

GUEST: ARI SOUTHIPHONG (ANDY SOUTH): FINDING THE LIGHT

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My name is Ariyaphon, Ari for short. And my mom renamed me. I asked her to, because it was very important for me to remain connected with my family, to remain connected with my mom. Ariyaphon means the blessing of radiant light, or the power of radiant light.

Which definition did you pick?

The meaning that she would have spelled it was, the blessing of radiant light. And the spelling that I chose translates Ariyaphon to the power of radiating light.
Power.

Honolulu fashion designer Ariyaphon Southipong, former the man known as Andy South, 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. Ariyaphon Southipong is one of Hawaii's most recognized young fashion designers. Name doesn't ring a bell? You may know her better as Andy South. In 2010, Andy South was a top-three finalist on Lifetime Television's fashion reality show, Project Runway. In 2012, a year before our conversation, Andy changed his name to Ari and began his transition to becoming a female. A child of Laotian immigrants, Ari, then Andy, grew up far from the glamour of fashion and television. Born in Kailua on Oahu's windward coast, Andy lived with his parents, his sister, half-sister, and two half-brothers. Andy's parents had a tumultuous marriage. By the time Andy reached the third grade, his parents had split, his mother remarried, and the family moved to the other side of Oahu, to Waianae.

And what prompted the move to Waianae?

Farming. [CHUCKLE]

What kind of farming?

Catfish farming. Catfish, and sunfish which is --

Tilapia.

-- tilapia.

[CHUCKLE]

It's a fancy word for tilapia. But yeah, so freshwater sunfish, freshwater Chinese catfish. When we first started, we actually did an above-ground tank in our back yard in Kailua, and it leaked into the neighbor's yard. It was a huge ordeal with us running into a lot of issues. It was also our test period, right, of trying to farm raise fish and see if it would be viable for us to actually do it as a business. We eventually moved out to Waianae, and I lived there most of my life, actually.

What brought your parents to Hawaii?

A better future, quintessential immigrant parents. But more so in my mom's case, it was specifically ... she had actually come here with her first husband, who is the father to my three eldest siblings, who are half siblings for me. But they came as college students, and it was also to escape Communism. My mother, youngest of five girls, daughter to a governor. So, when the whole government was overturned, they were actually warned to leave the country, or they would have eventually been killed if they were ever caught. So, that was their reason for leaving.

Is there an exciting escape story?

No. [CHUCKLE] College. [CHUCKLE] So, they didn't have any --

Visa.

Yeah; college visas. And at the time, they were actually coming back and forth to Hawaii for college at the University of Hawaii. And it just so happened that things with the government weren't going well, and so, eventually, Mom based herself here and slowly, everybody was sent over, starting with the kids. So, all of my twenty-plus cousins have gone through my mom's household, when they were in their teens going to high school, starting college. And then, their parents made their way over.

So, your mom was a privileged daughter of a governor, to struggling catfish farmer in Waianae.

Yeah; basically. My mom would talk a lot about her growing up in Laos, and a lot of things that she ... I guess, throughout our lives, growing up as farmers, she would reminisce sometimes about the easier times when life wasn't so hard, basically.

She had somebody tending to her all the time.

Exactly; yeah. But I love when people reminisce. I love old stories. I love speaking to older people. I just think that life is so interesting in the way that the stories are all different, and then you realize it's how they have come out of situations, or how they turn situations to benefit from, and to turn them into blessings, as opposed to letting it kill them.

So, you've always kind of been attuned to coping skills?

Yes; I think so.

And resilience?

M-hm. And I learned that all from my mom. And my mom still is the hero that I have, which I think a lot of people can say that their mother is their hero, or their father is their hero. I think for every child, it's very deep for different reasons. And for me, it's because I've watched my mom be the strong woman that she

is, and I've seen her in her weak moments. You know. But even in that, she had shown such great strength by not letting it show.

Growing up as the boy known then as Andy Southiphong, Andy found his mother's lesson of resilience to be a valuable and recurring one, as childhood teasing led to bigger questions.

Do you remember some of the early things that you had to use resilience to overcome when you were a kid?

[CHUCKLE] A lot of teasing.

About what? What kind of teasing? Regular kind?

Yeah, well, a lot of regular teasing, which is kids being kids. I obviously wasn't the popular kid growing up. I wasn't athletic. I was actually a lot heavier when I was a child, so I was teased a lot for, one, my weight, for me being just naturally effeminate as a boy.

Did that bother you?

It did, but I never let it get me down. Because I think I've been fortunate to have a lot of mentors throughout my life, and they've been my teachers, a lot of my instructors.

What did the teachers say, or how did they let you know everything's okay?

I guess it was the positive feedback that I was getting from them for my work, and for me being a good student. For them constantly telling me, You're gonna go far. And even in elementary, that matters so much to the development of a child. Because had they not been that positive with me -- and I don't think they ever knew that I would get teased or that it bothered. I was never bullied, per se. I never was picked on, but you have other students in your class of how many really rowdy boys, and you don't fit in with the boys. And then, if you play with the girls, that's more reason for you to get teased, right?

Did you try to sound less effeminate?

Growing up, I did, throughout high school. It started to matter more as I grew older, and as I reached high school. Because that, I guess, is ... you start to really decide who you are.

Or it's decided for you?

Yeah; it's decided for you based on the opinions of your peers. And I tried to; I took a weightlifting class as an elective. But I don't think I'm the correct person to go to weightlifting.

And did you talk roughly? [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE] I'm pretty sure. There were a lot of moments that I tried to. Locker room situations were awkward, because a lot of people just gathered and assumed that I was gay, and they would voice that. And so, from early on, that's when I was like, Okay, maybe I am.

Did you know you were gay?

I did. Well, I knew that I wasn't straight. That's the thing. And the closest thing that I knew of to what I really am was being gay.

But you didn't think that quite hit it?

No; never. And that's the thing, and maybe that was the reason. That was probably the reason why I never fully accepted it. I didn't come out to my mom 'til I was twenty-one. Among my gay friends, my other gay male friends, I never felt like I ... I still didn't fit in. Something internally just wasn't right. After high school, in college, I actually met more gay friends. Going out to the clubs more, meeting more of the community, that I started to meet transgender women and transgender men, drag queens or cross-dressers, that I started to realize that there's much more to the community, than just being gay or straight, or bisexual or gay or straight. And it started to open my eyes, because then I started to get to know them. I started to get to know people for who they are. That's never something that I allowed myself to do before, because I was so focused on school, focused on my career. And that's how I am. When I was in college, everything was school-school-school. I was sewing all the time, I was doing extra projects, 'cause that was my focus. And it could have been a distraction.

That's what I was gonna ask you.

Yeah.

Do you think you did that as an escape from questions about identity, which are central to any young person. It's who are you? What am I evolving into?

Exactly.

Who will I be, who am I now?

Well, 'cause I knew that I had a talent that was received positively. So, I think that's why I was always drawing, I was always creating. In high school, I always loved the big projects, the projects that every other kid hated. I loved building. We had to build these huge insects at one point, we had to make cell models. And I loved it. I spent all my money, all my allowance at craft supply stores. And on the weekends and on the school breaks, I would stay home and watch Home and Garden Television, and all these craft shows that I loved, and I started dabbling in quilting. And my mom taught me needlepoint when I was very young, so that's where I got a lot of my initial sewing skills from. But that was my way of putting my best forward, because I knew that that was something that was very positive in me.

And were you consciously thinking, there's other things I have to pursue, but I just can't get to that right now?

M-hm.

I don't know what it is, but something's up with me.

Yeah; always. That's always been in the back of my mind.

The former man known as Andy Southiphong set aside questions about identity and instead focused on finding a career that would play to his creative strength. During his senior year at Waianae High School, Andy fell in love with a career option he had not previously considered.

All those career days, and nobody mentioned fashion?

No; not at all, not in Waianae. And it wasn't until I went to a State college fair at the Blaisdell that I found a connection with it being creative and seeing what you create being taken to a commercial sense, and being sold and being worn, and actually being utilized every day. For art to have a purpose; that was really, really interesting to me. To see something that you create become something functional in the real world. And so, after that college fair, I decided that I wanted to do fashion. That's why I say it was serendipitous, because had I not gone to that career fair, I wouldn't have realized that it was possible.

What were you looking for at the career fair? Did you have something in mind?

At the time, I was in culinary arts. And before that, it was architecture and mechanical drawing, and I had taken classes in both throughout high school as electives. And that's because I loved being in the home, I loved to cook, I loved to do crafts with my mom. And so, I was trying to find something that was something that I loved. You're told that you should do ...

Build on what you know; right?

Yeah; build on what you know, choose to do something that you love, so that you're happy.

Not long after that serendipitous discovery, Andy Southiphong branded himself as Andy South and enrolled in the fashion technology program at Honolulu Community College. He gained a reputation for designing edgy couture gowns. Several years after graduating, serendipity found Andy once more.

I think you were only twenty-three when you got yourself on Project Runway.

Yes.

How did that happen?

I went through an audition process. I had gotten a call while I was at work, and it was the casting agent for Project Runway, who had gotten my number from someone else. And they said that, We called a few people locally in the area, and they all had you at the top of their list to contact to audition. So, they invited me to audition. And even then, it was maybe a week before the deadline, and I was like, I don't know. I had already looked into the audition process, I looked at the deadlines.

Was it a lot to do? Did you have to make something?

[SIGH] It was a lot of prep. Because you have to submit a portfolio, a digital portfolio, and you have to do a three to five-minute audition video, fill out the application, which I believe was twenty-some-odd pages. A lot. And that was like, written pages. And then, there was another forty of what you had to read for the contract. So, it was a very daunting process that I was just kind of like, Ah -- I kinda wrote it off as like, Oh, I'll try next year. But by them calling me I said, You know, what's the worst that can happen? I'll just continue doing what I'm doing.

I'll stay up late a few nights and get it done.

Yeah. So, a lot of things happened just in that instant, because I knew that I listened to what I was supposed to do. I could tell that God was telling me, You need to do this because you're getting too comfortable. 'Cause at the time, I was working for another company locally, another fashion brand, but she was more focused on manufacturing and selling. So, not as creative, I was doing a lot of office administration stuff and shipping orders, taking orders, but really learning the business. And that's really where I learned a lot of what I need to put into practice now.

And by this time, you were out of Honolulu Community College's fashion program.

M-hm. I was already talking to the owner of the company about taking over. Taking over the company so she can retire, and I would have been set. I would be running another company, but it wouldn't be the company I'm running now. And so, the fact that I acted on that gut instinct that told me, Okay, you need to do this, you don't know what's gonna happen but you need to do it and just be open to the possibilities. And that was me listening what I was supposed to do. The things playing out the way that they did that told me, Okay, you're about to embark on a really crazy ride and you better free yourself up, and be open to what's gonna come.

And you acquitted yourself in the way your mom said you should, with strength of character.

Right.

Was that hard to do? I mean, it must have been tempting sometimes not to make a snarky comment, as everyone else seemed to do.

Right. That would have been the easy thing to do. But I think I kept in mind that you're always on camera, you're always on a microphone, so even if you said something in private, they would ask you about it later.

And it'll exist on tape forever, or digital records.

Exactly. So, I always kept that in mind, which kept me from overreacting. But I think after I grew out of my childhood tantrums and as I matured, I grew calmer in my thoughts. My friends always told me that I have a really calm demeanor about myself, that even in the thick of stress, in the thick of chaotic situations, I'm able to think logically and to be levelheaded about my reactions. And there are times when I'm running around the studio, crazy, and I'm telling people to do ten things at one time and I'm yelling at people, but most times, I'm actually much more thoughtful about my actions, and that helped me. That and also making sure that I had ... many people don't know this, about how important my faith is to me. And the more I talk about it, I think you hear it, that it plays a huge role in my day-to-day, even though I don't talk about it and I don't make it an Evangelistical thing. But I kept my Bible with me, and I prayed every night, and I just wanted to keep myself centered, keep myself grounded, 'cause I knew that I was entering a place that I wasn't familiar with. And I didn't want to be just caught off guard and lose myself, I didn't want to lose myself in it.

Rather, Andy Southiphong aka Andy South, was finding himself. At the brink of his fashion design success in Hawaii and on Project Runway, Andy was beginning to resolve those questions about his identity, that he had long kept in the back of his mind.

When did you discover transgender living?

Well, my first time doing drag was probably years into going out in the gay scene. And it's not one of those things that had tormented me my whole life. I just knew that something wasn't completely there, but it was never pressing on my mind all the time. So, I decided to do drag one year in Portland.

Was that because you're a fashion-conscious person, or because you thought maybe you'd like to be a woman?

I thought that that was actually my opportunity to see if that was something inside of me that needed to come out. And along the lines of being a drag queen and being a performer, you've got a huge gray area of being a transvestite or a cross-dresser, which is a man who dresses up in women's clothing, and then, transsexuals and transgender people.

And there are some people who really don't know. They're somewhere in between.

And there's every different level in between being a cross-dresser and a transgender individual. So, I think that's why a lot of the confusion comes up with people in the public just not knowing a lot, or not knowing enough. So, a lot of times, being transgender gets mixed with being a cross-dresser, and you know, you're gay.

It's a big category.

Right; yeah. Because a cross-dresser technically usually consider himself gay, because they still like men, they like being a man, but they like dressing up as women just to perform for fun. So, I've been asked many times, So are you gay? And I don't consider myself gay. But it kinda just opens up the topic of conversation for all this gray area that can get very exhausting. And there's a lot of different levels, but I don't think that we shouldn't talk about it, because every person is different. And it really should be as the person identifies himself is what they are. Because gender, sexual orientation are completely different; completely different things.

Talk about that, 'cause I don't understand that.

Gender and sexual orientation are different. And I think it gets mixed up, because your gender is often called your birth sex or your sex. Right?

Okay.

Meaning physically, what you have. And sexual orientation is whether you are homosexual and you like being a male who likes other men, or a female who likes other women. But gender identity has nothing to do with sex.

I see what you mean.

It has nothing to do with sexual lust, it has nothing to do with the taboo of a man having sex with what most people will call a tranny, which I find very offensive.

I'll joke around with my other sisters about it. When I talk to my sisters and referring to myself, I like to keep things light. And so, sometimes I'll refer to myself as Trandy. [CHUCKLE] 'Cause I'm Andy, and I'm transsexual. But even my family has had to learn a lot about, I don't consider myself gay, I consider myself a woman who was born a male. Because I'm not attracted to other gay men. I thought I was when I was trying to live as a gay male. But I see myself with a straight man, I see myself having a real family, living as a woman, being completely that female role in society.

And yet, you've chosen not to have surgery. You're doing hormones, right?

M-hm. Yeah.

Is there a longer term plan?

There's a longer term plan, and the first steps are to get onto your hormone replacement therapy. Because it takes time, and you have to equal it to a girl going through puberty for the first time.

So, as you're building a business, you're going through this transition. And that affects even what your name is.

[CHUCKLE]

You could have kept your name.

M-hm; yeah.

What made you decide not to? It's the Andy South brand

Right.

And your name is?

My name is Ariyaphon, Ari for short. And my mom renamed me. I asked her to, because it was very important for me to remain connected with my family, to remain connected with my mom. And throughout the initial steps of my transition, I just wanted to be very sensitive to the fact that I wanted my mom to be as much a part of my life as she wants to be. Every mother wants to be a part of their child's life.

Why did she choose that name? Does it mean something?

Yeah. Ariyaphon has the meaning in Sanskrit, which is the Buddhist language. She went to the temple to ask for two names; one of them being Ariyaphon. And the meaning of it, depending on the spelling, either means the blessing of radiant light, or the power of radiant light.

Which definition did you pick?

The meaning that she would have spelled it was, the blessing of radiant light. And the spelling that I chose translates Ariyaphon to the power of radiating light.

Power.

[CHUCKLE] Exactly.

And so, this is a personal brand. So, you have to make that distinction between, this is me, and this is me. So, essentially, your transgenderism becomes a conversation in your business.

Yeah.

It's the first thing out there, if you're the spokesperson.

M-hm. It does. The true test was, I had done this after we had started working with Neiman Marcus, which is really great for a brand, being associated with a high end retailer like that.

Was that a factor for them, the fact that you'd chosen to go transgender?

No. I actually met with them about my second collection that they were purchasing, and I had gone as female. And at the time, I wearing a wig, and I was dressing in women's clothing. But of course, in the beginning, I was very androgynous and maybe a little bit more detectable as not being a genetic female. And I conducted the first part of the meeting with just them, just their buyer and me, that's it. And then, midway through, we got to catch up a little bit more, and then I told them, and I said also, I mean, I'm sure you guys know this by now by coming here, that I am now living my life as a woman and I have chosen to transition and act upon what makes me happy. I just wanted to make sure that the lines of communication were open. The main thing that I told them was, If you have any questions or concerns, or anything about what I'm going through, ask me. Don't feel that you can't ask me because we're professional or we have a professional relationship. I want you folks to be open with me, and I want you to know that me doing this is not gonna affect my business. But this is my personal journey that I'm deciding to take.

What was the reaction?

They were supportive. And along with everybody, everybody was supportive. Because it goes back to what my mom first told me when I had come out to her as gay. It makes so much sense, because when you allow your professionalism, when you allow your character to speak before you do, there's no denying that you're one that should be respected. I think that was the main thing, that was my mom's main concern with me living the living the life that I choose to live.

What a groundbreaking conversation you had with Neiman Marcus. How often do those conversations take place?

Probably not often, because you don't hear a lot about transgender business owners or transgender women who are in the process of making that transition as they conduct business.

Yeah.

Usually, it's before or after.

A lot of people would handle it a lot differently than you did. Because, you chose to just say, Here's the deal.

Yeah. And I decided that because quite honestly, I knew that I wasn't happy internally. And I guess what I always value above everything else is that I'm living a life that I feel fulfilled, and that I feel happy. Because if I'm not happy with the life that I'm living, there's no way that I can do good for other people.

Ariyaphon Southiphong currently operates her clothing line, still branded Andy South, out of her workshop in Honolulu's Chinatown. In a future episode of Long Story Short, we'll talk more with Ari about her life as a transgender woman. For PBS Hawaii, and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.

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

I love fashion very much, but it's not the only thing that I love. What I love most is actually creating opportunity. Seeing something good being done for the world, thinking that I'm gonna leave the world a better place than what it was is why I live every day. And I'm given the opportunity by having a company, by forming my company, by having the drive that I have, having the courage that I have to do it, make the choices that I've made, and to continue living my life, as well as living my life in a good way, and creating a lot of great things for the community and for society, and specifically with creating jobs, creating opportunity for young talent that's coming out of Hawaii.