

GUEST: CATHERINE PAYNE

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Farrington has to be a school, and the others schools that I worked in also, that does more than just provide education. We have to take care of many other aspects of the students' lives. I just saw people that were really willing to do that.

Coming up next on Long Story Short, a woman who grew up in a close, stable family, and who devoted her career to young people in need of stability and support. Just ahead, this story of award-winning principal, Catherine Payne.

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. In this edition of Long Story Short, we'll get to know retired public school principal, Catherine Payne. She always wanted to teach, and she wasn't satisfied with educating Hawaii's middleclass students. She wanted to work with the young people who needed her attention the most. Starting with her first official teaching job in the 1970s, Payne took on some of the toughest assignments Hawaii's public school system had to offer. As a principal, she steered thousands of students and teachers through tumultuous middle and high school years. In her thirty-five-plus-year career with the DOE, Catherine Payne was recognized by her peers and by national education groups as one of the stars of Hawaii's public schools. This educator spent her own childhood on the move as part of a military family.**

What was it like, moving again, and again, and again, as a youngster?

Well, I think what was stable about my life was my family. And so, as we moved, and we always drove, my mother always had lots of books for me to read. It was just a time when our family was always together. We would move in the summers most of the time, and get up at—this was before air conditioning in cars, so we'd get up at two or three in the morning and drive until noon, and we'd stop at a motel with a swimming pool. My father did mental arithmetic as we were driving along, so it was just really delightful. And that was the time when I was an only child, before my sister came along.

But you must have made some good friends, and then having to pull yourself away.

I think it wasn't hard for me until I was a teenager. And it just was our way of life, and we moved, and we sometimes moved—I went to three different first grades. We moved a lot. I think I learned to get along with all kinds of people. And it really helped me as a teacher, because I was used to being flexible, and just adjusting to whatever circumstances we had. My parents modeled that, because they also had to leave their friends and move, and make new relationships. And yet, they stayed in touch with people. And so whenever we moved, we were always seeing old friends, and family that were all over the country. So it I had a whole world that was my neighborhood.

I'm surprised that there was never, until high school ... rebellion or resistance, or unhappiness, or disappointment.

I'm sure there probably was some of that. [CHUCKLE] My parents were fairly strict in what they expected of me. And yet, it was also a very loving and interesting life, too. My mother was alone most of the time, because my dad ... because of his career, he was gone about half the time. It was just a very calm upbringing. I didn't have siblings to fight with until I was thirteen when my sister came along, and we didn't fight too much 'cause she was just a baby.

What did your father do? Where was he off to?

Well, he was a career Navy man, and he was on ships a lot, because he was a pilot. And so, he was flying with squadrons. And I remember so many memories in my life were just getting ready to meet the ship, or say goodbye to the ship, and sending tapes. But he was always sort of far away. He was in Vietnam, and then when he came to Hawaii, he was home. By then, he was living at home with the family, and that was I think, at a time when we really got to know my father as a teenager.

Because he was gone that much.

He was gone quite a lot. And then, I was in boarding school my last two years also, because during those two years, they moved three times, and the last time was to Hawaii.

How did you get to Hawaii? Was it through one of your father's assignments?

Yes. Hawaii was his last tour of duty with the Navy, and they moved over. We thought it would just be one year, and then he extended into a different job. And I had started college at the University of California up at Davis, and I thought, I should just spend a year in Hawaii, because it's an opportunity I won't ever have again. So I came here during my sophomore year, and never looked back. They actually stayed and retired here, and then in the late 80s, retired again to Texas. But I was firmly planted here.

What made you stay? What was it?

I just loved the cultural diversity. I made very good friends right away, and I just felt like this was a good place to be. But I knew that if I couldn't find a teaching job in Hawaii—and when I graduated in the mid-70s, it was very difficult—my plan was to leave, because I knew I had to go somewhere and be a teacher.

Why did you know you had to be a teacher?

[CHUCKLE] I always knew I was gonna be a teacher, from the time I was a very little girl.

Do you remember anything that prompted that?

I think I was surrounded by teachers in my family. My grandmother had been a teacher, I had aunts and uncles who had been teachers. And as a reader, I loved so many stories about teachers. I read about teachers in the 18th century, and the 19th century, and teachers that did heroic things in the ghetto, and I just thought, that's for me. I felt like the right place for me would be to teach in an area where kids were struggling. I did my student teaching at Kalani, and I loved it. I had a wonderful experience. But I felt my calling was either on the neighbor islands or in the country. And I was so fortunate to be hired in Nanakuli, and that's where I stayed for nine years as a teacher.

Why the more marginalized kids?

I'm not exactly sure, because it certainly wasn't my life growing up. But it was my life through what I read, and the kinds of people I admired were doing things like that. I thought about joining the Peace Corps, I thought about joining Vista. I came of age in the 60s, when that was a consciousness, and I just felt like I had something to give, to help. And the right things just happened along my path to make that happen.

Even for all your travels, you led a fairly sheltered existence in a stable family environment. What was it like getting to know some very tough situations in family in Nanakuli?

The main experience of Nanakuli for me was the welcoming *aloha* from the Hawaiian community. They taught me so much. The children there, from the little ones to the high school students, were just so delightful, and so eager to participate in life, and to learn. And the struggles that the families had were part of it, but it wasn't the main focus of their existence. There was so much good that they had to share. It was kind of interesting, because I became the advisor for the Hawaiian Club in my second year. And the students and I thought that was pretty funny. We traveled to the neighbor islands, we did dances and performances, and they would introduce me to their *kupuna*. And I just fell in love. That was what gave me the foundation for the rest of my career.

And yet, the struggles were very much a part of who your students were.

They were. And I really saw my place. Part of it was to help them to see that they could lift themselves above that, and that education was the way for that to happen. Many, many of my students, who I am still in touch with, have gone on to do great things. They've become teachers, they've become doctors, they've become lawyers, or they've become wonderful family members that have stayed in the community and are still helping. Some are teachers at Nanakuli High School.

With a calling for teaching, you later went into administration. What was that like? 'Cause it really does seem like two very different job requirements.

Yes. And it wasn't ever my career goal to be an administrator. But what happened through my time at Nanakuli and through the principals that I had there, were opportunities to be a teacher leader. They saw something in me, before I saw it in myself. And that taught me that in the role of a leader, that's part of your job, is to see things in your teachers and in the people who work for you, that they may not have discovered yet, and give them opportunities develop that side of themselves. So I kind of just was eased into administration. And my principal asked me to consider going through the training program, and I did. And then Waianae High School opened up as an opportunity for me to be a vice principal, and that just seemed like another good place for me to go.

Isn't the vice principal usually the one who dispenses discipline?

Discipline is part of the role, but it's really relationships and helping the students to know that you're there for them, and you have expectations, and you really just want to help make their school experience positive.

So somehow, they knew that even though you were disciplining them, that you cared about them?

I believe they did. It's not just the kids that you're responsible for when you're an administrator. You have to take care of the adults. Teachers need to feel supported, and they need to feel energized by the administrators. The Waianae teachers were just ... they also taught me so much about relationships and caring, and how to take care of kids.

And yet, from the outer world, I mean, outside Waianae, Nanakuli, there are a lot of perceptions of the place as being scary and bad, and very, very troubled.

Yeah. In every school that I've worked in, that's been a perception that people have had. Because when I taught in Nanakuli, and Waianae, and then Olomana and Farrington, people would always say, Oh, my goodness, it must be so hard there, you have all these difficulties. When you're in that school, that's not what you feel the most. It's supporting these people, the teachers and the students, and helping them to see a vision that is higher than maybe what they had imagined for themselves.

Catherine Payne served at Waianae High School just two and a half years, until a new daunting assignment came her way, the job of principal of Olomana School in Kailua. Olomana is actually several schools for young people who aren't making it in regular school. They have academic, social, or mental health challenges. Some have landed in juvenile detention or corrections. It's a school for at risk and delinquent youngsters, young people essentially, a school of last resort.

It just fit again with my real conviction that we have to take care of these students while they're still in school, and help them to find a different path. Because if we don't do that, the cost to society, and to them as individuals, is gonna be really, really great. The teachers that were at Olomana inspired me so much, because they were teachers that would see a little bit of goodness in

every child, and try to make that little bit grow, and grow. Kids need to have some adult in their life that they know cares about them. So it really requires a special person to be a counselor or a teacher, or an aide in a school like Olomana, or Nanakuli, or Waianae, or Farrington. Because you're working with kids who may not have that in their personal life, in their family life. So we have to be willing to go that extra step.

Now, some would say, Oh, if only we'd caught them earlier. What can you do with seventh through twelve grades? What works?

What works is giving them hope. And I think for many children, even at the age of twelve and thirteen, they've started to lose hope. They see their parents in trouble, they see their siblings and their cousins. So it's finding that little crack that you can get into, and give them hope. And we created different programs for the kids that stayed with us, where graduation could be a hope. And for so many kids who are in the dropout mentality, just thinking of graduation as a possibility changed their whole being. And we began to recognize these students, we had graduation ceremonies when they completed their requirements. These were kids that never, ever dreamed of graduation. And that's so important for these kids.

Did you ever get physically threatened?

At Waianae, I did have an incident where perhaps I was a little too green, but there was a student who was intoxicated. And I was out patrolling the campus, and she went into the boys' bathroom, so I just sort of followed her in to get her to come back out. And she did assault me, and tore my sweater, I remember. And she was arrested, and we did go to court. I wasn't really hurt.

Did it make you gun shy, though?

No, it didn't. 'Cause I knew I wasn't gonna be hurt seriously by her, and security came pretty quickly, so I just sort of stood my ground. The funny thing that happened shortly after that, I went to Olomana, where she then was. [CHUCKLE] And so, we met up again and made friends. But that was the only time.

When you're dealing with such a troubled population, do you feel like your work will never be done, or you can never do enough?

Absolutely. You can't ever do enough. You just do what you can do. We talk about planting seeds all the time. You're planting seeds that may not germinate for quite a while, but you still keep doing it, never giving up.

In 1995, after ten years at Olomana, Catherine Payne accepted the job that would come to define her career, principal of Governor Wallace Rider Farrington High School. At the time, it was the largest high school in the State, with about twenty-five hundred students, including many immigrants just learning English.

As principal, you may be the top person at the school, but it doesn't mean you're in control, because there are so many factors and constituencies. What's

that like, when you have to maintain order, but you really don't have all of the authority to do so?

I think one of the things that all principals realize is that you never know how your day is going to be. People that try to help us with organizing our time, and they talk about scheduling all these things, they really have no idea what a principal does. Because you don't know, when you walk into the office, who's gonna be standing there that needs to have some support. A principal of a large school, as Farrington was, cannot do it by himself for herself.

Twenty-five hundred students, staff of three hundred. Where do you find all the time to take care of all of these things, accreditation, and all of the things that are part of the job?

If you really sit down and list all the things, which I didn't do until I was ready to retire, 'cause I was doing it for the next principal, it's just overwhelming. You can't imagine doing all of that. And yet, when you're in that day-to-day living of it, you just do it. You don't do much else in your life, but you do that.

At times in the campus life of Farrington, gangs have been worse or better. I don't know what it was like when you first arrived there.

Well, when I first got there, we were actually coming out of a really tough period with gangs. There had been an incident where a student was quite severely beaten the previous year.

I remember stabbings in the parking lot at the time.

Yeah. There had been a shooting. The late 80s and the early 90s were really, really rough times. Adult Friends for Youth helped us, the YMCA on campus helped us. We have so many partners in the community that, while we did have incidents where gangs kind of would burst forth at different times, it never felt out of control. We have social workers on campus that actually have a peace council made up of different gang members that would talk about their problems before it escalated into conflict. So just different ways of working with the students, not to eliminate that social phenomena that is pretty much ingrained in the community.

There was that notable period where Hawaii's governor, chief of police, and city prosecutor were all Farrington grads. Keith Kaneshiro in his previous incarnation as prosecutor, Mike Nakamura, police chief, and Ben Cayetano as governor.

And they've all given back to Farrington. Ben Cayetano came and taught a class.

What was the class about?

He taught a class, and it was a political science type of group, similar to what he was teaching at the University. He wanted to give back and experience our students, and so he came and kind of co-taught the class with a teacher. Just an incredible opportunity for our students to experience him, and his wealth knowledge. I think it also opened his eyes a little bit to how challenging it is to be a teacher. [CHUCKLE] This school is not just Farrington, or just for the immediate group of students. This belongs to the community, it belongs to alumni, and they need to continue to support it. And they have.

Do you think principals need to be educators? Can you just have a master of business degree?

I think a principal needs to be an educator. I think it would be great if you had a partner in the school that was a business manager, so that they could take care of whether the bills were being paid on time, and the budget. You have a fifteen-million-dollar budget that you're dealing with, and I often wished I had some business background for that. But great educators have a passion for what they do, which is education. And if you are missing that reason for being in a school, that passion for helping children grow, then I think you're missing a piece of what is essential as a leader of education.

Along the way, did you see some really special interactions between people that perhaps changed others' lives?

It changed my life, watching teachers that so inspire me. What really would inspire me was when you would see something that was a problem or a tragedy, or some kind of situation with our students, and then to see how the staff would just coalesce to make that situation better. We had some suicides at Farrington, we had some other deaths of students, or deaths of students' family members, and how does the school come together to support those that are left. We had a student once who was the oldest in his family, he was a junior at the time. And he had siblings at the middle school and the elementary school, and his mother had just given birth and had cancer, and died within days after giving birth. His father had to keep his job, and there wasn't anyone in the family who could take care of this infant. And so, our eleventh grade student was going to have to drop out of school to take care of the infant. And his counselor found out about it, and the first thing that happened—'cause it was at Christmas too, is they did a huge drive to support the family, and gathering supplies for the baby, and Christmas gifts for the younger siblings. And then, over the Christmas holidays, trying to figure out how we could have this child still come to school, and take care of the baby at the same time. And at that time, we had a childcare program for infants for our pregnant girls, and for the girls that had given birth. It was a contracted program, but we were able to get them to agree that even though it wasn't his baby, he could bring his younger brother at six weeks, and come to school with his baby brother. And he was able to go ahead and graduate, because of that. It's one of the things that makes Farrington so special, is that we don't want anybody to fall through the cracks.

I can tell you are a believer, you're an idealist, and yet, you have to be pragmatic to do your job and to be an educator. How do you reconcile the two?

Well, you never lose your idealism, because that's what gave me the hope to keep going. But, there is the reality of the day-to-day operations, and how you keep the school running, and all the different people that depend on the leaders to take care of things. And that's just a balancing act that I think any leader of an organization has to manage. I believe that a good leader doesn't

feel like they have to have all the power. They really have to give it away and empower others. And that's how a system continues when you're not there. And that was my goal. I used to tell them even years before I retired that if the school didn't continue on and grow, and get better after I left, it meant that I wasn't a very good leader.

Why did you retire?

I was actually out of school for about three months, because I was ill. And during that time, I think it gave me moments of reflection where I began to think about what other things that I wanted to do, and also know that maybe I didn't have quite the energy to keep up that pace that's required at Farrington. And Farrington deserves somebody that had that. I was there fifteen years, so who's gonna do the next fifteen? And it just felt like it was the time to step back. It was hard. [CHUCKLE] I knew it was the right thing to do, but I'm still feeling connected to Farrington, and I think I probably always will. That's the school where I've spent the most time of my life.

Are you good at doing less?

Not really. [CHUCKLE] I definitely want to keep my mind busy, and I want to keep involved in education. I think up until my last day on Earth, that'll be what I'm most concerned and involved with. I have tried to step back, and see things in a different perspective. And I think that's how I'm looking at the whole educational system now, is more from the balcony, instead of right in the middle of the fray. I know times are very hard right now, and I hope people will be patient with public education and public educators, because it's just a really tough time. And the people who are working in those schools, in all our schools, are trying really hard to do a good job. It's tough.

In retirement, do you have a different view of the job of principal? Have you shifted in your outlook at all?

I think, as I look at it now, it's even harder than a year ago when I was there. It's a very, very difficult and challenging time for public educators. And my heart goes out to all of them.

Have you talked with some of your former students to find out what it was, if they knew of any particular thing that was done that kind of turned things over for them?

The students that I still hear from, they just remember the teachers that were kind to them, and teachers that continued to believe in them and tell them, you know, you can do this, you're gonna be okay. Maybe that's what inspired them, when they were twenty-five or thirty, to go back to school. You just never know how you influence a child. I had a student come up to me recently in the shopping center out at Kahala Mall, who came running up, and he was an adult now, and he had been at Olomana. He recognized me, and he just wanted me to know that he was doing well. And he was in his mid-thirties, he introduced me to his wife, he has a family, he has a good job. And he just said, I remember you, and you helped us, and I just want you to know I'm okay now. And that's what we live for. [CHUCKLE]

Catherine Payne retired in 2010, after fifteen years at Farrington and more than thirty-five in Hawaii's public schools. She intends to stay active in education and community service. Whatever she does next, Catherine Payne remains a role model for Hawaii educators. Her work will live on in the teachers she has mentored and inspired, and in former students who are succeeding beyond expectations because they had a teacher or principal who believed they could. For Long Story Short, and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. *A hui hou kakou.*

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When they become difficult, it's still being that same—coming back and saying, I'm still here for you. You can be obnoxious and you can swear at me, and I'm not gonna write you off. I'm still gonna be here for you. And that takes a special kind of adult that can do that.