

GUEST: CHIPPER AND HAU'OLI WICHMAN

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For me, the work that we're going is just like being on a fifteen-foot tube ride. It's amazing. You get the same kind of adrenalin, same kind of feeling of satisfaction that we're doing something pretty extreme, and pretty meaningful with our lives.

They came from different backgrounds, but found a common purpose in their personal and professional lives. This couple is working overtime to protect nature, culture and community. Chipper and Ha'uoli Wichman are 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. In this edition of Long Story Short, you might think taking care of gardens would be a mellow line of work, but for Chipper and Hau'oli Wichman, it's a high stakes, twenty-four/seven venture. This couple complements each other at work and at home, and together, they've forged a life, a profession, and a mission to preserve nature and culture in Hawaii, and beyond. The Wichmans' story starts with a seed, planted decades ago by Chipper's grandmother, that has grown into a garden tended with passion and intensity by this dedicated duo.**

Tell me about each of your backgrounds. What was it like growing up, when and where you grew up? Chipper?

Well, I was born in 1957, and Hawaii then was really so much more relaxed. I remember never having to lock the doors on the house. And we spent every summer on Kauai with my grandmother, which just really was just one of those fond memories that really influenced us in the course of our life.

And what were your interests as kid?

Well, started with baseball and stuff like that, but graduated pretty quickly into water sports. And love surfing; surfing became really pretty much the focus of my life as I was growing up.

And did you have a vision in your head at that time of gardens?

Not at all. I was not on the garden or plant track at all.

You were all water.

It was like surf, surf, surf, and when the surf wasn't good, we'd go diving, and really just enjoyed growing up around the ocean and being part of that.

Now, your parents sent you to some very private pricey schools; Hanalei, Punahou.

Yeah.

And your dad was an attorney.

M-hm.

But you didn't continue in the private school mode; you went to a public school, Roosevelt for your high school years.

Yeah. I guess you could say maybe I was a challenging teenager, and didn't probably really appreciate the opportunities they were giving me in terms of education when I was growing up. So, we had a little parting of the ways, and I really enjoyed going to Roosevelt. And for me, what it did also is, Roosevelt with Papakolea right there, is it really connected me with our Hawaiian community. That was a real benefit for me. And certainly, I think, to a large degree, Punahou recognizes that, and celebrates the fact that, you know, we're here in Hawaii and the Hawaiian culture. But you get to a place like Roosevelt, where it's not pretend, it's for real.

[CHUCKLE]

And back in the day, there was still Kill *Haole* Day. And so, you know what I mean?

How did you fit into that scenario?

Hey, I made friends with the biggest mokes right away, man.

[CHUCKLE]

That was—that was my buddies.

And that worked. [CHUCKLE]

Yeah. Sure, was good, because in the end, people really see right through your exterior and see who you are on the inside, what kind of a person you really are and what your values are. And I think that was what made me successful at Roosevelt.

Do you have regrets about not being more into school at the time?

Very much so. And I didn't really truly appreciate that until after I had worked for several years at the garden, and had an opportunity to go back to school. And when I did, I went to UH Manoa, got in through the community college system. And what I found was really amazing. I saw a lot of kids that were eighteen-year-olds, and they were there because Mom and Dad said, You gotta go to school, you gotta to the University after you graduate. And they didn't have a strong interest, they weren't driven. I was there, totally like a sponge, and for me, it was awesome. Whereas, I practically almost flunked out of high school, I graduated from UH Manoa with a 4.0.

And you went up to get a master's.

Phi beta kappa.

Yeah.

I mean, so it's more than the grades and everything. It was a learning opportunity, and I continue to benefit from that for my entire life. So it's really—I regret not having taken advantage of those opportunities my parents provided for me, but on the other hand, everything in my life has been there for a reason. I don't regret the fact that I got to really connect with our Hawaiian community at that early age.

The School of Papakolea is a good school.

Absolutely.

[CHUCKLE]

Still get plenty friends from there.

So, Chipper, it seems like you were born from a privileged *kamaaina* family.

M-hm.

Grew up in Honolulu.

M-hm.

Mostly. And, you're from a Nanakuli family of modest means. You're the first person in the family to go to college.

That's correct.

And Hau'oli, tell me about your background in Nanakuli.

Yes. So I grew up in Nanakuli, born and raised there. Born in '58, so Farrington Highway was two lanes. And my grandparents—we lived in my grandparents' home. And later, we moved next door, 'cause my aunt lived next door, then she moved to Maunawili. So, we were always with Grandma, and family was always around. The aunties and uncles that lived in the neighborhood, everyone was our cousins, and we played and went to the beach, and just enjoyed life out there in the country.

And went to public schools in the area?

Yes. Nanaikapono Elementary, then Nanakuli Intermediate.

Tell me about your dad. 'Cause you have this great story about him digging holes.

Well, he graduated from Waipahu High School, and got a job at Hawaiian Electric. And his first—well, one of this first jobs, he was a laborer, and he had to dig the holes for the electric poles. He became a foreman, and eventually retired from Maui Electric, where he was the superintendent of construction there.

That's right; you moved to Maui for your—is it high school or college years?

High school; high school. Yeah; I was fourteen, and then we moved our whole family of—I'm the oldest of five, and we moved, and my dad started working there in the early 70s, first as a foreman, and then, superintendent when he retired.

What was it like moving from Nanakuli to—what part of Maui?

Right in Kahului. Well, it was a big change for me. And I was kind of wondering, Should I stay in Nanakuli and live with my grandparents? But no, we just all moved together to Maui. And the school I attended was Maui High. So it was a feeder school, and all country folks from upcountry and Paia and Haiku all

came to this one school. So, it was really easy. It wasn't like I was coming in as a stranger. Everyone came together at the school.

Everybody had to meet at the school.

Exactly; yeah.

Though they didn't know each other at the time, Chipper Wichman also went from Oahu to a neighbor island at about the same age, but for very different reasons. As Chipper recalls, his parents had reached the end of the rope with their fifteen-year-old son.

They were a little worried about you for a while back there.

They were very worried.

[CHUCKLE]

They were very worried. And you never appreciate that until you become a parent.

Oh, how did they act when you were kind of acting up at Punahou?

Well, they may have a different recollection of it, but I think I'd really driven them to their wits' end. And fortunately, my grandmother was willing to take me in, so I actually went to live on Kauai with my grandmother during that very, I'd say, pretty stressful period of time for them.

Which turned out to be formative in your life, because she would eventually encourage you to get an internship in horticulture.

That's right; that's right. I mean, she was a woman of great vision, and really ahead of her time, and she was such a champion of the Hawaiian culture, as well as plants. She was working to preserve native plants when she was growing up. She was born in 1901. So I mean, people hadn't even truly appreciated our native flora and understood its threats back then. So really, an amazing woman who provided for me those seeds of conservation and research, and culture that have grown into, really, the values that have driven me in my life.

And you two met at UH Manoa, right?

That's correct.

Tell us about the meeting.

[CHUCKLE] Actually, our first class we had together was ethnobotany, which was very appropriate, considering our lives are so involved with plants. And our teacher at that time, Dr. Isabella Abbott, who recently passed away, is really an icon in the plant world. And so being able to have her—she was in her prime back then, thirty years ago. And so, I was really looking forward to that class.

Did sparks fly in ethnobotany?

Not really. We saw each other, but we barely talked. But we do recognize that was where we first saw each other.

It was a big, huge auditorium classroom, so there was a lot of people there.

When did you meet in earnest?

Actually, in Hawaiian Language class, couple of semesters later. And Hau'oli's grandmother on her father's side was Mama Hale. And Mama Hale was one of the *manaleo*, or really the *kupuna* who helped bring the language back after the Constitutional Convention. And she was somebody I had actually got to know very, very well, and didn't even realize it was Hau'oli's *tutu* lady. So, later, we—actually, our first date was to go to her grandma's birthday party.

Grandparents played pivotal roles in the lives of Hau'oli and Chipper Wichman. Between high school and college, Chipper's grandmother, Juliet Rice Wichman, urged him to apply for an internship with the National Tropical Botanical Garden. Little did he know that he would make his career there, working his way from intern to CEO. Since 2003, Chipper has run the Garden Organization, a family of tropical gardens and preserves across Hawaii, and also in Florida.

It really is an amazing organization, chartered by the United States Congress as a nonprofit. And that's really confusing to people, how did that even come to be. The vision was, our founders wanted to see this organization funded privately, with private money, and not being just another federal agency. But having that Congressional charter really set the bar high. It was clear that this organization had a destiny that needed to be fulfilled in terms of making a global difference. And that means today for us, working on not only a regional scale here and helping to really fulfill immediate needs here in Hawaii in terms of stopping the extinction of plants and helping to preserve our culture, and meeting educational needs. We really have a three-pronged focus; education, scientific research, and conservation. And we fulfill all of those on both local, national, and international scales.

How about telling me a couple of things that people may not know about the garden.

We are a nationally chartered organization, chartered by the United States Congress. But that idea, that thought came out of the Honolulu Garden Club by very visionary women, including Loy McCandless Marks, who was the president. I was recently given a packet of the minutes of the Garden Club meetings from like 1954 or 1955, when they talked about creating this organization. And it's amazing to see how it went from a Garden Club meeting all the way to succeeding in convincing the United States Congress that this was indeed an action worthy of a public law. We have the world's largest collection of endangered species, federally listed endangered species. It's really an amazing collection of plants, but it's not what the visitor is typically looking for, like the beautiful Bird of Paradise that are right behind you, or Heleconia. We have amazing plants, but they aren't collected or arranged or displayed for their beauty.

Are they homely little plants? Is that what you're saying?

Many of 'em are, but some are majestic trees. But they're not what the average visitor expects when they come to see a botanical garden. Our gardens have really been developed by scientists and conservationists as these living laboratories. It's time for us to make them public venues, so that the public can come and really get a better understanding some of these global issues and what we're dealing with, and there is no better way to convey that than in the beauty of a botanical garden.

In 1987, three years after Chipper and Hau'oli Wichman were married, their family and professional lives once again collided. Chipper's grandmother passed away, and left him the thousand-acres Limahuli Valley on Kauai. It was not exactly a gift, but a duty to carry out her vision of protecting the valley's natural and cultural resources.

This was a *kuleana*, that this was a responsibility to preserve it in perpetuity, but more than just preserve it. This was an area that was crying out for active management, and it took us seven years, but we succeeded in getting the State to create a special subzone called the Limahuli Valley Special Subzone, and approve a very active comprehensive management plan, a master plan for it. And today, it's considered really one of the poster childs in the State in terms of biocultural conservation, celebrating the importance of the area as a cultural area to native Hawaiians, and restoring the cultural values, practices, as well as plants

After your grandmother, Juliet Rice Wichman, gave you the *kuleana*, you in turn gave it.

That's right. We gifted that property in 1994 to the garden, after we had put in place the special subzone, after we knew that indeed the garden could properly manage it. And when we gave that property away, our kids were pretty young. So our son was born in '85, this was '94, he was nine and our daughter was seven. So here we were, we gave away the only piece of property we ever owned. And they looked at us like, Mom and Dad, are you nuts or what? And in fact, I think they thought we were pretty nuts anyways, raising them out in Haena at the end of the road, with no TV, or radio.

And in those days, it seemed more remote.

It was much more remote. And, it was not nearly as crowded as it is today, and the traffic was less. It was really, really wonderful. But what impressed them were the values that they grew up with. And later, as they got older, and especially after they went to Kamehameha School and University of Hawaii, they look back on that with so much pride, and they are so proud to bring their friends and show them their home, and where they grew up. And they're very proud of what we accomplished with that property and the gift of it. It was an important experience for us in terms of learning how to fulfill a *kuleana*, what it really means to *malama aina*, and to care for the land. Because far too often, we think of *aina* as a commodity to be bought and sold, and that its highest

and best use is the economic return you can get from it, when indeed, the aina has so much more to offer us.

Hau'oli, at what point did you get passionate about Chipper's dream, the garden? And because you do it a hundred ten percent, so you can't be lukewarm about it.

Well, it was after our children were grown up, and we started managing the Kahanu Garden in Hana. And then, I realized it was serious work, and there was a lot to do, and there was a bigger *kuleana* out there.

And you had family out there, so you saw community connections building.

Oh, definitely. And that was very important for us to come into a small community, Hawaiian community, but having family made it so much easier for us to get to know the other people there, and accomplish what we needed to do in taking care of Kahanu Garden and the Piilanihale Heiau.

So, you've got to give us some relationship tips, because you were together constantly, and you have such a good relationship. How does that happen? Or are you good at pretending?

No, I don't think you can pretend for twenty-eight years. [CHUCKLE]

He's the boss. [CHUCKLE]

Well, I think relationships, it's hard work. And I hope that, if nothing else, we can convey that to our kids, is we really, really understand and believe that the future of our island, of our communities are dependent on strong families. And maintaining a marriage is never easy. It's give and take, and it's being able to really hear and understand the other person. I think she'll tell you I do all the talking than listen. It's hard sometimes when you have a dominant personality to slow down and be a good listener. So that's something that I really try and practice. She said I'm the boss, but I think she's got some very, very valuable ideas, and feelings, and when I really stop and listen to them, she's almost always right.

What do you do when you can tell he's not listening?

Sometimes, she jokes around; I gotta send you an email, even though I'm sitting three feet away, to get your attention. Because our life is so busy, I think that can be frustrating. Communication is so important, and being able have common activities that you enjoy doing together. I think many couples end up going different ways because they don't have enough common enjoyment together. So, one takes off in this direction, and the other one takes off in that direction, and before long, your lives are kind of heading in very different directions. For us, we're probably the extreme example of the other mix.

How much time on a typical day do you spend together?

[CHUCKLE] Twenty-four hours. [CHUCKLE]

All the time?

Yeah.

Pretty much.

How do you do that?

Well, you know, it's not for every couple, but the requirement of the work that we're involved in, in leading a major nonprofit organization, as I'm sure you well know, you live it yourself, is pretty consuming. And for us, it's given us a chance to be able to do it together, and be together. Hau'oli said something many years ago. She goes, It's a good thing we do this together, otherwise, we'd never see each other. And especially now, with the extensive itinerary and travel schedule we have to do, being involved with a national board and international programs, that's really true. And I feel very blessed that she's really embraced it, and enthusiastically made it a part of her life. And I can honestly say, I would not be sitting here having this interview, if it wasn't for her and all the support that she's done. It also means there isn't a whole lot of separation between work and home, because we go home, and we're eating dinner and we're talking about work. But you know what? That's our life.

You have to both be passionate about it, or it doesn't work, right?

Exactly. Yeah.

What do you contribute, Hau'oli, and how does your working partnership go? I mean, usually, it boils down to who's better at what, right?

Well, I just kind of, I guess, keep him organized, and pick up all the loose ends, and try to just do the housekeeping. And he's just going forward, and just lot of meetings, lot of telephone conferences, and so I'm just in the background, mostly.

And you've heard him described as the man with the big vision.

M-hm, m-hm.

And that's true, isn't it, Chipper? You think big. You're not making small plans.

That's right. Yeah. When they asked me to become the CEO of this national organization, I knew, in fact we talked extensively about it. We knew that it would be a major change in lifestyle. We'd have to move from our family home where we raised our children, and it would mean extensive traveling and really giving up almost everything we were previously doing, in order to take this on. But it also meant that it gave us an opportunity to really make a difference on a global scale. It's been an amazing journey for us, and I think Hau'oli is excessively modest. She does not like the limelight, and when we have all these international meetings, she isn't up there at the podium giving presentations. But, she provides for me some of the most valuable input, because when everybody's gone, we talk a lot about what's going on, and she's really a great strategic thinker and a great identifier of people and their personalities, and what motivates them. And so, we have a lot of really important conversations behind the scenes, that people are never really aware of.

You've got another sharp pair of eyes—

Exactly.

—with another perspective.

Exactly.

And Hau'oli, your kids are actually going in the footsteps of landscape, and land management, right?

Pretty much; yeah. Mikioi studies ethnobotany, and she's taking a little time off right now traveling. But, she'll go into a master's, either botanical garden management or education. And our son is studying landscape architect right now.

What's your goal with the gardens? Where do you go next? What's your vision for the future?

Great question. We're right now in the process of developing a new five-year strategic plan, which takes the garden really to the next level, in terms of both developing the funding base as well as really tying us in with more international programs, and making a global impact. At some point in the course of the next five years, we also need to begin thinking about planning for the future in terms of transitions and leadership. While I'm not looking at retiring any time soon, I think it is really important to think about transitioning the organization at some point to new leadership, and assuring its sustainability. And that's never easy to do for somebody who makes that their life every day.

But you've gotta do it, because you want the organization to go on.

Absolutely. Yeah. We need to understand our role in the global picture and how those factors outside of Hawaii affect what we're doing, and as well as the fact that what we're doing here can be a leadership model to help others around the world. And I think Hawaii has a lot to offer. We were at a meeting a couple weeks ago that was convened by the United Nations on the global strategy for plant conservation. Several of us from Hawaii went and gave presentations. And Hawaii is a microcosm of the world. We're dealing with all of those issues, whether it's endangered species, invasive plants, overdevelopment, lack of water. We're dealing with it here, and yet, we're dealing with it on a small enough scale that we can develop models that can then be scaled up and applied to larger areas. And I think being able to put Hawaii on the world stage will help us. It will leverage our work in Hawaii in a tremendous way, as well as, I believe, contribute significantly to making the world a better place, and helping other countries with their strategies.

Do you ever resent the gardens for the toll they take on you and your personal relationship?

I don't think so. I mean, it's just a wonderful place to work. It's a very healing place to be in. Of course, some things are very intense, but to me, the garden is a very healthy and healing place for us.

And having common goals is huge.

Exactly; yeah.

We really do try and protect our weekends, because those are having time for yourself, and even if it's just working in the yard, or working in the taro patch, or walking in the garden, or walking on the beach, it is important.

Chipper and Hauoli Wichman pursue their conservation and research efforts across the State, the Continent, and around the world. They lead a frequent flyer lifestyle. A big part of their mission at the National Tropical Botanical Garden is to educate the public, and share their tropical treasures. So, if you get the chance, they'd welcome your visit to the award-winning gardens on Kauai and Maui, as well as in Florida. 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.

I accepted the directorship of that garden on three conditions when our chairman of the board called me up and asked me to take it on. I said, Under three conditions; one is, I'm the captain of the ship. We're gonna have to make some hard decisions, and you're gonna support it; don't question it. Number two is, we're gonna make good on every promise we've made to the Hawaiian community there. And number three is, I need some money. [CHUCKLE]