

GUEST: WILL HENDERSON: HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

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Work hard, be honest, and work hard again. I've worked hard all my life. I enjoy it; I enjoy hard work.

I mean, have you always thought you were in the process of becoming?

Yes.

Always?

Always. Even almost to this day, I have things I'm becoming.

As a young boy facing poverty and isolation, Will Henderson's early years were bleak. How did a disadvantaged child grow up to be a respected leader in Hawaii? Sometimes, the toughest situations in life set us up for our greatest successes. Retired healthcare executive, Will Henderson, 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. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Will Henderson served as president and CEO of the Queen's Medical Center for much of his career, retiring as a respected leader and mentor in the community. Ninety - two years old at the time of our conversation in 2013, he remains *akamai* and fit. He first came to Hawaii in the late 1950s, when he was recruited to lead the struggling Kauhaleolani Children's Hospital in Honolulu. Will was the first hospital administrator in Hawaii to have specialized education and training in the new field of healthcare management. But Will says education, leadership, and success did not come easy.

So ... where did your life begin, and what was your life like as a kid?

Leslie, if you've heard of the plains of South Dakota, you may have heard of it, but you don't know what it was like. Barren, and wind - blowing all of the time. And in the late 1800s, our government established some land grants be given away, Oklahoma land rush. Well, there wasn't a rush to South Dakota, but people did go there, and my mother and father went to that godforsaken country, and started their own life. And it is a lesson in the future. I feel, I would not change my life, as poverty - ridden as it was, no education, whatever it was. I would not change it, because there two things about my mother and father

that were so important now in my later years of life is, hard work and honesty. And I have carried those with me to the point that sometimes honesty has gotten me into a little bit of a disagreement with top leadership and the likes of that. My closest neighbor was about six miles away. As a child, you didn't know anyone there. Your parents did. My father, I hardly knew him, because he was always out trying to get work --

As a ...

-- to have a little bit of money.

What did he do?

Just any kind. Because in those days ... I don't know of anyone that had any training, any background. They had only a sixth grade education. And yet, mathematics, he could do anything with his hands, he could build buildings. Almost anything that could be done, he could do it. And my mother was a beautiful lady; beautiful lady. And she was a lady. [CHUCKLE] She should never have been out on those desert plains; that's all there is to it. Because that wasn't her life; she wasn't cut out for that.

You had siblings?

Two brothers; both younger.

And they were your playmates, because there weren't any other kids close by.

Well, think about it. At three years old, I was still unable to talk. Because my brothers were younger, and my father wasn't there and my mother was working to take care of the farm and everything, so you were alone all of the time. So, even at three years of age, I basically had no vocabulary.

So then comes the chance to go to school.

They decided that they would test me to see what grade I should be in. Now, mind you, I didn't know anything. I didn't know how to count anything. So, for the first time, the ABC chart was put up in front of me.

And how old were you? Six?

I was seven, going on eight. Yeah. And the principal, starched up and everything, was pointing to this, and this, and this. I did not know a single one of them. And he said to my mother, We'll have to put him in the first grade. I can remember that.

Did it make you feel you were at the back of the class, and in the hole? How did you feel?

Leslie, I was so uninitiated with other people, there was no thought. The only thing you do; oh, they're gonna put you in class. So they put you in a seat, and you just sat there. You didn't have any idea what was going on, and all you knew is, oh, class it out. Oh, so you left, and you'd go home.

So, at this point, your educational prospects do not look strong, Will.

Not at all. Did you ever read The Little Red Hen?

I think so.

Well, [CHUCKLE] that was a year before I could read that book, The Little Red Hen. And that's how difficult the future would be.

To catch up with his education, Will Henderson would feel he had to take remedial classes, even into adulthood. But his early years on the farm did teach him valuable lessons.

And then, by this time, we're in the Black Hills. And this was the beginning of a turnaround time in my life. Those were good, enjoyable years. And schooling was a challenge to me, always. I always had to work hard. And this is how I said earlier; I was blessed that my parents believed in hard work, because that translated to me. And I thought nothing of going to school, and I had to work for it. That was just a part of life. And that went on to my third grade, my fourth grade, my fifth grade.

As a young boy, Will Henderson didn't have much socialization. But during his high school years, a path towards friends and popularity started with a simple footrace.

I remember an event, that I was just in my ordinary big clopper shoes. You always wore shoes that were probably up to your ankles and the likes of that. And I happened to be standing out on the track field, and our school champion, he was a runner, his name was Squeak. And Squeak says, Hey, come on, run with me. And so, okay, we got started at the line. We were just practicing. And so, we went down the first hundred yards, made the turn, headed back the next hundred yards. And at fifty feet, I passed him, and he quit. And I went on and ran on in. Hey, he said, what's going on here? I hadn't run before, I didn't know anything about it. So, I got into track. But just a little bit of leadership began to develop, and as good fortune would have it, I went on and then played basketball as a major sport.

When you say leadership, you mean leadership by example? Because it sounds like you haven't been a big participant at this point.

I was elected vice president of the senior class. And that was my first time of ever being in a role of being a leader.

And why do you think you got elected?

[CHUCKLE] Because I was the best basketball player, the champion in that, and then I was the best runner. So, athletics paid off in that time.

While in high school, Will Henderson's family moved from the plains of South Dakota to the forests of Oregon to find better work opportunities. Life didn't get much easier for Will, but he began to take charge of his future.

Oregon was ... great poverty, as much as that I had been in. This is why I basically was in poverty most of my life. But Oregon was cold, rainy most of the time, foggy. Lived right on the edge of water.

Did your parents better their circumstances by moving, would you say?

I think so. Better for them, because we were now able to be together as a family. Both my mother and father worked. Jobs were very hard to come by, and so you basically took any job that you could get. My father worked in the sawmills. And I started working in the sawmill at sixteen years of age to have money to go to pay for my clothes to go to school, that sort of thing.

And go to school, or did you take off from school?

Oh, no; at that time, at sixteen, I was in school. This is when I was being a campus hero. [CHUCKLE]

Okay. And so, you'd go after school and work in the sawmills?

Well, that would be on weekends and in the summer.

I see.

When I would work in the sawmill

And it sounds like tough work. I don't know what you do in the sawmills, but it doesn't sound easy.

Yeah; it's hard, hard work. It's always hard work to be doing manual work like that.

And did you have career day, where you could consider what you might want to do for a living when you grew up?

Never; never once. You had no one. Mind you, in those days, not one single person among all of my friends and everything had gone to college. And when I laid out fifteen months from my senior year, in that fifteen months, yes, I worked the entire time in sawmills.

Why did you do that?

To get money to go to college. 'Cause I said I was going to go to college.

So that was right after your senior year?

After my senior year. Every single person told me, You will not go on to college, you're laid out, you're finished. This is hard work, and commitment. I went to college. I earned the money; I went to college.

So, you got exposed somewhat, but here you are as a young kid saving money for college. What made you do that?

What made me do it? [CHUCKLE] Leslie ...

Working in the sawmills. [CHUCKLE]

What would you do if you were working in the sawmills and logging camps, road construction, and longshoreman? Those jobs are hard jobs. They don't pay a lot. In the sawmill, I made forty - three cents an hour. That would be in 1939, 1940.

Was that good for a teenager to make?

[CHUCKLE] Oh, it was great. Nobody else had any money. They were doing the same job.

People were supporting families on forth - three cents an hour, you were saying.

Yes, they were.

After all his hard work raising money for college in the sawmills of Oregon, Will Henderson attended the University of Oregon. However, after only one year, he put his college plans on hold.

There was a timeout period. I put four years into the timeout period. That's World War II.

That's quite a timeout. So, did you get drafted, or did you volunteer?

If you didn't volunteer, you were going to be drafted. So, I volunteered.

[CHUCKLE]

And where did you serve?

That was from 1941, 1946, and I was Navy. And by accident, I was put into the medical corps. And I didn't know it at the time, but that would be my future.

So, what does a medical corpsman do on a ship?

Well, you're the basic doctor on ship. And I was on one that did not have a physician. The big ones would have a physician to back you up. But I was alone. I served on the LST. LST is about the worst ride you can get on the ocean. It's flat - bottomed, so it's like this. All of the time, I was seasick all of the time. Four years.

And probably, that's what you treated a lot of; right? People came in for seasickness.

Amazing, the other people didn't get seasick or anything. But they had almost everything else. Gonorrhea, everything that.

So, you were treating conditions that were above your pay grade?

[CHUCKLE] Let me tell you something. My pay grade was thirty dollars a month, I think. So, whatever I was doing was probably above the pay grade.

[CHUCKLE] It was an eye - opener to meet, at about age nineteen, twenty, twenty - one, all of these kids thrown together. And now, I look back, when we were called the greatest generation. Well, I believe in that. We earned it, and I accept it with great pride. But all of these guys, as rough as they were, and most of them totally uneducated, in my early gang that I was with, there were only two of us. One had finished college, and I'd had one year. And so, you think about it, these were all of these poor kids that their families were poor, they came out of the teens, the 19 - teens, the 20s, the 30s. And there wouldn't be many in the 30s there, because we were at war in 1940. But that was an education.

During Will Henderson's military service, he continued his remedial education through a chance encounter with a schoolteacher.

I met a very old schoolteacher -- she was forty - two years old, [CHUCKLE] at the USO, and became acquainted with her. And she had done something for me once, so I wrote her a letter of thanks. The next time I came in, she grabbed me by the ear and she said, Come over here, we are going to start teaching you grammar. And we started. First two words we worked on: then and than. That

lady had three boys, almost the same age as myself and my brothers. And that became extended family for me. And the youngest son, he and I are still in *hanai* brother relationship now.

How long did she tutor you?

I knew her over a period of four years.

Four years.

Four years.

And it helped you?

A great deal.

After the end of World War II, Will Henderson went back to Oregon and fulfilled his dream of a college education and bettering his circumstances.

Came back, and this time I knew a little bit more about [CHUCKLE] going to school. And I went to Willamette University, a small private university in Oregon. And that was a magnificent experience. Magnificent.

How was your college experience? I mean, you'd had a rough time with schooling in the past. What was it like after the war? And after your tutoring.

Number one, I continued my remedial classes through all of this time. And all my faculty would tell me, You don't need this, you passed. Well, the psyche, you needed this. And so, college was magnificent. Magnificent. This is your really coming out time. I was president of my freshman class, president of my sophomore class, president of my junior class. And when it came around to senior, one of the girls in the class said, Will, you've had everything, someone else should be president. I said, Okay. I was vice president.

[CHUCKLE] What happened? What turned you into the student government president?

I guess you begin to grow up, and you begin to learn about socialization, and you begin to learn about participation. After Willamette, I went to University of Oregon for a year of graduate work. In the graduate work, I decided to know something I don't know anything in this world, except something about being a pharmacist mate in the military. And stupidity is still a part of my [CHUCKLE] career, because I decided I will try to go to the university, and I found out there was a new career developing in universities. And that was a career in being a hospital executive. And applied to one school -- talk about not being very smart, University of California Berkeley. And by good fortune, finishing that, I got the opportunity then to go into assistant vice president at UCLA Medical Center, brand new medical center being built. And so, I went on the management team in the school faculty. And all of a sudden, you're in a role that you either have to grow, or you have to get out. And you had people who were available to you, that you could go to. And in those training years, those people became my personal supporters.

The future was looking bright for Will Henderson, now an administrator at the UCLA Medical Center. His decision to enter the newly formed career path of hospital management began to open opportunities for him. One day, Will received a call that would alter the course of his life. Kauaikeolani Children's Hospital in Honolulu, Hawaii was a financially troubled institution interested in him as its prospective president and CEO.

So, you're in Hawaii, and you're about to meet the people who are looking at you for this new job.

Children's Hospital; today, no one knows where Children's Hospital is.

I remember where it was; it was on the grounds of the Rehab Hospital, where that is now. Right?

On Kuakini Street.

Kuakini.

Yes, indeed. I met the chairman of the board and the vice chairman of the board, and we talked at length. They were very, very honest. They told me in the first sentence, We are bankrupt, we're going to close, but we wanted from your friend in San Francisco -- he told us about you, and so, we decided that we wanted to bring you here and wanted to talk to you. But he says, We're going to go bankrupt, we're closing up. And I spent a week here, and talking with them often, and et cetera, et cetera. And finally, I said, Well, I don't know, I'm very, very uncertain about this; I have a magnificent job at this brand new medical center. And the old chairman of the board said, You go home, and you think about it. Ten days, and you call me. And about eleven hours before the ten days were over, I called him and said I'll take the job.

Why? Why would you join a hospital that the head has told you is going to go bankrupt? Why would you do that?

There was such an appeal. And I looked at this, and I said, I can make that go.

Will Henderson turned around Kauaikeolani Children's Hospital and took them out of bankruptcy within his first year on the job. His leadership did not go unnoticed, and soon, he was recruited to become the president and CEO of the Queen's Hospital, which became the Queen's Medical Center.

You know, I was thinking that your family, most of them have passed on; right?

All have passed away. I'm the last remaining. I have a story I have to tell you about my mother. And I hope there's a way that you will understand this. I brought her here five times during the time that I was president at Queen's. And then, the fifth time she was here -- and all the prior times, all through the buildings, and introduced her to the people, and everything else. We stood out in front of the Queen's Medical Center, and she turned to me and she said, Will, what do you do here? She never could conceive ...

That her son grew up to be the president and CEO of a major medical center.

From poverty; from poverty.

What did you tell her? What do you there?

The best I could explain to her was to say, Mom, I'm responsible for everything here, and I'm responsible for everyone here, and I'm totally committed to it. Now, she understood that.

Will Henderson retired in Honolulu after twenty - two years of service to the Queen's Medical Center. He's credited with helping to transform the hospital into the modern medical center it is today by putting in place many of the practices and healthcare concepts that are now commonplace. At the time, Queen's Medical Center board chair Malcolm MacNaughton said that Will set the standard in hospital leadership with compassion, understanding, and dedication. Will still humbly attributes much of his success in life to the lessons he learned as a child on the harsh plains of South Dakota. Mahalo to Will Henderson for sharing his story with us; and mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.

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But there was nothing; we didn't have any toys.

You didn't have a TV to keep you company in those days; right?

[CHUCKLE] We didn't even have a telephone. Was nothing. And I think from that kind of venture, it's with you for the rest of your life. Because I can look back and see that the things that I do, commitment to hard work, I've worked hard my entire life.