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I still think, in my mind, I had a plan. I didn't know what that plan was, but there was this level of confidence that it was gonna happen. Until that graduation day, because somehow, it just smacked me in the face that, Hey, now it's real world. Right? You know, you're gonna have to find ways and do things on your own.

He led the restoration design of one of Hawaii's most iconic hotels, and has been named one of Hawaii's top young leaders and small business owners. Yet, during his high school years, Rob Iopa's future did not seem quite so bright. Architect Rob Iopa, originally from Hawaii Island and once an underachiever, 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. You may have walked through, or perhaps admired a building designed by architect Rob Iopa, but you probably didn't know the person behind the design. Rob Iopa's local projects include the University of Hawaii Hilo College of Pharmacy and College of Hawaiian Language complex, the redevelopment of Kuhio Beach Park in Waikiki, and the restoration of the iconic Royal Hawaiian Hotel. Under Rob Iopa's leadership, his Honolulu-based startup firm, WCIT Architecture, has grown into one of the largest architectural firms in Hawaii. Pacific Business News named Rob one of the most influential leaders of Hawaii for the next twenty-five years, and the Small Business Association named him the 2008 Businessperson of the Year for Honolulu. From an early age, Rob's parents were focused on his education. His mother Glenda had to put her college plans on hold when she gave birth to him at age seventeen.

Born and raised in Hilo in the late 60s, and kind of grew up with my mom and dad in a little area of Hilo called Wainaku. I remember crossing the street to go to my preschool, literally. Ended up going to a small private school called Henry Opukahaia. I skipped third grade, at the time I didn't know what that meant. But it did put me in an age group a year older than me.

That's a lot when you're that young.

It was; it was. It was a different kind of perspective. But we were multi-grade in that small school, so I didn't really recognize it until I went to public school in seventh grade, Waiakea Intermediate. After that, I got accepted to Kamehameha in ninth grade, and at the time, and still today, right, that was kind of the golden ticket. [CHUCKLE]

Yeah; you must have been overjoyed. Were you overjoyed? It was hard to get picked.

I was very happy that I was selected to go to Kamehameha School on Oahu.

And with the idea you were going to board?

So, it was interesting. It was a time when my mother had graduated from University of Hawaii at Hilo with a political science degree, and had applied to Manoa Richardson School of Law, and was accepted. My mother and father had divorced by that time, and Mom brought my sister, who was four, and me, who was nearing thirteen, to Oahu. So, I lived with my mom and she raised both of us, worked, and went to law school. It was a transition period for me, kind of moving and other things kinda of going on, so it was a little bit of a difficult time. It wasn't the right place for me, at the right time.

Is that right? I think of thirteen as a time of life that I would prefer not to remember myself.

[CHUCKLE]

It is; there's a lot going on.

Yeah. I think socially, I was very kind of attuned to what was going on in Hilo at the time, so it was a little bit of a displacement from there. And then, even my friends that I moved up with, there was a whole crew of Hilo boys that came up. Most of them were boarding; right? So, even my kind of support crew was boarding, and I was day student, and there was just various—I was used to going to school in shorts and slippers. But there was regulations on how one should dress.

Did you not like the authority?

I think I rebelled against it, a little bit. I don't know exactly why at the time, but I think I pushed back a bit. You know, JROTC was new to me at the time, and you know, I wasn't very good at ironing at that point in my uh, my life. It was a time of transition that I didn't quite understand. And as I like to put it, you know, they told me at the end of the ninth grade year that the Princess' vision would be better served if I was back on the Big Island.

Whoa! [CHUCKLE] That was a nice way to say that.

Yeah. You know, I don't think they put it in that fashion, but that's how I like to—

Yeah; that's a very gracious way to put it.

Yeah.

But, what was the reason the school gave you?

I think it was a series of events. You know, it was this kind of rebellion over time.

Were you acting out? Acting up, acting out?

Yeah; but simple kinds of things, right? I mean, it wasn't anything so dramatic that they said, Okay, this is it. But you know, I mean, there were things like slipper passes, right, that if for some reason you had a foot injury, you were able to wear slippers. And you know, I'd fake my slipper pass, or you know. I mean, those kind of things.

Did they just think you just weren't ready yet?

I think it probably worked out that way. But I mean, my actions were showing that I wasn't happy at that place. And you know, it was intended that there was a door for me to come back, if so choosed, from both sides after some time away. But, you know, I think I wanted to be in Hilo at that time.

Did you head back to your dad, then?

I did. I did. So, I went back to Hilo and lived with Dad right away. Started up at summer school, because I had work to make up for work that was uh, not completed.

And went to Waiakea High School?

Waiakea High School.

After his dismissal from Kamehameha Schools Kapalama at the end of his freshman year, Rob Iopa reintegrated into public school, sports, and his social circles at Waiakea High School in Hilo. However, the move did not do much to change his indifferent attitude about school rules.

I mean, I got kicked off of our high school team on our last game. You know, I was the offensive captain.

How did you manage to get kicked off that game?

[SIGH] Tardiness, missing school. You know, I mean, those types of things. It was that kind of period of time. My senior year GPA was 1.7. I didn't have much aspiration to kind of finish high school in the traditional sense.

Did teachers tell you, You're, you know, a smart boy, but you don't try hard enough?

Yeah.

Was that you would get?

I mean, that's the kind of storybook kind of version of how some of these things played out. It did play out that for me, definitely towards the end of my high school career too, right? If you only applied yourself. Right? I mean those types of things. And to a certain extent—I mean, this may sound a little cocky, but I thought I could. You know, I thought I could turn it on or off.

Rob Iopa was a classic example of a high school underachiever, a student who had the potential to do well if he only applied himself. During graduation day, a heart-to-heart talk with his grandmother began to set Rob on a new path.

It was my graduation day, and my grandmother kind of looked at me after this kind of turmoil over the past four years of up and down cycles. She's been an important part of my life as well, I mean, all the way through. I mean, she literally was looking at me almost with tears in her eyes saying, So, what are you gonna do now? I don't know why. I probably had thought about it. I actually physically failed high school drafting. I got an F in high school drafting. But I loved it. I loved the precision of drawing, you know. I didn't like being in class at the time; it was kinda strange. But I loved the precision of how things met. And mathematics has always been kind of something that I was interested in. I loved geometry, I loved trigonometry, I loved the kind of shapes and patterns, and the complexity of figuring something out. In response to my grandmother, I said, I'm gonna be an architect. I mean, it was probably the first time I ever blurted it. And I remember to this day where I was, and what I said, and how I said it.

Had you met an architect before?

Yeah. So, we had an architect in our family circle. He was my Uncle Jay's friend. He's still a practicing architect in Hilo. And I mean, I've told him this many times, that he was my inspiration. He was just cool, you know. I mean, he had the right cars, he had this long, flowing hair, he always dressed nice. It looked like something that was interesting, and it seemed creative. And I was like, Wow, I want to be an architect. I didn't know how to get there.

Hawaii Island Mayor Billy Kenoi, Rob Iopa's close friend and classmate in high school, shared a similar high school experience, and spoke about it in a 2014 commencement address, which went viral on YouTube.

Because I had a 1.8 GPA out of high school, when I told guys I was going college, they told me, Easy, Hawaiian, maybe you better throttle back some of that ambition and dreams. I'm here for tell you guys, No listen to them. Okay? 'Cause next thing you know, anything is possible.

So, I moved to California and went to junior college, and that was kind of, you know, a big transition step for me to kind of go on a different path.

You chose your junior college?

I did. You know, I mean, we joke. One of my best friends is Mayor Keno'i on the Big Island, so we were both graduates, classmates, best friends through high school. We were looking at colleges that we could kind of go to, and we were looking to proximity to the ocean, and kind of ratios of men to women as our criteria, you know, at the time. So, one of the areas was in kinda Central California, and it just so happened that I have an aunt that lives in Salinas. So I chose Monterey Peninsula College.

And was the thought of being an architect still in the back of your head?

It was the singular focus at that point.

Oh, really?

Yeah. I mean, almost in a way that nothing else mattered, and there was no doubt aside from that. I did very well in junior college. You know, I mean, I definitely applied myself.

Rob Iopa's hard work at junior college paid off, and he was accepted into the California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo. He continued his pursuit of a career in architecture; however, when he first got there, the program was not quite what he expected.

I think it was a little bit of a culture shock, kind of going to a school that was purposely focused on architecture at the time. I was still doing mechanical drafting, really. So, I was still trying to connect lines and to draw a perfect circle, and these types of, you know, manual drafting exercises that I thought was architecture, or the precursor to architecture. And then, I got to school, and they started to talk about the world of design. And I never really understood that, you know. And they were talking about composition, and proportion, and these terms that I never have heard before. I mean, I literally thought that I was drawing blueprints; that's what architects did. Right? I drew a floor plan for you, so you could build a home. I was a little, maybe even ashamed, if you will, that I wasn't as versed in design as what my peers were. So, I'd work in our studio environments, and then I would go home and work extra. You know. Because I knew that I probably needed that little extra time to kinda come up with a solution that would be on par or better than others. So I mean, it's still in my work stream today that, you know, maybe I gotta work a little bit harder than everybody else, you know, to get a little bit further ahead.

After seven years of post-high school education in California, with a bachelor's degree in architecture from Cal Poly, Rob Iopa was ready to return to Hawaii to begin his career.

I had really envisioned going back to Hilo. That was my focus. I had envisioned going back to Hilo, and the years prior I had interned twice in Hilo, and then once on Oahu. The second time in Hilo, I found a firm that I really enjoyed working with. There was a man named Marty Stewart, and another architect. He's still an architect in Hilo now, Neil Erickson. Both of them had hired me for the summer and gave me some pretty

extensive responsibilities through that summer. I was like, Wow, these guys, they're not just having me draw meaningless kind of details; they're saying, Hey, bring your creative thought. I really liked it. I liked the small town kind of focus and thought that's what I wanted to do. So, they hired me. I moved back home, I moved into a place, shipped everything there. I was ready to go, and a week before I was supposed to start work, they called me and said, Well, we just had three big jobs fall through, we can't give you the job. Which at the time was kinda devastating. The year before, I had interned at Wimberly, Allison, Tong and Goo, WATG now. Really, one of the world's leaders in hospitality design, if not the world's leaders in hospitality design. Great story, local company, started here, to become this international power. And I really enjoyed it, actually, and they really liked me. But I still thought Hilo was the thing. So, when I found out that Hilo gig fell through, I called at the time, Charley Wallace, who was kind of the director of hiring, and he says, Come on over. You know, we got a job for you next week.

Rob Iopa's new job at WATG would lead him to work on high profile development projects mainly in Southeast Asia. While designing for cultures in foreign lands, Iopa began to develop a desire to design projects for his home culture in Hawaii.

I still credit much of kind of what we do today to that opportunity. The opportunity that the company provided, the opportunity that my bosses at the time provided, the kind of freedom they let us in exploration. Right? I was twenty-five years old, out there with an expense account, designing some pretty high profile jobs, you know. I mean, I was like, Shucks, do they really want me to do this?

[CHUCKLE]

You know? But we were able to accomplish some really good things. I was in Kuala Lumpur, the tallest buildings in the world, the Petronas Towers were being built. WATG had a project right next door; literally, right next door for the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, that we would keep tabs on, but wasn't our direct project. We were restoring the Eastern and Oriental Hotel, the E & O Hotel in Penang, Malaysia, which is equivalent to their Royal Hawaiian or Moana. You know, I mean, it's a—

It's an icon.

An icon of the country.

What brought you back home?

So, I believe it was probably about '98, there was an Asian recession. So I mean, essentially, all projects that we were working on went into kind of deep hibernation. So, we were going out on six-week stints for the better part of two years. We'd go out six weeks, come back two, go out six weeks. And then, it just stopped. So, we came back home, and I was ready to come back home. I mean, it had gotten tiring. We were designing for other people's cultures, and I started to then have this yearning, right, for designing for our own culture. It just so happened that I came back, and I got put on

two particular projects at the time that I think were instrumental in kinda defining my next stage. One was the Kuhio Beach Park redevelopment, which was a City and County project, that essentially started at the end of the Moana and went to Kapahulu Avenue. This was in the late 90s, early 2000s. Included new beach substations, surfboard racks, closed down a lane of Kalakaua, brought in all those grassy lawns and meandering walk. Really transformed Waikiki in many ways under the Harris administration. So, I was the point designer and project manager on that. Got my opportunity to kinda engage in community.

What was the other project, when you came back, you did?

Aloha Tower Marketplace. So, Aloha Tower Marketplace had already been built and developed in the early 80s, probably. But a new group had come in, Trinity, and Scott McCormick was the person at the time, who's still my client now at Turtle Bay. But they had looked at trying to reposition the Marketplace at the time. We were doing all of these master planning efforts, and you know, I mean, with various big interest by the community, particularly as it related to Irwin Park. So, a lot of community action, interaction at that point. I had been dealing with the City as part of the Kuhio Beach Park project, and I got to deal with the State, the Aloha Tower Development Corporation has a board of appointed officials, and having to go through that process. And just all of that started to spur my next set of desires, I guess, and that's when I really started to focus in on doing work only in Hawaii.

After leaving the architecture company WATG to focus on more Hawaii-based projects and spending a year designing for Architects Hawaii, another large Hawaii firm, Rob Iopa decided to step out on his own and cofound a new firm called WCIT Architecture.

And it was really because of a calling and opportunity to join up with two of my former bosses at WATG who left to start their own firm and we joined to start the firm we have now.

Was that in 2000?

In 2000.

And I read that you went from start up to one of the largest architecture firms in Hawaii, in maybe eight years.

Yeah. Maybe even shorter. I mean, we never reached the kind of plateau of the largest firms in town, like Architects Hawaii and Group 70. But I mean, we were definitely in the top three or four.

How did that happen?

Timing, luck, friends. 2000 was the kind of beginning of this incredible economic boom throughout the world, but definitely here in Hawaii.

Royal Hawaiian Hotel; how'd you feel when you got that job?

It was quite remarkable, you know. I mean, there's periods in time and projects that you go back and you kinda just relive. But in my mind, that was The Project that said, WCIT has arrived. We had been doing significant projects on the outer island, but you know, as a firm, as iconic as the Royal Hawaiian Hotel was, it was really incredible. We still tell the story, and others tell it for us that were on the selection committee. But we came in, and for the first half an hour of our hour presentation, all we talked about was the history of place, how important that place was. We told the story, the legend of Kaauhelema and you know, Kakuiewa, and the scratching and the planting of the grove. We went through all this kind of history before we came up with our solution. And you know, I mean, it was the first time that our way of thinking and our methodology had gelled in such a way that people got it. It was the restoration of the royal grounds of Helemao; that's what we called it. I mean, we said that the place had historic significance. Royal Hawaiian Center right in front had already started to tell the story of Helemao and the importance of this place, but we thought that the Royal was the kinda culminating component of that, and that we had to restore the stature of this place. Not just because it's the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, and you know, a world iconic, but because the place was so significant. That's where Kamehameha landed, right, to unite the Hawaiian Islands. The first Kingdom of Hawaii was established right on those grounds. There's just tremendous amount of history.

Rob Iopa and his firm WCIT Architecture broadened their attention to a new type of design project: children's books. Their first book, Aama Nui, was published in both English and Hawaiian, in the hopes of celebrating Hawaiian culture while teaching keiki about creativity and architecture. At the time of this conversation in 2014, Rob had just launched the book.

In all the things that we are doing right now, and all the projects—and my clients are watching. Excuse me. But that one has my most time and attention right now. You now, I mean, we just spent a week at Merrie Monarch launching the book, which had gotten great kind of reception. We found out two weeks ago that we were awarded a Historic Hawaii Preservation Award for the book, and last week we were awarded two Pookela Awards for it. I mean, we aren't book writers, but it was just this way of expressing how history and culture and place can exhibit itself as inspiration for architectural design. So, it's a simple story I essentially wrote for my children. They are in the book. They're the two turtles, Makalii and Makana. But it was inspired by the idea that there was a home that we were looking to build in Keaukaha on these ponds, and the fact that the home needed to be raised above ground for tsunami inundation. I've always hated the idea of just, you know, building on stilts. That just looks strange. And I said, you know, When we design this, we've gotta find a way that this building can actually touch the ground, almost like legs. Then we started to play with the story of legs, and we drew the first one, and it just so happened to have eight legs. And we said, It's a crab, it's an aama crab. The aama crabs are all over in this area on the rocks in Keaukaha. So, the story is called The Aama Nui. Aama Nui is a one-eyed crab that protects these ponds. He has one eye, because he's been protecting, he's been beefing on the ponds and he's lost an eye in the process. But it's also the inspiration of

the design of the home, so the home is also Aama Nui. So, the story tells a simple moololo that talks about the crab, but also the inspiration of design, and then you see the design of the home. So, we call it an architectural book series for children.

Wow. So, does that mean that's another career you're gonna be running on a parallel course?

Yeah; we are, actually. I mean, so the second book is in process right now. It's Hale Olelo; it's of the creation of the College of Hawaiian Language at UH Hilo. And we have a dozen of these stories already baked, and some of them have built projects, you know. So, Royal Hawaiian, the story I just told, this perfect setting, right, to create another one of these books. What we're really trying to focus in on is that there is reasons and ways to express yourself's creativity with the history and stories of our place.

In 2013, work was completed on the University of Hawaii at Hilo Kahakaula O Keelikolani College of Hawaiian Language building. The building sits across the street from Waiakea High School, where Rob Iopa spend his tumultuous teenage years. When Hilo-born Iopa spoke at an even for the new building, he said it was one of his happiest moments to design the building, and that he finally became a Hilo architect. Mahalo to Rob Iopa 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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I'd like to say that our best designs do get built, because that's what makes them the best; right?

Because they're do-able.

They're do-able. Right? I mean, we can all live in this kind of fantasy world and design what-ifs. I mean, I've seen many wonderful proposals that never meet fruition. But the best designs are the ones that get built.