

GUESTS: DENBY FAWCETT AND BOB JONES

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BOB: The news is being done now to satisfy what we think the viewer wants. I don't particularly like that, 'cause I like the old-fashioned thing of, I'm putting out the paper or I'm putting out the newscasts, and I'll put on it what I think you ought to know.

News the way it was, now, and in the future, with longtime daily journalists turned authors Denby Fawcett and Bob Jones, next on Long Story Short.

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

Aloha mai kakou, and welcome to Long Story Short. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Hawaii reporters Denby Fawcett and Bob Jones have been mainstays in print and television news for the past half century. Bob reported for the Honolulu Advertiser, served as an NBC News foreign correspondent, and as a main anchor and reporter for KGMB-TV News. His wife, Denby Fawcett, was a journalist for both former Honolulu dailies and KITV-4 News. Both grew up in different parts of the country, but faced the same challenge of living in troubled households. Denby Fawcett's father was a prominent Honolulu advertising executive wrestling with alcoholism, and her mother was an artist struggling with a bipolar disorder. Bob Jones was subject to parental abuse while growing up in Ohio, and at age fifteen, ran away from home.

BOB: I never had a nice growing up period like teenager would. Because I went to school during the day. I had to do my homework, and I had to work every night. So, I had two jobs. I was a grocery store bagger, and I was a Western Union messenger boy on a bike. I would work 'til midnight, and then I had to go to school in the morning. And I'm very grateful always to a detective in Clearwater, Florida, who's now dead. And somebody had stolen money from a band safe in the school. I came under suspicion, and so did another guy who was from a town near mine, who had also run away and who was rooming with me at the time. Obvious suspects. We had not done it, but in the investigation, the cop found out that I was a runaway. And he said, I am obligated to tell your parents where you are, and they have the right to have you sent back home. So, he sent them a letter and said he found me. And he said, But I

have to tell you that he's doing well, he's in school, he has a job, he's been in no trouble, and if you feel like it, my recommendation would be to leave him be. And they did. I had finally written to my mother maybe a year or two years after I ran away. And I said, I should probably come home and see you guys. And she said, Oh, no, don't do that, your dad said if you ever showed up here, he'd kill you. [CHUCKLE]

And did you ever see your dad again?

BOB: Only at his funeral.

And Denby, you had this glossy childhood in an upscale neighborhood, great education. Your parents were very well known and well thought of. And yet, it wasn't, as most things are, wasn't all great.

DENBY: Well, my parents were very glamorous, and I had a wonderful childhood on so many levels. We lived on the beach at Kahala when it was a rural neighborhood, not that horrible gated-off thing it is today, or even now with Kawamoto's statue-fied neighborhood. But it was a rural beach community, and it was so rural that I even kept a horse where Waiālae Kahala is, and could ride on the beach after school. But my parents, they had a rough time within their lives of demons that they couldn't control. My mother had bipolar illness, and my father had a binge-drinking problem. So, for me, sometimes it was difficult, 'cause they were very unpredictable parents. Living with someone that has bipolar illness, it can also be very exciting. During one of the tsunamis, which we called tidal waves then, my mother said, Oh, I think it would be a terrific idea if we went out and saw it, when there were all the sirens going.

So, everybody was going in the other direction.

DENBY: And so, she took my friends too, on this unforgettable ride.

Their parents must have been thrilled to hear this.

DENBY: They didn't know, of course. [CHUCKLE] So, we drove out to the Windward side. And my mother was very charming and very beautiful. So, of course, she was stopped, and she told the Civil Defense or police officer, I have got to go back, I live in Waimanalo, and I have a pet that we forgot to get ... [CHUCKLE] ... told this whole story. I'll only go in, and go out. And so, he amazingly let us go. So, we drove in, and the waves were still coming in and out, slowly though, it was receding. So, we drove through this, and for quite a while, and of course, the kids loved it. And then finally, my mother said, I think we'd better head for higher ground.

Wow.

DENBY: So, she took us all the way to Hauula, where we went to this restaurant they had at the time called Cooper's Ranch Inn, and bought everybody all these cheeseburgers and coconut pie. And then, finally, drove us home.

What was the effect, do you think, of your childhoods on how you raised your child?

DENBY: Well, I think in my case, I tried to provide the number of adventures my parents had provided, to travel and take you to see things, and try things, and make everything available. My mother was wonderful in that way. We'd

always go and see anything in town, and travel wherever we could. Even on Oahu, we'd drive out to Laie. They had *hukilaus* then done by the famous chef Sam Choy's father. Children go places and do things, but we got to see some extreme things with her.

BOB: I can tell you that I never had any intention of being a journalist. I was gonna be the greatest defense lawyer the nation had ever seen. And I ended up getting a law degree. But, I became the editor of my college paper at eighteen, because nobody else wanted the job. And then, I got a job as a copy boy at the local paper in St. Petersburg, Florida, and I loved it. And I said, Boy, this is a great life. I was still going to college. They offered me a part-time job as a police reporter at night. And those days, you had to take your own photos too, so we had the old four-by-five speed graphic camera with the big flash. The police let you right into the crime scene with it. They didn't have the CSI stuff and the tape and everything.

No more yellow tape. [CHUCKLE]

BOB: No; somebody was murdered or committed suicide or whatever in their house. Me as the police reporter, I'd walk right in with the first guys responding. Walk around the house, steal a picture off of a bureau, 'cause I need a mug shot to use with the story in the paper. So you just take a picture and put it in your pocket.

[CHUCKLE]

BOB: Those were very different days.

Wide open days.

BOB: [CHUCKLE]

DENBY: I kind of went to journalism almost accidentally, 'cause I did it when I was in high school. I wrote a teen column for the Star Bulletin. I had an office in my bedroom, I had a typewriter and my own phone, and would call about parties, and get every name accurate. And then, I didn't do any journalism in college. I majored in Spanish, and when I graduated, I decided I wanted to go down to Argentina and live. A family friend had an art business down there, so I asked my dad if he'd give me the money, and he said, No, I always told you, when you graduate from college, you're on your own then. So, I thought, Oh, well, I'll go to the paper and earn the money to go down there to Argentina. And then, like Bob, I got to like it. I just loved it. So, the only jobs for women on a newspaper then were what they called the Women's Page that was about parties and gardening, and food. But it was interesting. I went to a lot of military parties and got to know people in all the different services. And then, Vietnam was happening, so that caught my attention, and I never left reporting after that.

After three years in the Air Force and stints at newspapers based in Germany, France, Spain, and Kentucky, Bob Jones joined the staff of the Honolulu Advertiser in 1963. Two years later, he was assigned to cover military units from Hawaii serving in Vietnam. He later landed the coveted spot as a foreign

correspondent for NBC News, reporting from the battle zones of Nigeria, Vietnam, and Laos in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1966, Bob's then girlfriend, newspaper columnist Denby Fawcett, quit the Honolulu Star Bulletin after the paper turned down her request to send her to Vietnam. The rival paper stepped in when the Honolulu Advertiser's managing editor, Buck Buchwach, offered Denby the assignment as one of the few female journalists to cover the conflict.

DENBY: Well, I think everyone that goes to a war, it's like the aristocrat Pierre in War and Peace. He wanted to be in the war against the French so bad, and he finally got in, and got into a combat zone. And I think that everyone is kinda the same when they go to war. When people first start shooting, oh, it's very exciting, you know. And he was like, Oh; and then, Pierre says, Oh, they're shooting at me, who my mother loves so much. And it's that realization that you're just a number. You're gonna probably be killed, or very likely. And then, it is very terrifying to everyone that is in a war.

BOB: You have to remember about age, too.

DENBY: We were younger; yeah.

BOB: I mean, it never occurred to me. I was with a squad led by a sergeant from Waimanalo named Bobby Andrade. So that's why I was covering them. We stopped in the jungle to put a map on the ground to see which way we would go next, and seven of us gathered around the map. And a mortar shell hit the map, and it killed the other six people. It put some holes in me that healed up reasonably quickly, but the sad thing was that the Army claimed at the time that it was a Viet Cong attack, Bobby Andrade had rallied the troops after the mortar hit, and repulsed this attack. Well, there was no attack. Bobby Andrade was killed instantly. That was all made up. They gave him a Bronze or Silver Star for heroism posthumously, and then admitted later on it was our own people that fired a short round. Even after I recovered and went back out in the field, I still didn't think about it very much. It was something that happened, and it probably won't happen again. And it could have happened the next day that I stepped out in the field. But it's your age, and your inability to see your mortality. I feel bad 'cause I did a really poor job of covering that war because I was young, and caught up in the excitement of it, that I ran around covering everybody shooting at each other, thought it was very exciting and really good videotape, and good print copy. But I was never doing anything about what's really going on in this war, and why are we there, and what do people think about us. I couldn't speak Vietnamese, so I never talked to a villager to say, What's going on in your life while all this fighting's going on in your village? So, it took me forever. I think it was until my last tour, I was with NBC News then, and I started to say, Wait a minute, there's a political side to this, there's a civil war going on, there's people with mixed feelings about this, and why are we all here, and how do the people feel about us being practically an occupation army in their country. I just didn't do any of that, and I should have.

If you were trying to do some serious stories, like political stories, what's going on, why is the president of Vietnam changing every two years or replaced by some other military general, et cetera, does this war mean anything, you would get what we called a rocket. We still had telex in those days, and New York would send us things saying, Why no bang-bang? Because they wanted exciting film and video to put on the air for viewers. I figured that is the game that everybody plays, and I'd better learn to play it.

Denby was one of the first women reporters to go to the war. But, I don't think women covered the war much differently than men, at least not in the beginning.

DENBY: With men, it's, Oh, I want to be in combat zone. I think with women, you've got a lot of different kinds of stories, 'cause women would talk to you, Vietnamese women. There were women there, other women, not reporters, to interview that you could talk to. I did a lot of stories in the Mekong Delta with Vietnamese, and I'd take interpreters and go, and I once lived with a lotus farmer for a week. And that was a very interesting experience, 'cause he was living between the Viet Cong and the Americans. So, people would come each night, the Viet Cong side, and want money or food from him, and then he had to be nice to the Americans too, to watch someone walking a line like that. But then, I was interested to go and see what it would be like to be with combat units, 'cause I had read a lot about war when I was young. My parents liked Abraham Lincoln, so we had shelves of books on the Civil War. In Vietnam, you could go anywhere you wanted, 'cause it wasn't officially a war. So, there was no censorship, and there was no monitoring of the reporters. None of this embedded stuff. And you could with any combat unit you wanted to, as long as the commander would allow you to, to be with this unit. And that was where my trouble came when I first started reporting, 'cause people would say, No, you know, if you died, it would be very horrible. Not like if a man reporter died. [CHUCKLE]

You poor little lady. We don't want you getting hurt. Right?

DENBY: No, but it would be bad. They felt it would be very bad for them if a woman under their, care of their unit died. Or one man even said, No, you remind me of my daughter, if you go out ...

But the Marines said they'd take you.

DENBY: Yeah, I was about given up, and they were in the worst part of the war, the hardest. Marines, they're your frontline, your shock troops, and they're up in the border between North and South Vietnam. And so, when I went up there, I decided, Oh, they'll never say. But I just kept asking, and they said, Sure, come out now. [CHUCKLE] So I didn't even have boots, I had to borrow some from someone, and landed in a helicopter they were taking out.

Were the experiences you took from the war, the ones that are the most meaningful to you, did they happen on the battleground, or in the towns? What were they?

DENBY: I think probably in combat, 'cause you're so bonded with the people that you're with, and just the closeness and the courage you see people have, and the kindness to each other under very bad circumstances. 'Cause that's about as intense as it will ever be.

BOB: I missed the war. I really did. And I missed it so much because Tet fighting came along, I was reading about it. I said, Oh, my god, this is fantastic stuff going on, and I'm not there. And I went back in '72 and rejoined NBC News for another tour. But I think when I got there, the war had changed. The North Vietnamese were in the country big-time, with really big weapons, long-range artillery, tanks. And I got into two really bad scrapes. And I said, Uh-oh, it's not the old war, the old guerrilla war, go walk around in the field, probably not gonna get shot at. You are gonna get shot at, 'cause they can see you from thirty miles away and fire long-range artillery at you. I got into some really, really bad stuff. And I said, I'm scared. I think that tour cured my love of war. I mean, I would not want to go to Afghanistan or something.

The on-and-off courtship of Denby Fawcett and Bob Jones included separations during their Vietnam reporting assignments. They eventually married in 1970, and during Bob's second tour as an NBC correspondent in Vietnam, he was accompanied by Denby, who gave birth to their daughter Brett in Saigon. Back home in the islands, Denby reported on local news for the Honolulu Advertiser. Later, she took on political reporting for KITV-4 News, retiring in 2011. Meanwhile, in 1966, KGMB-TV station owner Cecil Heffel came calling, and Bob Jones began his twenty-eight years of reporting and anchoring local television news.

BOB: I hated television people. I thought they were just real ignoramuses, not real reporters, they sorta picked up on what print reporters were doing mostly. I was in Saigon and I get this letter, or telegram from Heffel saying, If you will come to work for me, I will pay you twice whatever you're making now. So, of course, being a loyal Honolulu Advertiser reporter, I said, What day would you like me to show up for work, Cec? [CHUCKLE]

Did you worry that maybe you wouldn't be good at television?

BOB: I wasn't good. I was not good. I mean, I was pretty terrible. I'd never done it. I always remember doing my first election returns, and I was getting everybody's name wrong, and the wrong person with the wrong return figures, and stuff. I was pretty much a stumblebum.

So, when both of you came back to civilian, you know, peacetime Honolulu, what was it like covering news for you then? Did you feel the adrenalin was gone, the intensity was missing?

DENBY: The intensity was gone, but people would often ask me, Well, weren't you bored? And for me, I went back to being a general assignment reporter on the Advertiser. I liked it, 'cause I felt I'd never really learned to be a journalist. You know, I'd been on the Women's Page, the lowest possible person, and then

had the highest possible job, been a foreign correspondent in a war. I didn't even know how to cover a police story. I mean, I knew how to report a story, but I'd never gone to journalism school. So, I really enjoyed learning the profession from the bottom up. I even wrote obituaries. On the slow nights when there was nothing going on, we'd write obituaries of famous people who would eventually die.

Advance obituaries.

DENBY: Yeah. So, you'd have the whole history of the person. And then, of course, when their death came, that would be on top of the story. But I loved the history of these people, and their lives, and who they were. And so, I found it very engaging.

What kind of natural attributes, and then gained skills do you need to really go in there and make a difference in terms of what you report?

DENBY: I think the main thing is curiosity. Once I want to find something out -- I can't think of a particular story, I just don't give up. If someone says no, I'll call someone else. And if they say no, I'd call someone else, and just keep going 'til you can get it. Just that you have an obligation to do this, since you do have this privilege and this opportunity to get information to people that want it, that have no way of getting to it.

BOB: Maybe one other thing. When I went to work for the Overseas Weekly in Frankfurt, Germany, the editor said to me before he hired me, Do you have a need to be liked? And I said, Absolutely not. And he said, Good, because a lot of people are not gonna like you in the military. 'Cause we were covering military stories. And I think that is extremely important. If you're worried about how people are gonna think of you, or if somebody's gonna say to your face, I hate you, then you're in the wrong business.

Former TV reporter Denby Fawcett and former TV news anchor and reporter Bob Jones contend that the definition of news has also changed, with entertainment supplanting news value. The Internet has also become a prime source of news, competing with newspapers and broadcasting. Local TV news stations also are operating with reduced staffs and more airtime to fill.

DENBY: I see this in all the stations. They're expanding. There are gonna be more news shows coming up.

More hours of news, you mean?

DENBY: More hours. But not different.

But not expanding staff so much.

DENBY: But they're not expanding the staff. So, that's where you get into the dangerous part of you have these huge blocks of time to fill, but people who are already stretched as far as they can stretch. 'Cause it's also changed too; your job isn't just going out, doing a couple of TV news stories. You have to feed the Web, and then you have to feed the social media to promote your story. So, it's just constant. I think that's gonna be the problem, and that's where you

run into trouble with journalism. We were mentioning the UH provides the stations with already edited news clips about the wonderful things that the University is doing, which are now being run by television news.

Without explanation that these were from --

DENBY: I think they explain, but --

BOB: They put a little logo at the bottom.

DENBY: There's a logo, but the problem is, you don't get two points of view. You'll have the point of the University, which often in news, there's an opposing view.

But does the anchor say, Here's what the University of Hawaii wants you to know?

DENBY: No. [CHUCKLE] And it's filling time. You see more weather, more traffic, more celebrity orientation, more free ads on TV, where things that we wouldn't do stories on before become news stories, but they're actually just providing free advertising.

BOB: The news is being done now to satisfy what we think the viewer wants. If you want to satisfy the consumer of news all the time, and his attention span is going down, and he really just wants to see automobile crashes and meaningless police stories, quite often, then your news isn't what it should be, but it's, I guess, what's selling in today's market. I don't particularly like that, 'cause I like the old-fashioned thing of, I'm putting out the paper or I'm putting out the newscasts, and I'll put on it what I think you ought to know.

DENBY: You hear a story on TV, it may be shallow and superficial and just lame, but if you're interested, then you can go online and you can go as deep as you want. And before, I remember having to go when I was researching my stories, I'd call a research librarian at the main library and ask her to help me get a newspaper article. And now, the tap of your finger and you can get so much information, and you can verify it with the original source. 'Cause the sources are there. Like the Civil Beat does terrific stories here that other people aren't taking the time to do, and some of the blogs. 'Cause it is our responsibility. I mean, we never got all our news from TV, or papers.

Bob Jones wrote an autobiography titled, Reporter, in 2012. Denby Fawcett has also been busy writing, after contributing a chapter about her Vietnam reporting experience to the book, War Torn. Denby left reporting to devote more time to her writing projects, and to seek new adventures. At the time of this conversation in 2013, she was training for an eighteen-day trek with her daughter Brett to the eighteen-thousand-foot elevation of Mount Everest Base Camp. Bob also is a frequent world traveler, but he and steep hikes don't get along. He continues to write a column for the Mid Week publication. Thank you, journalists Denby Fawcett and Bob Jones for sharing your long story short. And thank you for watching and supporting PBS Hawaii. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou, 'til next time. Aloha.

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit PBSHawaii.org.

DENBY: But sometimes, I miss the excitement of the newsroom, and I miss the camaraderie where you come back. I have exciting things happen to me, but I don't have a little gang of friends. Being a newsroom is like being in a little clubhouse when you're a kid. Everyone has an exciting story to tell, and you're in your own society. So, I miss that sometimes.

BOB: I never missed it.

You never did? You were the boss.

BOB: I've never missed it a day after I left. And I think the reason is, that kind of [SIGH] tension that would be inside me every day. Do we have enough stuff to fill the newscast? Is the stuff gonna get done on time? Are there gonna be technical problems? I always felt very aggravated inside. Now, I don't have to worry about that.