

GUEST: SEAN PRIESTER

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Food is powerful, and it brings people together, and it's a call to action. Put some food on the table, and people are gonna come running. Chefs have that, they have that power. It's sort of like you use the skills that you have, and use the attention and notoriety that you have, and if you can use it to benefit to others, then give it a shot.

We've seen many examples of chefs working for the good of the community, especially here in Hawaii. But how about someone who started out with a larger mission of being responsible to the community, then along the way, became a chef? Next on Long Story Short, you'll meet Sean Priester, a chef with true soul.

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

Aloha. I'm Leslie Wilcox. If you could craft the perfect chef, what ingredients would you include? Well, maybe they're well-traveled, influenced by many cultures. They should have passion for the food they cook, and the people they feed. They should understand that food can nurture community, and maybe it helps to have strength from overcoming personal obstacles. You'll find all these ingredients in Sean Priester, executive chef and owner of Soul Café, in Kaimuki.

I understand you grew up all over the world.

Right. Well, I was born in Atlanta, and six months after I was born, we moved to Belgium; Brussels, Belgium. And that's where life began for me.

Tell me about your parents.

Dad was in the Army for twenty years, he was a master sergeant in the Army. Mom's been a schoolteacher all her life. And they were wonderful. I think I had a wonderful upbringing.

Were they protective?

Protective. Dad was always conscious of me being independent and being able to take care of myself. Mom, she was a protective mom, nurturing mom.

Did your parents sit you down to tell you life lessons, or how'd you learn from them things that matter?

I didn't have any really life lesson talks until I was in my teens. But just because we were a military family and just traveling so much, and being placed in these

different environments so frequently, it really just gave us opportunities to adapt and cope with new friendships, and losing friendships, and being in uncomfortable environments.

What are the other places you lived as a child growing up?

Child growing up, we moved to Cleveland, Ohio. I lived in Monterey, California, lived in Minneapolis. Savannah, Georgia was another place that we lived in, Munich, Germany. Ended up in, Fayetteville and Raleigh, North Carolina just before coming to Hawaii.

What's the biggest payoff, you think, of all those military moves? Is there an experience in your life where you think, That really helped me, right there?

Wow; that's a very specific question, I would say. [CHUCKLE]

Well, in general.

I'd say it just really made me aware of my environment, and made me want to really get to the core of people's existence wherever I was, in order for me to feel comfortable and in order for me to integrate and just be on an even playing field with the rest of the community.

You'd try to connect quickly.

Tried to connect quickly. Exactly.

What did you choose to study at college, and where'd you go?

I went to NC State. I chose materials engineering. Sounded really good on paper. Through the process of being independent and on my own, I didn't find that the curriculum sort of fit into what my goals were. And I really was seeking out a way that I could benefit society in a way that would be uh, a bit more powerful or more upfront, I guess you would say. Just kept looking for something that suited me, and I ended up in this course called Conservation of Natural Resources, which you would call ecology, and very young in its stages, as far as the course of study. And it seemed like a good way to contribute by working on solutions on how to protect the planet and protect our natural resources.

What'd you do after college?

After college, my dad had retired from the military and moved to California. So I ended up in California as well after leaving NC State. And I went into this organization called The PIRGs. And The PIRGs are ... P-I-R-G. It was Public Interest Research Group. Sort of a consumer—sort of a spinoff of a Ralph Nader sort of a consumer group. And what it did was, it was a political action group that went and lobbied for clean air, clean water, pesticides, things of that nature.

And then, what?

Then the summer was over. And I was looking for where I was gonna go next. I was living at home, and I thought Northern California would be a nice place to go live, and I made contact with a buddy of mine from NC State who had been in Hawaii for a few years already. And he suggested that I come to Hawaii.

Belgium, Cleveland, Georgia, Germany, North Carolina, California, and now, Hawaii. Sean Priester had seen much of the world. He could have settled anywhere. Fortunately for us, he came here.

So when you got here, did your buddy give you some advice about living in Hawaii? Did he give you the lay of the land, tell you what you should know?

Well, it was my friend Todd from college, and he gave me enough information to sort of get me settled and give me time to acclimate to Hawaii. I'd say that the larger growth came from a guy named William, William Cineza. We worked together at Sunset Grill. Born and raised in Wahiawa, local boy, and he really just, you know, took me under his wing, this new guy from wherever, from all over, from all over, and he told me the ways of Hawaii.

So, what were the ways that he applied to you?

[CHUCKLE] Well, basically, he just taught me about—and it's stuff that I knew from my own sort of travels, but just respecting the community, not judging the community.

Then, you moved to the Laniakea YWCA on Richards Street, the Wild Mushroom.

That was the birth of the Wild Mushroom. Yeah. I worked at this restaurant called the Fresh Market in Manoa, and that was that was a spinoff of that. The Fresh Market closed down, and then we reopened in YWCA. And when the proprietor left, Matt Lau left the Fresh Market at the YWCA, my thoughts were, you know, it was my food all along, and I should continue this on. And the Wild Mushroom became successful in a lot of ways. I'd worked for the Café Laniakea as well, as a general manager during the week, running their operations. And so, there just came a time when I needed to choose, so I chose the Wild Mushroom to continue to nurture and pursue. And when I did that, I started creating a business plan and things of that nature. And so I left the Y, and shortly thereafter, I ended up with an organization called Steadfast Housing, another nonprofit, who provided housing to people with mental illness and other things as well. And they actually had a grant to work with the State Hospital and create this little café that we actually opened it up, and it provided vocational rehabilitation for people with mental illness who had received treatment. And we had this beautiful little spot where we were serving most of the staff, and sometimes some of the patients. And there was a beautiful sort of synergy between my desire to teach and to sort of share my knowledge, and operate a business.

But didn't stay?

I think I put in four years, and that seems like a long time in restaurant years. And I'd taken my staff to Tastes of Honolulu, which was a huge accomplishment for a community that a lot of stigma attached to it, and we performed well there. So, I had accomplished a lot in that realm. And what it came down to at the time when I left was, Top of Waikiki presented itself as an opportunity. A friend of mine was working there, and suggested I pursue that. And I was sort of at this—I'd worked for nonprofits for almost eight years, and I wanted to put myself in a

position where I was accountable for the fiscal success of a restaurant. Top of Waikiki was one of those showcase restaurants. It had a lot of wow factor to it. My thoughts were, going to the Top of Waikiki turn it around, show my street credibility, show my ability to manage the resources, and then, take that education and pursue.

So, what job did you accept there?

Executive chef.

And so, you're the top guy deciding what food should be served? Did you change the whole menu?

I did. I did. The Mau's were very generous in allowing me to create autonomy in that respect. I really found that the best way for me to work is to speak with my own voice, and within whatever parameters I'm working in. And in order to just be committed to what I was doing, I needed the opportunity to sort of put my heart into it. And they allowed me to. Slowly, but surely, we peeled away the menu and started adding some of the things that reflected my culinary sensibilities and that the tourist community would find appealing. Ultimately, though, it was about the locals for me. My goal was to bring respect to the Top of Waikiki, and bring integrity to the menu, and be looked upon by our peers with some respect as well.

How did you execute?

I can tell you, within the first year, I cried a couple of times, and there were, clashes with management, clashes with staff. However, we were able to eventually, everybody got onboard, and we were able to take the ideas, and values, and vision that I had, and create something that was pretty fantastic, and I think, unique as well. So we made it happen.

Chef Sean Priester was on a roll. Under his guidance, the menu at Top of Waikiki had a nostalgic influence combined with fresh local ingredients. He also brought an environmental consciousness to the restaurant. Top of Waikiki was beginning to get the kinds of reviews that most chefs crave. Then, he left.

And then?

[CHUCKLE] And then, I ended up with a lunch wagon. The day after I left the Top of Waikiki, I was on the street.

So, why would you go from the Top of Waikiki to a street truck?

[CHUCKLE] Really, it just came down to, I've always wanted to move forward. I'm always looking for the next sort of challenge for me, what's gonna be my creative motivation. It really just came down to I'd started to get more into the expression of my own, like I said, my own self. And I started going to markets and marketing this vegetarian black-eyed pea chili that I was doing, and I guess I'd done all these culinary sort of tests, where I've gotten to work with the best products, from Kobe beef and *foie gras*, and I've been in environments where I've gotten to cook and have Alan Wong taste my food, or Padovani. So there was a lot of validation that already had occurred at this point in my career. For

me, the next thing was just to go and actually touch upon something that I'd been avoiding most of my career, which was my background. My family's background is from the South, and I really just wanted to explore that and see, now that I'd done all these things that I felt like I needed to do be a chef, I was gonna go ahead and explore these things. So, through that process, there was a change of direction. I ended up with a lunch truck, and I wanted to explore that. And I was doing—

It's very hard work, isn't it? I mean, don't you have to get up really early in the morning, and ...

How'd you know that?

And the profit margin is thin.

Yeah. Yeah, it was all that. It was a surprise to me how invested you needed to be on a day-to-day basis in order to make things work on a lunch wagon. Yeah. And it was totally 5:00 a.m. for produce and the next two hours for prep, do the truck, clean it up, and go pick up your product for the next day. And, yeah, it was quite a learning experience for me to do that. Yeah, the Soul Patrol was just born out of my desire to see where, again, where my culinary exploration was gonna go next. And that romance with lunch wagon that I didn't know about, that we know is different now, my perspective on it now, I just wanted to explore that as well.

So, now you have a truck. How do you decide what you're gonna serve in your truck?

Pretty early on, like I so this black-eyed pea vegetarian chili. And—

That sounds great.

It's delicious. And we also do a cornbread that we serve with honey butter that's been the core of the Soul Patrol's existence. And after that, we bring as much as the market will bear. I mean, I bring a representation of Southern cuisine, so I'll do a pulled pork or Carolina pulled pork sandwich, or I call it Carolina Pulled Pork Adobo Sandwich. And I do ribs, and chicken gumbo, and fried chicken. And so, what I'm really doing is just representing sort of the Southern regional cuisine that I'm familiar with.

When you talk about food, it's almost like you're talking about values. You use words like honest and integrity.

Well, I mean, those are personal values that have challenged me, and that I think are important to society, and I think are important to how I leave the Earth, and how I represent myself to my kids. I've said before that cooking is my vocation, and it's been my way of expressing myself.

Your life is difficult. One, it's hard to operate a business. Two, restaurants are a notoriously short-lived business proposition in general. And three, you give your food away, what, twice a month. I mean, so you're trying to make a profit with a young restaurant operation, and what do you do? Some of the time, you give it away. What's that about?

I built a relationship with a guy named Utu Langi, and through meeting him and seeing what a generous spirit he has been, I was given the opportunity when I

got the lunch wagon to go and feed the homeless. And because of my commitment to Utu and the values that he represents, I'm compelled to do that, to give a little bit as much as he does to the community. So, twice a month, the Soul Patrol goes to the Next Step Shelter, and we create this wonderful—I think it's a wonderful breakfast. And I go get fresh berries, my volunteer team are whipping up whipped cream and we make fresh pancakes.

And these are kids who often eat canned food.

I'm not sure where they're eating. I mean, they leave the shelter at a certain time. I'm not sure; maybe they're getting their breakfast at school, or some other way. But I can only imagine that they're not getting quite what we're preparing for them. And it's awesome to see these little kids, being little kids. 'Cause, they're not very much interested in the community service that we're doing, they're just running around the truck, and playing with each other, and things of that nature. But it helps, the parents and, you know, get them off to a good start of their day, and people going to their jobs and going to interviews. And again, it's just my way of doing what I can. Food is powerful, so ...

How many breakfasts do you serve on an average when you go to Next Step twice a month?

Well, I mean, their shelter is limited to a little over two hundred, so we're flipping about two hundred pancakes, about five in the morning, and shuttling up there, and serving 'em coffee, and juice, and like I said, turkey sausage and things of that nature. So, yeah, it's two hundred, two hundred a visit. It's a cool thing.

These days, even large corporations have difficulty supporting charitable causes. For a small businessman, especially a restaurant owner like Sean Priester, donating resources and time on a regular basis can only be described as challenging.

What does your family say about your contributions, all the things you do that don't go to profit in a financial sense.

My young son is pretty resonant on what I do for the community. And you can just tell by his comments that he's aware that having two kids and needing to get them to school on certain mornings, going out to feed the homeless doesn't really support that process. My wife's been really supportive of that as well. You can ask my mom anything, and she'll be proud of me. So the family is like I said, you know, I'm conscious of a legacy that I have to leave, and ...

How long have you been thinking about legacy? 'Cause you seem young to be thinking about it.

It's probably in the past few years. I really took some time to take some personal growth courses that really supported looking at the way that I responded to situations in my life, and how I viewed them as well, and looking at honesty and integrity, and things of those nature. So ...

Did you have a problem with honesty before?

Yeah. I mean, honesty means you're exposing yourself. Right? And you're exposing yourself to rejection, and you're exposing yourself to getting hurt in certain ways. I mean, a lot of that goes back to me, a lot of that was, before sobriety. A lot of that is hidden behind why I drank, and why I did drugs. So—

Okay; I missed that part. So when was that?

Well, sobriety happened '96 for me. And so—

So how long have you had a drinking problem?

Oh, probably when I got to college, when I didn't have the parents looking over my shoulder. I mean, I don't know, if we called it a problem then, but I can't say that I was being terribly responsible at the time.

But you worked, and it wasn't a ...

Yeah, I worked. I pursued my schooling, I got to Hawaii, worked quite a few jobs before I got sober. That kinda stuff. But all that was just, an exercise in me not being able to be open or confront feelings, or being completely honest with myself as well. So honesty and integrity has become huge, since becoming sober. 'Cause you get sober, and all that's still there.

What made you decide, all right, enough of this lifestyle, I'm changing?

I was sitting at the bar, drinking a beer at like, nine in the morning or something. And I kept a journal and a diary this whole time, too, and wrote down my thoughts and what was challenging me, what my turmoil was. Ultimately, I just said, if I don't do something about this, then I just want to die. I just want to get out of this. And what the dying part was, when they look at my tombstone, they're gonna say, Sean Priester died an alcoholic and a drug addict. And I said, this is not the way my dad and mom raised me. As a Priester, my last name, this is not how I want to go out. And it really came down to owning up to that realization, owning up to and respecting the fact that Mom and Dad raised somebody who was more responsible than that. And I made a call to detox that same day, and had a cab take me over, and got the detox and went to a class. And they said, over fifty percent of you aren't gonna make it through this or stay sober. Well, that was all they needed to tell me.

Just challenge you, and you're up for it.

Exactly. So, I believe my destiny was to be in this position. And again, as being an example, this is the scariest thing I've ever done. And like you said, there's a lot of uncertainty in what I'm doing as well. And I wanted my kid to see that, you know, you gotta follow your heart, you gotta follow your passion, you gotta—

And face your fears.

And face your fears. And the results are gonna be good either way, 'cause I did it.

The next time you sit down to a meal, you might want to think how that meal represents more than just food. It's about family, friends, community. For Chef Sean Priester of Soul Café, every meal he serves is a reflection of his upbringing, his dedication to helping his community, and his day-by-day challenge to

conquer his fears. 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.

Well, when it comes to legacy, I want to leave here, with people having a knowledge that, I did everything that I could to be a good family man, to run a fair business, and I served the community well. So another good day of service. Just served our two hundred. [CHUCKLE]