

GUEST: GERRI HAYES

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There's always another way. I just find adversity ... I'm there to learn something. And I have failed at a number of things. And if you don't get the learning, then it was a real wasted exercise to have gone through that much pain.

From raising two daughters on her own, to starting and running a very successful business, Gerri Hayes has never backed down from a challenge. Gerri Hayes, CEO of the furniture company Office Pavilion, 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. How does one overcome adversity? The toughest situations can motivate some people to exceed what they thought to be their own limitations. As a young, unemployed single parent of two daughters, Gerri Hayes faced adversity. With great tenacity, she overcame her tough situation and many other challenges that followed. She's the founder and CEO of Office Pavilion, one of the most successful woman-owned businesses in Hawaii. Life for Gerri Hayes began in a small New England town.

Did you move around a lot growing up?

No, I did not. I was born and raised in Western Massachusetts, in a very small town, Orange. Stayed in the same house 'til I left home at seventeen, and did not have any ... it was a Peyton Place. [CHUCKLE]

It was a Peyton Place?

You know, I remember when that came out, the book, I said, Sounds like our town. You know, they're very small, very insular.

Did you have a sense of what you would be and do when you grew up?

I only had one dream, and it was to get out of Orange. [CHUCKLE]

Is that right? Why?

It was so provincial. I used to joke, and my mother even said; she said, You always said, I must have been switched in the crib, I don't belong here. [CHUCKLE] It was one of those places, I just didn't feel like I belonged. And then, I had a twin brother and a younger sister, and older sister, and everyone's still there. No one ever leaves this place.

So, you're not in step with your twin brother as far as childhood?

No. It was just like I said. I just always felt like I had only one dream, and it was to get out of Orange and go somewhere else. I graduated, actually, right after I turned seventeen. And I got a job and moved to Worcester, which is a city south of us, and knew I was out. [CHUCKLE]

And was it better for you in another town?

Oh, yeah.

In the same area?

Yeah. It was just better to be in the city. I think I just needed to get out and get into a less provincial environment, and with more exposure to more things. And it was a great thing to do, to get out of Orange. [CHUCKLE]

Where did life take you from this new city?

Well, actually, here's the good news and bad news. That's when I found I was pregnant; I was seventeen.

Soon after you left Orange?

Right after I left home and had settled in with three girlfriends into an apartment in Worcester, Massachusetts, had the shock and surprise. They forgot that part about family planning; they didn't teach us. [CHUCKLE]

And who was the father?

He'd been the guy I dated all through high school, and he had gone into the Navy. And of course, then there was the question of what do I do, and we ended up getting married. Which was fine.

It didn't work out?

Of course not. I think children should never get children or have children. [CHUCKLE] Anyways. So, anyway, so I was in Charleston, South Carolina. We got married in Charleston, South Carolina. He was in the Navy. You know, it was the Vietnam War and he got drafted, so he was in Charleston, South Carolina, and that's where my first daughter was born. And then, I went to San Diego; my second daughter Leanne was born in Balboa Naval. And then, about two years later, it just wasn't working. You know, those marriages don't. So I became a single parent. But then, we got divorced and I moved back to Orange.

To have family childcare?

To try to figure out what I was going to do. Yes; my mother helped, and that's when I decided that I had to figure out what I was really gonna do with this life. And so, that's when I went back to school and became a surgical tech.

As a single parent with no support from her ex-husband, Gerri Hayes needed to learn to survive and provide. She began training and working as a surgical technician, prepping hospital operating rooms for surgeries.

So, liked your job.

I did like my job, and found it fascinating. And it gave me a real foundation. Obviously, part of even getting that training is understanding all the medical terminology and what went on in hospitals, and how it worked. Anyways, but then there was nowhere to go. You know, you worked long hours. I'd have to be in the OR by six and take call almost every other night. So, I decided to move on, and that's when I met this woman. I was very active politically. It was the 60s. [CHUCKLE] So, there I was. Very much a feminist, got into the anti-war movement. And I was actually at a League of Women Voters meeting where they were talking about, you know, abortion reform, and ended up meeting my mentor. She was one of the women. And that's who I went to work for, and became her executive assistant at this family planning program, and then eventually became the director.

So, that's a good job, right, director of family planning?

Yes. And actually, what happened was, I felt they were going at it wrong, which that's usually how I do things. I said, Well, you're doing this all wrong. Why would you put these clinics in a hospital?

I can understand why you're the boss of a business now. [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE] I am a little bossy. [CHUCKLE] But I said, You're doing this wrong. You're trying to attract these populations who are terrified of going into hospitals. And so, that's how I co-authored an article on setting up non-hospital-based family planning clinics. The first ones in New England, actually, and then I got put into Planned Parenthood International, and that's how I got invited to Hawaii. They wanted me to consult, because they were having the same problem.

How controversial were family planning clinics back then?

Oh; very. Very.

I mean, there had been bombings and you know, violence associated with family planning.

Family planning was—yeah. And so, that was the other thing; putting it down on a main street and in a rough neighborhoods anywhere so that women would have access without having—right? Because back then, even, if they were married, had to have the husband's permission to go. So, it was pretty radical to set up non-hospital-based family clinics.

That's what you did?

Yeah. Hired my own doctors and nurses, and set up this thing, and did peer counseling, and went out and spoke to Head Start groups. My belief was, obviously, having had the experience, I said, If you could stop first birth order with young women, you give them a chance to go on and really create their lives.

Did you ever feel in peril, unsafe?

Only once. [CHUCKLE] I got thrown down the stairs. Someone came in late at night, and they were ... but mostly no.

So, philosophically, they decided they would take a shot.

Yeah. And I'm also very feisty, so you can imagine I wasn't someone who was intimidated.

Where did that come from? The feistiness; and going against the grain.

I was the black sheep in my family, and I was the girl. [CHUCKLE] My mother said, If you could have only learned to manage your mouth. But my father was so domineering, and I just wouldn't take it. And so, I have to tell you, I got the belt more times that most people should ever get one.

And you still mouthed off?

And I would just say, Fine, let's go. Because I felt like I had to say my peace.

And you took the blows.

I took the beating. I said, You know, you will not silence me. [CHUCKLE]

So, you never had regrets about speaking out?

Oh, no.

As a result of Gerri Hayes' article about her non-hospital-based clinics, she was invited to Hawaii to meet with Planned Parenthood. Little did she know that her trip to Hawaii would alter the direction of her life.

So, here you were, running a family planning clinic, and feeling that you were working for a good cause.

Yeah.

And then?

And then I published that article, and got invited to come to Hawaii, which I had never had any interest in. And came here, and absolutely went ass over tea kettle. Thought it was the most fabulous place on Earth.

Why? What was it, exactly? I mean, besides the surf and the sun.

No, no; it wasn't even the physi—it was the ... remember, I had two daughters, and I was a single parent. And I remembered every time they—and I had asked not to stay in hotels. I said, I'd like to stay with the directors or with a staff member. 'Cause I said, I want them to experience the people of Hawaii. So, I ended up having this wonderful experiences. In Maui, I'll never forget, they were having a big pau hana, and then, they brought all the children. And she said, You'd never not invite the keiki. And I looked at her, and I said, Oh, my god, in Boston, you don't understand, they'll call me and say, Gerri, if you can find a babysitter, we'd love you come to the party. And I would always go. It

was just very—your roles were really separate. And here, I realized the appreciation of the fact that you had children was really high, and and the inclusiveness. You know, so it was sort of like, hmm, this is a whole new way to look at it. So, I went back. That was June, thirty-nine years ago. And I thought about it, and then Judy said she was gonna quit her job over in Maui, and she said, Why don't you take over Planned Parenthood Maui? So, I gave my notice, sold everything I owned, and moved here on February 1st, thirty-eight years ago.

And?

And got here. [CHUCKLE] And just as I was coming in December, she sent me a note and said, I can't afford to quit, we started building a house on Hana Highway. And I said, You know what, I've sold everything, I've given my notice, I'm coming anyway, I'll figure it out.

That seems so confident. Did you feel confident?

I did; I did. I just knew I was supposed to not be back there anymore. So I moved here, and I didn't have a job, but I had an apartment. And I figured it out. [CHUCKLE]

What did you figure out? The door was closed, you were on Maui.

I started applying for jobs, and mostly social service, like I said, so I applied for the American Cancer Society job in Kauai, I interviewed for [SIGH] all kinds of things. And then, I kept seeing how little they paid, which was kinda shocking. It still is shocking; right? The lack of value we place on social services.

Social services.

And I went, Oh, my goodness, I don't think I can do this. Well, then I saw these other ads. 'Cause you know, you're look at all ads. And then, I was just looking for a medical surgical salesperson to sell high level open heart equipment, packs and gowns. And so, I was like, Sounds like me. [CHUCKLE]

Had you sold before?

I'd never sold a thing in my life. I remember saying, If you can use it, you could sell it. So, I went in and interviewed, and he didn't hire me right away, 'cause he said, you know, he had this other nurse that he hired. And then, he called me back, and he said, Come in. And so, I absolutely found my calling.

Gerri Hayes relied on her background as a surgical technician to make the transition into medical sales. Taking the time to learn the subtle ways of island culture, and to sit and listen to her new customers was important to her success.

I came from Boston, and as you can tell, New Englanders, we're rough, we're aggressive. I obviously had a wicked accent then. Now, I only slip occasionally in "park cars" [BOSTON ACCENT]. But back then, I remember coming in, and then I went into every one of my operating room nurses and sat down, and I just said, I need you to tell me what it would be that I could do for you, that would make it important for you to buy from me and work with me. And they all said the same thing. Show up on time, keep your word, follow up, and tell the truth. I was like, That's it? [CHUCKLE]

They must have liked that you asked them, too, one-on-one.

Oh, yeah.

Like they mattered.

They said, No one's ever. They said, Gerri, number one, this is Hawaii. People think they're on time if they're three hours late, and it's annoying because we're busy, we're running an OR. And so I was like, Oh! So, I did; I just wrote it all down. And I remembered years later, I still have this whole group. Most of them are retired now, but all these directors of OR, they just said, You were the best. And they said, The other thing is because you'd used it, you knew how to do it, we could call you in, you could scrub in and help show everybody how to use the new equipment. And then we'd sit in the nurses' lounge. You know, it was like it was very easy. And then I learned all the rest, so I had to sell operating room, but then I also had to sell other kinds of medical supplies.

Working fulltime as a single mother with no family support was a struggle for Gerri Hayes. She credits her Hawaii friends and neighbors for helping to raise her two daughters.

Must be very hard to raise children without a grandma. You know, people have family and really use them here to help them with their kids.

Yeah. That was the hardest.

How did you manage?

That was the hardest. I had ... [SIGH] I don't know. [CHUCKLE] I don't know how I did it. Don't know how I did it. Someone said, How did you do it? I said,

You just do what you do. I had great neighbors, I will say. I lived on a sweet little street, Mikiola Drive, and all the neighbors, they all watched out for me. They just thought I was—right? I mean, it was really sweet. It was like, Eh, Mama, watch the kids, you know, 'til you get home. So, I was very lucky. That's again, that culture that knew and respected how hard I worked. And so, I had Walter and Harry across the street, and I mean, those kids couldn't have done a think without them getting busted by them.

A few years into her new sales career, Gerri Hayes received an opportunity that would propel her from salesperson to running a sales operation.

Okay; so I did med surg sales, then I got a call from this man who owned a business and had a division here in Hawaii, Medical Business Interiors in Seattle. And he said, I heard you're the best salesperson in Hawaii. And I said, Well, it's true. [CHUCKLE] A little hutzpah. And he said, I'm looking for someone to run my territory over there.

And it's business interiors.

Medical business interiors.

Business interiors. Okay.

This is hilarious. So, he flies over on a Sunday, and I met him at the Top of the Ilikai. After three mai tai's, he—I should have asked for more; I left too much money on the table. [CHUCKLE] But it was like, he hired me. And so, I took over, and it was basically doing interiors for hospitals.

You mean, providing furniture for hospitals?

Providing furniture, but also having to do, you know, go out and meet with architects and designers, and end users. And the part I could do, 'cause I understood material distributions, I could do some of this, but the rest of it was ... and I learned it. Again, one of those, I don't know where you get that piece that just says, You know what, I can figure this out. And I did.

Was it hard to figure out, or I mean, does it come easily?

It came pretty quick. But again, I have always been lucky. Had somebody, an installer. And he said, Kerry, what am I gonna do? I said, This architect's calling me, and he wants to show me these plans. He said, I'm going with you, girlfriend. He said, Just keep asking him questions, and when he asks you what you think, say, You know, I need to think about that, and I'll get back to you. So,

we get in there. Guy rolls out the plans. I didn't know electrical, plumbing. And I would just sit there and I'd tell him, So what's your concept, what are you trying to accomplish? And I got Kerry sitting there, and he's going, Sir, I don't think that's gonna work 'cause the way doors are laid out. And so, he was great, 'cause he actually knew how to do this. And he took me aside and he taught me how to read a blueprint, and he taught me all the ... and so, I was very lucky. And we worked as a team.

So, this time, you were not just selling; you were running a business.

Right.

A division of a business.

Yes. So, I had to hire, and I did. I had an interior designer, and I had a logistics person to handle shipping and do all those things. But I did what I did well, and I was actually very good at knowing what I was good at, and delegating. So, I let the interior designer take over, and then I would let the gal who did the order entry, and so I think that's why it worked. Because I also didn't feel like I had to do it all. The ability to know what you're good at, and then let those who do what they're good at.

Did you do the hiring?

Uh, yes.

Were you good at reading people? And you're still hiring, so I should ask you, Are you good at reading people?

Yeah; I'm actually pretty good at it.

Here you are working, doing medical business interiors. And things went along quite well, until they went very badly. What happened?

I absolutely loved working for MBI, and learned the whole industry while I worked for Hank. And one of the biggest jobs, and it was so exciting to win it, was the HMSA was building a new state of the art building over on Keeaumoku Street. And everybody kept saying, Gerri, there is no way they're gonna buy furniture. I said, There is no way they're not. How could they have you build a state of the art building, and then move that crap? I said, I have been in their offices. And he said, There's no way the board will approve it. I said, I'm going to figure a way, I said, 'cause I know two things. They need an emotional coat hook to

hang that decision on, and I'm gonna find it, because, I said, it's how you solve the idea.

Gerri Hayes came up with an innovative sales pitch, or an emotional coat hook as she calls it, to refurnish all of her client's new offices. But what should have been the sale of her career had an unforeseen outcome.

The point would be, why would you have a beautiful new facility, and move all your people into it, and then move all this old furniture, when you could ... I said, And I would handle the whole disposal, the sale of it, and everything, and give you a credit toward the purchase of new furniture. I said, I think it's at least worth—I'll write you a proposal to give the board. Fine. And he took it, and of course, they jumped on it with both feet. And it was amazing.

And it was a great sell for you.

It was the emotional coat hook, and it ended up being like a six million dollar sale. Which thirty years ago, was a lot of money. Eight floors, everything, front door to back. Everything. So, the good news and bad news was, after the job was done, that's when I found out that my boss had put all of these expenses against the job, and there was eighty-seven thousand dollars in commission that he wasn't gonna pay me. And my girlfriend, because she worked in accounting, said I had to sit in the meetings with these three men going, No woman should ever make that much money, and ra-ra-ra-ra-ra.

Did you get the money?

Well, the attorneys all get money. Don't you know that? So, I ended up with about thirty-seven thousand, which is still okay. It was enough for me to say, I can go do my own thing now.

Gerri Hayes says that experience of being shut out of an eighty-seven thousand dollar sales commission left her unwilling to work for somebody else. She decided to start her own business.

You know, I went to a Pacific Business News event, and I heard that the top woman-owned business in Hawaii was called Office Pavilion. And I thought, Let's see, what would make the most money? You know, what is that? You know, what would Office Pavilion do?

[CHUCKLE]

It's just incredible to me that, you know, you're a contract furniture provider.

And that's what people don't understand. Every time you go to the airport and you sit in that black and silver seating, that is Eames Tandem Sling Seating that we have done since 1976 out at that airport. If you go into a hospital, if you go into rehab, all that renovation at rehab we just did, it's all done in this fabulous new Compass program that we do. So, I do hospitals, I do healthcare, we did Case Middle School, Iolani, UH IT that just opened, the Cancer Research Center. See, I just think of all the different pieces to this business. It isn't just furniture. You know, I've done all the special operations. I have a lot of fun with special ops guys.

And you have to know how people work in order to serve them in this business.

Yes.

You have to know a lot about them and their business.

Yeah. And how it's changing for them. Part of the biggest challenge right now is really helping them get in front of the curve of everything that's changing. Healthcare is just ... everybody's on there around this one. Right? And I mean, there's just so many things. Part of it is, that's why you educate yourself and you try to become a partner and a proactive solution provider, because they're all facing—I mean, it's becoming very competitive.

In 2011, and again in 2012, Office Pavilion was named the number one woman-owned business in Hawaii by Pacific Business News. One of those years, company revenues reached thirty-seven million dollars. Over time, Gerri Hayes' business has expanded beyond Hawaii, to the Philippines, Japan, Korea, and Guam. As the driving force behind the company that she founded, Gerri admits it's been difficult for her to loosen the reins for the next generation of the family company.

You could be retiring, if you wanted to.

[CHUCKLE]

You could be retiring yesterday.

I have started my exit strategy. I have two daughters, Wendy and Leanne and my son-in-law Bruce in the business, and they've been there a long time. But it's so different, you know. I think that is the next thing. How do they learn, how do you teach and mentor people into that entrepreneurial piece, as opposed to the maintenance piece of keeping a business just running. And that is probably

the challenge I've got right now is, they're getting there, I'm having to shut up and back off. I think that is hardest, because sometimes we're doing strategic business, and I can type that up and have it out tomorrow. [CHUCKLE] And I said, But then, it wouldn't be their plan, and it isn't allowing them to ... it's not forcing them to think the issues through.

Is it important for you that your business live on after you?

Yeah. That's probably the biggest struggle I'm having right now. I really want my kids to see it as a legacy business that creates all kinds of things, creates jobs. We have a staff meeting Friday, the first one of the year. And look it, you have forty-two people. Now, multiply that times all the people they support, and you realize the power when you create jobs, and you create a business. It's not about you. And I want them to know that my grandsons ... I mean, I honestly look at my youngest; he was sitting here in the chair. He's the salesman in the group. And I said, What a wonderful thing it would be to have a third generation come and sit in that chair. And I said, Your job is to take it from thirty million to a hundred and fifty million, and maybe open up Australia. I said, You know, I've done what I set out to do, and I'd love to see you grow it, and I'd love to see ... he said, I'm going to Harvard, Grandma, and then I'm coming back and taking the chair. [CHUCKLE] And I said, But just to know. I said, Do you know what a gift a business like this is? I said, it creates a life for you, you create livelihoods for others, you get to do good in the world, you get to have all the fun and travel. I mean, I have traveled the world. My true love, besides reading, is traveling. So yeah, I want to see it live on. [CHUCKLE]

Gerri Hayes says that she has women business mentors, and she believes Hawaii is a supportive and encouraging environment for entrepreneurial women. She's certainly a testament to that. Mahalo to Gerri Hayes for sharing her 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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Okay; I've had three people say, I don't know why you haven't written a book. And I'm like, What would I write? And I say, Well, if I ever wrote a book, it would be called, And It Ain't About Furniture. 'Cause it's about your life, and how all these things, and all the serendipity, and all the hilarious stories. Leanne said, You can't tell these stories, Mom, when you're with Leslie. [CHUCKLE]

[END]

