

AL HARRINGTON: A LIFE OF GRATITUDE

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I'm basically born in a grass shack.

Literally?

Literally. In this little village of Malaeimi. And then I get a shot to come here ... go to school, and then I go back to Samoa on a mission, and I see these kids carrying bundles of bananas and stuff to cook, and watching them. And I look at that, and I said, By the grace of God, that could be me. That could be me. But we were given a shot at it. We were given a shot at it.

And sometimes, all you need is that one shot. Al Harrington took that one shot...that opportunity, along with the many more that followed...and turned them into a life filled with teachers, mentors, academic, athletic and entertainment success, family, and gratitude.

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

***Aloha mai kakou.* If you mention the name Al Harrington to ten people, you might get ten responses as to how they know of him. Some may remember him as a star football player at Punahou in the 1950s...some may recall that he played the role of Ben Kokua in the original Hawaii Five-O. And others may fondly remember his cabaret show during the heydays of Waikiki. For every one of those roles that Al has played in his life, he can recall the person or persons responsible for his success...and the moments when these people changed his life. A life filled with gratitude.**

So, your mom had said, You're now Harrington. And you said?

Right. Oh, okay.

Just like that?

Just like that. Okay. Because ... of his goodness. My dad, the Irishman that adopted me was such a big picture guy, and he knew—I mean, here I am, I'm raising his kids, all these *hapa* kids in the family. And I'm helping him as much as I can as a boy. But he was good to me.

Tell me how that went over with the Halawa Housing kids.

Oh.

Because you went to the *Haole* school—

Oh.

—and now you have a *Haole* name.

Right. So, I go to school the next—the fall of my sophomore year. And they're saying, Al Harrington is now the running back at Punahou. And everybody in the town is saying, Who—wow, they got one new *Haole* kid at Punahou. And then one time when the name ... the kids in Halawa Housing began to realize, *ho*, my name Harrington now, one of those kids came up to me when I got off the bus and he hit me like this. He said, So what, you like be *Haole*? Come over here, I teach you how to be *Haole*.

[CHUCKLE] What did you do? What did you say?

So, I had to fight my way. And then of course, we had a few bumps and grinds here, and then after that, then they accepted it. [CHUCKLE]

And how did you feel about it?

Well, I felt good about it. The real truth is I felt good about it. Because I really loved him. He never underestimated my intelligence. He always thought that whatever I wanted to do, you could do.

So the Samoan boy formerly known as Al Ta'a was now Al Harrington. The boy who was born in a grass shack was enrolled in Punahou. With the help of so many, Al's life was changing...his potential for success was rising. And then along came...Stanford University.

Charlie Henderson was—they lived in Diamond Head. I mean, *ho*, that house. It's right next door to the Dillingham, what you call, estate. So, I used to go there and spend the weekend there. Charlie Henderson's father, Mr. Henderson, was really good to us guys that came and spent the night. I remember sitting down having breakfast, and Charlie is showering, and the old man would come and sit down and have breakfast with me. And he would talk to me, you know. Talk to me, in his pajamas. The *buggah* would come and sit down, talk to me and tell me [SNIFF] ask me about what—how or day is, and how we're doing in school, and all that kinda stuff. So that makes an impression.

Yeah, you mattered.

Yeah. Exactly. And I don't have to, 'cause he could buy me. The guy had enough money, he could buy my—the Halawa Housing, he could buy that building. But here he is, he sits down and talks to me and he says, Well, you guys gotta get ready for college, Charlie's gonna go to Dartmouth. And then when it comes time for me to go to college ... it's—becomes a part of it, because the group of guys that I'm running with, running around with, they're all oriented towards that already.

M-hm.

In Halawa Housing, I would have gone to Waipahu School, and I would have said to myself, Oh, I going be one mechanic, I going to do something else. But the orientation is different at Punahou.

So, you believed you were going to college, but you didn't know how you were—

Yeah.

—get there.

It's funny, 'cause I came home one day and I said to my mom, I said, Ma, *dakine*, Mr. Iams and the athletic director, they said that I should go college. And my mom ...

[CHUCKLE]

What is that? 'Cause ... she's just from Samoa. She said ... I said, That's a school after high school. So we get ready for it. And then, my dad, he got the big picture, and he says, That's good, let's get ourselves ready for that.

I suspect Mr. Henderson admired you, because of what—

Yeah.

—you could do on the football field.

Part of it was that, because Punahou had not taken the championship in twenty-nine years, and here his son is on the team that was on the verge of making it [SNIFF], of doing it.

And it was an amazing group of guys, and—

Oh, yeah.

And you were the standout, I would say.

Well there was a lot of standouts, you know, Brooks was on that team.

Oh, that's true; that's true. Okay; so it was a fabulous team.

Yeah. Yeah. Curtis Laukea was on that team, the Ane brothers was on that team.

Wow; okay.

Yeah. Then you had AK Espinda, who eventually goes to Purdue, and all of these kids what you call, Wendell goes to Cal, University of California. All of us, from there, we go on to bigger and better things, and Punahou was good to us. And then, I find myself at Stanford.

Stanford came calling.

Can you believe it?

Did you have other choices too, besides—

Yeah.

—Stanford? What'd you have?

Well I sound like I'm bragging. But I could have gone to Ivy League schools like Princeton, Harvard, Yale. So they sent me up there to go visit these schools. And they sent me up there when it was so cold ... froze my *okole* off up on the East Coast. So immediately, I said, I no like go school over here. So then, Dr. Fox comes in, and he suggests that I go to Stanford. And I was—at this particular time, I had become fairly close to Dr. Fox, because he was [SNIFF] there as a counselor and all—helping all of us as members of the team. So then, that move me in that direction.

Most times, our successes define our lives. When we conquer, overcome, adapt, and succeed, we usually take a step up. But those rare occasions when

we don't succeed can also be defining moments...forcing us to consider other options, to seek a totally different direction.

Tell me about playing football at Stanford. What was that like?

Oh, my ... [SIGH] ... challenging. Very challenging. I found that I became much more comfortable in the classroom, and I began to get a little bit tired of football.

Why? What happened on the football field?

I wasn't as successful as I wanted to be, number one. Number two, I didn't know how to handle the coaches. I was the darkest guy on the football team.

Did you feel counted out by them? Did you feel minimized?

See, if I say yes, then it sounds like I'm complaining. If I say no ... then it's not the true picture, completely true picture.

So they did minimize you?

From my point of view ... from my point of view, there was a little bit of that.

Why? Do you think they didn't think you were smart?

I'm not really sure. I think a lot of it, too, was my own insecurity. There were some insecurity. As much as you say to yourself that you're secure in the situation, but there are some subtleties of things there. So, I became very much comfortable doing what I was—I got more success in the classroom.

Really? Wow. And yet, it seemed like sports was such a—

Yeah.

—natural for you, all along.

Yeah, it was. There was a naturalness. But ...

Did you not get opportunities?

Yeah. I think we got the opportunities. It's hard to put your finger on it, because the human being is full of all kinds of inconsistencies.

M-hm.

And so, if—when I come to that part of my life, there's still some parts of that experience that I have not articulated.

M-hm.

I'm still in the process of articulating it. Yeah.

When you left Stanford—

M-hm.

—I understand the Baltimore Colts—

Yeah.

—wanted you, and you could have played with the great—

Yeah.

—Johnny Unitas.

Well, I wasn't that high in the draft. So there was great possibilities that I could have gone there and not make it. So, but the possibility of going on a mission ... I could make it. [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE]

I could—yeah. [CHUCKLE]

You could work for free for the church.

[CHUCKLE] Right. So that's basically—and it made my mother happy.

Mm.

When my mom said to me, when she started to cry on the phone, and saying, Oh, we've been missionaries all ov—for years, and so be—make me so happy if you went on a mission.

And you had a BA in history from—

Yeah.

—Stanford University.

That's right.

So, you were ready to go.

I was ready to—I was ready to go do something. I was also what you call, accepted to various law—to a number of law schools. So, I could have gone to law school also, which I did when I came back.

Oh, how long did you go?

I went for one semester, and then, my dad had a business and he went broke in the business. He had gotten into a business with this guy, another cop, and then it was cracking rocks, the rocks that they have up on St. Louis Heights. And then they crack the rocks so they can set the foundation for the houses up there. So, he got into this business, and then the guy ran off with the money. So, he was about to lose the house that we lived on St. Louis Heights. So, then he called me, and then I said, Okay. So, I left law school, and ... I—

Did you like it? Did you really miss having to leave?

Yeah; I did. 'Cause the semester exams had come out, and I was not far off from the top. Not, you know—above the middle of my class. So I left. But I always thought that I was gonna come back. But I—

And what; did you crack rocks, or what did you do?

[CHUCKLE] Well, I got out—I got out there, got off the bus going back to my apartment. I ran into Ellis Brooks Chevrolet in Mabanis [PHONETIC] Boulevard. And there was sign says, Salesman Wanted. So I get off the bus, I go into the car dealer—Gere [PHONETIC] Chevrolet, Gere Chevrolet. I walked into the Gere Chevrolet, and I filled out the application, and the guy comes out and he looks at the application. He says, Okay, we'll call you. Don't call us, we'll call you.

Oh, so you were thinking, I've gotta make money for my dad. That's what I—
Right.

That's what my job now is.

Yeah; that's right. M-hm.

Wherever I am, I'm making money.

Yeah; exactly right. [SNIFF] So, I filled the application out, and the guy says, We'll call you. And ... of course, Martin Luther King still hasn't done his thing, right? So, this still counts. So, I'm walking out of the Gere Chevrolet, and in walks this Chinese guy. His name's Ray Lim, and he comes in the door. And he looks at me, he says, Eh, *brah*.

[CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE] You're Al Harrington. I said, Yeah, yeah.

[CHUCKLE]

You was at Stanford, right? Yeah. Where you going? What you doing here? I says, I was just applying for the job over there. And the guy says, And what? The guys he going—they going call me. He grabbed me by the hand, takes me right back into office, and he says to this guy—the guy's name was Grant. He said, Grant, this is Al Harrington, he played football at Stanford. You remember, up there, Palo Alto. And he says, Yeah, I know the school. He says, Well, you gotta give this guy a job. And he says [INDISTINCT] the manager looks up and he says, Okay, we can start him next week. One person.

One; oh.

One. Well, that changed. Ray Lim becomes the guy that saved my family. So, I go in there, and I start selling cars that week, and two years time, we get the man out of hock, the old man out of hock.

When you listen to Al Harrington talk about all the different lives he's lived...student, athlete, car salesman...it's like watching the film, Forrest Gump, and the many coincidental lives that Forrest lead. Every turn that Al's life took was by the good graces of people willing to lend a hand, or a good word. And being in the right place at the right time.

This is when I meet Heather, my first wife. I meet her, and then we get married. And then, the movie Hawaii is being filmed. Okay. They asked me to come home—to come home to be a part of the casting crew. To help in the cast, the cast situation. So that's what brings me home. I come home with—I get married, and I come home with Heather. And we do the movie, and we make good money. And Heather is pregnant. So, I gotta make up my mind whether the movie's over, and whether—I gotta make up my mind whether I'm gonna go back to Hollywood and play the game in Hollywood, and read for parts, et cetera, et cetera, or go back to law school.

Yeah, because now, you have these valuable contacts—

Right.

—in the movie business.

Right. Exactly. And so, I'm down at the shopping center, and I run into Dr. Fox. And Dr. Fox says, Eh, Al, good to see you. He says, What are you doing? I says, I just got through with the movie Hawaii, and I'm thinking of going to Hollywood. He says, Oh, no, no, no, no, this is what you're going to do now. You're gonna go back to the university and get your teacher's credentials, and you're gonna come and teach at Punahou. And so the life changes again. And so, I go to Punahou—I mean, I do exactly that. I get my credentials, and then I start teaching at Punahou. And I love it. Absolutely loved the process. James Scott, who is president of Punahou School, was one of my students. Hoo, make me feel good.

Did he act up on you?

No.

[CHUCKLE]

Because he was a good student. I mean, he was not only a good student, but a good athlete, and a good person.

M-hm.

And then Nainoa Thompson; he was one of my students. When I think about those kids, I said, Man, I just hope that one day in that classroom that I said, Maybe one thing that might have changed their mind.

Now Al Harrington is teaching and coaching future leaders of Hawaii...giving them direction and knowledge. But this striking Polynesian man was not finished with life. Where most of us would have been content to accomplish all that Al had done so far, Al was still reaching.

And while doing the teaching and the coaching, I'm doing motivational speaking for various schools. And in the audience in one of those speeches that I do, is the casting director for Hawaii Five-O. Ted Thorpe was his name. Ted Thorpe. And he comes up to me after the speech and he says to me ... [SNIFF] ... I have a script that you might be interested in. And he gives me the script, he says, Read the script over and call me. So I take the script, read it. And ... it's bad guy, but it takes a lot—I mean, it takes good—bad guys to make the good guys look good. So, I get that part. And then, I'm in the door of Hawaii Five-O. And meanwhile—or I'm teaching and loving it, and then pretty soon they give me a part every year, every season, for four seasons.

Different bad guys.

Yeah; different bad guys. So and that then begins to move the other way. And then, I get involved in doing *luaus*, because I wanted to make more money. And the lady that opens doors for me in the entertainment field is Mrs. Flanders, Josephine Flanders. Remember her?

Who taught you ballet.

That's right.

What were you doing, learning ballet?

Because when we were playing football, I had read in a book about this guy named O'Shesky at the University of California who took ballet and as a result, strengthened his legs. And then, I meet Mrs. Flanders, Josephine Flanders, and she loves the idea, because a football player she would never get anybody like that taking lessons. And so, she begins to teach me about the whole idea of drama in school. Josephine comes back when I'm teaching at Punahou, and my kids are born, and I don't have enough insurance to get 'em out of the hospital. And then, doctor—Dr. Fox gives us advances in the insurance thing so I could bring the child—get the children out of the hospital. And then, I'm looking for other ways of making money. And so, Josephine is at this particular time, is the entertainment director at the Hilton Hawaiian Village. And she has a *luau* there twice a day—twice a week. And her head *luau* person is, Ray Kinney,

who, this great, great, *kupuna* of Hawaii that was able to take on music into all corners of the world. And he's back home now, he's retiring, and he's doing just the *luau*. And he does a fantastic job. So, she asked me to support him. So I go and I watch him. This where I learned how to handle the visitors. 'Cause he's working directly with the visitors, and he's working with this *mana* of *aloha* that is able to touch them. Ray Kinney and Josephine Flanders gave me an opportunity to come into the market. So while I was teaching school, I would do one *luau* a week.

That's such a good part of island life.

Yeah.

And some people say it makes us very provincial, because everyone's afraid to offend each other. But also, when you ... you're gonna run into people again, and again. And in—

Yeah.

—your life, they've come back around—

Right.

—and around, and it's been a good thing for you.

Oh, yeah.

They've been really helpful to you.

Well, Josephine—

And vice versa.

Josephine she just took a liking. Just like Mrs. Abreu. She just took a liking. And then, I got Mr. Griswold at Aiea School. And then at Punahou, there was Dr. Fox. And all of these people, they come into your life, they touch you, they raise you up, they give you an opportunity to see another side of the situation.

If you've ever been up late at night, and turned on a good western, you may have seen a familiar face...Al Harrington, born in Samoa, raised in Hawaii, found success in Hollywood playing Native Americans.

I love cowboy movies. I'll watch—

Yeah.

—any Western, any time, any place.

Me too.

I'll watch it ten times.

Yeah.

You show up in the Westerns—

[CHUCKLE]

—as an Indian, again an again. And you have the speaking part.

Yeah.

I wonder how that was? And you do a great job. You—

Oh, I mean, the Indians wanted to take me home.

[CHUCKLE] You know, I'm just thinking. Hawaiians wouldn't like—

Indians.

—an Indian playing—

Playing Hawaiian.

—a Hawaiian. So, how did the Indians feel about you playing an Indian?

Well, first of all, they didn't know.

Oh, they had to know.

Well, there was certainly—and there was a part where me and the Filipinos were getting all the Indian parts. And the—

[CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE] And the Indians were getting mad. 'Cause some of the Indians that came to try out for the parts, they couldn't read, because they came from the reservations, and the schools sometimes weren't as good—

Oh ...

—in the reservations. So, they leaned towards us, who could read. So, we began to get the parts. But then, the Indians started to make a little bit of—make noise, so the union passed a law that you—if you're gonna play Indians, you gotta show what reservation you came from.

That's a problem for you.

That's a problem for me.

[CHUCKLE]

So ... when I did *White Fang*, when I—

White Fang II.

Yeah.

Yes.

Yeah. When I did *White Fang II*, the director wanted me—I mean, after all the readings, yeah? [CHUCKLE] I go for the reading for *White Fang II*, and it's like a Quonset hut in Disney—Disneyland—I mean, Disney Studios. [SNIFF] And I walk in there ... *uku paila* Indians.

M-hm.

Every Indian you can think of is sitting there, waiting to get to read.

And they're going, He's not an Indian.

No, no, no.

[CHUCKLE]

No, no. They thought I was Indian. And so, the whole room goes through the reading. And lo and behold, I'm the last guy that is being chosen. And then in order for me to get the part, we have to go to the Haida—Haida Council, 'cause the chief is Haida, and ask the Haida Council if I, Al Harrington, could play this role. And they had to give us approval. Probably have to give them a stipend for the movie. [SNIFF] So ... we go the Haida Council, myself, the director, and the producer. And the Council comes in, and in the Council ... there's about ten of 'em, is one guy that looks familiar to me. And I'm looking at him, he's looking at me. And I find out that he used to come to my show in Waikiki.

Oh ...

See, he used to come with his family, and I used to tell Bob them, When my friend the Indian come, just let him come in, take care of them, because he's my friend.

Karma.

Yeah. See? So, we are introduced to the chief.

And you're paying it forward. I can just—

Right.

—feel it coming. [CHUCKLE]

We're introduced to the Council, and the chief gets up and says, Hey ... that's my brother. That's my brother Al Harrington, he's from Hawaii. And he says, He can play the part. So there it is. I'm given the role of the chief of the village, because of that thing that happened. So yeah, you don't know. So much of life is being in the right place at the right time, one person moving in one direction.

But you were willing to take the chance.

Yeah. You gotta be open.

And go on merit.

Go on—be open for the opportunity. Be conscious, be conscious. It's like ... he says, From the time of conception ... to the time that you're born in that nine months, you do nothing. Everything happens for you. Why not let things happen for you also after you're born? Sometimes, we try to make things happen, and we don't follow the pattern ... that is destined for us to follow.

With angels on his shoulders, Al Harrington has followed his destiny. And through his eyes, we were privileged to get a glimpse of a life filled with gratitude, lessons learned, and valuable friendships. 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 remember my grandfather, my grandfather on the Kalama side ... in Laie. People walk by the house, *Tutu* Kalama ... Grandpa Kalama is on the porch. People walking by, they go, *Hui! Hele mai, hele mai*, come, come have some—have some—something to drink, have something to eat with us. And you hear that. And that's what this is all about. In the end, Hawaii creates the situation by which that can happen. And the host culture laid the foundation. And that's what we were doing when we were in Waikiki. Trying to convey that.