

GUEST: DANNY KALEIKINI: THE EARLY YEARS

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In the 1960s, Hawaii was known as a magical place; a place where tourists could enjoy the sand, the surf, the hula dancers, and Danny Kaleikini. For thirty years, Hawaii's Ambassador of Aloha welcomed the world to the Hala Terrace at the Kahala Hilton, and he did it in a way that everyone could understand.

[HAWAIIAN LANGUAGE] [JAPANESE LANGUAGE] [FILIPINO LANGUAGE]
[KOREAN LANGUAGE] [GERMAN LANGUAGE] [SAMOAN LANGUAGE]

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. Walk up to any Hawaii resident and say, *Aloha*. Chances are, they'll recognize the trademark greeting of Hawaii's own Kaniela, Danny Kaleikini. Anyone who is anyone stayed at the Kahala Hilton, and they all went to see Danny. But like many people of renown, Danny Kaleikini, an entertainer with an international following, had humble beginnings.**

How did your life start out?

Well, I started out doing a prayer every morning to Akua, to God, and I thank Him for the breath of life, and that, to give me the strength to survive. Because that was our number one goal, to survive every day, coming from where I came from, Hawaiian Homestead, Papakolea.

What was life like? When you were a little kid in Papakolea, what do you remember?

I remember growing up in Papakolea, my *ohana*, my family. We didn't have much. But the best part is, we didn't know we didn't have much.

[CHUCKLE] How many of them were you?

Well, there was—

How many people?

A total of eight, plus two. So we had one big family. Plus—

How many bedrooms?

Only two. We survived, and I think that was most important.

Are you saying you didn't have enough to eat?

Oh, we had plenty to eat. We could go in the backyard, we had the guavas, we had the sweet potatoes, we had the *waiwi*'s. And I tell everybody, I says, at

home, for all the holidays, man, I says, we had hotdog for turkey, hotdog for Christmas, hotdog for New Year's. I finally got invited to a Thanksgiving dinner, my friend's house, and they served turkey. And I go, What is this? They go, That's turkey. I says, You folks don't have hotdogs? [CHUCKLE] They go, What you mean hotdog? I said, I thought ... No, turkey is for Thanksgiving. [CHUCKLE]

So when you say you worked to survive everyday, what was tough about survival?

I think, coming from Papakolea, my oldest brother and I, we used to go sell newspapers. I was only about six years old. And walked from Papakolea, all the way down to Bishop and King Street, go sell—we had the corner over there.

How old was your brother?

My brother was, he was eight.

So eight and six, walking all the way—

Yeah.

—down there.

Yeah; but he was *akamai*. He was my oldest brother, and the newspaper was only five cents, Honolulu Advertiser. He told me, he said, Brah, sell three papers, and the next paper, that's for us. So he said, make sure when I sell the three papers, put the fifteen cents in your pocket. And the other one, put in your left pocket; that's the one we going take home. And that's how I learned. I tell, well, what an education. Then I would end up—we both end up with, like, thirty-five, forty cents for the day. That was big money for us.

What did you do with it?

Give to my mother. We took it home, that was the main thing. And then we got—oh, we going enterprising. So we going shine shoes. We shined shoes by Hawaii Theater. We couldn't pass Hawaii Theater, 'cause that side belonged to all the family from Palama Settlement. We stayed on this side of Hawaii Theater, belonged to people from Papakolea, Kakaako. And, you know, so we—everybody knew where they could go, and where they couldn't go.

And nobody ever tried to take over the other one's—

No.

—area?

No, everybody—those days, everybody—had everything going on that time. I mean, had all the gambling, had everything else. I mean, was interesting, but—

You saw a lot, as a little kid.

Yeah, but that's how you ... that kind of education, you could never buy. The old days, they were ... I mean, you could sit down and *kuka* with these guys, you could talk story. And when you talk about *hanai*, adoption, and about *ohana* and family. 'Cause, going to school, everybody was wearing long pants, and I was still wearing short pants.

Why is that?

'Cause—

Couldn't afford?

We couldn't afford. I mean, you know what? Just to buy one was like four bucks, man. And that was big money. So I was shining shoes, and so I went to this place called Kress. You ever heard of—

Oh, yeah.

So I walked out with the long pants. And the manager was following me. [CHUCKLE] He goes, Excuse me, you have something that belongs to me? I go, No. He says, Oh, really? What's under your shirt? [CHUCKLE]

So you tried to get yourself—

Yeah.

—long pants.

So I said, Oh, I said, I sorry. I said, I always wanted one long pants, and I couldn't. I said—was four dollars. Then he said—'cause he knew I was shining shoes down by Hawaii Theater. He saw me. Anyway, he says, You cannot walk in here and take things without paying for it. He said, You going jail, you know that? I said, Gee, I sorry, I never—and so I told him, I said, But I get about thirty cents I made today, from selling newspapers. So I said, I can give you the thirty cents. He said, Well you come down, and you make up for the whole four dollars. You take these pants now, okay? But you come up, and you make sure. I used to go every day, every other day. I only had twenty-five cents, but I go, Oh ... and I paid him for the pants, that's how. But I never forgot. I mean—when you talk about *ohana*, family, I mean, that's how we all—everybody came together, and that's the word *hanai*. We adopted each other, so we—we could ...

Did you feel deprived?

No.

I mean, you didn't have what you wanted.

No, but I think most important, we had each other. My father worked for the City and County. He was Refuse Department; my mother was a cocktail waitress. But we all survived. The thing is, we all came together *ohana*, family. And we used to *kani ka pila* in the back yard. I mean, we had no idea what we were doing. Sing songs, we'd sing all the Hawaiian songs. I mean, [SINGS] *E lei ka lei lei*. I mean, that's all, we sang it all. And I know that my grandfather ... we had to learn ... passages from the Bible, sing the church songs. And I said, Ho, this is—I said, When I get big, I want to be a truck driver. And my grandpa said, Oh, terrific. You don't want to learn, you don't want to sing, then you don't eat. [CHUCKLE] Well, because I like to eat, I know all the church songs. [CHUCKLE] [SINGS] *Ekolo mea nui ma ka honua; nani kelii ke kahi hehei, nani kelii*. I mean, was amazing.

Did you want to be a truck driver?

Oh, yeah. When you grew up, and especially you go work for the City and County, Refuse Department. They have credit union. [CHUCKLE] And I mean, that was the thing, everybody. Otherwise, you can go work for the telephone company. But City and County was the best. [CHUCKLE]

And that's what your dad did, so that's what—

Yeah.

—you wanted to do too?

Well, I figured, yeah. I just figured, oh, well, I going be rubbish man, not too bad, I going have—I get income, and I can borrow money from the credit union. But ... yeah, that was part of growing up. And then, not knowing that there were ... besides that, other things outside of that, you could pursue, but that was up to you.

Truck driver, City and County worker; honorable ways to make a living, support a family. Danny Kaleikini's life was headed in that direction. But if there's a common thread that runs through the lives of so many of our Long Story Short guests, it is that collection of decisions, and people, and moments in time that, when viewed individually, can seem insignificant, and yet, the impact of these seemingly isolated factors make the difference between a regular life, and a life that is as big as the world.

I gotta be honest, Leslie. I really wanted to attend Kamehameha School. Coming from Papakolea, Hawaiian Homestead, I thought, one of us, with eight of us in the family, one of us would be accepted, being Hawaiian, *kanaka maolis*. Well, we tried and we all went to public schools, got an education. And I went to Royal School Elementary, then I went to Kawananakoa. I even ran for student body president.

What was your platform?

I ran against the smartest guys in school. One was Korean, one was Japanese, and one was Hawaiian. The Hawaiian guy was Robert Kihune. Okay? You know him?

Admiral.

So they all get up, and they dress nice, they wear shoes, and they gave their—made their presentation. Here comes the boy from Papakolea. Bare feet, I get *sala moka* pants, choke bottom pants, and ripped. And I get up there, and I go, You heard all the guys talk. I said, Whatever they said ... I going do better, so just let me sing you a song. [CHUCKLE]

And you won?

I won. [CHUCKLE] Was unreal. [CHUCKLE] All the girls voted for me. [CHUCKLE] Was so unreal, man. So I became the student body president. But after I graduated Kawananakoa, they said, Well, you're gonna have to go McKinley. I said, No way, that's Oriental school. They said, Well, then, you go Farrington. I said, No way, then I have to sing Dahil Sayon.

[CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE] I said, How about ... Roosevelt? They said, It's an English Standard school. You cannot just walk in there; you gotta take a test. And because it's English Standard, they used some of the biggest, and the hardest, and the harsh words that you never saw in your life. So my grandfather said, Hey, go take the test. He said, English is like Hawaiian. As big as the word is, cut 'em up, make

'em short. He said, No worry, no *puiwa*, don't be *makau*, don't be afraid. So I said, Okay, I'm gonna take the test. I prepared myself. I wore socks with my shoes, and I go in there, take the test. Open the test. Whoo. I had perspiration coming down. I saw the longest English word I ever saw in my life. The word was, as-pi-ra-tion. Ho. I said, No *puiwa*, no *makau*, don't get afraid, Kaniela. Cut 'em up, make 'em short. Oh, I get 'em. I put 'em down, aspiration. If you have headache, take two. [CHUCKLE] They said, We want you, you're very creative. [CHUCKLE]

You said you didn't want to go to McKinley, 'cause it's an Oriental school. Well, you're Korean-Chinese. It sounds like you were raised in a very Hawaiian—

No, my—

—atmosphere.

—oldest brother went there, my father went there. My uncles, everybody went to McKinley. So I said, I wanted to go Kamehameha. They said, Cannot. Then Farrington, I said, Oh 'cause all my family went to Farrington High School. I mean, was most unreal. But Roosevelt was mostly military.

So you just wanted to go someplace nobody else had gone in your family?

Yeah, and then they said they had the good-looking girls. [CHUCKLE]

That seems to be a recurrent theme here.

They said the good-looking girls all went to Roosevelt. [CHUCKLE]

There were people who attended Roosevelt with you, who made a name for themselves in organized crime.

Yeah, we all came out together. This was in the 50s, but we're all family, we're all related to one another. But, everybody has to do what they had to do. They chose that destination, and I went this destination in there, but we still come together, *lokahi*, united.

Why do you think you didn't go the same way?

Well, I wanted to really pursue music. Because after being involved with the music, with the choir and everything else, and I said, God, I can really make a go at music, 'cause—

Did you get any peer pressure from them?

No, we talked about it, and so one guy says, Eh, let him go sing. Let him go, and he going do good. He can talk, he can sing. We just support him. And they did.

When your grandfather said, You gotta sing if you want to eat, did you have any sense that you had a really good voice?

No. I guess, 'cause everybody sang. We had no idea until I went to Roosevelt High School, and I met my music teacher, Miss Alda Coit Lee. She said, Young man, you should come and try out for the choir. I said, No way. I says, That's not for guys like us. She said, You have a beautiful voice. And so I go in on the choir, and I started. And I learned the finer points of singing.

And she had heard you in the hallways, or something?

Yeah, she heard me. I was singing, you know when you're sitting in the corner and—

M-hm.

—singing with all the guys. And then I said, I might as well go give it—and I went in and I really liked, I really enjoyed it. Then I became part of the octet, the special group, and that's how I got involved with music, really got involved with music. That really kinda turned it around for me.

At this point in Danny's life, things were beginning to pick up speed; his skills as a singer and entertainer are developing. This is usually the point in a prodigy's career where he or she thinks that it's all about them. But listen closely to what he says. Danny knows that he didn't get where he is alone. And even now, as he reflects in 2010, at the age of seventy-two, Danny Kaleikini has not forgotten anyone who lent him a helping hand.

Who was in your high school that people might remember today?

Ron Jacobs, Wesley Park. And Wesley was my business manager. Because of Wesley Park, and I thank him very much, he got me my job at the Kahala Hilton in 1967. He got me a contract for five years. And the rate was \$1.5 million. I was guaranteed, which was unheard of. I tell you, Leslie. Before I went to Kahala, I had learning from the best from Hawaii. I started at places, and I want to thank people like when I was shining shoes, I used to go every Fridays, right across Hawaiian Electric was Charley's Taxi. And they had jam session. Jesse Kalima and The Thousand Pounds of Melody.

Wow.

So my brother and I, we'd go there, and just about five-thirty, with our shoeshine box. And they would say, Eh, two brothers from Papakolea, come over here, sing us a song. We go up there, we sing a song. [SINGING]

[CHUCKLE]

And after the song, people would throw all ... we'd pick up, like, two, three dollars, man. So we take it to Jesse. He tell, No, no, you guys take that home for you. And I tell you, I never forgot that I went to work at Waikiki Sands. Was owned by Rudy Tongg. And they had the only ladies Hawaiian band. Leinaala Ignacio, and then that's Cypriano's mother. Okay? But she had the Hawaiian shows there. So I go there, and I never forgot the Chinese manager. Go, clean your table, go. So I go clean the table. Go sing your song. I go sing. I sang my song, but sometimes I make fifty cents tip that night. And after I get through, I had to walk home to Papakoles, 'cause the bus ... closed by ... I think, ten o'clock. So then from there, Ray Kinney saw me, and he took me to the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. And he said, You watch what I do. He says, You're gonna learn. Then I learned how to be an emcee.

What was the most important thing you learned in being an emcee?

Well, not to rush, to take it. And the more you rush ... and you just take your time, 'cause that way, you double talk, and you say things three, four times, the same thing. So he just said, Just take your time, be sure what, the ... *Anoi aloha kakou apau, mai mai komo mai, aloha.* Tonight, we just want you to enjoy

yourself, relax, as we bring you the music of Hawaii. [SINGS] *Nani Hawaii ka mo—*

M-hm.

But I learned. And timing was so important. So from the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, I was there with Ray Kinney. And I went to the Hawaiian Village. Jo Flanders was there, and at that time, because I was doing the *luau* shows. Then when Alfred Apaka passed away, they were looking. I think they had several people. Jimmy Kaina, Jimmy Moikeha, then I came in. I was doing the *luau* shows, then I came into work within the Tapa Room. And then it happened for me to go to the Kahala. Wesley found a contract for me to move to the Kahala Hilton.

Now, how did he get the chops to get a contract with the Kahala?

Well, Wesley, being in the business world, he knew. I learned in life ...

[KNOCKING] you can be the smartest guy, you can have all the degrees in the world. But if you don't have that association, that's the key to success. And I learned that in life. But Wesley, he knew a lot of people. He knew all the businesspeople, and Bob Burns was the new general manager. He came in, and Wesley met Bob Burns, and they talked together, and he said guarantee that we're gonna do a good job. But—

It seems like both you and your business partner, Wesley Park, you're able to get along with people, lots of different people. You don't have to really know them well, or understand them, but you find a basis, and you're able to bridge well.

Well, the combination is, you cannot have two *poo paakiki*'s, two hardheads working together. You need intellectual, and you need one that can do the job, but listen at the same time. I mean, I always thought, Oh, I don't need him. I can do it myself. It never worked. 'Cause I knew, if I took on that project, I would fail. 'Cause I didn't have the business knowledge. You need people, you need support, and it's like coming together. But everybody has their expertise. But you gotta listen to what they have to share. And I was fortunate that I had people like ... two people that really supported me was Larry Dolim, the owner of Holsum Bakery.

How'd you know him?

I was his newspaper boy. I used to deliver papers to his house in Punchbowl. That was my route there. And Mr. Sullivan from Foodland; he was close to Larry. They were both—Foodland and Holsum Bakery, they worked closely together. And so I got to meet two of them, and they supported me, and they wanted to make sure that ... the business part. Then the other buy was Mr. John Bellinger, you know, First Hawaiian Bank. He was tough, he was rugged. I remember when I got involved with going to the Kahala, so I called his office, and his secretary says, Who's calling? I said, Oh, Kaniela. Oh, Danny. I said, Can I speak to Mr. Bellinger? She said, Oh, wait, he's busy; wait, wait, hang on. So he gets on the phone. What you want? I go, Oh, Mr. Bellinger, I want to make an album. So?

[CHUCKLE]

But, I don't have the finances. He said, Then don't make 'em. [CHUCKLE] I go, Oh, thank you. [CHUCKLE] He said, Come down here now. He said, Get your *okole* down here.

And he helped you?

Yeah, they sponsored my first album. [CHUCKLE]

Who else helped you along the way?

Oh, I gotta thank ... Reverend Akaka. And Danny Akaka, when I went to Kauai, was my minister of music. So I was part of the choir. But Kahu, is really the one that taught me about that magic word, *aloha*. And [TAPS GLASS], the *ukulele*. He told me the *ukulele* represents the world. There's only four strings, but each string represents all the different people that make up our world; black, white, yellow, brown. He said, You play each string, you'll get a sound. But try playing it all together, then you find a chord, then you find harmony, then we can all come together.

What was it like—do you remember the moment when you realized, I'm gonna play the Kahala?

Oh, no, I was so scared. I mean, that was like, one step beyond, to go from downtown Waikiki to Kahala was, the Hilton International was, I mean, premier.

Did you replace anybody when you went to the Kahala Showroom? Or—

No.

—did you create that showroom?

I created that showroom. I created—

It's—

—that room.

So what was the thinking process in figuring what will work in the showroom?

Well, first of all, I said, We're too far from Waikiki. I said, We have to work hard to get people, 'cause just to catch the taxi, and then local people said, Kahala Hilton? You know how much the cup coffee? One dollar. [CHUCKLE]

Well, who were you playing to? I mean, what did your audience to be?

Well—

Locals—

—I had no idea.

—and ...

I wa—

—tourists?

I wanted the tourists, but that's why Wesley and everybody says, Go get the local people.

So as a way to get the tourists.

And then, I tell you, I thank God, the local people, holiday supported. They would have their Christmas parties, they would have all the events. And they would come. I mean, they would come like sixty, seventy-five, one time. But we had *kamaaina* rates for them too.

Well, how did you draw them in? What do you think brought them in?

I did it Hawaiian style. I did it the *pupu*'s, and all the *kanaka maolis*. I mean, I used to sing, *Ua Like No a Like*, I did, *Leialoha Lei Makamae*. But I did all the ... even like Andy Anderson was one—I love Mr. Anderson. I love his songs. And I used to sing *Malihini Mele*. And then everybody used to get a bang, 'cause I used to add my own words to it. But—[SNAPS FINGERS]— that thing was an upbeat tune.

Real hapa haole ...

All the *hapa haole* songs, I tell you. And every night, I sang the *Wedding Song*. And the other song was either *Lovely Hula Hands*, or *Beyond the Reef*. Either one. Yeah; and everybody knew the song. Not only the *malihinis*, but the *kamaainas* as well. 'Cause *Lovely Hula Hands ...* Andy Anderson wrote that song.

So you started out with a local crowd. And then, what happened?

And then the tourists started to come from Waikiki. Then I had to go market the show. And I started to get the Japanese. Once the Japanese, you could not—the second show was sold out. Every night. Was unreal.

And thus began a run of shows that most likely will never be equaled in Hawaii entertainment. We'll talk with Danny Kaleikini about his thirty years as the headliner at the Kahala Hilton in an upcoming episode. For Long Story Short, and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit pbshawaii.org.

I went to the senior prom. I took this girl, but I was playing in the dance orchestra. We had a sixteen-piece orchestra. We were call the Teen Towners. I was the drummer, I was the trumpet player, and I was also the vocalist. So, I had a big part in the band. So I took this girl, and I says, I'm gonna have to play the first two sets. And I says, But the third set, I can come back, and we can have a dance together. And those days I bought her a carnation lei. Five dollars, cost.

Those big, red ones?

Five bucks, cost me. And so anyway, so I took her. I'm playing, I came back and I go, Where's my date? They said, Oh, she called her father to come pick her up, 'cause she said you're boring. And I said, What? She left. I said, For real? And she took my lei? [CHUCKLE] I paid five bucks for that lei. [CHUCKLE] True story. [CHUCKLE]