

GUESTS: ALVIN WONG

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I firmly believe you need a purpose getting up in the morning. I think after age sixty - five, the purpose changes a little bit, so that if you can get up and put your feet on the ground, that's a major accomplishment already.

So, you have to find things that inspire you.

[CHUCKLE] Exactly.

In 2011, the New York Times named Alvin Wong as The Happiest Person in America. This assertion was based on the result of a poll that created a profile of the attributes that contribute to a good life. They were not expecting to find someone with all these qualities, but all it took was a few phone calls. Alvin Wong, 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. In 2011, Gallup conducted a three - year poll to create a statistical composite of the happiest person in America. They found that the person would be male, tall, Asian American, live in Hawaii, at least sixty - five years old, married with children, have his own business, and be an observant Jew. When a New York Times reporter set out to find this person, she called a synagogue in Hawaii and was told that not only does this person exist, but his name is Alvin Wong. Alvin Wong, or Al, as he prefers to be called, was born and raised in Honolulu, and considers himself to be a very happy man. Is it because he has all the attributes listed in the poll, or are there other reasons that he considers himself so happy?**

I was born in 1941, maybe six months before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Earliest memories is, we had a bomb shelter in our back yard, I lived in the Bingham Tract, McCully area. We had a bomb shelter which was a hole dug in the ground, and some sandbags put up. But I remember playing Army in these trenches and things like that.

Did you keep it for many years after the war?

Yeah. And I wouldn't let my dad take it down, because it was nice. But then, my dad says, "Ho, there's this big hole in the back yard, and it's a liability," so he took it down after a while. I remember when I was four or five, I would be playing in there and doing things like that. But fond memories of childhood, where you walked everywhere.

And let's see; you were in the Bingham Tract area. So, where could you walk to that was fun as a kid?

Well, we had a soda fountain down the street. That was fun. You go and have ice cream, and stuff like that.

Was that the old John Ing store?

Yeah. How do you know that?

I loved that little grocery store, where he had shave ice --

Yeah.

-- and candy, and --

Right.

-- juice wax candy.

[CHUCKLE] Where you bit off the thing, and you ... yeah.

Where did you play?

Around the neighborhood. We used to play football in the street. Which is amazing, because nowadays, you play in the street, that's a death wish. You don't do it now. But in those days, there weren't very many cars. Boy, am I dating myself.

[CHUCKLE]

We had a three - bedroom house with one bathroom. And my earliest memories is, some of my dad's siblings would stay with us. So there would be maybe five or six, seven people in the house at one time, all using the same bathroom. Nowadays, you think about it, and you say, "How was that possible?" But we managed. Then this happiness thing came around, so I started thinking about ... why would I be so happy, why am I so happy. And I had to think back on my youth, the kinds of things that my parents taught me. Growing up, we were taught to be humble. The Asian way.

Were you taught by words, or by example?

Both. Example; yes, definitely. My father was the most humble person out. And in fact, one of his mantras was, If you're gonna succeed in a Western culture, you have to drop all your Asian beliefs and adopt the Western culture.

Now, was he an immigrant?

No, he wasn't; he was born here. But he had this firm belief that you couldn't succeed until you became a Westerner, or the beliefs of what the Western culture was about.

Mm.

So, when you think about it, I think it's really profound to say, you can't just keep all your Asian beliefs and make other people believe in this kinda thing; you have to either meet them halfway, or you have to go and meet them on their grounds.

I see.

Yeah. So, humility; he was very humble. And I think he taught us that very well in terms of - he would always say, "You're not the most important person; you're not the smartest person."

Now, today, people would say, Well, that's not giving you self - esteem, Al.

But introspectively, if you look at it, I don't think anybody can call themselves the smartest person. There's always somebody smarter, there's always somebody who knows something maybe different than what you know, and you can always learn from them. So, yes, in this kind of culture that we live in today, self - esteem plays a big part. But when you think about it, when you really think about it, if you're humble and you really believe that you're not the most important person, but you can learn from everybody else, that, I think, encourages your self - esteem to say, I want to learn more.

I think your dad was giving you perspective. I mean, to place you in context.

Yes.

Which is really helpful in the world.

LSS 722: Alvin Wong

Right. Definitely. And that's the example that that he led. And my mom - my mom was a homemaker. So, I think if you look at today's standards, she probably had about a fourth grade education. But yet, her job, which she did very well, was to keep the family together, to keep the family clean, to keep the family looking nice, and to guide us, the kids, in the right direction.

Do you remember any advice she gave you?

The one thing that she always told me, and this was when I was young, and as I was getting older in life and trying to make a decision, What do I want to do? She said, "Whatever you do, you can do anything you want, but you gotta be happy at what you do. When you get up in the morning and you're going to work, you have to make sure that you're happy." And if you're not happy, then you gotta do something about that.

Do you remember being told you were a happy kid, or feeling that you were happy as a kid?

No, not in that terminology. But I think my mother was more introspective with this kinda stuff, and she paid attention to demeanor, she paid attention to personalities. And when she saw that maybe I was in a funk, she would say, "Why aren't you happy?" Or, "What's wrong?" And as a kid, you would say, "Wow, how did you know that I was feeling bad about something?" And we would talk about it. And this lady with a fourth grade education was probably heads up over a lot of people in terms of looking at oneself, looking at how you portray life, how do you go through life, and make it through life.

Right priorities.

Exactly.

Yeah, priorities; and also attention.

Right.

Alvin Wong's father had a career as the financial vice president of the old Honolulu Star Bulletin. He believed in the importance of education, and made sure that his children went to good schools.

You went to a private school.

I did.

So, your dad definitely paid for your education.

He was very much aware that education was foremost in terms of anything else that he could give us in life. And he took a special interest in how we were doing in school, what we were learning, and things like that. And you know, being the CFO, he stressed math. He didn't stress as much science, because that wasn't the area that he was in. But he stressed math.

Now, why did your parents decide to send you to Maryknoll?

[CHUCKLE] It wasn't a decision based on - Well, this was the best school - and they did research on it. It was the closest school to where I lived. [CHUCKLE]

It's a co - ed Catholic school, with a good rep.

It was. And they couldn't have done any worse, in terms of that. But it was close, it was walking distance, I walked to school, walked home. And it was a private school. And strangely enough, my sisters did their high school education at Roosevelt, a public school. But my dad insisted that my brother and I stay at the private school.

Now, it seems to me that Roosevelt ... correct me if I'm wrong, wasn't that an English Standard school?

Yes.

So, that was a tough school for local kids to get into.

Yes; exactly.

You had to speak Standard English.

Yes; that's right.

So, that wasn't a slam - dunk.

No. But, yes; that was the first English Standard school in Honolulu.

And your sisters made it in there.

Yup.

Did your sisters mind that the boys got to go to a private school, and they didn't?

Well, I think my other sister, Alana, who recently passed away, would tell me, Well, we had a choice, but we wanted to go to the English Standard school.

Mm.

And Alana wanted to be a journalist. She ended up as being one of the first women on the Hawaii Bar, and this was in 1949, where there were like maybe two other women in the Hawaii Bar at that time.

That's wonderful.

So, you know, I mean, when I look at my family, they sort of pioneered and created this path that others can take. You know, she was a woman, she was Asian, and you know, she was admitted to the Hawaii Bar.

So, you went to Maryknoll.

M - hm.

And then, what did you do?

Then, I attended University of Hawaii for a while, and then I went to the mainland for school over in the East Coast, Boston University. And came back and did some post - graduate work at Oregon State. It was in the sciences, because my dad was kind of leading me in that direction of being a professional and maybe a physician. And I thought, "No". I was very much interested in financial aspects of things, being Chinese and everything. [CHUCKLE]

And your dad was also.

Exactly.

But he wanted you to go into science, whereas he went into the numbers.

Yeah. Yes, that's true. And I never did ask him, "Why did you do that?" The one hint I get was, he wanted us to be professionals, so that we didn't have to work for someone. Because he had worked for someone for all of these years, and he was saying, "This is hard work to work for somebody. You need to be on your own." But in this day and age, working alone now is even challenging. But, again, I went with the numbers. And

towards the end, I kept telling him, "I'm blaming you for this; you were the role model in this thing." He didn't say anything.

[CHUCKLE] Now, did he and your mom expect you to marry a nice Chinese girl?

Well, if they did, they were seriously disappointed. [CHUCKLE] But no, I don't think so.

They never told you anything, one way or the other?

I mean, my mom told me - Trudy was there. She said, "Well, you know, the Jewish culture is one of the oldest cultures in the world." And it's coming from somebody who had a fourth grade education. Profound. And she would say, "Some of the cultural practices of the Jews and Chinese are very similar." And in our wedding ceremony, we had a veil lifting ceremony prior to the wedding. And my mother would say she did that too in a Chinese ceremony. So, I was like, "Wow."

So, very accepting. Well, how did you meet Trudy? Tell us about your wife.

Trudy is a flight attendant with United Airlines, and she was here on temporary duty one summer. This was in 1975, I think. She's gonna kill me that I don't remember these dates.

[CHUCKLE]

But it was in 1975, and I lived at the Ilikai at that time. And she was there too, and we met at a party. And the rest is history.

So, you actually converted to Judaism.

Yes. Her family was more conservative, leaning towards some orthodox belief, so there was no question that I was going to convert.

How did that square away with your Catholic training at Maryknoll?

Well, strangely enough, I went to Maryknoll for thirteen years, and I never was baptized a Catholic. And keep saying that it's not that I didn't try. I tried. Because peer pressure when you're going to school is, "Oh, you know, I want to take communion with the rest of my friends." But it just never happened, for whatever reason, as I look back on it.

Did you experience a religious, a faith conversation with Judaism?

Yes, I did. I mean, in terms of when you look at Judaism and its teachings, it probably fits better with me. Judaism teaches that your Heaven or Hell is here, whatever you make of it while you were living. So, if you lived a bad life, then your Hell is going to be that people remember that you were a bad person. So, it's easier to kind of understand this and program your life so that this is the reason why you don't want to be bad, because people will remember that you're gonna be bad. Not that you're going to Hell, which is, where is it? That kinda thing.

Alvin Wong retired after a career in finance and data processing and hospital administration. He continues to stay involved in health management as a consultant in quality care for seniors. Since being identified as The Happiest Person in America in the New York Times article, he's taken on another role; one that has almost become a fulltime job.

Well, let's talk about the Happiest Person designation. How did all this come about?

Well, the Gallup Poll and Healthways partnered. Healthways International is one of the largest health research companies in the world now. And they're researching wellness, wellbeing, what makes people happy, and things like that. It was for three years, and

LSS 722: Alvin Wong

they were going to show all the data that the Gallup people had on wellbeing, wellness, attitudes in the United States, and happiness. And so, the author of this article in the New York Times thought it would be nice if they did a little whimsical article on who would be the happiest person in the United States, based on all of this data that they had. So, they challenged the Gallup people to come up with this statistical profile of who would be the happiest person. So, Hawaii was the happiest state for these three years going. Males were happier than females, and Asian Americans were happier than any other ethnic group in the United States. People over sixty – five were happier than people under sixty – five. Married people were happier than unmarried people. People with children were happier than people without children. So, it went on, and on, and on. And the kicker was that in the religious area, Jews were happier than other religious groups in America. And so, when you pieced it together to have all of these things, Alvin Wong became The Happiest Person in America.

You were the only one who fit all of those criteria.

Yeah.

So, how did you find out?

Well, first of all, Catherine Rampell, the author of this article, she didn't think that there was gonna be anybody with this profile. So, she called the Temple here and talked to Rabbi Shaktman at that time. And she read all of this profile, and she said, "I'm looking for somebody who would meet some of this criteria." And he said, "Alvin Wong meets all the criteria." So, she called me, and we talked for about an hour.

And in talking to Catherine Rampell, if you were to read the article, at the end she said, "Before he said goodbye, he said, 'Is this a practical joke?'"

[CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE] Because I didn't know. Why would somebody call me to ask me to tell me that I was the happiest man? I mean, you never think about that kinda stuff. I wouldn't, anyway. And the ensuing months, I received hundreds of phone calls from people all over the world. Literally, all over the world.

Did they ask you what the secret to happiness is?

Yeah. But that's the single most asked question of me. What is your secret? In the beginning I was like, "Secret? I don't have any secret to happiness. You know, I get up in the morning, and I'm pretty much happy." But then, I was thinking, "Well, I think they're looking for more than that." You know, it's like, "Give me your secret, you know, give me the shot of happiness so that I can be happy tomorrow." So, I did research, and I call it my search for my happiness. And I spent almost a year just researching all this happiness. The gross national happiness, all this stuff. What makes people happy? And finally came up with, well, it really comes from you. You gotta be as happy as you want to be.

Nobody pours happiness into you.

Exactly. And so, this is what I talk about now.

You don't get it from outside sources.

Yeah. But then, I talk about humility, I talk about respect, I talk about compassion. Because if you have all of these things, what you have in life is the ingredients for making others happy. I have a favorite Chinese proverb that goes, "If you want

happiness for an hour, you take a nap. If you want happiness for a day, you go fishing. If you want happiness for a year, inherit a fortune. But if you want happiness for a lifetime, help someone else." And that's what I want to do now, is to spread this happiness around. Because so many people ask me about this.

And when you were told you're the guy, did you think you were that happy person?

You never think about that kinda stuff. I wouldn't, anyway. And I guess the other thing that I'm really shocked about is that there is such a fuss made about this little article that appeared in the New York Times.

It's because it's something everybody wishes for and wants more of.

Exactly. And that's what I learned. After a while, I began getting so depressed. Everybody out there is looking for happiness, and they think they can find it by asking somebody else what it is. So, I tell everybody that having this designation placed on me has been very stressful, because everybody expects me to be happy.

I don't think anyone expects you to be an automaton.

No; no, no. But I like to think that whatever I do, it's not because of the title, but because it's genuine. So, I will admit, I get mad at times. Usually, I get mad at inanimate objects. I will drop something on the floor, and ... lose it. Because that was a stupid thing to do, but I'm blaming myself for it, so I'm losing it because I'm blaming myself for it.

What gives you your biggest feeling of security?

The family. And this is what we stressed with the kids growing up. We have a family core, have dinner together; at least have dinner together. And the family makes up the security. I've learned in life, and this is maybe through my parents' example, that everything you do, you do well, but you do with passion. In order for you to do it well, you have to be passionate at what you do. And if it's marriage, you have to be passionate at the marriage part. If it's raising kids, you have to be passionate about doing that. For me, the thing that drives me in many areas, if I'm gonna cook dinner tonight, I'm gonna be so passionate about what I'm doing, whether it be a stew, whether it be a curry, whatever. It's gonna be the best.

You don't stay up and worry, and steam, and fret at night about anything?

Well, I used to. I can't say I didn't. When you're in the workplace and you think that you've reached an impasse on a certain issue or whatever, yeah, you stay awake, you worry about it. I used to do that a lot. But I guess maybe this is why in the Gallup Poll it says people over sixty - five are happier - Because they're wiser now. They know that they're not gonna solve the problem if the brain is so chaotic and is worrying about things, and they're gonna sleep on it. So, it's not as frenzied a life anymore. And maybe that's why older people have a better chance of being happy, because their outlook changes a little.

Your wife is such a great sport. 'Cause I know when you pass sometimes people say, Oh, there's The Happiest Man in America. Does she give you a hard time about it, ever?
All the time.

[CHUCKLE]

LSS 722: Alvin Wong

The Gallup Poll identified mostly physical aspects of what makes a happy person. But for Alvin Wong, it has been the intangible qualities of upbringing, humility, compassion, and above all, family, that are at the core of his happiness. *Mahalo* to Alvin Wong for sharing some of his happiness with us. And *mahalo* you for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. *A hui hou.*

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Do you make a distinction between happiness and joy, which I've heard people do? Happiness really depends more on circumstances, and joy is more a state of being.

Joy is a state of being. Joy is when you get to buy your first BMW. Joy is when you get your first iPad, or something like that. But it quickly wears off.

I see. So, happiness is an enduring state.

Yes.