

GUEST: THOMAS KAULUKUKUI JR.

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Well, I learned that people are all alike. They expect from their leadership a high level of character, they expect competency. And when things get really tough, they want to look at the leader and understand that the leader is gonna do their best to pull them through the really difficult times.

Former State Judge and managing trustee of the Queen Liliuokalani Trust, Thomas Kaulukukui Jr., and a life of community leadership; 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. Thomas Kaulukukui Jr. grew up in the Honolulu valley of Kuliouou as the son of a Hawaii legend. Despite the father's small stature and slight limp, he became Hawaii's first all American college football player. He was a humble man, a fine coach, and a State and Federal public official who quietly brought people together. What do you do when you live in the shadow of a great man? What Thomas Kaulukukui Jr. did was, learn from him. And now, this proud son looks back on his own long and dedicated service in the combat zones of Vietnam, in the classroom, on the football field, in the courtroom, and as a leader of the Queen Liliuokalani Trust, which assists orphaned and destitute children of Hawaiian ancestry. All along the way, he has embraced the values he learned at home, from his mother, and from his father, who was known and respected almost everywhere he went in Hawaii.**

When he passed away about three years ago, some people came up to me and said, Your dad was a great man, he passed away at the age of ninety-four, you're Thomas Kaulukukui Jr.; how do you feel now about stepping into his shoes? And my answer was, I don't have any feeling whatsoever of uncertainty about that. My dad trained me all his life to be Thomas Kaulukukui. I'm Junior, but now I'm Thomas Kaulukukui. And I feel fine about that. Interestingly enough, people have asked my children the same question.

[CHUCKLE]

How does it feel to grow—

So that's—

—up in that house?

—a good thing, right?

Yeah; so maybe it's a good thing.

And do you think they're challenged by that, or do you think they just take that in stride?

I think, like me, they take it in stride. I mean, that's the good thing about having those models in your family. If they're good models, they become part of your life.

Did your dad ever talk with you about mistakes he made, in the hope that you would not make them?

Not very often, although, most of us knew about his life. He, like everyone else, I'm sure, made mistakes. But he didn't dwell on them. That's another positive thing about his leadership training, is he didn't dwell on mistakes. He just moved forward, and tried to make himself better. And he was very competitive, but he wasn't so concerned about beating other people. He was really concerned about improving himself. And that's one of the great lessons I learned.

You grew up in a great old valley, Kuliouou.

You should know it well.

[CHUCKLE] So did I. And you lived in Kuliouou when it was a farm valley, before the development of Hawaii Kai was—

That's right.

—ever maybe even conceived.

Right. That's when Lunalilo Home Road held farms, pig farms and watercress farms. And Lunalilo Home Road was the end of the Earth, because the next thing was Waimanalo. But it was a great place to grow up. We lived way back in the valley. Everybody knew everyone else. If you did anything wrong, your neighbor would probably spank you and send you home. And therefore, you tried not to do anything wrong, because everybody knew everyone. A wonderful place. And I didn't leave there until I went away to college.

And you must have gone to a lot of football games, 'cause your dad was seriously into football, and he was a coach.

I was going to football games by the time I was five or six years old. I have memories of standing on the sideline while he was coaching, and watching a whole herd of large football players headed towards the sideline, and having one player look up with horror on his face, 'cause he was about to kill the coach's son. And all the bodies flew over me, as they got out of the way. And that's the way I grew up. I was the water boy for the football teams that he coached. He coached at, of course, University of Hawaii, he coached at Iolani, he coached in the Hula Bowl. And I spent many, many hours down the lower reaches of the old Honolulu Stadium.

And you would see him sketching out plays, right?

At night, he'd sit up at the kitchen table, and not only sketch plays, but he'd take the black and the red checkers, and he glued a cork to each of them as a handle. And so, the—

[CHUCKLE]

—red checker would pull around the end and block the black linebacker.

[CHUCKLE]

And then, he'd write it down. So, I watched that growing up.

Were you a good athlete?

Probably for my size, I was all right. But I was small. I always told him he should have married a big Hawaiian woman. He married a—

[CHUCKLE]

—a small Chinese woman. I would say that I was competitive in nature, and more competitive probably, than skilled.

And so, you went out for all the sports?

I went out for most of the sports that I played until in high school, we had a really terrific—I was at Kamehameha School. We had a terrific football team. By then, I had discovered surfing, so I spent most of the time surfing after that.

Did you know what you wanted to do at an early age?

No, of course not. Nobody does, and I didn't either. As a matter of fact, I graduated a year early at Kamehameha, and was set to go to college somewhere. And I remember the last night, I went surfing, and didn't want to come home. 'Cause I didn't really want to go to college. Especially since college was Michigan State University, where it snowed and it was cold.

And who had decided that?

My dad had a lot of friends at Michigan State, so it was something that I agreed to do. I got used to the cold, enjoyed it. People were really nice to us. It was the mid-60s, it was the last time Michigan State University really had its glory years. There were two national championship football teams, and one of the big reasons was because my dad was the scout for Duffy Daugherty, the coach, and the Hawaiians reigned up there. In fact, one game, I think it might have been Penn State, all of the points were scored by Hawaiians, so the Detroit Free Press had headlines the next day, sports section said, Hawaiians 13, Penn State 3. It was the first time that Hawaiians, I think, left here and made their name in sports in a school like the Big Ten. So I really enjoyed it. And after college, taught a year in Michigan. I was a PE major—I met my wife there. We were married right after college, and while I was teaching, I came home one day. The Vietnam War was on. So I came home one day, and she was standing in the doorway, crying, with this long envelope that had United States Selective Service on it. And I had been drafted. So I went into the Army in 1968.

From 1968 to 1970, Thomas Kaulukukui Jr. served in Vietnam as a platoon sergeant with the paratroopers. It was in the jungle of Vietnam that he cultivated some of the leadership skills that would stay with him.

Well, I learned that people are all alike. That no matter where they come from, they have the same primary motivations. They want to be respected, they want to be kept safe. They expect from their leadership high character, a high level of character, they expect competency. And when things get really tough, they want to look at the leader and understand that the leader is gonna do their best to pull them through the really difficult times.

And you had all those things going for you?

Well, if I didn't have them, I learned them. Because another thing about being in battle is that young men at the time, they're like a pack of wolves. And they will do whatever the pack wants to do, unless there is an alpha wolf that keeps them on track. And if you're not that person, they will get rid of you and get somebody else. So you really have to learn to step up. I'd never been in a fight in my life. I was in three fights in the first month I was there, because the men decided to test me. You have to realize, this is Vietnam War—

And you—

—and look at the way I look.

Uh-huh.

I'm not a six-foot, fair-skinned, round-eyed person. I was brought in to lead them, and I was obviously Asian. So I looked more like the enemy, than I did look like them. Part of it was, there was another leader there who they wanted, who had been there a month longer than I was, and they weren't sure about me.

So you had to fight. There was no—

Gotta fight.

—other way to do it?

Yeah. Fortunately, I was a black belt in taekwondo by then.

[CHUCKLE]

Before I got there, so without having to really hurt anybody, I guess they kinda ... got some religion and said, Well, I guess he can beat up everybody else, so he's all right.

That's good. And you've continued to do martial arts all of this time.

Yeah. I started when I was nineteen, and I continue to do it. There is a philosophy in martial arts, which mirrors the philosophy of almost any great philosophy. And the main tenets are the same; balance, discipline and self-control is important. Competency, practicing competency is really important. The development of one's character is very important. Treating people fairly is very important. But all of those principles are the same principles that I've been taught outside of martial arts. But I enjoy it because it allowed me to be a little bit physically active, it allows me to teach and continue to transmit that information to people. It allows me to develop in people ... strength. Because martial arts develops strength of character, it develops courage, which I think is really important.

How does it develop strength of character?

It develops strength of character, because it teaches you, among other things, how to deal with inequities and power. As I told my kids, two rules in life; never hit anybody smaller than you; second rule, never hit anybody bigger than you. Okay. Knowledge in both sides. So it develops strength of character, because it teaches you to deal with the self-discipline that you have to have in interactions with people, and to stay your hand. When you want to ... you may wish to strike out, you have to learn to stay your hand. And that's self-discipline, which is one of the primary principles of character. If you're well trained, your demeanor, the way you carry yourself, sends a message to somebody else that maybe you're just not the right person to beat up today.

Were you different when you came back from Vietnam?

I don't think anybody can go to war and come back, and not be different. My mom said to my wife, I've lost the part of my son that was easygoing, and that laughed so easily. And I think that's true. But time kind of heals that, and some ways, being different is not good, and some ways, better different. And for a lot of our veterans, they're going to face the same challenge of trying to take a difficult experience, and find the good parts in it.

Your platoon had a saying, didn't it?

Well, my—

Something inscribed that—

Yeah, my platoon leader had a inscription on his helmet that said, For those who have fought for it, freedom has a taste the protected will never know. Which I thought was a really interesting thought about having to go to battle for your country, or for the ideals of the country, and really having a sharp appreciation for what it means to do that. And that's why veterans tend to be kind of a different lot. Kinda like putting on the uniform for your football team. You played, and you've sweated, and you've sacrificed for it, and some people have died for it. So a couple of things come out of that. One is a love of country, in the sense of the value of loyalty and service. And the other thing that comes out of it is, you tend to hold your leaders to a high level of responsibility.

Thomas Kaulukukui Jr. would become a physical education teacher at Kailua High School in Windward Oahu, and he coached wrestling and football. Then in 1974, he enrolled in law school at the University of Hawaii. With his wife Joyce, he had three children, and the Kaulukukui family struggled to get by on money from the GI Bill, and from the job that Tom worked twenty hours a week while going to law school fulltime. Three years of hard work and sacrifice ended with a plum entry level job in law, clerking for Hawaii's Chief Federal Judge, Samuel P. King.

First of all, he had a great wit, so he was a Federal judge, so he was appropriately dour when he needed to be, and serious when he needed to be. But there was a certain lightness that he added to proceedings. So he had a

great wit, and was a funny guy. He was a funny guy. He was a great jurist; meaning that he was terrific in terms of his knowledge of the law, and how to apply it. He was a very pragmatic man. I remember there was a case once, where there was a union election, and one party brought an action in Federal court to get an injunction to keep the other candidate from badmouthing him in the union papers and everything else. And I remember that Judge King said, This is not the Kahala PTA, this is a union election; if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen. Which I thought was a very pragmatic way of looking at things.

And he was full of those pronouncements from the bench.

He was full of those pronouncements.

In this very lofty, beautiful—

He had a card—

—stately courtroom.

He had a card that said, The greatest lawgiver since Moses.

[CHUCKLE]

And the lawyers would come in and ask to see him, and knowing that they were out there, Judge King would bellow to Rebecca, his assistant, Find out what they want, and tell them that they can't have it.

[CHUCKLE]

Interesting guy.

Did you incorporate any of Judge King into your persona?

Well, eventually, I became a judge, a Circuit Court judge. And the first thing I did was, go to see Judge King to get some good advice. One of the things he told me is, You gotta outwork the lawyers, otherwise they're gonna run rings around you; you have to be better prepared than they are. And so that's what I tried to do during my term on the bench.

What's foremost in your mind when you're a jurist?

To make sure that the process runs fairly. As Judge King and others have said, the only thing that stands between the accused and tyranny is the judge. The requirements are really high, and I was always aware, as most judges are, that you have to make sure that the process runs fairly. It's like being an umpire. Things have to run fairly. However it comes out, it comes out. And for a while, I was a motions judge on the criminal bench. And I remember suppressing evidence of drugs that was brought in by one young man in his luggage. But the search was illegal. So once I suppressed the judge and granted the motion for suppression, there was no case. So as they pounded the gavel and I was leaving, the man stood up, and he was so relieved, young man. He called out, Thank you, Your Honor. And I remember stopping and turning around and saying, Don't thank me, it's not personal, thank the constitution.

Did it frustrate you to know that sometimes, it was a matter of, yes, procedure and protection, but on the other hand, sometimes that covered a multitude of sins.

Sometimes, it did cover a multitude of sins. It never frustrated me, and it doesn't frustrate good judges, because that's their job. Their job is to make sure that the protections are upheld, because without it, none of us is safe. I think the judge's role is to make sure that justice is done within the framework of the law, and I am convinced that the framework of the law, if it is a living law, mirrors our life experience, and that its standards should mirror the standards of the changing society. I think it was Oliver Wendell Holmes who said, The life of the law lies not in logic, but in experience. And so, the law should not, in my mind, be completely logical if it runs afoul of common sense and experience. And that's how case law is made. Judges look at things, and all of a sudden, you've got a principle that has changed, because a judge has decided in the light of their experience, in light of the community experience, something just needs to be changed a bit.

Did you get reversed at times?

Yes, I did get reversed. But an appeals judge once told me, he said, If you don't get reversed, it's because you're not making decisions.

Did you enjoy being a judge?

I loved being a judge.

Okay; well, here again, you left the judgeship.

Yeah. But I love what I'm doing now.

Judge Thomas Kaulukukui Jr. left the bench after five years in 1993 to pursue a role in advancing the health of native Hawaiians. Well, at first, he turned down the position at the Queen's Health Systems. What changed his mind? A bumper sticker.

My dad retired from the Office of Hawaiian Affairs. He and I both helped with the investiture ceremony of the new set of trustees the following year. On the steps of Kawaiahao Church, an elder came to me and said to me, Junior, your dad is retired and he's one of our leaders; when is it that you're gonna step up and help your Hawaiian community? And I thought about that. So I thought about that, and over New Year's, I got in my car to go to the aikido dojo to teach aikido, and old truck drove past me from Waimanalo. The doors were barely hanging on; it was all rusted out. And as I pulled up behind it, I saw a bumper sticker, and the bumper sticker said, Eddie Would Go.

Mm.

Eddie Would Go. And I looked at that, and I thought, Well, there it is. Eddie would go, Eddie went; Tom is going. So the next day, I went to work, and I wrote a letter to Governor Waihee and said, I think I have another calling, and I'm leaving the judiciary to do it.

What did you do at Queen's? You were vice president.

I was vice president of community affairs, and my main job was to help work on programs, foster programs that improved the health of our Hawaiian people. And I did that for five or six years.

And did you enjoy that job?

I loved that job.

Okay; and so why did you leave that job? [CHUCKLE]

I left that job, because Monsignor Kekumano, who was one of the three trustees at the Queen Liliuokalani Trust, passed away. And when the remaining two trustees considered a replacement trustee, somehow, my name came up. At about the same time, we were thinking about reorganizing at the Queen's Health Systems, so I thought it's a good time to leave, so I did leave. I left there and went to the Trust in let's see, 1998. And I've been there ever since, and currently, I'm the chair and the managing trustee.

Tell me what the Trust does.

The Trust was founded a hundred and one years ago, last year was our centennial, by Queen Liliuokalani, in order to care for orphaned and destitute, poor Hawaiian kids. They are eighteen years old or younger, although, in special cases, sometimes we carry them over the age of nineteen. Every possible misfortune that you can think of has befallen some of these children. Some of them are orphaned when one of their parents commits suicide. Parents quite often are the victims of violence, in many cases, domestic violence. They are functionally orphaned by parents who end up in prison, and cannot take care of them. They may have one parent who is not in prison, but who is incapacitated as a parent by drug use, or by illness. Everything you can think of has happened to them. And so, they come into our fold, and through nine different children's centers, which are really run by the Queen Liliuokalani Children's Center—that's the program side, we try to take care of them. We do community programs which help improve the lives of these kids in many, many different ways, hundred and fifty different programs. Our budget is about \$17 million a year. We charge not one cent for every program that we run, so it's the function of the trustees through the lease of lands and the management of an investment portfolio to raise money for these endeavors. Most of these kids are remarkably resilient; remarkably resilient. It amazes me sometimes, what they've gone through, and how they can overcome it, or at least cope with it. And what they really need is, they really need to have one really caring adult. Now, whether that's the chairman of the board of the Queen Liliuokalani Trust, or their grandfather, or a social worker who works for us, that can make all the difference in the world.

Do you end up being the person who's the adult in their life that—

Sometime—

—cares?

Well, we try to go to about everything that we can go to. And for example, when we went to that hospice camp up in Kona, I had the opportunity to sit next to a fourteen-year-old girl whose father had been killed in an automobile accident. Only fourteen years old; she was kinda now helping take care of her brother. And we had a chance to talk. And then, finally, that evening, I gave a class on music and grief. I like to play music. So I sang a song. I said, This is a

song for my father. I had him all my life. Some of you lost a parent early. But it doesn't really matter, 'cause grief is grief. I miss him just as much as you're missing your parent. So I sang a song, and it was kind of a sad song, but it remembered my dad. And when I was through, that fourteen-year-old girl came up and sat next to me, and she kinda put her arm on my shoulder. I said, I wasn't sure I was gonna sing that song, but after I met you today, and I knew you lost your father, I sang that song for you, as well as for my father. And she put her hand on my shoulder, and she went, I know.

[CHUCKLE]

So the child has a nurturing—they have the ability to nurture also. And they understand. If they understand what the adult is going through, that you are—Hawaiian would say, *paa*, that you are together. You're *pili*, you're close together.

Here, you've gravitated to a calling, where it's not all very comfortable. You're dealing with kids who've been so subjected to pain, and difficulty.

Yeah; it's not surprising to me. That's why I became a teacher. My dad loved children, and he loved to coach and teach children. And from what I observed, the greatest victories in that area came with the kids who had the most to lose, and who had the hardest life. When the light goes on, it really goes on with those kids. So I believe that I've been lucky, that every part of my career that I have pursued, I'm meant to be there, and I was trained to be there.

So, is this the position that you're gonna keep for a very long time, or—I know you're enjoying it; does that mean you're about to leave? [CHUCKLE]

No. [CHUCKLE] That's a good question. No, my plan is to stay here for the near future. Eventually, I'll retire from this job. I don't expect to retire from life. There's probably something else out there for me; I just don't know what it is yet.

Thomas Kaulukukui Jr. is a leader's leader. He has influenced other people of influence. In addition to his work with the Queen Liliuokalani Trust, he enjoys teaching leadership skills to young people of native Hawaiian ancestry. Mahalo pihā, Thomas Kaulukukui, for sharing your long story short, and thank you for watching and supporting 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.

What kind of leadership did your dad have? Was it leadership by example, or did he sit you down and give you lessons?

Mostly by example. Rarely did he have to sit me down, or anybody down, to give lessons. If you saw what he did, you wanted to be like him. I'm sixty-five years old. I still want to be like him when I grow up.