

GUEST: TY SANGA

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That's the reason why I became a filmmaker. Because we saw other people telling our stories, and not right. They just mess it up, or tear it apart, and they put their own twists into what they think is local or Hawaiian, and just kinda butcher everything. So with the medium and how much it's changed, and made it more accessible for us, it's given us the ability to give us the voice, and put the power within our hands. And that's been what I've been kinda stressing through all my films.

The vision of young Hawaii filmmaker, Ty Sanga, 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. The Sundance Film Festival, the nation's preeminent showcase for independent filmmakers, recognized Hawaii filmmaker, Ty Sanga, in January of 2011. His short film, *Stones*, became the first all Hawaiian language film to be screened at the festival. Ty, along with his brother, was raised in Hawaii by a family whose heritage reflects our community's ethnic diversity. His mother, Trinidad, is a first generation immigrant of Filipino ancestry. His later father, Gilbert, was of Hawaiian-Chinese descent. Lauded for his use of the camera, and his ability to convey the Hawaiian experience through the medium of film, Ty Sanga's quest to find his calling started by knocking on doors to make hotel room service deliveries.**

We lived in Houghtailing, Kalihi area. And my mom and dad constantly worked quite a bit. I mean, a lot, a lot. They were both working in hotels, especially my aunt. So many times, me and my brother, whenever they would work, and it would be holidays, we would be sent up to the mainland where my mom's family is. So we kinda lived this, dual life of Hawaii and LA, and just the experience of what California was like. Well, it rose my awareness to what local is. 'Cause my cousins, a lot of times, they would tell me I speak way too much Pidgin. And I never really understood what Pidgin was, until they exposed to me that we're not really speaking English. To be honest, I never knew I was even speaking, quote, a different dialect, or a different language. I thought I was just speaking English. On my mom's side, everyone's second generation Filipino. So

when they moved up to LA, they pretty much more assimilated into American culture. They actually gravitated more towards Mexican culture, because there was no other Asians that looked like them. And many times, my cousins, and they're very strong-willed too, and they're very, like, This is how we should act as Americans. And only until I got into college or past that, especially when I got exposed to ethnic studies, I started realizing the differences within our cultures, and then how much I represented more of a, quote, unquote, local culture than a mainland culture. Most of that actually happened, that prejudism happened when I was in college, when I went for my master's program in Chapman University.

What happened?

Pretty much every year, on the dot, like I would get pulled over by a cop. And they would always confuse me as some Latino guy. Well, I don't know what he wants. I guess 'cause back in the days, my head was shaved bald too. And so that didn't really help. But, I got pulled over quite a bit. I'd be walking to school, and my school was in Chapman University, so it's a very conservative white community, which is in Orange County. And that first year, I'd walk to school quite a bit, 'cause I didn't have a car yet. And the cop car would go around the block, come back again, and stop up right next to me, and he'd be like, What are you doing? And I would tell him, I'm going to college. I mean, I'm walking to my school. And he's like, Let me see your ID. And he just gave me the runaround. And then he'd just drive off, and that would be it. Every year, it'd be the same thing too. 'Cause sometimes, the next year, I'd work, like, when working on a film, you're working on it like for long hours. And sometimes I would come home at three in the morning. So I would leave school at three in the morning, and I would get pulled over, and then he would run my license plate and everything, and it would be the same questions as well. It's like, What are you doing out, why are you driving around, what do you do? And it's just like, what's going on? Stuff like that never happened to me here in Hawaii. But now that when I moved to the mainland, I realized that there's this divide of, like, I'd never been exposed to something like that. I've always read about it when I was studying ethnic studies, but I've never been actually exposed to that type of prejudism.

Filmmaker Ty Sanga's parents shared their values of hard work and education by demonstrating their strong work ethic, and by using their hard earned wages for their son's private schooling. His father impressed upon Ty the importance of his Hawaiian heritage. When Ty was an eighth-grader, his father died of an illness. His mother continued to provide for her children's educational opportunities.

And that's the reason why she always pushed about us just education in itself, and how it helped propel you within the society and within life. Especially 'cause then, I think her highest was high school, and that was it. And then she

went straight into a service-oriented job, working in hotels. But from there, she worked her way all the way to the top. But then, she didn't want us to go through that type of struggles as well, so me and my brother went to—

Was it a real scrimping, saving thing to put you and your brother through private school?

Yes, it was. I mean, it was the beautiful thing and I think that's the thing about the first generations too. Like those type of parents, that they don't want to let their children know how much they have to sacrifice for it. 'Cause they want... the reason why they come to American is 'cause they want a better life for their children. So when that happens, which is almost like a negative effect to it to an extent, is that they never expose them to all the hard work, and what they have to go through, sometimes. And that's the reason why some of the children of them feel so privileged that they demand these type of things, and why isn't my mom giving me all this type of stuff, when we've been always having that since we were children. So it's interesting that my mom tried to, quote, unquote, spoil us. But like, I think my dad and my auntie them guys kinda kept us really grounded in that sense of like, who we were, and then what we needed to do. And then, like, that you also ... I think that's what I loved my dad about. 'Cause then like, he never, like ... he instilled that really hard work too, on top of that.

And he was also in the hotel business, right?

Yeah, he was. It's funny, 'cause then he was actually the manager of my mom. I think that's how they first met. And then he ended up going into engineering, 'cause then he switched positions afterwards. And then my mom ended up rising up into manager. But, I always saw it all the time, that they constantly, constantly worked a lot. And I appreciated that quite a bit. 'Cause, I mean, it's not like we were latchkey children, but then I understood what they were doing. I don't know, it's just kind of a weird thing to say. I understood the sacrifices they were really making for us.

You went through three Catholic private schools.

M-hm.

Before getting to UH. And when you were in UH, did you have a sense of where you were going? I mean, usually, the first two years are deciding on a major.

How'd you do there as far as deciding?

I didn't really know what I wanted to do, and I definitely knew I didn't want to start working right away. So I mean, school was the easy transition. And when I went to school, it was I think I first started out in ICS.

ICS is ...

Computer science. I loved computers a lot back then. And then I realized, like, Ww, I don't really don't like doing math. But then, which is funny, 'cause my next transition from there was business, which is like another version of that. And then that, I just lost interest in. I mean, but it just felt like every one of my friends was going into business too, and it just seemed like that's what you needed to do, 'cause then everyone wanted to be successful. And then that didn't go so well, and then I went to hotel management, and that's kinda where I ended up

sitting for a bit, actually. 'Cause then while I was going into TIM, I started working at Ihilani, and then that's ... so it's almost like a circle with my mom and my dad, and my aunts them all worked in hotels, then I started working in hotels at the same time as well. Just felt like a natural progression, actually, for me. I realized if I was gonna work so much at something, for so long, I would rather have it something a little bit more meaningful for me. I mean, I loved the hotel industry, and especially since, for me, I saw it as a way to become an ambassador to cultures that have never been exposed to Hawaii. Especially when I was in room service, like a lot of the times, we had easy access with the guests, and we talked to them frequently while we were serving them, or while we were doing certain things. And then they would ask us all these different questions of like, Where do I go from here?, and like, How do I say this *Kalaniana'ole*? You know, all of these different things. And it felt nice. But it didn't feel worthwhile. And then, so, I just started going back to school. 'Cause I didn't really know what I wanted to do still back then, so I just started focusing more of my—like I was still taking TIM courses, but I was signing up mostly for ethnic study courses. So I think at the same time with ethnic studies, I was doing literature as well.

So you were just following what you were interested in.

Yeah.

You didn't have a grand plan?

No. I mean, 'cause then by that point, I was already in college for like four years, I think. And the reason why I started taking a lot of ethnic studies is 'cause they focused more on social services. 'Cause then, when I was a high school student, I used to volunteer quite a bit, actually, with American Red Cross, with all these youth environmental programs. So then it kind of fit more along the lines of what I wanted to do, actually.

You were looking at some of the more marginalized people in society too, right?

Yeah. I mean, well, that's 'cause it finally opened my eyes in regards to who we were as a culture, and as a society. I mean, I always felt strongly about being proud to be from Hawaii. They justified it through ethnic studies. And even through my literature classes. 'Cause when I took this course by ... it was a short stories course, by Mike Kuleloa, and he introduced us to a lot of like local short stories. And oh, that just ... and that's where I found this, like, Chris McKinney, and Lois Ann Yamanaka, and like Lee Tanouchi. And then like, everything that my mom them was saying, and everything that my cousins them were saying on the mainland, that oh, you should get rid of that local culture, 'cause you need to be more American and stop speaking Pidgin, and then these writers and these ethnic studies courses made is proud to be who we were, and be respected for it too. Especially like Chris McKinney and Lee Tanouchi, they demanded to be respected for being local and demanded to be respected for speaking Pidgin. So it just blew my mind, and then I just started diving more into those type of things. And then through ethnic studies, I got introduced to documentaries. A lot of it was like the *Maka O Ka Aina* stuff, which it dealt with a lot of like the land issues, and then people getting displaced. Like Hawaiians

being displaced from their lands. Powerful, powerful images of Hawaiians getting arrested, and crying, and getting locked into cars. And then just like they're destroying their buildings. And it's so funny, 'cause then, I can't even pinpoint what the docs were called, but it just hit me so strongly. And then, next week, we'd watch another documentary in another course, where John Okamura would show us like, Asian Americans fighting alongside of African Americans during like the Black Power movement, and how like our cultures were moving on the same trajectory as them, we just wanted to get acceptance. And it blew my mind knowing that, 'cause we grew up knowing how powerful the African American movement was, but then realizing that Asians were a part of that movement as well, and how much that they tried to accomplish just in regards to acceptance. I was never exposed to that growing up. I mean, we were never exposed to that at all, actually in Hawaii, nonetheless, where we're considered the majority. It was a huge effect into who I was as a filmmaker. 'Cause then, they started giving me the realization that we have a stronger voice that no one else has ever heard.

The University of Hawaii's Academy for Creative Media provided Ty Sanga with hands-on experience in filmmaking. He produced several award-winning short narrative films that reveal a social awareness nurtured through his ethnic studies experience, and a keen eye for the nuances of local culture.

I got into film because of documentaries, but then I've never made a doc since then, I think. I think the first assignment I did was this piece called Passive Voice, and it dealt with the connection between this older generation and the younger generations, and the responsibilities that we need to give for the older generations.

I love the title, Passive Voice.

Yeah. And especially 'cause in the our Asian culture, we're very like, yeah, it's very passive aggressive sometimes. You never say anything, but that something's brewing within it. That generation, they've sacrificed so much for us to exist. And it's sad sometimes, when people like kinda toss them off to the side, and they've ... the reason why we're here is because of them. So that story, Passive Voice, was kinda like my nice little homage to them. There's two characters, a granddaughter, and then a grandmother. But the granddaughter was like, she's in college, so the whole entire story is about her, her responsibility to go home, go over Grandma's house and take care of her. And then, the whole story is just about realizing how important that was in regards to connecting with your elderlies. I don't know, I just was dealing with these different types of themes back then. I was trying to do interesting things because I was inspired by different filmmakers in that, like, [INDISTINCT] technique. And I didn't really know what I was doing about it, but I was just like, all right, I want to just explore and test things out. And, thankfully, I think it won, actually, at the Olelo Youth Exchange. Where everyone else was doing all

these flashy, like one thug beating up another thug, and stealing goods, and it was like very—

Action.

Yeah, Tarantino-esque, and I guess I was dealing with drama stuff and emotional local stuff.

How flexible were you if things didn't go your way?

You know what you want, but then sometimes certain limitations show you that you can't achieve it. So you still ultimately try to achieve your goal, and you try to work around it, or work within the problem. Because like usually, any limitation is just an opportunity for more creativity.

What was your next film?

We all had to pitch stories, and then that was the story that I knew, 'cause I worked in the hotel industry. But I associated it with like, a hula girl coming from the Big Island, moving to Hawaii. Just that thin line of like, what is considered as commercialization versus what is considered like culturally acceptance. Yeah, and like, being true to your culture, and being commercialized.

A lot is left unsaid, but it's understood.

Yeah. I think I forced things too much back then. 'Cause I'm not gonna lie, it was definitely like, it was derivative of my ethnic studies courses, where I wanted to impact people as much as those films impacted me. So I think sometimes I tried to be ... we call it metafive, in Chapman, which is like it's bigger than a metaphor. You're hitting the audience over the head, when it shouldn't need to be anymore by that point. 'Cause like you said, it is understood.

You know what it reminded me of? I have to share this with you, because Malcolm Naea Chun shared it with me. It's a quote from Mary Kawena Pukui. And she said, Do you believe I'm wearing a kukui lei? It's Hawaiian in looks. It's plastic, made in Hong Kong. That's what's become of a lot of our beliefs.

M-hm. Yeah. The commercialization of our culture. I'm super grateful I went through that process of making this film, because then it also opened my eyes to the complexity in regards to our society of like, how much ... I mean, even the older generations grew up living like *hapa Haole hula*, and being a part of that society too. I mean, to be honest, it's derivative of who we are today as Hawaiians, practically. I mean, many of those things, you can't really pull apart, because it's almost connected. And then, like, if we say you get rid of like all of the stuff in the *luau*'s and everything like that, you're practically saying that you're losing ... everyone their jobs as well as the Hawaiian. So and it's so weird, 'cause in so many of them, they've dance hula within the *luau*'s, but yet at the same time, they go to the *halau*'s on the weekends. So it's this two worlds that they live on. And it's interesting as a filmmaker, I didn't really find that until I started digging deeper and exploring it. And I think that's the beauty of me like, becoming a filmmaker now. 'Cause then you start discovering things that I've never been exposed to. I wouldn't have been on that journey unless I started it. Like, I mean, finding these things out unless I went on this journey. So, yeah.

So did you resolve after that one, I'm gonna be less ... preachy?

Yes, definitely. I mean, you learn to finesse things, and you learn to like, How do you convince the audience about what your story's gonna be about, and not be hitting them over the head and it's like putting a little sugar into the medicine that they're gonna taste, and how it's gonna—'cause once you get to that point, then how is it gonna resonate with them afterwards. Yeah. So it's a balancing act. And I guess I'm still trying to deal with it today. Yeah. 10G.

[MUSIC]

Follow the Leader deals with like, acceptance, actually. It's more about acceptance and friendship. And also, prejudice within our cultures, and in society, really, of like local culture. When I went to St. Theresa and St. Anthony's, we used to collect all our basketball cards growing up. And I used that as a parallel too in regards to like, in basketball and like especially back then in the 90s, like the White players weren't the great basketball players, and Michael Jordan and all those guys were all the main. And these were the stereotypes that we knew. And then that story dealt with stereotypes as well. It's about finding companionship between two kids that just wanted to be accepted within their little group that they're existing in, their little microcosm of this basketball collecting world. [CHUCKLE]

You have such a good ear. Because I never collected baseball cards, never was in that mom & pop store, but I feel like I've been there. I feel like I've bought from that very same lady—

That's so funny.

—who was at the counter.

I mean, all my movies come from my everyday life, and from what I've experienced. I wanted to film the actual story that we used to collect basketball cards in, and that story was gone. And it's just like another form of like why I tell stories, 'cause like all of our stories are gonna disappear.

After earning a bachelor's degree in ethnic studies from the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Ty Sanga left for California to attend graduate school at Chapman University's Film and Media Arts Program. For his graduate thesis, he chose to write and direct a story loosely based on the Hawaiian legend, *Na Keiki O Na Iwi*, as written by Frederick Bruce Wichman. It depicts a couple who are the last of the ancient Mu people living in isolation, and struggling with whether to accept newcomers. It was this film, titled *Stones*, that brought him back to the islands, accompanied by a contingent of Chapman students, to shoot the film on location.

There's always those stories of like the people that go to the mainland, and they never come back, or they go to the mainland and they fail at it. I mean, like, a lot of my friends actually went to graduate school or even just undergrad, and they go to the mainland, and they're like, I get homesick, I miss Hawaii so much, I want to go back. A lot of my heart was in Hawaii that when I went to the mainland, I didn't want that to happen to me. So I kinda closed that door. So

maybe I almost slammed that door. So when it was time for me to do my thesis film, like oh, god, that story just haunted me every night, actually. 'Cause then it reminded me of like, I guess just my whole experiences, wanting to be a filmmaker.

Wanting something that you thought you might not be able to have?

Yeah. Well, even just in regards to Hawaii. 'Cause it's like I missed it so much. And then like, I guess it's one of those things. So hence, I changed the legend quite a bit. I mean, like, we adapted the legend. I called up Buddy Wichman and we talked stories with him, and I adapted it more into a different version.

So this is the Mr. Wichman who lives on Kauai, and who's written books on legends.

Yeah.

He's considered just a wonderful expert.

Yeah. Yeah.

And was this a Kauai-based legend?

Yeah, it's the legend where when you're heading out to Kalalau, then you see the stones out there. So yeah, it's the stone colors. And then actually, that's when you know you're heading into *Kalalau*, 'cause when you see those. I wanted it to be kinda my story of my struggles of what I was dealing with during that time, actually. So the story is really, really different, actually. The only thing that's the same is the sacrifice that gets made at the end of the movie.

Definitely, it's about love, and then loss of love, and then sacrifice. At the same time too, it deals with cultures colliding. And it's all about acceptance. I mean, like just separation. 'Cause then, like many a times, like there are the *Mu* that lives in the valleys, and then they shun themselves away visitors coming to the island. Actually, you know, it's moving into the island. 'Cause a lot of the stories that we found, I mean, it's so interesting when I was like reading, doing my research, it's just like many of the legends were about the *Mu* migrating away from Hawaii. So we got pieces and pieces from there, bits and pieces from there, and then I definitely tried to—wanted to make sure that this is my own personal story.

[HAWAIIAN LANGUAGE]

Our main character is the female—

[HAWAIIAN LANGUAGE]

—*Nihipali*, where she living in the darkness, and then through this journey, she kinda becomes enlightened. And it's so funny that all of the antagonists are male characters, even for the villagers' side. The fathers, and her husband, they impose this kind of like closed-minded roles onto them, the females. On the flipside, like the light becomes like death. When the sun comes up, it's death for them, and for her. So the whole, entire, her life would be in a dark world, yet she's able to see everything. So we wanted the audience to be kind of—we played with different techniques. One of our biggest influences was Pan's labyrinth and how they messed around with colors and lighting. 'Cause it also deals with the fantasy world, and the reality. And then like, that was another

way for a Western audience to understand what kind of story we're telling. When you close yourself off from so much, for so long, you lose what really is important in your lives. And for him, he was just so very like one-sided, and narrow-minded. And then for the wife, she was willing to move on and move forward. And sometimes, if you stay stagnant, it's almost like it's another form of extinction. And then that's what ends up becoming. So it's a tragedy. I'm not gonna lie, the story is tragedy. But it hopefully has ... hopeful messages within it. Yeah. I definitely think my first biggest responsibility is to make it specifically for Hawaii. But then, like, when I do that, like I mean, I already know it becomes universal for everywhere else. And it's because of what you talked about also, because of making it very like three dimensional, and because of just digging deeper into things, and not making things so surface level, and talking about it up here, like just getting it so that everyone else understands from here, from Hawaii to like, DC, or Wisconsin, or wherever they're from, you know, it's gonna resonate that way. Yeah.

Told with cinematic grace, *Stones* was one of only eighty-one entries chosen from sixty-five hundred to be showcased at the Sundance Film Festival in 2011. In 2011, Ty Sanga teaches screenwriting at the Academy for Creative Media, and works for a production company, all the while shaping stories for inspirational and thought-provoking films about, and for Hawaii. Among his projects is a documentary in the works about Hawaiian community leader, Myron Pinky Thompson. *Mahalo piha*, Ty Sanga, 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.

Especially when I was growing up, my mom never wanted me to ... she wanted me to get rid of the Pidgin, she wanted us to, like, wear our shoes, stop running around barefoot or slippers, start wearing nice collared shirts. So then, it trained us, like, to ... we know when to turn it on, and we know when to turn it off. Or actually, to just feel more comfortable in your environment, I think that's kind of where I learned. It's almost like survival skills, that when I get placed into an environment, I kind of adapt to that culture.