

GUEST: DEREK KURISU

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Growing up in the plantation and seeing how the lifestyle was, I started realizing that the success of any business or any organization, it's people. It's nothing else, except people. And if you treat them good, you treat them with dignity and respect, you'll get treated as such too. They'll always be there for you.

Collaborative businessman and advocate for locally grown products, Derek Kurisu, next on Long Story Short.

Aloha mai kakou, and welcome to Long Story Short. I'm Leslie Wilcox. For more than a century, sugar production drove Hawaii's economy, and Derek Kurisu, who grew up in plantation communities on the Big Island, never imagined that sugar cultivation would become a fading memory during his lifetime. As the sugar industry was folding during the early 1990s, Kurisu was encouraged by his employer, the Taniguchi family of KTA Superstores, to assist the community being left adrift as sugar jobs disappeared. Before Buy Local, Eat Local became a rallying cry, Kurisu worked for food sustainability, while also preserving the best traditions and values of plantation culture. In case you're wondering if Derek Kurisu is related to Honolulu businessman and investor Duane Kurisu, that's his younger brother. Derek was the middle son, with two brothers and two sisters, raised in the plantation villages of Hakalau and Pepeekeo on Hawaii Island. His father, Yasushi, was a machinist in the sugar mill, and his mother, Janet, a housewife. Derek is grateful for his parents' strength of character, as well as the close knit community which taught him so much about how to live life. Since he was a kid, he's found uncommon sense around him, even in the pau hana grumbling of his father's drinking buddies.

Every day, they used to come home and drink beer, him and his friends, and everything else. And I used to always listen to their conversations and said, Wow, they have the answers to all the problems of the sugar mill. 'Cause I guess when they have their few drinks and all that, everything became, Ah, we going solve everything. So then I told myself, You know when I grow up, I want to be the plantation manager.

Now, were there Japanese plantation managers back then?

No.

[CHUCKLE] You would be the first.

I was there. I want to be the plantation manager, because I would go and see all of the laborers, 'cause they have the answer to all of the problems. And you know what? I went to get an agriculture degree, and when I graduated, the mills were all gone. They were starting to close, they were starting to consolidate, so that whole dream went away. I always felt the need to make sure that the plantation workers had some kinda say. And you know my brother, my kid brother, Duane.

Duane, the Oahu developer and businessman.

Yeah; so we worked on this project for Governor Ariyoshi. It's called Hawaii Next Fifty Years. And we did the opening in the C. Brewer Building. And my brother bought the building. So when we went in there I tell you, I had this unbelievable feeling. 'Cause, right on the balcony of the C. Brewer Building I could feel my father. They used to call him Scotch. All these guys, they had nicknames. Scotch, Bust Up ...

[CHUCKLE] Bust Up.

Wimpy. Yeah, they had all these names.

Wimpy? [CHUCKLE]

Wimpy, Lefty, Groan, a Buddha. And I could see them all standing around on the top of the railing, looking down, drinking their beer and telling us, Eh, you see? We not *opala*. 'Cause they used to call *opala*, the cane rubbish. They said, They used to call it *opala*. Right? Eh, we not *opala* anymore. Right? And we're drinking a beer inside this big, nice C. Brewer Building. Gave me a fantastic feeling, thinking that like all these laborers that worked really hard, they came such a long way. And lot of them are gone today, but I think some of their values and stuff are still ingrained in lot of us. And I think it's our turn to go and make sure that it carries on through generation and generation.

Do you think your father imagined that you and Duane would do what you're doing?

I don't think so. But my dad was an amazing guy. Before he passed away, he wrote one book called Sugar Town, and in that book, I mean, it contained a lot of the values of the plantation life. So I felt that was very, very important. But the great thing about living on a plantation, there were so many great people; right? And everybody had some kind of strength. And the key, too, is that people in their different strength area would help each other. For instance, your car break down, a mechanic would come and fix it; right?

And he wouldn't charge you?

Oh, he wouldn't charge you.

But what would you do for him?

Oh, no, and if you went fishing, you had fish, you'll bring fish over to the home. So a plantation family wasn't just made of five or ten people; it was thousand, it was family of families. And that's what made it so great living on the sugar plantation. I have a older brother; his name is Hervy.

Hervy.

And for him, I mean, when I look at him [CHUCKLE], he reminds me of these plantation men. They're so kind, sincere inside, and if they're your friend, they'll just do whatever it is to make something happen. Lot of these plantation guys, they wouldn't tell you anything. But you learn a lot from them just by looking at them, by observing, by watching. 'Cause they don't say stuff. Let me give you one story. Okay. I used to enjoy going bodysurfing, swimming, and all that as a youngster. We used to make our own body board, right? And I never had one, so I used to go bodysurfing. And one of these plantation men told me, Eh, Derek, tomorrow after work, I'll come and I'll get you something. So, I went down to his house, and there, I saw this big table. I looked at the table, I go, Ho! And it was like those ply board, a thick one like that. And I can still remember being under that house. Then he told me, Oh, Derek, draw your surfboard on this thing. So I drew my surfboard his nice table. Then he grabbed a saw, he cut it. He made for me one board. I went, That's the plantation kinda thing.

Yeah.

Then he put on the skegs for me, and he said, Come back tomorrow, I'm gonna go and waterproof the thing. But that is what it was all about. I think why I was real fortunate, that I had a great-grandmother. And she used to live up close to the forest line of Hakalau. All of our families, my aunties, uncles, and my grandparents used to gather at my great-grandmother's house every week, at least once. Used to get about forty or fifty of us. And I think for myself and my brothers, we have learned a lot of the values, the culture things and also, traditions from that. And we have also learned, and always used to remind us, to make sure not to bring shame to the family. [CHUCKLE] And I think that ingrained in each one of us. They really took care of us, they gave us everything, met all our needs, our life was very simple. And I still tell myself, Wow, you know, I better make sure I'm on the right path. I guess for me, that was like the foundation of my life.

Seeing yourself as part of something larger.

Oh, larger. So whatever I do now, I know if I do something bad, it's a reflection not only me. All my families, all my ancestors, all my friends that helped me out, KTA Superstores where I work, all of the employees, gets affected. And you know what? To me, that is very, very important. I try to make sure that I don't go and upset anybody or make any enemies, and I guess this whole thing about an obligation to the family or to the organization or whatever you belong to, helped me keep a straight life, and motivated me to move ahead. There was other people in my life that actually really influenced me. Actually, when I got married to my wife.

Is she a Hilo girl?

Yeah; she's the Hilo girl. She was an educator, and I guess she kept me focused, grounded, and she kinda motivated me and helped me to be whatever the best I wanted to be. And that became very important, 'cause I was kinda free,

whatever. But that kept me focused and grounded. Then having a child is another whole story, right? He actually motivated me to become like a role model, and I had to make sure that what was real important was to be very supportive of him.

The owners of the locally owned KTA Grocery Stores urged Derek Kurisu to attend college. He'll never forget the supportive role of owner, Yukio Taniguchi, and his son, Tony. In 1974, Derek earned a bachelor's degree in agriculture from the University of Hawaii at Manoa. For some forty years, Kurisu has taken on various positions at KTA Superstores, and at the time of this conversation in 2012, serves as the company's executive vice president.

A lot of my friends are very motivated, and they're very intelligent. And they all decided, Okay, we're all going college.

And you weren't one of them? You were kind of bringing up the rear?

I was, yeah, whatever. So then, I said, Okay, I better go college too, 'cause it's the thing everybody's doing. So in order for me to get to college, that's when I started working at KTA Superstores. Yeah; 'cause I used that to support myself. And the Taniguchi family, Tony and Yukio, they gave me the opportunity to go to college, so could get that college education. Tony would tell me, You know what Derek, you gotta get one college education, and you can work whenever you can work. So work between your classes, and all that. And then, I needed to finish up my degree up in Honolulu. So he would come up here, he found me a job.

Really?

Yeah, they would find a me a job. And so, I came up here, and I worked up here. And what was really amazing, he would come to visit me. And the people in the supermarket would get all excited to see an owner of a supermarket come to visit one worker, 'cause I was working up there. And from there, I told myself, Wow, KTA must be someplace real great. I mean, where I'm able to just talk to the owners, and be real close to them. Whereas in the other markets up here probably didn't have that kinda relationships. So I felt, Wow, that is home for me.

And your boss had his own kids, right?

Oh, yeah.

It wasn't like he didn't have any kids.

They had all their own children and everything else. They treated me like one. Incredible. I made a lot of new friends along the way, and 'til today, they still care, they support me and help me in whatever I undertake. I mean, I got friends like one dairyman, this guy David Wong, Jr. I mean, he would force me to get into this total quality management thing, so I started to learn something different, so I could progress ahead of everybody else. Whenever I think about, I always tell myself that it becomes my obligation to do well because I'm

representing all of them that helped me. And [CHUCKLE] maybe it's because they feel sorry for me. [CHUCKLE] I don't know.

Was there a sense of measuring at all? Like, Okay, he did this for me, so I should do this much for him?

No. All of them, they taught me a lot, and it's not by what they told me. It's about what they did. And for me, having friends and having associations all over the place that is willing to step up, I mean, it kinda motivates me to just get better, and to make a difference.

In tough economic times, how do locally owned businesses survive the competition of the big box retailers? Derek Kurisu and KTA Superstores found an answer by building upon the Taniguchi family's near century-long relationship with the Big Island community. The family had the foresight to establish sustainable community partnerships that became part of the Buy Local, Eat Local movement. Derek Kurisu's creation, the Mountain Apple Brand private label was launched in 1992, and now consists of hundreds of Hawaii-made food products sold at KTA Stores.

I look at the founders of the company, Koichi Taniguchi, I look at his sons, Yukio, Hide, and Tony, and the whole Taniguchi culture. I think they prepared us for this. They made us realize the importance of the customer, the importance of the employees, the importance of the supplier, the importance of relationship. Growing up in the plantation and seeing how the lifestyle was, I started realizing that, the success of any business or any organization, it's people. It's nothing else, except people. And if you treat them good, you treat them with dignity and respect, you'll get treated as such too. They'll always be there for you.

But in a time when the economy's been weak, people are driven by price; right?
Exactly.

So how do you keep your market share when things cost more for you?

Well, it's a matter of partnerships, right? So everybody kinda work together. 'Cause the wholesaler knows that for us, if we don't survive, they won't survive, that we're connected, all over the place. So we're all working together. And it becomes real important for KTA to survive, because when we survive, we're able to give back, and there's so many other companies, thousands of employees is depending on our survival. When the plantation went under, that was a big part of my life. It just tore me apart, because I never thought it would ever go under. And Tony Taniguchi at that time told me, Eh, Derek, when the plantation goes under, we have a major obligation to make sure that we take of the people, because they've been coming to our stores and shopping. And even for our family, once a month, my dad used to get his paycheck, he would come to KTA and have it cashed, and we would do all our grocery shopping and go home, once a month. So that's the only time actually we came to Hilo. I told Tony, Okay, I'll do something. And so, so that's how I came up with this Mountain Apple brand, creating products or selling products that was locally

grown or locally manufactured. This was back in probably 1990, around there. So it's been a long journey. You look at me now, you can tell. It's been a journey.

This is what a lot of people have discovered only lately.

Yeah; yeah. But you know what makes me feel real good? I think this whole movement of creating Buy Local, this whole impact had created somewhat of a ripple effect within our companies and within the whole State of the importance of supporting local.

How many partnerships are there? How many products in your store are results of partnerships you've created through ag or manufacturing?

There are about sixty different partnerships, and there's about two hundred forty items. And, again, it fluctuates, depends on the season and everything else. And it's real unique. 'Cause when we started the thing, is that like, the jams and jellies. Because I understood [CHUCKLE], worked in a supermarket, I understood agriculture, instead of putting the product with the jams and jellies in the grocery store, I would put it in the bakery. So it gave my manufacturer or my supplier, or my partners a better chance to make it happen.

Did you have a model for that? Did you see that done anywhere else?

No. [CHUCKLE] You had to be different. Tony, Yukio, and everybody ... what I am today is what they allowed me to be. And what KTA is today, is what they allowed us to make it happen. And I'm so grateful for that.

'Cause you're unpredictable.

[CHUCKLE] Well I try to do anything that people don't want to do. I remember all these fruits. They said, Oh, make a local product, we're gonna buy 'em. So as long as you can supply us, we'll buy whatever. So I went back, I started to think about it. Then, all of a sudden, I went out to the store, I saw all these papayas being thrown away, or fed to the pigs, and the farmers were getting like penny or two cents a pound for it. So the farmer would just grab it and feed it to the pigs. So, I told myself, Wow, I gotta invent or I gotta create a product that uses papaya. Yeah? And I see guavas falling from the trees, so I gotta create a product that using guava. So all of a sudden I went up to the University, and the students create this product that had a papaya and guava, and have traces of pineapple and local sugar inside. So, oh, it tastes so good. And so, I was thinking, Okay, what I'm gonna call it? So I was driving up and down Saddle Road, and I saw all this lava. I said, There you go, PAVA. I'm gonna call the thing PAVA, papaya and guava. So today, Meadow Gold process the thing, so everything's local. I had this guy Eddie Wai design the carton, so all the signs, everything is local. And I have the drink out now.

Who owns the drink?

I own the name, and Meadow Gold is the one processing, so he's the one that's gonna go out and sell it. And the reason why that's important, because by creating a drink that comes out of a plant that we process milk from, it helps bring the cost down on the milk, the local milk, so I'm able to be competitive. 'Cause I'm one of the only stores on the Big Island has local milk.

So, you're in the intersection of ag and consumer, and manufacturing and retail.
Yeah. So I really believe in value added. In order for agriculture to grow, we need to have value added using the Grade B surplus and what have you. I've been real fortunate.

Are there other things that you think we're not using, that could be put to use and bring costs down like that?

Here's a good one. The wild boars been coming into people's yards and stuff on the island. Right? So today, we have wild boar sausage, Portuguese sausage that we sell in our store. You see, one of the things about it is that when you really look at it, the hotels and restaurants will want to use all the loins and the good cuts. Because wild boar has a fantastic taste 'cause they feed on macadamia nuts and stuff.

Oh, wow; high end. [CHUCKLE]

Yeah; high end. So for them to use the other parts, it doesn't work, so we use that in Portuguese sausage, so we create value added stuff with that. We started to really market local beef about twenty, thirty years ago. And we never brought one drop of beef or grinding from the mainland; it was all local. Today, our local beef sales is forty percent of all our beef sales. And it's big. I feel real good about it, because whatever the restaurants cannot use, the loins and all that, we'll use that so that we can balance the whole carcass, so everybody gets. [CHUCKLE]. The milk industry was interesting. Because I remember them telling me that our competitors were bringing in mainland milk. So I got all our ranchers together. At that time, we had five different ranchers, and I told them that I'm gonna—in fact, that was my first Mountain Apple brand product. I told them I'm gonna create a Mountain Apple brand milk, our own private label. Instead of having the missing children on the side, we put the whole literature of why you should support local and what is Mountain Apple brand. And so, the five farmers agreed, first of all, that we're gonna work together to bring a fresher product, and we're gonna improve the quality of the milk. And I think the third thing, we eventually took out all the RSBT, you know, those synthetic growth hormones. So we were the only milk without that. So we removed all that, so everything was natural. And the thing just took off.

It sounds like that might be hard to agreement on that from those farmers. I mean, they're in competition with each other, one might want a better price.

It's kinda interesting, but in time of crisis, everybody gotta realize we gotta work together. And what makes me feel real good about it is that all of the ranchers, the dairies all over the State all closed up, and the only dairy we have is on the Island of Hawaii.

So, the answer was depending on each other.

Exactly; and realizing that the competitor is not each other, the competitor is the products that's brought in from the mainland, outside sources.

And that's a recurring theme in everything you do.

Exactly. We gotta start to remove all these silos, remove all the walls and barriers between people, between organizations, between businesses, between everybody, so we all can work together as one. And I make sure that there's nothing in it for me, so that I'm able to be successful with my whole goal, is to make people work together.

You assemble a lot of meetings, you pull people together. Is it very administrative, or is it kind of organic where you can just kind of do like a flash mob?

Organic. We gotta start to remove all these silos, remove all the walls and barriers between people, between organizations, between businesses, between everybody, so we all can work together as one. And I make sure that there's nothing in it for me, so that I'm able to be successful with my whole goal, is to make people work together. I tell you, I don't have any secretary, and I share my office.

With whom? Who do you share your office with?

I share with my meat buyer. Well, we all share together. And for me, what is important, is not the glamour of where you're at and everything else. What is important is the store. Making sure that the store functions, and we're able to put whatever resources into the store, not into ourselves. So, you just go and work with the positive. You grab those that want to make it happen. And a lot of times, we kinda focus on vocal majority, and we get ourselves nowhere. So, I'll just grab people that want to be part of the family, want to do it, and we just make it happen. And I guess people who are involved all understand what I'm talking about. They all understand this whole Hawaii culture, plantation Hawaii, or whatever culture you call it. Like the *lei*, right, how everybody gotta work together. And to me, that's important.

The Big Island is such a special place. We got beautiful weather, we got beautiful scenery, but most of all, we got beautiful people like all my friends here at Toa Here! Yeah! You know—

With no prior television production experience, Derek Kurisu plunged fearlessly into the world of television production more than a dozen years ago. As a vehicle to help bridge and build community, Derek produces the monthly cable TV series, Prime Time Living in Paradise, and Seniors Living in Paradise, hosted by George Yoshida.

I remember we needed lights, so we used to grab like those home lamps. [CHUCKLE] I mean, 'cause we had no idea. And I hired this cameraman who's with me today, helps me producing the family show. Man, the guy, he just had one small portable camera, and we started our first show with that. So we have two shows. We have a senior show, and we have a family show, plays every night, it rotates once a month. And the good thing about this is that, a lot of these seniors, I mean, there's so much content in there. It's so precious that I

want to build one archives so we can keep it there, so that their great-great-grandchildren one day will be able to see.

What's the kind of thing they've said that's really touched you?

Well, [CHUCKLE] I remember one of them came to me and said, Derek, the last year of my dad's life was the greatest, because he was on your show, and everybody recognized him, and now, they all know that, you know, he collects shells. And for me, actually, why I created two shows, the senior show and the family show, because I wanted eventually to have a little bit more a connect between the children and the seniors. If you have intergenerational things and both of 'em could work through each other and learn.

In 2012, Derek Kurisu's boss is Barry Taniguchi, wise grandson of the company founder, who steers the KTA course of weaving together plantation style values, a deep understanding the community served, and the willingness to try new things, to collaborate and partner for the good of all. It's an approach that says, We're all in this together. Thank you, Derek Kurisu, for sharing your long story short. And thank you for watching and supporting PBS Hawaii. I'm Leslie Wilcox. *A hui hou kakou.*