clothes, we got food, and we go to school, public school. And so we had a pretty tough—not really, really poor, poor life, but not luxury at all.

A lot of people would figure, since both parents were physicians, there'd be affluence.

No; no, not in the old days in Taiwan right after the war. Taiwan was very poor. Actually, we were not the poorest. Some of my classmate had no shoes. Some of my class—well, I even personally didn't have anything more than maybe one pair of shoes. And we had to make our own clothes. Even when I was twelve, I have to make all my uniforms myself.

Did your parents communicate values to you about work, and community?

Yeah; yeah. I think that's what daily, they showed us. Even though they were kinda poor, they have a clinic in the house, my father immediately come back from the hospital, university hospital and medical school hospital, he had fulltime job there, make very little money. But then he come back, he immediately take his clothes off, and treat the patients. And many of the patients don't pay. That time, they don't have money. So my mother kind of help out, and she did the kids and the mother, and the father does the surgery and all that. I know they were busy all night, and on the weekends. Very little pay. But I see them doing that. I thought, Well, that's life.

Did your parents, as physicians, encourage you to go into the medical field?

Not really. Actually, they probably told all of us, Don't become physician. Or they kind of, maybe informally, we saw how they do, seven days a week, and the house is open for the public all the time. And we decided, none of us want to be physician. They think scientist or educators are the best. And they also don't like us to make money, either. They said, Making money is not good. So in a way, none of us went into business. We all become scientists or—

What was the bias against making money?

I don't know. My parents just tell us from—they warn, people who are rich are not as good as people who are poor. Or something like that.

Did your father ever explain why he was willing to take in people that he knew would probably never pay him?

I think it's kind of—I don't think they had to say it. Basically, we grew up that way. When the patient comes in, we all have to disappear, or go to the back yard.

When there's a need, you fill—

Yeah; m-hm.

—the need.

M-hm. We saw them doing that. And I think, yeah, maybe it's just their education, their life, and they just show us. And they're very happy. We saw them busy, but they were happy.

Her parents' work ethic was reinforced by Rose Tseng's teachers, who recognized her potential, and encouraged academic excellence.

They would say, You're good, but you're not working hard enough. You have to work hard enough. And that was when I was thirteen, my seventh grade, actually eighth grade teacher tell me I didn't work hard enough. And lo and behold, I started working hard enough. I got everything. And I got exam from the high school entrance exam, which was big deal. And I thought, Well all I have to do just little hard work. So from then on, this teacher told me, You're good in math, science, but you're not really good in PE. You better learn PE. I thought, Oh, I don't like PE. But then she told me, But you cannot be successful,

you're not healthy. So a lot of things is hard work by somebody influence you all along.

When you were born in the same province where Confucius was born, my guess is, you were not named Rose.

No. [CHUCKLE]

How did you get the name, Rose?

Actually, my teacher was a Catholic nun. She said, Hmm, you all have to pick a name. She gave me a long name, and then Rose. And Mary, I think. And you know, I thought, Oh, I want a shorter one. But Mary was in every textbook, so I don't think I want Mary. So Rose was the one. [CHUCKLE]

And Rose is a nice, classic name.

Yeah, I thought. And I understand the color, and I understand, I mean, I understand what a rose is. So I said, Okay, I'll pick that name. I never knew I will stick to this for the rest of my life. I thought was using a lang—but I never use Yun-Li anymore.

Rose Tseng started college in Taiwan, where she studied chemistry and engineering. While she was away at school, her parents moved to Ethiopia to work for the World Health Organization. When Rose went to visit them, she caught the travel bug, and decided it was time for a move of her own.

I told them I'm not going back to Taiwan, and I'm gonna apply for some college in the United States. And I look in the United States, I decided the east, west, and I got admission for East Coast, West Coast, UCLA, and the university in the East Coast. And Kansas State, I decided. And I told them I'm going to Kansas State. They said, Hmm, okay. I mean, they didn't say one thing or the other too. They gave me like—I remember, a thousand dollars in 1962, not a whole lot of money. That's the only money they gave me. From then on, I was on my own.

So you began applying for scholarships?

Yeah; I did. And I thought Kansas was cheaper, a little bit than UCLA, like maybe a hundred dollar cheaper for tuition per year. But that make a difference. So then, I went to work in a lab, and I work in the summer as a waitress.

What about the language? When did you learn English?

Actually, I did not learn alphabet until twelve ... seventh grade. And I went to school a year early, so in seventh grade, I was twelve. And then I didn't learn English until, really, Ethiopia. I went to Ethiopia, and I didn't know how to speak, except English, so I start practicing. By the time I get to Kansas, maybe two months later, I was fine. I was able to understand enough, 'cause I took—I mean, I was a pretty good student in high school. So I took all the English grammar, writing, and when I went to Kansas, most people thought I could speak English. But there were things that I really didn't understand. But yeah, I just learned by trial.

And no problem getting a job, no problem with your schoolwork?

Mm, no, no problem with schoolwork. Schoolwork, my math and science is so strong, so my chemistry, I get A's. But I remember taking speech communication; that was tough. I remember taking American history, and social science; that was tough, because I have to do all these questions in certain time. I understand it, but I'm slower to reading all these long questions. But it was tough for the first couple years.

Rose Tseng earned her bachelor's degree in chemistry from Kansas State University, and then, once again, she headed West with a scholarship to UC Berkeley, where she would earn her master's and PhD in nutritional sciences, with minors in biochemistry and physiology.

Kansas was very nice, I learned everything. But I miss ocean too much. I grew up in Taiwan, and I miss ocean. I also miss tofu.

[CHUCKLE]

I also miss—

Not a lot of that in Kansas, right?

No; no. And vegetable and fruit, and fish. And things I missed too much. So Berkeley gave me a scholarship, and actually I had scholarship, and then for Berkeley fellowship to match up tuition and everything. And so I went there. And of course, Berkeley is a good school, too.

Let's talk a little bit about meeting your husband. Because he would become your lifetime companion.

Right, right. And we met in Berkeley. And he was a graduate student, I was a graduate student. We both came from Taiwan. And we got to know each other. And we met in the library. We were studying in the library, so we're both are not rich. So we go to movie together occasionally.

But same values and—

Same values.

—you could understand his profession as well.

Uh-huh, uh-huh.

And then, how did you decide, when it came time to go into the working world, whose career led?

Well, I think that part, I'm still traditional Chinese—was traditional Chinese. I married, change to his name, I felt that must be done. And then I was following him. And I finished my PhD earlier, but I did a year post-doc, waiting for him to decide where he want to go.

And then you went where he wanted to go.

M-hm, yeah. He want—

Which was?

San Jose. He got recruited to IBM. So he moved to San Jose, which is not very far from Berkeley.

And then you found a job there—

M-hm.

—as well?

M-hm, m-hm. Actually, I stayed home for half a year, trying to say, I don't need to work anymore, I can just enjoy life with a little kid. My first daughter is one year old that time. But I found myself immediately got into San Jose State, teaching part-time, and San Jose City, teach chemistry part-time. And then I start feeling I'll enjoy the teaching, and enjoy research, so I went back, and they recruited me fulltime. And then I found the first Department of Nutrition and Food Science at San Jose State when I was like twenty-seven.

And when you became the chair of the department—

M-hm, m-hm.

—was that where you wanted to end up?

No, I did a lot of things by chance. Because they didn't have a department chair, and they asked me to do it, I did it. [CHUCKLE] And I think I just kinda grew into it, because I was developing new curriculum, I was doing research, I was advising students. So I got into it.

But in the back of your head, it wasn't, and after this, I'm gonna go do that?

No. Not really. I think if you look back, I just happened to be in the right place, and people asked me to do certain things. It just gradually happened.

What she calls chance, led Rose Tseng to take on more and more responsibility. Her ascent took her from teacher, to chair, to dean, and ultimately, chancellor; first, at a California community college system, and then at the University of Hawaii at Hilo, where she became the first Asian American woman to head a four-year university. Along the way, she developed a reputation as a skilled matchmaker, with a talent for bringing together the people, resources, and funding to make things happen.

I like knowing people, and I like to build teams and how to work together. So I think basically, now I look back, maybe I was born or happened—I had the opportunity to learn these things, and I enjoy learning it. And when I learn it, I'm not very strong leader in a way, I don't tell people what to do. We kinda work together. So I'm a facilitative kind of leader. At least in San Jose State, they tell me I was more, and even the union told me, You're not a true, true management. You're more like us.

But that—maybe—I don't know what the standards were then, but now, the standard is collaborative leadership.

Yeah. Actually, I feel like I was born to do that. And I didn't know that was the kind of things you should do. I mean, now at that time, I told my father, I'm not, I'm not the kind of dean people think I should be.

You don't tell people what to—

Yeah.

—do, and when.

I don't tell people. My father says, They want you. If they want you, they must see some good about you. You've been there for many years, they know you. So I think collaborative facilitating and not bossy, but still have the vision.

Were you recruited for the job of UH Hilo chancellor?

I love Hawaii. I went to Hawaii for every vacation. And lo and behold, somebody nominated me for the UH Hilo job. So anyway, so it just came my way. And so I decided to apply, decided to send my thing in the last day. And it fits. It fits, because I want to get a smaller place, I want to go back to research, and meeting with people, and get culture and science. I'm a scientist, but with really understanding of culture and minority culture, and indigenous culture. I love to learn that. So it fits after a while, I thought, Well, this is my destiny. I go around the world, going back between East and West.

Well, you say it fits. But I can think of a couple of reasons why it might not have fit. For one, you're a hard-charging leader, and Hilo sometimes resists change. It wants things done on its own time. And you were from the outside, too.

M-hm, m-hm.

Two things that could have kiboshed the deal, as they could have really hurt you, unless you figured a way around them.

I think I was maybe took me a little while to figure out. But I did ask community, What do you want? I said, I came in from outside, don't ask me for the vision of the university. Even though I was a couple years ago, I was on the accreditation team for UH Manoa, so I knew a lot about UH system. So I thought Hilo was intriguing, because this is the second university in the State of Hawaii, and still hasn't really polished

No, and it was feeling very, very marginalized by—

Right.

—the UH system.

A little bit, I think, the people there all feel that way. So go back to, I came in, first few month, I learned and tried to ask the community, What do you really want? And they say, What's your vision? And I said, I don't really have a strong vision. I want to get better, but I want to get the university better, the community better, and the State better, help the State better, and getting East and West connection better to Hawaii. And very vague. But then they gave me input. I had a survey, literally, being a scientist. And I taught research methodology, I did a survey. And everyone fill in. I couldn't believe people fill in six-page things what they want to do. So I came out with goals, and finally followed the goals. Making university better, making more native Hawaiians, and making culture and science together, and getting more resource, getting university bigger, getting true, true residential university. And a lot of things fits what I like to do. And they came from the community, not just from me.

I know you've said that the success of a university is tied to the community's success.

M-hm.

And both can help each other.

M-hm, yeah.

How did you go about connecting the two better?

I think my purpose is, if we all want certain thing together, like in Hilo, the leadership together, whether it's union leaders, whether it's a business leader, or community builder, native Hawaiians, we eventually see the same thing. Want to be a better place for the next generation, and want Hawaii to be a better place.

Everybody wants the place to be better, but so many have different ideas about how to do that. And you've had to navigate some interesting—

Yeah.

—contradictions or schisms between, say, Western science and Hawaiian culture, and the feeling about Mauna Kea being a sacred place.

Yeah. That's one, people tell me is very, very difficult. I didn't find it that difficult. 'Cause I want, first of all, it's sincere from my heart. I really believe native Hawaiians have so many good culture, good language that we really, as a Hawaiian state, especially in Hilo has more native Hawaiians. We have to make that the best. So I encourage them and support them, and they are good. So we got a new building, we got a new PhD program, and all that. And they're the best. Then, I have science. I'm a scientist myself. Hawaii, out of the whole place, is a natural resource. How do we protect the nature, protect the culture, and protect the science, and make the science best. Everybody have the same goal now. I would say not everybody, the majority of people says, We want the best for the children. And of course, more science, better science, as long as our kids can get involved. And that's it, that's it. Your kids has to get involved. Because we cannot have a foreign scientists only, even though I may be coming from mainland, but I see myself as a resident of Hawaii now. I think my university had to deliver some education so that the future—the world best telescope, like thirty million telescope, had to be able to hire our students. And they see the future, they could be the best scientist, they can get Nobel Prize, they can get discovery. And they have the hope. So we've been—and the Imiloa Astronomy Center is one thing Senator Inouye helped me to build that, and he has the vision, and I carry through pretty much with the help of everyone. That's integrate culture and science. So now the kids in Big Island and everywhere understand science and culture can integrate or can help each other. And it can be the best of both worlds. We have many native Hawaiian kids are in science field now, and they're doing very, very well. And they actually are probably better scientists, because they have the interest in their heart than many people who just become skillful, but no passion. They have the passion of protect the mountain, passion of understand the universe. They have the passion of everything they learn.

I wonder how many of those of us who are outside Hilo realize to what extent the campus changed during your twelve years as chancellor.

I'm pretty proud of that. It's not myself. The Legislature helped, the community people helped, the students helped, the faculty helped. But we have the same goal. When we work together, things happen.

We just don't have time to list everything that blossomed while Rose Tseng served as chancellor of UH Hilo. Just to give you an idea of developments on her watch, the school added ten new bachelor's degree programs, six master's degrees, and two PhD programs. It launched three new colleges, a foreign exchange program, and nine building projects. Student enrollment went up fifty percent, and funding for research grants more than tripled.

The metrics from your tenure are very impressive. But what do you think was the most fun and notable, in terms of what you did? Because this took—it was all leadership, and it took a lot of people, but what was the fun of it for you, in terms of what you did during the day?

I don't know what's the most fun. I think the fun during the day is to see students. And I think that's why I decided to move from a big place to a smaller university is, the students know me, and I see them—all kind of students. The native Hawaiian, the international, the mainland students, the Oahu—and they just love it.

Can you define, perhaps, the essence of your tenure?

I would say, I did my best. This place is a better place for the community, and for the people. And in certain ways, unite the world better through East and West connection. And the kids, they are better citizens, and better global citizens than before. That's just increment, but to the point of more broader impact to the world. And the kids are enlightened to be global citizens.

You didn't move to Hilo until a dozen or so years ago. Do you think you've found the place where you'll live the rest of your life?

Yeah, I like Hilo. I really, really like—actually, I like Hawaii. I think I learned a lot, the last twelve years, from Hawaii. Especially Hilo, because I live there. People are so sincere. People are so pure. And they don't get mad. You could be the meanest person there, I think you can get mellow.

[CHUCKLE]

And so I enjoyed Hilo. The people say they're slow, they're whatever. I find they're just so patient. I mean, most Hawaii are like that, too. I think all the Western people should come to Hawaii to learn the real aloha spirit. Not just fake aloha spirit. The sincerity, the people, the goodness of people. And you know, Hilo is really—people are very, very nice.

Your whole life, it sounds, you've been twenty-four/seven. What do you do when you're just—do you ever have a time when you're doing nothing, and really thinking about nothing? Just mellowing out?

I love education, but I don't always like twenty-four/seven. So I decided that I need to step down, then I can have a little life, then I can still do education, and still do things for the community. And I don't think I will ever just stay doing

nothing, just for myself, and just enjoy. I don't think I'm that kind of person yet. Maybe when I get a little older. Right now, I still would like to contribute. And I'm helping. I don't want to be running the university, but I want to run things that helping the university, helping Hawaii, helping the State.

Rose Tseng's advice for students graduating from high school and college is to travel, read, meet people from other places, and always keep learning. All things she continues to do, herself. Although Dr. Tseng stepped down from the chancellor's position at UH Hilo in June 2010, retirement was not what she had in mind. She told us she'll make herself available to help in advancing the goals of UH Hilo, and she'll keep working for more East-West exchange. For Long Story Short, and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

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For young people, I would say, read, learn, and learn from everybody. Confucius said you have learn from any three—I mean, if you are among any three, he said he can learn from the other two. Even Confucius. So I feel like I'm humble, I need to learn from everyone. And I think young people should just learn.