

GUEST: DR. GINNY PRESSLER

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That's absolutely right. That may be why I was so passionate about, even though I love doing surgery, actually leaving the practice that I loved so much in order to try to fix healthcare.

Hawaii healthcare leader, Dr. Ginny Pressler, 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. Dr. Virginia Pressler is Executive Vice President and Chief Strategic Officer at Hawaii Pacific Health. At this time, it's Hawaii's largest nonprofit healthcare network, with four major hospitals and more than fifty outpatient clinics throughout the islands. Dr. Pressler, a one time banker turned surgeon, turned health industry executive, goes by Ginny. She's a leader in the effort to transform healthcare in Hawaii. Throughout her career, she's pushed for initiatives that encourage healthful habits, and improved the wellbeing of Hawaii's people. Ginny Pressler's story goes back to the small plantation town of Hana on Maui. There, a famous artist would inspire her mother, at age twelve, to change the course of her life.

My grandfather was the manager of the Hana Plantation. So, she lived in Hana; she grew up on the plantation there. And there was no place to stay in Hana, but lots of artists and other special people would come and stay at the plantation, and my mother was exposed to all these wonderful people. Now, Georgia O'Keefe came to Hawaii when my mother was about twelve, and she remembered my mom and my grandfather and grandmother talking about Georgia O'Keefe coming. And my mom was a voracious reader; she was homeschooled and read all the time. And so, she knew all about Georgia O'Keefe, and she was all excited about Georgia coming to visit. And then her mother, my grandmother got called away to California, where her mother was

ill, and so my mother at age twelve ended up being the hostess with my grandfather to Georgia O'Keefe when she came to stay in Hana. And so, my mother showed her around for about ten days, and the Georgia O'Keefe in Hawaii, which is a book that's out that has a picture of one Georgia's paintings on the front was written by my mother.

Was she showing her the landscape for pictures, and did she hang out while there was painting taking place?

She took her all around. She drove her around and took her to places.

Drove her?

Yeah. [CHUCKLE]

At age twelve?

I think maybe Georgia drove and she was showing her where to go. I'm not sure. I guess that probably was how it worked.

[CHUCKLE] Although, you never know.

Yeah.

In the country, all things happen.

She got her license when she was fourteen, but I don't know if before that, that she drove or not. But she showed her around, took her to the places to see her favorite flowers, and things like that. And Georgia O'Keefe developed a real love of the floral beauty of Hawaii.

Does your mom tell any stories about a particular place, or comment?

Well, Georgia O'Keefe sort of changed my mom's life. I mean, she was living very isolated, really, in Hana, homeschooled, as I said, doing a lot of reading. And when she met Georgia, it sort of opened up her eyes to a whole new world. And it was after Georgia left that she told my grandfather; she said, You know, I know I'm gonna go to Punahou in a few years, but I want to go now. And so, she went in eighth grade, I think, to board at Punahou, which was quite a move for her from rural Hana to Punahou.

And she met her husband while a teenager at Punahou.

Yeah; when she was fifteen and was at a family mutual friend's place. Alexis [INDISTINCT] in Kula would entertain the servicemen that were stationed on Maui, and that's where she met my father. And my father was out here in World War II as a fighter pilot on an aircraft carrier, and he was from St. Louis. So, after the war, my mom and dad got married in St. Louis.

So many local girls married servicemen at that time.

Yeah.

Didn't they?

That's right. And in fact, when my dad met my mother, he was eight years older than she was. And he had told my grandfather that, When she grows up, I'm going to marry her.

Ginny Pressler and her four siblings were born in St. Louis. Like her mother, Ginny Pressler's life would change at age twelve, when her father moved the family

back to Maui. She says it was a welcome escape from the frills of St. Louis' teenage debutante balls to a laid back lifestyle.

And you lived where, on Maui?

We lived in Spreckelsville, in a old plantation house. We were just renting it.

So, the nearest public school was Kaunoa.

Kaunoa School; right. So, I walked to school with my neighbors, barefoot to Kaunoa. And after school, we'd just hang out under the monkey pod trees, or we'd go and play beach volleyball, or go to the beach or ... just hang out together.

You know, you and I are of that generation where there was no such thing as play dates or structured play.

Right.

What was childhood like as far as, how'd you spend your free time?

I was more the adventuresome type; I liked to go out and explore and find things. So, I liked to go out in the woods and in the streams, or the ocean, or the beach, and just explore and find things, build forts.

Build forts.

You know, climb trees. We used to do lots of fun things on Maui. Lot of fluming, hiking.

Fluming is something kids don't get to do nowadays. It's too dangerous, or the flumes have broken down, those water - carrying structures.

They were such fun. And of course, now you could never do that. Because we were on all the plantation property that at that time, you could get away with it.

And did you ever complain, I don't have anything to do?

No.

[CHUCKLE]

No. If I ever complained to my parents I had nothing to do, they'd find something for me to do, I'm sure.

So, you can definitely occupy yourself.

Right. We were expected to be self - reliant. And you know, I was one of five children, so we all kind of took care of each other. And I remember doing a lot of babysitting and fixing dinner for my younger brothers.

What were your parents like in raising you? Achievement, apparently, was important by virtue of the schools, I can tell.

M - hm.

What were they like?

Well, I remember my dad always saying, I don't care what you do, as long as you do it well. And so, that was the mantra, was you always do your best, and there's no excuse for not doing the best you ever can. At the same time, my dad was very loving and full of fun and adventure. We did a lot of fun things together, and he loved family. But hardworking; very hardworking, I remember.

What about your mom?

And my mom was a stay - at - home mom. She was very involved with others in the community, did volunteer work, did a lot of needlework. And so, when we moved back to Maui, she was volunteering. And then when I went off to college, my family moved to the Big Island, and she opened up Waimea Wool Craft, where she was teaching people in the community how to do needlepoint and knitting. And then, that expanded into the Waimea General Store, which she still has today, and my brother takes care of that.

Is that right? So, that's a hub. So many people have shopped there for many years. What prepared her, you think, to run the store? She must have liked people.

She loves people. I think my whole family are entrepreneurs. I'm the only one who's working for a company. Everyone else, all of my siblings, my father, my grandparents on both sides were all entrepreneurs.

So, you lived in St. Louis until you were about twelve, and then the rest of your childhood was spent on Maui. Has that neighbor island background informed the way you live your life today?

Very much so, I think. And it's been very helpful. My memories really are that time on Maui as a child. And it really has shaped my attitudes towards healthcare in the State, as well as just the needs on the neighbor islands, and recognizing how different it is in the rural areas. That's a very important thing in all the areas I've been in, especially in the last ten or fifteen years, where I've been on either the public health or administrative side of healthcare that we're trying to provide throughout the State. Recognizing the different needs on the neighbor islands. And they're very different from Honolulu.

That's true; you can't say neighbor island as a general thing when you're talking about healthcare or growing up. Because every island is so different in its culture.

Yeah.

On Maui, Dr. Ginny Pressler attended H.P. Baldwin Public High School, then transferred to Seabury Hall, a private school in Makawao that her father helped establish. In fact, she was in Seabury Hall's first graduating class of fourteen students back then. Her family then moved to Waimea on Hawaii Island, while Ginny Pressler left Hawaii altogether to attend Cornell University.

Well, I started as a math major, and then I got into social psychology. And I really enjoyed learning about how people form attitudes and their behavior, and how difficult it is to change behavior. Which to this day, I look back at things I learned so many years ago, and it's so true still, although the science has changed quite a bit about attitudes and behavior change.

People haven't changed. [CHUCKLE]

Yeah. And the group dynamics, and how group decisions are made. So, it was fascinating for me to learn how people think and work together, and I use a lot of that today in the work I do.

And in healthcare, you are trying to change how people behave, so you do draw upon that.

That is one of the most difficult things, when people know that something's not good for them, but to get them to change behaviors is very, very difficult.

So before you got into healthcare, you're graduating in social psychology. And what was the plan?

At the time, I was gonna go on to graduate school in educational psychology. And I came back; couldn't wait to get back to Hawaii. But I wasn't quite sure what I was gonna do with it. If I got a PhD, what would I do with that? And decided that I should probably just get a job. So, I started working at Bank of Hawaii as a management trainee. Was very fortunate to get into the management training program, learned a lot. I mean, it was a totally foreign field to me, banking. I was there for five years, and did the whole gamut of banking, but it never quite fulfilled my sense of -- I remember one day saying, So, where do I want to be thirty years from now? I'm gonna stay at the bank, obviously, I'd want to be the president of the bank. Is that what I want to be? And I said, No. So, then the question was, Well, then why am I there? So, that's when I started doing some soul searching about what I really wanted to do with my career. And medicine just kinda came up.

How did it come up?

Well, a relative who was in med school at the time, for some reason, I was visiting and went to see his med school and all. And he said, You know, I think you'd make a really good doctor. And maybe he knew I was soul searching, trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I don't know why he said that. But it just ... a light bulb went off in my head and I went, Yeah. There was the combination of the math and science that I loved. I always wanted to be a scientist when I was a kid. And I wanted to do something meaningful to help people, and I like to work with people. And it just all came together, and I realized, yeah, that's what I should do. I was twenty-seven at the time. And the things I was reading said if you're over age twenty-six, you're too old to go to med school. [CHUCKLE] But that didn't stop me.

Dr. Ginny Pressler went back to school and enrolled in pre-med classes at the University of Hawaii's John A. Burns School of Medicine. She also gained hands-on surgical experience at a cardiovascular research lab. She was still a pre-med student when she decided she would become a surgeon.

You're talking about cutting.

Yeah.

Cut, cut, cut in sensitive places. What prepared you to do that?

Well, I'm a very ... oh, I don't know how to put it. I'm a sensitive person, but I'm also objective, and I can sort of compartmentalize and not get emotionally distracted. When you're operating on somebody, or even an animal, you're focused on what you're trying to get done.

You were in there for the duration. You were a surgeon. In fact, you started specializing in breast surgery, which at the time wasn't usual.

That's right. In fact, I remember interviews with you twenty years ago when I was a breast surgeon.

That's when your hair was longer, and mine was shorter. [CHUCKLE]

That's right.

About twenty years ago.

That's right.

Did you have a scary moment in surgery?

I think the scariest cases were trauma cases where there was massive liver damage, because the bleeding from that is very difficult to find the source. So, I had some scary times when I was in the operating room.

But I've heard so many people say it takes so much to get you rattled. I mean, what does rattle you?

[CHUCKLE]

You're very composed.

Well, I guess I've always been composed. What rattles me ... I get really irate with injustice and unfairness.

What do you do?

What used to get me really upset when I was a kid was, my younger brother and I used to fight, and he would punch me or instigate me, and I'd fight him back. And I'd get him down on the ground, and he'd say, Let me go and I won't hit you. And I'd let him up, and then he'd hit me. And I would get furious. It's like that's not fair. You said you weren't gonna hit me back. So, when things aren't fair, when I see people doing unjust things or unkind things to others, that gets me upset.

Well, the healthcare industry is full of inequities, and so there's a lot of fairness to fight for there.

That's absolutely right. That may be why I was so passionate about, even though I love doing surgery, actually leaving the practice that I loved so much in order to try to fix healthcare. Because it was wrong; it needed fixing.

That is a huge bite. I mean, you knew that wasn't gonna be, Okay, here's my three - year plan.

M - hm.

I mean, you knew that it might be a lifelong adventure, or less than that? What was your thinking?

I've always been an adventurer and a risk - taker; calculated risk - taking. And I was following my heart, my gut that healthcare was broken, and I could only do so much in private practice. Even if I brought in a partner and I tried to create

this comprehensive care for patients, that I couldn't do it on my own, that I needed a bigger system to do it, and that we needed, in fact, to fix the whole system of healthcare.

And you worked in government.

Subsequently; yeah.

How far did you get in that endeavor?

Well, I had actually been running a health plan for a while, and then worked at the Department of Health from 1999 'til 2002, and was Deputy Director at the State Department of Health. And it was just about the time of the master settlement agreement with the tobacco industry, so there was money coming in for the tobacco settlement. So, I was very fortunate that I was given the leeway to work with those funds and convince the Legislature and the administration that most of that money should go into healthcare. So, that's when we created the Healthy Hawaii Initiative that was focused on physical activity, nutrition, and tobacco control. And obesity then -- this was what, fifteen years or so ago, was beginning to be recognized as a major problem. And here we are fifteen years later, and it's a bigger problem, but it's finally being recognized as a real issue.

And that's one of the eternal frustrations, it seems, of healthcare. We make advances, but sometimes you just don't see the the results you want.

Well, I've always been an early adapter, so I'm always sort of a little bit ahead of the rest. I'll read things and recognize trends and say, Yeah, it's very clear that this is what's happening, and this is what we need to do. But the rest of the world isn't there with me. [CHUCKLE] I'm always looking out longer term.

Thanks in part to Dr. Ginny Pressler's long - term vision, Hawaii Pacific Health is recognized as a national healthcare leader. Back in 2002, the organization was an early adopter of electronic medical records, an important piece in streamlining patient care. Throughout her career, Ginny has gone by the name Pressler; that's her first husband's name. She's been married for almost thirty years to Andy Fisher, but kept the name Pressler for practical reasons.

Well, I got married the first time in college, and we were married for about ten years, and then we got divorced. And because I got married in college, all of my diplomas were Pressler. So, from undergraduate, and then my master's degrees and my doctorate degree were all under the name of Pressler, and I was known professionally as Pressler. And I was thirty - seven or so when I met my current husband. And so, I already had that professional name and chose not to change it when we got married. I actually am legally Fisher, but I kept the name professionally. The funniest part about it is -- my husband is such a great sport, because we'll go places where he gets called Mr. Pressler. It's bad enough if it were my maiden name, but it's not even my maiden name. It's my first husband's name, and my husband handles it very well.

And your children are Fisher.

They're Fisher; right.

Your little girl, your youngest child, is adopted.

Yes.

How did that come about?

Well, we had lost a child, and we wanted to have two children. When we lost our son, we felt that things were unbalanced having just one child, and we'd always wanted to have two kids. So, we tried to have another child, but I was in my mid - forties by then, and after trying some in vitro and other attempts to have another child, we finally realized we love every kid we see everywhere. It's like it doesn't have to be our genetics. And so, we decided to adopt. And I'm so glad that we did. It was a wonderful experience.

Now ... mothers always say there's no difference in how you feel about a adopted or a blood kid. But were there differences in her perspective or the way you raised her?

Yeah. When we had Katy, our youngest, I didn't feel any different. I always felt the same about her as my own. And in fact, since we had lost one child, and I was there for Katy's delivery, I actually cut the umbilical cord. It was an open adoption, and we'd been chosen ahead of time to be the parents. So, I was able to be there for the delivery, which was wonderful. So, I've always thought of Katy as -- I forget that she isn't my own natural born, although she's a different ethnic makeup than we are. But it's never really connected to me. It's like, she's mine, and there's no difference in how I feel about her. And so, it was very interesting for me to find out as she was growing up how hard it was for her. She never liked the fact that she was adopted.

So, you did an open adoption. Does that mean there was any continuing communication with the birth mother?

Yes; we had an open adoption, and we did have a connection with the birth mother. But she stopped contact after a couple of years. So ...

So, Katy never had a chance to ask her, Could you tell me about the circumstances of my adoption.

Right.

Although, sometimes information doesn't answer a question of the heart.

M - hm. Yeah; she seems to be settled with it now. But you never know. I hear about an awful lot of adopted children who, even in their forties or fifties, still want to go back and connect with their birth mother or father.

Yes; I have an adopted child as well, and she did get to meet her birth parents when she was about twenty - one. And ... that's why I do think that even when there's love and a chance to get together and get to know, there's still questions that sort of are unknowable or answers that are unknowable.

Yeah. And I've come to understand as much as I can now, which I didn't appreciate before. And that's another thing that I've learned. I mean, you just take things for granted that, Well, we love her, what's the problem here, you know.

Right.

But from her perspective, I can concede that there's a loss.

Personal loss is familiar for Dr. Ginny Pressler. In addition to the death of her fourteen - month - old son, she also lost her father at age fifty - eight to a sudden heart attack on the tennis court. She calls her father the kingpin of the family, and a big piece of her life.

He and I had gone out to dinner the night before, and he'd stayed at my place. And I remember waving goodbye to him as he backed out of the driveway and went back to the Big Island. And later that day, I get a call from my sister saying, Dad's dead. I'm going, No; how can he be dead? I just saw him. And so, it was very, very difficult for me to come to grips with that. 'Cause it was so sudden and unexpected. So, that changed a lot of things and made me reflect on life, and what was important.

And how short it can be.

Yeah. And then, I think losing our son was a very tragic thing, and it made me really think about balance, and what are the really important things in life. And it makes you reprioritize things.

When you've had adversity, it's been to show you about priorities in life, the value of time and family, and love.

M - hm. How precious our loved ones are, whether they're family or friends, or whatever.

Do you feel too busy sometimes?

Sometimes.

Because healthcare is a busy thing. [CHUCKLE]

Yes. And in fact, I look at that picture that I have from twenty years ago when I was being interviewed by you. At that time, she must have been about six months old, Katy, our youngest, reaching for the TV set, trying to touch Mommy. That picture to me, it means a lot, because it was a time when I was so busy, and I never had enough time with the kids, and I would miss really important events because of commitments in my professional career. Usually, it would be because I had to take care of a patient, and that came first, regardless. And so thank goodness I had a supportive husband. But I always felt being torn, that I wanted to be with my children, and I hated being away from them. And so, that was a perfect example. I think it was an evening interview, and I wasn't home with the kids, and so my husband puts me on TV so the little one can see me, and she's trying to reach me, and she can't, trying touch me through the TV set. I mean, those kinds of moments just are very poignant.

And again, some of the choices you make aren't bad choices. I mean, choices between good values, family, work.

I don't know that I would do anything differently. I really value the career that I've followed. My kids have turned out fine. I don't think that I've neglected

them in any way, and they are resilient, and they are proud of me, I think. And I don't think it was a mistake.

And certainly, their mom hasn't had just any job. I mean, essentially, you're out slaying the beasts of things that drive up the cost of healthcare and bring down the quality of healthcare.

Looking for justice and fairness, trying to get the best to everybody.

I've heard so many people say that our healthcare system is broken, and there really isn't authentic hope on the horizon. What do you think?

Oh, well, I agree it's broken; that's why I got involved twenty years ago to fix it. But I think there is hope on the horizon. And it hasn't happened everywhere in the country yet, there's big gaps across the country, and within Hawaii too, as far as the progress towards creating a system approach to healthcare for patients. But I am very, very impressed and pleased with the progress that we've made, at least at my organization. As I said earlier, some of the things we're doing now, I never even dreamed we'd be at this point. And it isn't perfect yet, but it's moving in the right direction.

And do you think your job will ever be done?

No; no, I don't.

And that's okay with you?

Yes. Well, you don't want you job to be done; right? I think one thing I've decided about life is, number one, we're not expected to know why, and when, and where, and how long, and that it's all meaningful, and it just makes it more precious.

Precious, indeed. And in case you're wondering, if Dr. Ginny Pressler were a man, I would still have asked the question about work life balance. It's not a single gender issue. Dr. Pressler is among those fighting for justice and fairness in Hawaii's healthcare system, while making time for personal health and wellbeing. She and her husband are regular standup paddlers and outdoor enthusiasts. Thank you, Dr. Ginny Pressler, for sharing your story with us. And *mahalo* to you for watching. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.

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So, I've always had this sense of urgency and impatience, and as I've gotten older, I'm finally beginning to realize, slow down. Even at stoplights, it's like, don't get frustrated because that person didn't pull out yet.

You can't control it, so let it be.

Yeah. So, I'm becoming a little bit more patient as I get older, and I think children teach you patience.

