

GUEST: MAILE MEYER

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My sisters and I, we're our self-entertaining unit. We—

[CHUCKLE]

—were our teammates, we were our confidants, we were our competitors, we were our friends, and our helpmates, and my parents made a beautiful lifestyle for us where we could all grow up together.

What determines who we are, the people we become? Is it our heritage? Is it our surroundings? In the story of native Hawaiian bookstore owner and retail entrepreneur, Maile Meyer, a strong, close-knit family provided the foundation for her life. But it wasn't until she embraced her Hawaiian ancestry that Maile Meyer became the person she is today.

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. When you hear the word, gathering, what comes to mind? Your family? Your community? Your culture? What Maile Meyer sees when she envisions a gathering is all that. For this strong-willed, multidimensional Hawaiian woman, who launched such groundbreaking businesses as Native Books, Na Mea Hawaii, and Bookends, the concept of gathering has been her lifelong companion.**

So many people know at least one member of your family; one of the—

M-hm.

—M's or the—

[CHUCKLE]

—L. How did that happen? Tell us about your siblings, and your family.

Oh; thank you. Malia, Mele, Maile, Moana, Manulani, Luana, and Maui are the seven children of Harry and Emma Meyer. And my mother is an Aluli.

Now, you have one sister who's an L; the rest are all—

Yes.

—have names that start with M.

Yes; and we just learned the stories, whenever we learned them. But we learned the story that there was a *kupuna* who was a Chinese woman, who told my mother, just asked, Why do you want to have so many girls? Don't you want

a son? Because, obviously, in the Asian culture, sons are so important. And my mother said, Why do you say that? And this woman said, Well, it's because you keep naming your daughters—your children M. Whatever the superstition. So this woman said, Name your next child with something else. So Luana was born, the sixth girl. And then, number seven was Maui. So all of us, we lived in a compound. My mother was much more, what's a good word ... it just worked better that we were all there in this little nest. And so we lived alongside the canal in Kailua, right next to all of my aunties and uncles on my Aluli side. Every time when we had dinner, someone was at the table that wasn't related to us. And they were always part of the family, or cousins, or relatives. I mean, it was a Hawaiian style. My mother didn't necessarily connect to her Hawaiianess by name, but she exhibited qualities that really were all about what we as a people feel. So the inclusiveness, family was a very loose definition; it was anyone that entered into your sphere. And so, we *hanai*'d all kinds of different people who lived with us when they needed a place to stay.

What was your dad like?

My father was from the Midwest, and really wanted to get away, and get to a place of warmth, and an island. He had a vision of going to a place warm and far away from where he was. And he was in a small town, and he lost both of his parents at an early age, so he was very independent, and jumped on a—he was drafted and went off to Hawaii, and got off that ship, and was able to stay home with some finagling, stay in Hawaii. And he just was a man who believed that his daughters could do anything. He was really, really supportive of us being our own people, and independent thinkers. And when he showed up we had a very long driveway from where the garage was. And the minute we heard his car door slam, my sisters and I would race to see who could get to our father first to get a big hug. 'Cause he worked really hard, but he really supported travel. We saw slaughterhouses and orchards, and machine shops, and places where he could show us how things were made, constantly educating us through experiencing things. He really fostered creativity, as my mother did, in the way we played with each other, the way we lived in our neighborhood.

Now, didn't your mother lose her parents early, too?

She did. Her mother died when she was three, and her father died when she was six. And she was raised by the Sacred Hearts nuns in Nuuanu, and by her older sister, Alai, and Aima, actually, Auntie Aima. So they had that in common. So they didn't have a lot of—my kinda broke the mold for themselves. They didn't have an idea of what parenting looked like. But that idea of—there was discipline, and there order, and structure, and lots of classes to learn to sing, and dance, and read, and elocution, and I mean, it was hysterical, the things—

[CHUCKLE]

—that my parents tried out on us. They wanted a big family.

Did they speak of arts?

Oh, all the time. My mother—ever since we were little, we were the full class, because there were six of us. We took all kinds of painting, and drawing. And my sister Mele had a kiln by the time she was ten. And my mother had the Young of Heart Workshop and Gallery, which was a not-for-profit in Kailua, attached to St. Anthony's Church. And she had about thirty volunteers there, and all my sisters and I set up chairs, took them down, we helped to teach classes. We did anything and everything she wanted. And so we grew up around artists, and art. And my sister Mele is a practicing artist and art educator. Moana is an artist, Luana is a teacher, Malia was a nurse, my sister Manu was an educator, and creativity is kind of at the core. Creative thinking and problem solving is kind of embedded in our family. And we all tend to work for ourselves, because my father and my mother were very entrepreneurial and independent.

What'd your dad do?

My father ran a lot of little businesses until he landed in a collaboration with my Uncle Kepp, who built something—a hotel called the Hawaiiiana. Uncle Kepp was a developer of small, fabulous projects all over the islands. He was amazing. And he built The Hawaiiiana. And he was not a good hotel operator, and my father was. So my father ran The Hawaiiiana for about eighteen years, with my mother at home with all of us in Kailua. And he did a phenomenal job. He hired all Hawaiians. I mean, George Naope was the first hula show at The Hawaiiiana. Lolani Luahine used to go there. I mean, all the women and men who were part of the Hawaiian entertainment movement in the 50s all did shows around the pool.

Is this The Hawaiiiana Hotel that was in—

On Beachwalk.

—existence until recently?

Yes.

A low—

Exactly.

—key, low stories.

On Beachwalk, by The Breakers.

And that retained its appeal, although lost some of its luster—

Yes, yes.

—even into the 2000s.

Exactly. In the 50s and everyone who was there, who was a guest, became part of our family. So they would come in the summertime. My father would take them by bus to our home, and we would—

[CHUCKLE]

—do hula for them, we cooked for them, we cleaned for them. We did all the—we just—they became beloved. And we would visit them. Those were the days when people came to Hawaii, could have access to Hawaiians and local families, and that's the way they were treated, like family.

Despite instilling a strong sense of family in their children, Harry and Emma Meyer didn't raise them to stay close to the nest. Soon, it was time for Maile Meyer to go away for college; and when she did, she had one overpowering criterion.

I just wanted to go where it was warm. So I didn't really get that—you know, the Stanford energy was a Stanford energy. It was the warmest school that I got into. So I went. And I had a sister, Mele, who was there, so we both were at Stanford. And I had a fabulous, fabulous time there. I just am completely engrossed by whatever I'm doing, so I was so naïve, coming from Hawaii. Oh, my god. And people were blown away at how naïve I was. I would jump on my bike with my swimsuit, and go to the pool, and people would look at you like, Why are you wearing your swimsuit? You wear your swimsuit at a pool, you don't go to the pool in it. Or I'd buy people ice cream, and they would be weirded out. I don't know you, how come you're buying me ice cream?

[CHUCKLE]

Why are you smiling so much? I mean, there was a real cultural process that I had to understand. That people from Hawaii, we want to include, it's our nature. And in different places, people don't necessarily want all that loving on.

[CHUCKLE]

How did that affect what you did?

I was misunderstood a lot; believe me. But because I knew at my core that's who I was, I just held steady, and did what I did. And people were always commenting about, That Hawaiian girl. And I didn't really associate myself ethnically as a Hawaiian at that point in time.

Why not?

Because during that time period, in the 70s, I learned Hawaiian. I took a Hawaiian history class at Punahou. It was taught by the band teacher, from Michigan. And so, it was a totally throw-away focus at Punahou during that time.

What about your parents? Your mom was Hawaiian.

Well, of cour—but we were raised—my mother's father—so many Hawaiians passed during the turn of the century, and there was so much pain with the overthrow. My grandfather decided that in order to survive, he needed to Westernize, but never left the core of who he was as a Hawaiian. He wanted to adapt. So he was the first Hawaiian that got a law degree, from Michigan and Yale. He went and got all the *palapala* that you needed, all the paperwork to say that you could come compete, and you could be part of the system, because he knew it was a system that was going to help his people; or so he thought. But he could never get on the bench, he could never get a judgeship, and he was very disillusioned by that. But he was raised my mother, went to the Royal Hawaiian to learn how to—or the Moana to learn how to eat artichokes properly, and hold her teacup right. So it was a very difficult time to be a Hawaiian, the turn of the century. But did my mother always pray and include

others, and her generosity and her aloha spirit? Those were Hawaiian things that she didn't necessarily identify as Hawaiian—she was Hawaiian-Chinese. But they clearly were; that was where they came from.

So here you are at Stanford University. What did you take up? Were you like so many people at that age who say, Well, we'll see what happens after the first two years of the—

[CHUCKLE]

—core requirements?

When you're in an environment where there's so much learning that you can do, it was such a joy to just fill the days with all kinds of classes across all kinds of disciplines. And I ended up staying in the arts, because it was just an extension. I could be creative. In other words, I'm kind of web thinker, so there's not one solution set for me, and the arts were a place where I could come up with lots of solutions to any one problem. So I did a lot of photography and design, and then went and studied over in Italy, and had an incredible time. I did a study on contemporary art in a medieval city, in renaissance city, and there wasn't any. I mean, it was literally underground. And it was things like umbrellas stuck in fruit. You know, that was like the best that they could do in the 70s. But I loved the arts, and gravitated towards those things, and really enjoyed my time in that department.

Then you went over to the other side of your brain, and you got an MBA in arts management.

I did. Which was such an interesting experience, because the people I were with were ballet dancers, and museum painters and artists that weren't good enough to do the thing.

Is that true? Do you mean that seriously?

[CHUCKLE]

Or are you being modest?

You know what? I didn't choose that. You have to be really fearless to be an artist in today's world, because creative people aren't supported, whether you're a musician or a dancer, an artist, or a writer. Those are paths that you feel compelled to do, because it's soul work that you're doing. So that character, I was always better in a support role.

And by now, you're at UCLA for your—

I'm at UCLA.

—MBA.

Yes. And I met my husband, Michael, at Stanford. He was from the East. Very buttoned down and formal. And I was shorts and slippers, and the same tee-shirt kinda thing. And then he went to UCLA Law School, and then I went to UCLA Biz School. So we took the bus together with our brown bag lunches, and were graduate students together. But the business school, we had much better parties than the law school. So [CHUCKLE]—

Important distinction.

Absolutely. It was much more fun to be in business school. And everybody went off, migrated to Wall Street, and then the arts community, we all went into things that were much more creative. And so I got to work for the Olympic Arts Festival in the Olympics, which was fabulous.

What did you do for them?

I was a venue accountant at all of the Olympic Arts Festival started the LA Arts Festival that's been around since 1984. So it brought in incredibly creative acts from all over the world. So we handled all the box offices. So myself and six other arts management graduates, we had badges that let us in anywhere, to see anything. And then when the shows were done, we handled all the tickets and the accounting. And then I migrated over to the Olympics, and I was head of the payroll for the Olympics, while the Olympics were going on.

Sounds like a dream job.

It was hysterical. I was younger by—we had all these accountants in suits, sitting on long rows, trying to process payroll from all the venues. And they put me in charge of all of them. It was ridiculous. [CHUCKLE]

Why was it ridiculous?

Because I was really young, and I was a minority woman. And it was bizarre. And I had a great time. We ran out of money one day; I told them, Take your ATM cards, get it out of the machine. I mean, because you could come up with different ideas, if people trusted you. And Peter Roth was a man who went to whoever had the competency. So he let—

He came to you?

Well, he let all of the arts people, all of the venue accountants, we all ended up getting placed in different areas. And so ran payroll until I went to work for Chiat/Day. But it was like being in a war. I mean, we did whatever it took to pay these people, and it was very bizarre, but it was lots of fun.

The Olympics doesn't last forever, unfortunately.

No, it didn't.

So then, what did you do?

Then, I went to work for Chiat/Day.

And what is Chiat/Day?

Chiat/Day was an advertising agency that, I think, I was the seventy-fifth employee, and I think there's ten, fifteen, twenty thousand of them now. But we worked out of the old Biltmore Hotel down in Waikiki—I mean, hello, down in Los Angeles. So I was an account executive for them.

And whose accounts did you handle?

I started with Nike, and then I worked on the Apple account, and Pizza Hut, and lots of different accounts; mostly Nike. In the 80s, at the Olympics, Lee Clow did all the creative, and so I got to work directly with an amazing man.

So he's a certified genius, isn't he?

He is. And if you saw him, you'd think he was a homeless man. When I first met him, I couldn't believe that he was the creative genius. And he was a pure creative genius. And inside his jacket, whenever we went anywhere, were all

the things that he had to remember. Because he couldn't remember them; he was too busy getting a great idea out of that light bulb over there.

Working in the 1984 Olympics, being part of a successful advertising agency, with Nike and Apple as your clients; for most people, that's a career. For Maile Meyer, there was a higher calling.

At that point, having that much fun, did you intend to stay in advertising in LA?

The advertising business in the 80s, when I left towards the end of the 80s, it was intense. People were doing all kinds of crazy things, and they were producing bad work. And so, my creative team—I couldn't go up and sell bad work, 'cause it wasn't that creative, that one window of time. So I decided to leave. Because I would much rather have been creative, than someone selling someone's work. Just because you worked at a creative place did not mean you were creative. So I started doing some game development with one of my brother-in-laws in LA, and I went and traveled. My husband was working really hard at a law firm, and so I left and went to Europe and dug ditches, and planted in orchards, and spent time with a really good friend of mine, who was a landscape architect, and traveled, just to kind of let go of that workaholic ... 'cause Chiat/Day, we worked twenty-four/seven. And then we came home, 'cause it was time to kind of connect to a community. I loved LA. I love lots of choices, to be able to reorder the universe. But Michael, that's not his idea of good time, so it was time to move back to community.

How did you know that Michael would love living in Hawaii? After all, he wasn't of this place, and he—

Well, you know—

—was from the East Coast.

Yeah. Well, you can't talk people to into living on islands. So it was his decision to come home.

Home.

Yeah. Because he's a community person, so he wants to run into people you know on the streets. I love wherever I am, so I was so happy. But I couldn't make the decision to come home. That was not my decision to make. And he was so happy. He tells a story about being at Aloha Stadium, at a game, a football game with my father. And the people behind were very concerned when it started to rain, and kind of reached over and covered him with an umbrella, and the announcer said, Make sure you don't block anybody's view. And it just seemed so kind and gentle, and he was really, really taken by that, and wanted to live in place where people at a stadium, filled with thousands of strangers, could still be kind.

When you moved back to Hawaii, did you think about advertising? You had some great experience, some nice cred in advertising.

[CHUCKLE] Well, I always laugh, because I went to Bishop Museum Press, thinking it was publicity press. I mean, what an idiot.

But it was a printing press.

Printing. So as I was talking to the production guy, he's sitting there, and I'm noticing multiple titles of the same book, faded ad then more. And I thought, Oh, my god, they're publishers, and those are different editions of books. But I was hired at Bishop Museum for half of what I was making in Los Angeles. We're retro yuppies, Michael and I. We've always taken jobs where we get paid less every time. And so I went to the Bishop Museum Press, because it wasn't about the money, it was about the experience and connecting to the Museum.

Did you realize you had changed substantially when you came back?

I did, through the eyes of others. And it was interesting, because I was hired from the mainland by Dr. Duckworth, who hired me because he didn't know that I was Hawaiian. 'Cause when I came back, I was one of the highest, whatever tiered, because that was not the time. When still, Hawaiian—the incredible Hawaiian leaders were—that was the day when Manu Boyd was on the switchboard, and Pat Bacon was using Correct-O-Tape and typing. These people were not being valued at all.

Are you saying that Dr. Duckworth did not know you were Hawaiian, and that was a good thing in his mind?

He didn't know, and if he did, he may not have hired me. I don't know. But it was the strangest thing, to come and see these incredible resource people not being valued for who they really were. And as Hawaiians, we're waiting; we're not trying to assert. And Koko Willis, the head of Molokai Clan, he was the janitor. He could have run the museum, for god's sake. But because I had credentials. Probably the only time I ever tell people where I went to school is when I absolutely, positively have to. Because it doesn't matter. But it mattered to him, and that's how I got the job.

Stanford and UCLA.

Mm.

Done.

M-hm. [CHUCKLE]

And meanwhile, you're going through this acculturation period again, where you're getting back to your Hawaii roots. How did that change process go for you?

Like everything, you just start to laugh. It was funny. Because I just didn't know what I was talking about, I didn't fit in. And I had to learn humor, laugh about the mistakes that I made. And not knowing how to pronounce Hawaiian words properly, being in places, and especially when I started Native Books, because I took books out into community all the time. And one of the places that helped the most for me was going to the Hawaiian Leadership Development Program, which my sister Manulani, at the University of Hilo, that's how Native Books started. And I went there for years beforehand, and then started Native Books, but learned to be in community again. To actually be with other Hawaiian people, and people who were serving the Hawaiian community. And so,

learning through being, and doing, and gathering, was the right way to do it. From community.

So there you were now, this is your first your business, Native Books.

M-hm. My daughter Emma, who's twenty now, she came with me, and she was six months old. We went to Manu's. The Leadership Conference was in one big room. I had a table in the back where I had brought books in order to help pay for our airfare, and a little ordering sheet, and I passed Emma along to the Hawaiian to my right, and children are communal property, in the best sense of the word. So everybody loved on Emma. And I looked up, and I saw her being passed around the room. And I kept writing orders, and I came back with a hundred orders, and my first person to help me was my mother, sitting across a desk. And that's how Native Books was started, with family. Family being there, family supporting, family just helping in every, and any way. That's how I started.

And nobody trying to collect a paystub over it.

No. [CHUCKLE] That wasn't the idea.

Your approach to business has never been conventional. What is your approach?

I think if I was told that I was in retail, I would be unnerved by that. Because I don't want to be in the exchange of goods. That's not what I do. What I do is, I create and hold space for relationships to develop between people, between knowledge and access to knowledge, and opportunity for people to share and be a resource to each other. So books are a form of that delivery of knowledge, but so are conversation and time spent in practice. So just being a resource for a community is really what I've wanted to be, and to do it with people who want to have that model, where money is a very low frequency kind of method of exchange. It's for people who don't know each other, and then you can barter, which is a wonderful thing that's coming back. I mean, now, all kinds of things are being traded. We have fish, dried fish and *poi* on Friday that comes from Keeki Fukumitsu, and people will come, and we'll trade them if they want a bag of *poi*, and they want to drop off something. There's other ways, we can be an exchange.

But how does that translate into the dollars and cents of the IRS?

M-hm. Well, communities support us, so people come, and when they need to buy something, they buy something; but they don't come to Native Books just to buy something. They come to learn something, they come to get advice on something, they come to hear Hawaiian, they come to watch and participate at a reading, or we recently had an event where I was giving away a very beloved book on The Duke. It was published by the only native Hawaiian publisher, Top Down Publishing. And the books had been remaindered, and I bought them so that they wouldn't be destroyed, because they had value to me. And I gave them away based on people's ability to write me a story about a Hawaiian that inspired them. So you couldn't buy the book, or put a silly price, because it wasn't about buying the book. It was about sharing a story, and sharing a resource to an inspiring Hawaiian, The Duke. So I can do that when it's

my own business. I can't do that with every product, but I can do that with some things. I can give away things, I can make them have less monetary value, I can make them have more monetary value. You can buy a *poi* pounder at Na Mea Hawaii, but if you are a practitioner, you will pay half of what you would pay if you're putting it on your shelf. So if we use the things that we value in the ways where they can be helpful to community and be of service, they have a different price on them, to me.

Yeah, there are times when one passes your store, where you can't tell that it is a retail operation.

Yeah, yeah.

It's a ... *kumu* are teaching, and reading is being done. It just—

Yeah.

—seems like a place of free-flowing knowledge.

Those are happy days for me, 'cause then I know it's working, 'cause people are in many forms of learning and growing. And the Hawaiian word for learning and teaching is *ike* or *ao*; you can do both. You can be a teacher, and a learner. And if we can be that way for each other, then there's some real dynamic in relationship that happens. So that's the kind of place I want to be, and I want to figure out what that form looks like as we move ahead in time, because twenty years from now, who knows if there will be bookstores, or what form the books will take. But I know the sharing of wealth and knowledge, that will still be a need. So how can Native Books and Na Mea Hawaii kind of address that need? Maybe *kupuna* are always gathered there, and people can talk directly, or there'll be people learning from *kupuna*. There are so many forms that it can take. So I'm looking forward to what's gonna be happening next.

For some, the concept of gathering a community that shares and trades ideas, services, and goods is not the ideal retail model. But that doesn't matter to Maile Meyer; she wouldn't have it any other way. 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.

My sister Manu, my sister Mele, Moana, Luana, Maui; all of us in our own way, we reach out in the ways we were raised, and there's a lot of pushback, because people don't want to be kissed if they don't know you. They don't want you to buy them something and tell them, Oh, don't worry, you can pay me back. 'Cause they don't want you to do that, they have a different construct. But we're Hawaiians in our land, and we can celebrate generosity, and kindness, and respect for our people, and for others, without having to feel like if I want to give away something, I can, it's my store. If I want to share something, I can.

