

GUEST: DANNY KALEIKINI: AMBASSADOR OF ALOHA

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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.

So these two Roosevelt boys—

Yeah, but we had to do ev—

—got this thing together.

We had to do everything our self ... put the show together. It wasn't easy, Leslie. And because we were far away from Waikiki, we like, in the boondocks going to Kahala. But we had to make it. The successor was, the local people. Wesley said, Take care the local people. And they all came. And because the local people came, then the tourists came.

And once the tourists came, the Hala Terrace at the Kahala Hilton became The Showroom for Hawaii. Presidents, royalty, Hollywood stars, everyone who was anyone came to see Kaniela, Danny Kaleikini.

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

[SINGING] And the silent night shines with the light in the eyes I love. All the things I ever knew, all my world is only you, whirling in the dance you do, lovely hula girl. That's an old one. [CHUCKLES] Aloha no. Danny Kaleikini. [CHUCKLE]

***Aloha mai kakou.* I'm Leslie Wilcox. In this edition of Long Story Short, we continue our conversation with entertainer, Danny Kaleikini. As a young boy in Papakolea, Danny was taught the values of family and hard work. He started out playing music in his back yard, then took his talents to Waikiki, where he learned the business of entertainment. All of this led to the year 1967, when Danny Kaleikini, the boy who couldn't afford long pants, became the headline entertainer at the world famous Kahala Hilton.**

[MUSIC]

Did it ever get old to you, doing the show for thirty years? And you said you were doing it, what six, seven times a week sometimes.

No. I went in there, and I was really down and out, I get up there, and I look in the audience, and I see everybody naked. And I'm laughing so much.

[CHUCKLE] I look, and, look at them. Oh, my god. [CHUCKLE] And I'm laughing, and I'm doing the show.

You were amusing yourself.

Yeah. [CHUCKLE] No, but it worked. 'Cause you know, I had to do that ... every night.

And that showroom was based around you, right? It was—

Yeah.

It was the cult of Kaniela.

Yeah. I mean, I got to meet the king and queen of—Queen Elizabeth, and her husband. And Prince Charles used to stay there, 'cause he played polo, and he used to come with Princess Diana. I got to play golf with President Ford, and I met ... all the presidents stayed at the Kahala. And I got to meet 'em all, and then Mrs. Imelda, she would come. She would stay at the Kahala Hilton; Mrs. Marcos. And she would come to my show. And she always brought like about, forty to fifty people. And they had a section, and the security was tight, and everybody was comfortable, and yet, uneasy, because of the security and everything else. But they always stayed in one little corner. So I'm doing the show; I get up and, Aloha. Then all of a sudden, I go, p-sst, [FILIPINO LANGUAGE].

[CHUCKLE]

[FILIPINO LANGUAGE] Which means, beautiful lady. [FILIPINO LANGUAGE] I would sing, *Dahil sayon*, [FILIPINO LANGUAGE] *mabuhay*. Mrs. Marcos would stand up, and sing the whole song. That was her song. But she had a big voice. But all the big stars came to the Kahala. One of them was Don Rickles; funny guy. He always came with Bob Newhart, Wayne Newton, David Copperfield.

And then, you started making a lot of trips to Japan, right? You had a—

Oh, 1960—

—whole new following.

1960, I was invited to Japan. I was the first from Hawaii to do the Tokyo Broadcasting competitive, singing international. So I was the first. I competed with people from Olivia Newton John, they had people that came from Russia, China, Japan, and it was a big competition. The host of the show was Sammy Davis. And the stars, the special guest stars were the Jackson, Michael Jackson and—

M-hm.

—the brothers.

So how'd you do in the competition?

I won a gold trophy. I won one of the awards. I was very fortunate I won.

Did Hollywood come calling for you?

I did the movie with Charleston Heston. I had a speaking part with him in The Hawaiians. I played the Hawaiian captain for the Royal Hawaiian Guard. I had to arrest Charleston Heston.

What's the charge?

Violation of the defense of the [INDISTINCT]; treason.

You are taking me to jail?

Yes, sir.

Let me go.

And I had to shoot it up in Los Angeles. I stayed at the Roosevelt Hotel, but every morning I'd get up to go do makeup at, like, five o'clock in the morning. After I did that, I said, I don't ever want to be an actor. All I did was wait, every day.

What about performing at showrooms in Vegas?

While I was there, I worked at Caesar's Palace, in the main showroom for three years. First year, I was the opening act for Paul Anka in 1970; then '71, I was the opening act for Phyllis Maguire. Third year, I worked with Alan King. So it was a wonderful—I mean this was in the '70s. And then, '58, I left Hawaii '58 to '59. I went to work at the Royal York Hotel in Toronto. I did a show, a television show. And there was a young man that started out, and he sang, [SINGS] If ever I should leave you, it wouldn't be in springtime. Robert Goulet. Then I went to work in New York City at the Lexington Hotel. They had the Hawaiian Room, so I worked there. And then I worked at the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago. And then I went to Fort Lauderdale in Florida, in the Yankee Clipper Hotel. This was in 1960. Then from there, we went to work in Cuba, 1960, at the Habana Hilton Hotel. And Bautis—and they had all that thing going on, and Bautista left, he went to Florida. So we were booked at the Habana for about a month. And one day the military came and they took over the whole hotel.

That was the Bay of Pigs time, right?

Well, the guy, Fidel Castro and the brother were—that was the headquarters for them, and we all became Cubano. Viva la Castro. Viva la Castro. [CHUCKLE] And we went—

Were you scared?

Yeah. 'Cause all of a sudden, the military, and then ... 'cause we didn't have our passports. Then finally, we got our passports, and we went to work in Puerto Rico at the Caribbean Hilton Hotel.

What did your family say? Your father, your mother, brother, sister.

Oh, yeah; they couldn't believe what I was doing. Like, my father would never come into the room; he always stayed by the coconut tree. He had his fatigue jacket on, he had his six-pack beer.

[CHUCKLE]

So, I set it up one night, and had the spotlight. P-king, they shined the spotlight. Oh, he wanted to knock me out, boy.

[CHUCKLE]

I said, Ladies and gentlemen, I want you to meet my father. He refuses to pay my cover charge. [CHUCKLE] So he sits out there with his six-pack beer [CHUCKLE], and we leave him alone, and security knows that he's my father. But I said, He taught me how to sing. Then we would sing the Hawaiian songs together right there. [CHUCKLE] True story.

Wow.

I wish I taped that. Oh, my god. That's collector's item.

No pictures of that exist.

Oh, no more that time. That's why I said, those are the kinda times when you don't forget, and you remember. And I think it's so important, not only for me, but for everybody. I mean, you have your father, take care your father, you have your mother, take care your mother, you take care your grandma, take care. But I think it comes to the point, we all gotta *malama no ohana*. You know, *malama*, take care the family. But all the people that helped me, being at the Kahala all those years. I mean, that was a long time to be there. From the costume making to the girls that all worked with me, the *hula* dancers. Jackie did all the costumes for the show. And then my daughter was the designer. But, you know, it lasted for ...

Thirty years.

Thirty years, yeah.

And you kept all those people employed.

Yeah, but I kept telling everybody; I says, The magic is ... we used to get together once every two months, and I used to tell the guys, Eh, the star of the show ... all of us, okay? You guys give 'em good service. Would you like another cup of coffee, ma'am? Would you care for a glass of water? And you give 'em that smile, and give 'em that *aloha*. Give 'em good service. I said, by the time we get do the show, and then everybody's in a very good and then after we do the show, I said, I guarantee, we're gonna be here for a long time.

By any measure, thirty years as a showroom headliner is a run beyond anyone's wildest dreams. Danny Kaleikini did it by combining music, his Hawaiian background, humor, and his *aloha* spirit; especially his *aloha* spirit.

[MUSIC]

Was it Governor Waihee who gave you the title, Ambassador of Aloha?

Yeah; in 1988. Yeah, that was—I was so honored, 'cause you know, Duke Kahanamoku has been our Ambassador of Aloha. And I had the privilege of working with Duke. We went to open the Sheraton Dallas Hotel in 1959, in Dallas, Texas. We went up there, we had no idea about Dallas, Texas. We got to the hotel. The people that came to meet us made us carry our own bags, and they took us through the back way.

[GASP]

Then we found out about ... they thought we were Indians, and we never knew, that lifestyle. And the guy thought I was a mulatto, and I didn't even know what a mulatto was. I knew what *malassadas* was, but. [CHUCKLE] Then I found out mulatto was Black and White. [CHUCKLE] And then, so we all go up. 'Cause all wear suits and necktie, and he goes, Eh, how come we gotta ... then we found out later, we had to go get permission to go eat in the dining room. I mean, was a whole different—well, 1959, we weren't even a state yet. They had no idea what Hawaiians were. And I had to blow the conch shell for Duke Kahanamoku. I was so scared. [CHUCKLE]

What were you scared of?

To blow the conch shell, 'cause was for Duke Kahanamoku. This guy was an icon. He was King Kamehameha. And I get up there. [BLOWS]

[CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE] No, but he was the nicest, nicest man.

You're still known as Mr. Aloha, the Ambassador of Aloha. What does that mean to you? I mean, do you think of that every day?

Oh, I'm very honored to just to share this *aloha*, not only here, but around the world, no matter where I go. I can honestly say, I've seen the world, and because of music and I thank *Akua*, I thank God. But I go with *aloha's kekahi i kekahi*, the breath of life, that we share with one another. That I'm involved with the world of *aloha*, you know, the fishpond in Kahaluu. It's a fishpond that was owned by Kamehameha III, and there's a total of forty-two acres. Dr. Yap bought this place fifty years ago, and Linda Won is the daughter, so I got involved with them. So we're trying to keep it Hawaii of yesteryear. But it's interesting. But I tell you, with all the changes that I've been around, that we've seen the changes, and you know what it is, from television to look at show business today. All I'm saying is that, to all of our great leaders, we educate everybody on that five-letter magic word, A-L-O-H-A, *aloha*, 'cause it's so important. Especially the young people. They're the future, they're the stars of tomorrow. And some of 'em, they have an attitude, *taran-taran*, like we say. But it doesn't hurt. Not only the young people, our *kamalii's*, the *keiki o ka aina na kanaka maoli wahine, kanaka maoli na kane*, but also to the *kamaaina's* as well, the *malihini's*. Bring back that *aloha* that we have, because otherwise this is what makes us so unique and different from all the world.

How does *aloha* live with anger and, you know, upset over things that haven't gone the way they probably should have in Hawaii?

Well, I think some people, hold it in, and I think that's the worst thing to do. I say, we get a *pilikia*, eh, chuck it up. I've always found that, there's a problem, but you always can find an answer to this. You can approach it so many different ways. The problem is three hundred sixty degrees, you can hit 'em from every corner. 'Cause there's always one *puka* that you can just go in there and come out with a final. I mean, where it makes—we can all come together, *ohana*, family, as one. But there's a lot of people that, in life, like I said, you learn from all experiences. When I got involved in 1960, I went to the bank; I wanted to make a loan to help me with my show business. I went to the bank. I stood there all morning, and I dressed, I looked nice. Finally, he said, Good morning, sir. He says, We looked at your application. He said, We turned you down, 'cause people like you are poor risk. And you have the occupation, entertainment; it's not considered an occupation. This was 1960. I said, Excuse me; I said, I'm working as a tour director, but I'm also doing part-time, and I just want to further my career in entertainment. He said, Well, I'm sorry; we turned you down. I cried, man. I couldn't believe it. I walked out of there. But that gave me an incentive to go forward. I didn't sit down, go suck 'em up, or go play *taran-taran*. I just called my father, City and County. I said, Dad, I got turned down. He said, Oh. But, I said, they said that entertainment is not occupation. He go, Oh. He said, I see you at home. I got home that night. He went to the credit union, City and County. He could get only five hundred dollars, but I had to wait 'til Friday. So I got the five hundred dollars, and that was the beginning, the start of, doing. Then after I went to Kahala, and I signed that contract, five years, \$1.5 million, with Mr. Burns and Wesley Park, then all of a sudden, I became Mr. Somebody. But I was involved with all the—I was doing lot of charity work outside. And I got invited to be an Honorary Rotarian at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. I'm so excited. What an honor. I didn't even know what a Rotarian was. I go there, Mr. Danny Kaleikini, congratulations and welcome to Rotary. Was the bank manager from the bank. I looked at that guy. He said, Would you follow me? He says, Congratulations. So I walked to check in, so I'm signing my name. And everybody, all the businessmen, I said, Oh, by the way, I says, I want to say thank you very much. I said, You were the turning point in my life. I said, Remember the day I came to the bank? You didn't say, *Aloha*, would you care for a seat, would you care for a glass of water. You looked at me, you said you turned me down 'cause people like me are poor risk, and that my occupation—entertainment wasn't considered an occupation. I said, I cried. I said, You broke my heart. But I said, You gave me the incentive to go forward. I didn't die, like a dog. I said—but I says, I called my father and I told him what happened, and he got the money from the credit union, City and County. And I sing for them free. Any time they call me, I go down the rubbish dump, I sing for them any time. But I just wanted to say, thank you.

International celebrity, successful businessman, friend of Hollywood stars and Washington movers and shakers; Danny Kaleikini was all this. But the life of a premier entertainer wasn't always filled with good times.

Have you ever had a major failure, or a deep disappointment in your life?

Yes. I lost my son.

Oh ...

My son was twenty-nine years old when he passed away, I died inside, and ... but I know he's up with *Akua*, he's with God, he's in Heaven. But it's interesting. Life works in so many different ways. I have a grandson now, he's hapa. Nice, wonderful young man. And every year, as he gets older, he looks just like my son. It's like One Step Beyond.

Do you have any advice to people who are grieving?

Oh, yeah. Just like I said, they're in good hands. They're up with *Akua*. Like we say, *Aloha ke Akua*, God is love. Yeah. *Na ke Akua e hoopo maikai ia oe, aole pilikia*. 'Cause they're smiling, and then one day we'll all be together, we'll all come together as family. But I know that they're watching us too, so we watch. That was my biggest disappointment.

M-hm.

But being in show business, people forget that you know, we're human beings too, and that the lifestyle that we had, when they were sleeping, I was up. And I tried to be ... when they were growing up, to be there with them, like my son was playing football, and I went to the football game, but I got there late. We were rehearsing or something. He already made the touchdown, so I didn't see him. I just—oh, I felt so ... and then, I was working like three hundred sixty-five days a year. I mean, for ten years, I worked seven days.

Mm.

I mean, I was doing, six nights, plus the *luau*. And I remember my son said, Dad, let's go skiing, let's go to Tahoe, take the whole family, we all go together, take Mom, take *keiki*, and take whoever want to. I said, Oh, I couldn't, 'cause New Year's Eve, Christmas Eve was sold out.

M-hm.

And the thing is I think about all the good times, and it took me a while, but you know. So I just said, *Aole pilikia*. We go forward, and one day we'll all be together. That's—

Nice.

That's how I feel.

Do you still have lasting relationships from your days in the showroom?

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I think it's so important. I think that we talk about *hui lokahi*, coming together, as one *ohana*, family. And I've always said when I was at the Kahala, I used to tell people, Hey, go see Brother Don Ho, go see Al Harrington. I says, The Surfers. I said, the Society of Seven. I said, We got some of the greatest shows in Hawaii. I says, Everybody does something different, and

you will really enjoy what. So it was—from ... Tihati had his show downtown, but, Polynesian Cultural Center—

M-hm.

I think it was so important.

What is the reason the show ended at Kahala?

They sold the hotel.

You would have kept going?

I would have. Yeah, I even asked the people if they wanted, you know. But they were gonna ... big management, they were gonna do, a whole different ... they had a whole different outlook on what they wanted to do. And I think they wanted to more ... they wanted to bring in more the trade type shows, and bring in more of the ... wasn't a hotel for the tourists. They was gonna cater to all the big—

Business, corporate groups.

Corporate groups, which is—

Yeah.

But it doesn't work that way. It's a shame, 'cause in 1967, we could have bought the hotel for \$17 million. But nobody would lend us the money.

[CHUCKLE]

Your dad's credit union wasn't up for that one. [CHUCKLE]

No; it's a true story. I tell you, yeah, but I look back, and I says, I had a wonderful, wonderful stay, and I thank all the people that supported me, all the people that helped me, and we all worked together as one family. And I think that was the key in the success of ... but the secret ingredient ... A-L-O-H-A. That made it work.

We may never see another run like the one Kaniela enjoyed at the Kahala Hilton. At the time of this conversation, in 2010, Danny Kaleikini is seventy-two years old. He sings for special occasions, and is still very much Hawaii's Ambassador of Aloha. 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.

And to all of our *ohana*, family, my *hookupu*, my gift, is to share *ohe iho ano*, Hawaiian bamboo nose flute. I learned from my *kupunas*, from my grandpa, my *tutu kane*, and I thank him very much. And this ... *ua makaukau*. [NOSE FLUTE/HAWAIIAN CHANTING/DRUMMING] *Aloha ke Akua, amene.*

[APPLAUSE] **Whoo-hoo! [CHUCKLE]**