

GUEST: AL HARRINGTON: A CUP HALF FULL

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I think you see things as blessings, when other people would say, you know, My life just got torn up.

Yeah, for me, I like the cup being half full, rather than being half empty. And I'm not sure where that came from, but it's always been a kind of a natural thing for me.

And you've needed that cup as you've gone along, haven't you?

Right. [CHUCKLE]

A cup half full; we've all heard the expression, but how many of us really live on that side of life, the positive side, making the best of everything that's thrown at us? That is the life of Al Harrington.

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

Aloha; I'm Leslie Wilcox. Have you ever taken stock of the people who have influenced your life? Your teachers, friends, loved ones, all those who have helped make you who you are, and in some instances, maybe even saved your life. Al Harrington, star athlete, teacher, actor, entertainer, started his life as Al Taa. He counts his blessings every day, and he never forgets the people who have filled his cup of life.

Where were you born?

I was actually born in American Samoa, in a little town called Malaeimi, which was next to the Mormon town called Mapusaga, which is about fifteen from Pago Pago, the major harbor.

And your family, at some point, established the Mormon Church in American Samoa.

Yes. My great-grandfather was amongst the first big chiefs, a chief called Suapaia. That was the title name. And he was amongst the first to be converted into the Mormon Church. But the conversion was interesting, because what happened is, one of his sons, Uncle Salu, had fallen off a horse and had wounded his leg rather seriously. And so, like us Polynesians do, we had the spiritual people come and bless him, and do the herbs, and all of these things. But he still never healed. So, on a Sunday afternoon, the family

gathered together at my grandfather's house. And just a week before, they had brought the Catholic priest in, 'cause we were all Catholics at that particular time. And he was supposed to have blessed my uncle, but the wound did not heal. He still walked with a limp. And on that particular Sunday that I just mentioned, two Mormon missionaries—[CHUCKLE] and this is interesting. Because in the old days, the Mormon missionaries were called *kaupoi*. Cowboys.

Why?

Because they all came with jeans and boots, and a lot of them wore these cowboy clothes. So, one of my uncles said to my grandfather, he says, Let's call the local *kaupoi*, let's call the *kaupois* come in. [CHUCKLE] And I'm saying it just like the Samoan accent, *kaupoi*. It's not cowboy. [CHUCKLE] So, they bring the two missionaries in, and they asked them, Okay, we want you to bless our uncle ... my son, my grandfather. [CHUCKLE] And so, they do that. And a week later, he's walking normally. So, being the kind of spiritual, simple faith people we are, we says, Well, maybe this more right than the other one. [CHUCKLE] So, we convert.

So, the transformation.

So much of Hawaii's culture comes from people who emigrated here from other lands. Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, and Samoans; even Hawaiians came from elsewhere. Many moved to Hawaii to find work, to follow family, to reap the rewards of a mid-Pacific paradise. And some, like the family of young Al Taa, later Al Harrington, were compelled to move because of their faith and a hunger for higher education.

So, we become converted in Western Samoa. And then the Mormon leadership was preaching to us as we get converted. We should leave Samoa and go get educated. Get education either in America, or Hawaii, and come back and build Samoa. So that's how we get oriented towards coming to Hawaii. So that's why in about 1950, in the 50s, late 40s and late 50s, there's a grand migration of Samoans coming from Samoa to Hawaii. Part of it is the Mormon conversion.

And your mother was part of that.

And my mother was part of that. What happened was, my—[CHUCKLE] this is a great social drama that takes place. 'Cause my father at that time was supposed to have been one of the great athletes of American Samoa.

Well, knowing you, I believe that.

Right. Well, there's a line, there's a line there. And, amongst the first to graduate from the Marist Brothers School, which is a Catholic high school. It was supposed to be one of the finest high schools in the Pacific. So he graduates, and he courts my mother, marries her, and then has me and my sister, and another brother that dies. So it's me and my sister. So, after the marriage and settlement and so on, he's supposed to come to Hawaii, and then work here,

and then send for us. So, that's what happens. That's how we get to Hawaii. He comes here, and he works. But the human drama is such that when he gets here, he falls in love with this wonderful Hawaiian woman.

Oh ...

The Kalama clan. See, part of the Kalama's, Leimomi, and she was gorgeous, beautiful Hawaiian lady. And then, he ends up marrying her, and then my mom [CHUCKLE] comes here and finds out that, you know, this has happened. This is the human drama. And my mom, being the warrior woman that she is, goes to work as a nurse's aide. Because in Samoa, she worked as a nurse's aide on the Island of Tutuila. And she earns enough money to send for me and my aunt, Auntie Tino. But she and I come on the Mariposa to Hawaii.

And your sister is with your grandmother?

And my sister is with Grandma. Mele is with Grandma. So we come here, and then we begin our life here. And Mom is working as a nurse, and Auntie Tino goes to high school, evolves as a person, and then I go to Liholiho School in Kaimuki. 'Cause we lived on 10th Avenue.

And you actually lived in lots of different places as you grew up.

Right.

Why is that? All over the island, it seems.

[CHUCKLE] I don't know, but I'm not sure for all of the sociological reasons, but I only knew that, okay, Mom would say, You go stay with Dad for a while, and then I would go and stay with my dad and my stepmother, Leimomi. I was very blessed. I was very blessed with people like my stepmother Leimomi, 'cause she was very educated. Kam School graduate, had scholarships, potential scholarships to go to University of Michigan and other places. But she met my dad, and she settled down. But she was very education-conscious, conscious of speaking proper English, and et cetera, et cetera.

Your life sure changed a lot quickly.

Yeah.

I mean, lots of movement. I think you see things as blessings, when other people would say, My life just got torn up.

Yeah, for me, I like the cup being half full, rather than being half empty. And I'm not sure where that came from, but it's always been kind of a natural thing for me.

And you've needed that cup as you've gone along, haven't you?

Right. [CHUCKLE]

To go through those transitions.

Right. So, this is what happens. I'm going between the two families, and I'm acquiring great knowledge in the Hawaiian community with Leimomi and my dad. And then, my mom now marries Harrington, who was here as a soldier. And Mom meets him on the beach, which I remember clearly, 'cause we were all on the beach having family picnic.

And what happened?

And then, this *Haole* guy was out Ala Moana Beach by the reef, and he couldn't get on his surfboard. So, I was about three years old and I'm watching this guy, we're all watching this guy. So my mom swims out there, and helps the guy get on the board, and then invites him to come have dinner with us. So he never leaves. [CHUCKLES] So, they end up getting married, and then he becomes my stepfather. Milburn R. Harrington, who came from Iron Mountain, Michigan, up there in the upper peninsula. And through him, I acquired even greater insight in the use of the English language.

Yeah; at what point did you learn to speak English?

This is happening. This is happening as I'm going—

You're a toddler.

Yeah.

You're young.

Yeah, I'm moving back and forth. And part of it was just the fact that my dad was there, and he spoke very properly. I don't really remember exactly when this took place, but he said to me at one time, he says, If you go Downtown, you see all the guys who work in the office, they all speak English. All the guys that work on the street, they speak Pidgin. So if you like work on the street or you like work in the office, you better learn how to speak English. So that kinda stuck. You know, that kinda stuck. So I tried, you know, I tried.

Did you speak Standard English in the home?

Yeah. Except with my mother, when she got mad at me, she swore at me in Samoan.

So, Al Harrington's life in Hawaii as Al Taa had a tumultuous beginning—a broken family, constantly being shuffled from one home to another. And yet, he always saw the positive side of what other people would have seen as an upheaval. But Al Taa's real journey had not yet begun. That journey started with Mrs. Abreu.

In first grade, I had Mrs. Abreu, this great Portuguese-Hawaiian woman. Big buggah. [CHUCKLE] She sit down on the chair, hang over, some stuff. But all of us small kids, we were afraid of her, 'cause she was huge. And if you don't get things right, man, she slap you, Mrs. Abreu. So, I figured out that if I could read well, she going like me. So, Dick and Jane books, yeah? So, I would take the Dick and Jane books, and I learned how to read before the reading lesson took place. You know, either night before, I would look at the books.

And did your parents tell you, you gotta study, you gotta work hard?

No.

No?

No, no. They didn't. That doesn't come in. It comes in more in the relationship with the teachers. Because I wanted the teachers to like me, you know.

So that you would have a pleasant time in class.

Right.

Or, so that they would respect you?

Well, part of it was respect, part of it was just needing some affection, needing some care, somebody to like you. Mrs. Abreu probably was the first affection that I'm getting outside of the family. You know, biological parents and non-biological parents. I mean, mother and father. So, she's this big Hawaiian lady, great big smile. When she looked at you and smiled, you know, her whole face smiled. Made you feel, you know, like, Hoo, I'm good. [CHUCKLE]

So, you wanted to please Mrs. Abreu.

So, I wanted to please Mrs. Abreu. And so, that's the beginning of my move towards academic excellence. It wasn't just because I was interested, but I wanted to please her.

All Al Taa, later Al Harrington, was trying to do was to make Mrs. Abreu happy. But, Mrs. Abreu's class was the beginning of Al's journey into educational excellence. And he did so well, other teachers and school principals took notice.

So, I go to Laie, I'm living with my father and Leimomi. My mother. I feel such great affection for that lady. [CHUCKLE] So, we moved to Laie. And then, I go to Laie School, and the teacher there, Mrs. Enos, is another one. I remember teachers, 'cause they were all good to me. So, Mrs. Enos says to the principal, I think his name was Kanahale. He was a Kanahale. And she says to him, Maybe we better move him up to the next, because we might hold him back at this grade. So, I go to the fifth grade. And that's how I skipped the fifth grade, because again how important teachers are to kids. Because when I think about the teachers that were good to me, that's what gave me a leg up. Gave me a leg up in dealing with the social challenges and economic challenges to come later. And then later on, we move from Manoa Housing to Halawa Housing, and then I go to Aiea School. At Aiea School, there's the principal, Griswold, Charles Griswold. These names stick in my head. And, Charles Griswold sees four of us that are going to Aiea School, Aiea Intermediate, and he says, Four of you should go and take the test to go to Kamehameha. Because, he sees some potential in us. Again, a teacher's vision, right? A teacher looking at a student and saying, Okay, there's potential here, let's see what we can do with it. So, the four of us go to take the test at Kamehameha, we all pass the test, and we're all getting ready to go to Kamehameha School. Except, Kent was the president, Colonel Kent of Kamehameha, and they write me a letter saying that, you know, Sorry, the other three can come, but you cannot come because you're not Hawaiian. Now, living in Halawa Housing, you're running around with all these *bla-la's*, all these bruddahs. We're doing all kind crazy kind stuff together, and you don't know if you're Samoan, Portagee, Filipino, or whatever. We're just running together.

So, all of a sudden, you became aware of this distinction between you.

Yeah; exactly.

How did that feel?

Sore. [CHUCKLE] Sore; yeah.

So, they started going to Kamehameha.

Right.

And there you were.

Of the three guys, Danny Fuller was one of the great football players who eventually goes to Purdue, University of Purdue. But Griswold says to my dad, since I didn't get into Kam School, You should go take the test to go to Punahou. And I said to him, I no like go to that *Haole* school. And my dad says, Well, maybe you gotta go over there and learn how the *Haoles* do stuff.

Now, which dad is this? Your stepdad?

This is my adopted father; my stepdad.

So your *Haole* stepdad is saying, You should check out the *Haole* school?

Yeah. Because he's a policeman at Wahiawa precinct, but we live in Halawa Housing.

Because he had so many kids?

[CHUCKLE] Yeah. Because now, there's nine kids, you see? Now, there's nine kids and I'm the oldest of the ten. So he says to me, Maybe you ought to go. And I told him, I no like go that school. It happened then, that the captain of his precinct in Wahiawa was Curtis laukea's father.

Oh, Curtis laukea was a Punahou grad.

Yeah, Punahou grad.

The wrestler.

Yeah. My dad goes to Curtis laukea and tells him about what happened.

Did your dad take offense that you said you didn't want to go to a *Haole* school?

No.

No?

My dad didn't, because he had a sense of what Hawaii's ... that's one thing about my dad, my stepfather, or adopted father was, he had big picture vision of things. And so, he understood what the situation was. So, he goes to Curtis laukea, his captain, and he tells the captain about that I want him to go to Punahou. So the captain comes to my house in Halawa Housing. And Curtis laukea's father was big. I mean, when he walked in the door, he closed the light. No more light come through the door, 'cause he's big. As a matter of fact, the laukeas were consultants to Kamehameha. I mean, that family goes back to Kamehameha the Great. So, Mr. laukea walks in the door, and I look. I'm sitting at the table. [CHUCKLE] I said, I hope this buggah no give me lickin'. [CHUCKLE] So he walks in the door, he says, Eh, your father said you no like take the test to go Punahou. I says, No, I no like go the *Haole* school. And he looked at me; he says, I went Punahou. And then he looked at me and he says, So you better go take the test. So then, I said, Okay. [CHUCKLE]

So, Al was fulfilling his family's calling to go to Hawaii to get educated. Who could ever have dreamed that this young man, the future overachiever, Al

Harrington, would have the opportunity to enter one of the most prestigious learning institutes in the Pacific. As it turns out, there were many who believed in the young Al Taa.

So, there; I go to take the test at Punahou, I pass the test, and then I become influenced by some other people that eventually makes us see a bigger picture again. Amongst them, one was Dr. Fox. Dr. Fox, who was president of Punahou School. There were us Hawaiian boys that went, people from Hawaii that went to Punahou, and he kinda took us under his wing.

You'd already distinguished yourself athletically as well?

Yeah, I began to. [CHUCKLE] 'Cause in Halawa Housing, we're not far from Japanese Camp, plantation camp and Borrinke Camp, Filipino Camp. And so, we all used to play baseball up in Aiea Community Center. But the best organization of baseball, and any sports, was the Japanese community. So, we were then playing in Barefoot League, playing baseball. And they were all very well organized. So, I began to play baseball.

No football?

Then, I started also playing Barefoot League. And I was only thirteen.

But people noticed.

Yeah. 'Cause I had big feet. [CHUCKLE] But some kids that came out of there were already playing in high school. And it happened that Mr. Laukea had heard that I had been playing in the athletic sports in these various leagues, local leagues. And so, that's why when I went to take the test at Punahou, he kind of pushed the fact that I was also a good athlete. And at this particular time, you know, so many things happened. 'Cause Dr. Fox was president of Punahou School, but he had not won a ILH championship in football. In baseball, he had, but in football he didn't. But he loved football, so that's why at this particular time, he was trying to recruit whatever Polynesians or whatever athletes he could get to play football. So, that opened the door for me also, besides the fact that I passed the test.

I read accounts of your playing football at Punahou at that time, because you were admitted.

M-hm; yeah.

As Al Taa, that was your name then.

Yeah.

And I know the longtime sports columnist, Bill Kwon called you up.

Yeah.

A man among boys, because they would pile on you, and if they managed to stop you, they'd untwist themselves from on top of you, and then you'd just get up and say, Eh, good going, good tackle. But you were hard to stop.

Well, I wasn't the only one. Had others, like Danny Fuller, and the Abreus. There were some Abreus that were playing, and Yonamine, Wally Yonamine was before us.

What was your position?

I was a running back. I was a running back. But yes, it was nice of him to say that, but had other guys that were great too. So, that took us to Punahou.

And what about your concerns about no like going to the Haole school?

Again, you know what it is? Teachers. Having good teachers at Punahou. I remember these guys. Brogan taught me English. And this guy taught me Shakespeare. And he starts to speak in, this poetic sense of the English language. And I took to that. I said, Wow. You know. Rich; it was Mr. Rich who taught me Western Civ, and the fall of the Roman Empire, and all this kind stuff about the Mongols coming down, but made it colorful, made it real. And then, I had others who taught me economics and stuff like that. That's what became intriguing, is the teachers that were there. There was Brogan. Kiefer was another one. And then Iams, James Iams was the athletic director.

How about social life? Because you're a kid from Halawa Housing.

Right.

Son of a police officer.

Right.

Adopted son.

Right.

Or, he was soon to adopt you, but you were step kid to a police officer.

Never knew what *Haole* people were. 'Cause us guys, we were out in the districts out in Halawa Housing. Everybody is one color, or we're all mixed. And to be there, and then all of a sudden to see, wow. The management people were mostly *Haoles* at that time. Some Japanese, but mostly *Haoles*. So, what my father had told me, you know, began to ring true, you know, that all these guys that speak good English are the ones that are in management. Everybody else is doing the manual work. So then, I moved more in that direction, because of teachers, because of my dad.

What about friends? How about making friends there?

Oh, yeah. I made some great friends.

And when you were in sports, it is a family that welcomes you, right?

Right.

So you did a lot of stuff with fellow football players.

Yeah; yeah. The Espindas, AK Espinda and their family, they just kinda took me in. Charlie Henderson, whose father was president of Castle & Cooke, and you know, I would sleep at his house. And they had maids. And I'm looking, and then I remember this is really interesting. I went to this party at Lou Ann Dunkley's house. And I walked in the house from the kitchen, and right as you get out of the kitchen you see this big freezer. The same kind freezer I saw at the Pake store down in Aiea. I look at the freezer, I said, Holy cow, these guys get one store in the house. So all of that kinda stuff then impacts me as to, Okay, how come they got that, and we no more that?

And what were your friends at Halawa Housing saying about, how come you never hang with us anymore?

Right. So my mother, the warrior woman that she is, I started to get famous as a football player, so the headlines were, Taa did this, and Taa did that. My mother looks at that, and she says, How come Taa, it's Taa? He no support you. She said, Your daddy support you, Harrington support. [CHUCKLE] So, she goes to the courts and has my name changed. Changes my name to Harrington. So, I come home the summer of my my freshman year, I'm going into sophomore, and she says to me, Okay, that's your dad now, your name is Harrington. I said, Oh, okay.

We all have difficult times in our lives, and when those difficulties do occur, we can choose to hide from the problems, or we can embrace them and learn from them. Al Taa, now Al Harrington, chose the latter. He chose the cup half full. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, 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.

People who know you well, they use a couple of adjectives to describe you most. And I think it goes without saying, you know, they feel like you've got a good brain and great athletic ability, but they say what really sets you apart is your hard work and your tenacity.

Uh-huh.

Where does that come from?

That comes from my mom. It's the warrior spirit of my mother. My mother, when she make up her mind that this is going to get done, it gets done. And you know, I believe that if I don't do as well as you do, I can either out-work you, or I'm gonna out-hustle you.