

GUEST: WAYNE RAPOZO

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I guess my grandmother deserves special mention. Because as a woman growing up in turn of the century Hawaii, and then being a child of the Depression, life was hard. And I suspect there was not the money available for her to go far away to school. So, I think the difficult thing for her of me not coming back home was ... it reminded her of what she maybe could or could not have done.

The sacrifice of generations before us can never be measured, but the character, values, and principles that our parents and grandparents pass down to us live on, even if life takes us to the other side of the world. London-based corporate attorney Wayne Rapozo, 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; I'm Leslie Wilcox. We've all heard the term Brain Drain, how some of the best and brightest of our young people leave for college and never return. But you have to believe that Hawaii lives in the hearts and minds of everyone who leaves this special place, no matter how far they roam. Such is the case of Wayne Rapozo, a corporate attorney based in London, and handling big money mergers and acquisitions and leveraged finance transactions for international clients, far, far away from the Kauai plantation where he grew up.

I am far away from home. I ended up in London just in the sweep of time, and luck and chance that sometime happens in the modern world. But I began my life on Kauai, and a significant amount of time was in Pakala, which is the plantation village, which I'm associated with, sort of the Makaweli Plantation.

West side?

West side, Gay & Robinson. Part of my life was also in the household of my parents in sort of the Kalaheo-Lawai area, but the big part of my childhood, and where I identify with is a plantation village called Pakala.

You spent a lot of time with your grandparents. Were you raised by them?

In large measure, yes. And typical in the extended sort of *hanai* style family, you often have the aunts, and uncles, and grandparents involved in life. For a range of reasons, I ended up in my younger years being with my grandparents. I mean, I grew up with allergies. I was supremely allergic to pollen and mold.

Hmm.

And would sort of break apart in bronchitis attacks, and have a hard time breathing. And my grandparents lived in an area of the island that is fertile, but very dry, on the west side of Kauai. So, it could be in part the luck of nature that ended up involving me being more often at the home of my grandparents.

So, allergies take future international corporate finance attorney Wayne Rapozo to the west side of Kauai, an area where life is simple, and Hawaiian culture and values are rooted deeply in the people who live there.

At some point, as you become an adolescent, in the case I think of a male adolescent, you sort of start forming your own view of who you are, and want to choose things about who you are for yourself. And when I started reaching that point in life, I just realized so much of what I wanted to be was in the vision of my grandmother and grandfather, in a way that I thought I would never be as a child. I just saw the world the way they saw it. I took immense pride in the position that my grandfather had in being, a *luna* at Gay & Robinson Plantation, and the position he had, and he knew the land, he knew his job, he was respected for what he did. My grandmother was just the biggest social gossip, the family matriarch, and I really just liked that very much. It was just so much of who I was. And so, by the time I was in high school, I just wanted to just be just with them. And I think the extended family and people in the community just viewed me as belonging to my grandparents, and they did as well. And so, by the time I was eleven or twelve, I think they saw me as belonging to them, I belonging to who they thought I should be.

You stayed there all year, not just part of the time.

Exactly. I started just staying there all year.

Tell me about your grandfather; what was he like?

Stern, man of few words, man of immense authority, man of immense pride. He liked working a good day, he loved being patriarch and sort of being able to say he had a large and successful family. But he had a very stern hand, so when he said a few things and raised his eyebrow or frowned, that was code for, You should listen, and he would not compromise. Usually, he expected it to be obeyed.

What if he was tested? How far would he go in terms of his sternness?

There would never be, as there was, I suspect maybe in the generation before me, the threat of the slap across the face. But actually, he didn't need to, because the mere threat of his anger was enough to actually frighten me in place.

So, you never saw him do worse than frown?

He kinda raised his voice. No; Wayne, I told you no. You know, What's your problem? Why are you being so stubborn? I told you no; is it a problem? He was like six-two, six-three, broad shoulders, deep voice, from smoking a good cigarette every day. So, that was enough to be intimidating.

And what about your grandmother; what was she like?

She was much more the softer touch, but in secret was actually the power behind the throne. She would always be warm and engaging, and want to know why, and why not, and be willing to change her mind, or would be not even phrasing things as though decisions had been made. She would just phrase things as a conversation, and always asked, Oh, how can I do this or that to be helpful? She would always be sort of warm and engaging. She would be the one who would crack the whip on money. No unnecessary spending; you spend on the family, you spend on education. If you don't spend on education, you spend money to help the family with the business. The rest is excess, and you should eliminate excess spending. You should not be spending more than you need to.

And what should you do with the money you save?

And you save; you save for the day that life will be difficult, when you need to live off the savings. For them in my own life, their view was, you need to save for the rainy day. And the rainy day could be, you may be in a situation where you may not have a job, you may be on the political outs. And remember, they were in an era where if you crossed paths with powerful people, you may not be able to work for a chunk of time, and may need to live off of family.

Did you go to public schools?

I did. Well, I went to a Catholic elementary school, and then was the first big sort of, you know, stink in the family was, I actually wanted to go to Punahou or Mid Pac. And Mid Pac for a bunch of reasons didn't work out, but the issue with Punahou -- and I sort of talk about it now. But at the time, I was just devastated. Punahou closed their dorms. And then, although I immensely identify with being in and of Hawaii, I have no documented native Hawaiian ancestry, so Kamehameha was not going to be an option. Be that as it may, such was life when I was eleven or twelve.

Sounds like you were a very smart boy in public school, or in Catholic school.

I was smart. I was a bit rebellious.

You said Why, all the time, how come.

Yeah.

Why.

I loved challenging authority.

So? [CHUCKLE]

So, why? Well, that doesn't make it right. Or, that doesn't seem to be the fair outcome. So, in university, that worked out beautifully.

But not so much earlier?

But not so much in high school.

As a kid?

No, not so much earlier as a kid.

And Waimea High School is where you attended.

Waimea High School.

Early 80s, I think, is when you graduated.

Exactly; early 80s, I graduated Waimea High School, which is at the far west end of Kauai.

How did you navigate high school socially?

My goal was to talk to everybody. I think, and maybe this comes indirectly from my grandparents, and in just being in a plantation village. They lived in old style classic plantation village, probably the same way it was in 1840. It was the same way it was when I was growing up. And in playing the role of *luna* and being the small midsized rancher, they would also work on a day-to-day basis with the Hawaiian community, with the Japanese community, and more recently with the Filipino community. And I think as a result, grandfather and grandmother, they talked to everybody. Everyone was a business partner in small or big ways, everyone was part of their social circle in small or big ways. And that is very much of who I am. And what I do day-to-day in London as an attorney or socially, I try to ensure I talk to everyone. So at a dinner gathering or lunch gathering, I'll be just at home with a group of Americans as I would with my best friends who are in Switzerland and Italy. I view myself as just as much at home, not in some contrived way, but in some very comforting, emotionally settling way, because I view them as colleagues and friends.

Talking to everyone; back in those days, before email and the Internet, that was the best way to find out what was going on in your community. Talking to everyone has served Wayne Rapozo well in a highflying corporate legal career that began with a prophecy from his grandmother.

At some point, your warm and engaging grandmother told you something that devastated you about going away.

She did. My senior year, they had the sit-down with me. My grandparents took the view that when you finished high school, they would help you do two things; start a business, or pay for your education. They viewed them as equal. Their view was paying for some fancy education was unfair for some of their kids who were a bit more technically astute and/or better businessmen. And so, they gave me the same bargain in life I think they gave their own children before me, which was, We're gonna pay for you to start a business or we will pay for your university. And they said, We know you're university bound, so what have you chatted about? And we talked about the range of things we could do. And I had been admitted to a range of schools, but the two favorite ones for me would have been Princeton and UH Manoa. And then, we said I'm likely to be law school bound, or business school bound. I thought eventually, I would go that path if I did well, and I was determined to do well. And we had settled on,

I'll go to UH Manoa. I'll be closer to home, allow me and them to save up a bit. And they said, you know, and all limits go away to go off to law school. So, I got admitted, did well at UH Manoa. And when I was reviewing the law schools and where I would go, and they were all on the East Coast, in Washington, DC or in New York City, my grandmother goes, You are aware you're not coming home. I mean, she seemed a bit angry for a bit, and I said, Why are you being so frustrated? Did I say something to offend you? She goes, No. She goes, But you are aware if you go down this path, you're not coming home. I said, Well, why do you say that? She goes, Because I know it's the case. She goes, Are you ready to be ... you may become this person that you may not want to be, and once you become that person you may not want to be, you may be in a position where you may not be able to decide, you may have already made the decision without realizing it that you may never come home. And she goes, If you do that, all this time and money that we've invested in you -- and she goes, It's not just the money. She goes, In a small place like Kauai, we count upon our sons coming home. And she goes, If you don't come home, a lot of the time and energy and hopes go with you. Are you ready to deal with that? I'm like, I'm only twenty-one, this is like a bit too much to lay on me. I said, I'll keep that in mind, but, I know where I come from. I said, I'll come back home at some point. But I said, This is not me -- what's the Hawaiian word, being snobbish or being *haimakamaka*. I'm like, No, I know, I know very much where I come from. And I said, I'll come back home, but I won't let go all this, I promise you. She goes, Okay, thank you. So, I end up going. For a bunch of reasons, I get accepted to all the law schools I applied to. The real favorite was to go to NYU. I wanted to be in New York. But money was gonna be tight, and New York University did not give a full scholarship. George Washington did give me a full scholarship. So, I talked to the dean at NYU at the time, and I said, It's gonna be hard for me to swing it this year, just for a whole range of family financial reasons. And I said, But if I go elsewhere, can I come back in a year? He goes, Actually, you probably can if you do as well as you did in your undergraduate studies. And he goes, you do just as well with law school, if finances work out for you by next year, we might actually find more money for you at NYU, and you can come back and talk to us. So, I did my first year of law school at George Washington University and did well. I'll be honest with you, did exceptionally well. And I applied again to NYU, and I spoke to the dean and he goes, You need to officially apply but, he goes, you're basically gonna get admitted. And then, God from Heaven threw *manua*; He threw *manua* my way. So, the Hawaii Community Foundation gave me a big chunk of money, and NYU gave me a big chunk of money. So, in the process of applying to New York University and getting admitted to finish law school, I had managed to be -- I never thought I would have this, but I ended up being completely financially independent. There was scholarship money for the entire amount of my law school tuition and living expenses on the table. And so, took the train from Union Station to Penn

Station, and never looked back, other than with extraordinary pride for where I come from, but never looked back.

Local boy does good; starts off at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, attends law school on the East Coast. What then, for attorney Wayne Rapozo?

During, I think it was my first summer, I applied for my dream job. I applied to work at Carlsmith Wichman Case.

In Honolulu.

In Honolulu. This is what I wanted to do since I was eighteen, nineteen. They work with a lot of the establishment banks, they work with a lot of small businesses. They work both with the sugar plantations, they also work with government agencies. They have a good profile on Honolulu and on the neighbor islands and it was what I thought it should be.

You like all that engagement.

I loved all the engagement. It was plugged in politically, it was plugged in with the business community, it was one of the three or four most prestigious firms in Honolulu, some say the most prestigious. And I'm like, This is what I wanted. Grandfather was like, I'm completely behind you; in fact, I've already told everyone that you're gonna work at Carlsmith. So, Grandfather was very happy about it. But at some point, I'm just realizing life may get uncomfortable in Hawaii, and that was just family and personal. I just thought, Maybe I'll need to be away from home for a bit. But then comes the professional side. At the time, I grew up in plantation Hawaii, so I should have been prepared for this. But as I looked around in Honolulu, I just smelled a bit more of the notion of the plantation mentality, that there was a sense of discipline and hierarchy that was more than I thought would be the case, especially having spent three or four years on an elite mainland institution.

What didn't you like about the hierarchy?

I couldn't be who I wanted to be, in the sense of articulating fully a new idea, a political idea, something in the community that it was more than just waiting my turn. I have broad degree of respect for, in persona and professional life, you wait your turn, you don't begin with everything on a clean slate. But I did want a bit more of intellectual independence, and I did want to have the opportunity, looking ahead, to do things in the community. And in the practice of law, I did want to have a freer hand as I started off my career in building something that I was gonna be more directly involved in. And I got the sense in Hawaii that I was going to be constrained. I actually thought if I did something too robust and controversial with a Kauai civic group that I respected all my life, will I in fact push back and not be as engaged as I would be --

They'll think you're an upstart.

Exactly.

Who the heck are you? In your home turf, you're known as the Rapozo grandson, and you carry your family name. It's not about you, it's who you represent.

There was some of that. I think there was some of that. But I was kinda proud that that actually would be very helpful, that I was a Kauai boy who has done well, that I come from a big extended family doing the mix of things in plantation life with small businesses. I was immensely proud of that, and I kinda thought that wouldn't be as much of a hindrance, even if I wasn't a Honolulu boy. The thing that I thought would be a hindrance would be, would I be afraid of doing things for fear of being criticized on some community issue or some political issue which was, I don't support X or Y in the State Legislature, in a manner that would be inconsistent with how a major law firm or its clientele may perceive things. I was a bit nervous that that might chill my wanting to be independent and have a view on all of those things, and still be able to be a vibrant part of the business community. I mean, in retrospect, I probably could have done a lot of that, and it would not have been a conflict. But I objectively think at that time in Hawaii there was still some of the strong hierarchy governing how people behaved, and I perceived it that way, and I was very afraid that that would just prevent me from being the best I could be, and that in New York, where I would be with a range of people as my contemporaries would be from across the United States, and that the law firm would be less concerned about the range of things that were happening in social or civic life. I always thought you do what you need to do, and the law firm would be not second guessing you. In Hawaii, I thought I would be second guessed. So in that summer at Carlsmith, when I decided I liked it immensely, I went back to Kauai and I told my grandmother, I said, I think you are correct. And she goes, I know I was. And she goes, But I think it's the right thing for you to do. I said, Why? She goes, Because I think you'll be better in New York. She goes, There are a range of things going on with the family, and she goes, you shouldn't let that distract you. It'll come to pass and just blow away, and so she goes, you go start off your life.

There's a popular bumper sticker that reads: New York, Paris, Waimanalo. In corporate finance attorney Wayne Rapozo's life, that bumper sticker would: Pakala, Honolulu, New York, Hong Kong, London; Pakala, Kauai being his roots. His education and career have taken him to big cities around the world. Today, he lives in Notting Hill, London and is the choice of many influential corporate clients in tricky big money buyouts and complex business issues. The boy from Kauai's west side with the allergies is living the life he'd always dreamed of, but not in the place where his heart lives.

And so, as I say, it goes down as one of the big regrets of my life, and I think it was a direct consequence of choosing what I chose to do, and without realizing it, choosing what not to do, that I didn't get to work as directly as I would with a

range of people, personal and professional, on Kauai. And I feel a little bit like I let people down.

But you are giving back now, through your foundation programs.

I think so. Four or five years ago, it may have been longer, I stumbled on a savings book. And the savings book was probably created by my grandmother. It was her name and my name. And it was a bank account that I thought was probably put in place for my education, but I think she used it from time to time, and it just passed to me. It wasn't that big amount, but it was emotionally a big amount to me. And so, I called the people who helped bail me out for law school. So, I called the Community Foundation, the Hawaii Community Foundation, and I said, I always wanted to give back to the community, and I'm far from home, but I said, I think I can do something. And I'd made small, and sometimes large, charitable contributions over the years to the Catholic schools, to various native Hawaiian groups, the Hongwanji Mission. These are all things that were important to me when I was growing up. But I said, I need to be more organized and systematic about it. I need to be more engaged. And so, I said, There's some money here from my grandparents, and I said, I want to top it up in a meaningful amount. And they said, No, this is what we do. And they said, No, in fact, we remember you from years ago. Many did. And so, it worked out quite well. So, I set up several funds in the memory of my grandparents. So, one is the Rapozo Kamaaina Fund. It makes grants in the community for stewardship, for economic self-sufficiency, for education, and for cultural celebration, which I think are cornerstones of Hawaii. And there's a George and Augusta Rapozo Scholarship Fund that gives a scholarship every year to a high school student, ideally from each of Waimea High, Kapaa High, and Kauai High. The goal is that over the course of time, a graduating senior from each of these high schools receives a grant for higher education, whether it be university, four-year college, or whether it be a vocational accredited technical school for vocational study. There's a third fund which is the Rapozo Private Fund. I keep track of that. We make three to seven grants to a range of community organizations on Kauai and on Niihau. I'm very, very, very supportive of Niihau. And Niihau, of course, includes Niihau Island, and the Niihau community who live on Kauai, as they've straddled Kauai their whole lives even going back centuries ago. And sometime through my gossip -- and I have extensive gossip, I picked up that from grandmother, so I call Kauai and Honolulu like every three or four days. And so, I have an idea of what's going on in the community. And so, I suggest some of the grantees, sometime the Hawaii Community Foundation suggests grantees. And in addition to giving on Kauai, which it has over the past five to seven years, it also gives symbolic grants on the neighbor islands, Maui, the Big Island, and even Leeward Oahu which is kind of a neighbor island, on these four areas: cultural celebration, economic self-sufficiency, education, and land stewardship.

And so, the grandparents of London-based frequent flyer attorney Wayne Rapozo had passed on to him their values, their loyalty to the community, their passion for talking to everyone, and a savings book which helped him to give back to the place that means so much to him. But there was one more thing that his grandmother left him.

They did two things for most of their children. One was the big bargain one; you get to have your education, or starting your business paid for by us. The second thing is, when you get settled down, we'll help you buy a house. I suspect in the early days, the big extended family would literally help you buy the house. I think in modern day times, they help you with the down payment. But they never lived to ... one, see me settle down. Grandfather died when I was in my mid-twenties, Grandmother died when I was in my late twenties. I think I was just about to turn thirty. So, they never reached the point to be able to help me buy my house. And so, because I want to inherit as much as I can of their legacy, because it'll help me carry on, so that one day when I have my own family, which I don't yet, but one day when I do, that I'll be able to celebrate some degree of continuity. So it was always the biggest blow to me that I didn't get them to help me buy my house. So, when I worked my first summer in Hawaii, first law school summer at Carlsmith, that's when I had the frank talk with my grandfather and grandmother. And my grandfather was like all supportive. You just go to town, go live your life in the big city. Grandmother was a bit more introspective. But she said, I know you need to do what you need to do. And she goes, I know you have managed your finances quite well, and I want to give you a few things. So, she hands me a few old books, a few crocheted items. And then, she gives me three gold coins. And she goes, I was given this when I was very young, that if there's ever a crisis, I should use this. Of course, when you grow up in the Great Depression, nothing's a crisis, so she kinda sits on these. I presume she just sits on three gold coins. I don't know how she got them. I'm just guessing. Was it from some old ranch that they'd leased or sold out? I don't know what it was. But, she has kinda three gold coins and she goes, This is the only thing of significance, other than money, I can give you that I think is valuable. And she goes, You use what you need to use it for, now or never, but I just wanted to say that you have this.

Mm; what a great gift.

It is. And so, I have these three gold coins. So, I'm buying my house. They are going to help me buy the house, because I'm going to sell one of the gold coins, which I thought never in a million years I will have sold, but I wanted to sell one of the gold coins, not very much but still valuable, and so that gold coin is gonna go to help with the down payment so that, I think, as a matter of historical significance in my little history of my life, they actually helped me buy my house.

International attorney Wayne Rapozo's career is a story of power, negotiation, finance, and yes, law. But his life is a world where the love and devotion of his grandparents allowed him to leave Hawaii, while filling his heart with a love for this place that will always bring him back.

For Long Story Short, and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. *A hui hou kakou.*

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Wait 'til you have kids.

I know.

[CHUCKLE]

I'm gonna probably have someone who's like me, who will be completely self-righteous and obnoxious. And I'm gonna say, Why don't you go to school here. No, I'm gonna go as far away from home as possible. Yeah. Yeah; I can see this happening.

And you'll say, All that time and investment I put into you --

I know. I'm gonna have the script, right? I'm gonna be like, I spent all this time and money, but it's not the money.

[CHUCKLE]

You know, it's the fact that we've invested our hopes and dreams in you, and you're gonna go far away. And they'll probably know me well enough by then to say, Is that from Grandma and Grandpa? And I'll say, Well, not really, but yeah. [CHUCKLE]