

GUEST: CORALIE MATAYOSHI

LSS 806 (LENGTH: 27:16)

FIRST AIR DATE: 9/30/14

A lot of my best red suits have come from the Punahou carnival white elephant. Because people buy these red suits, and they think, Wow, it's so nice. And then, they think, Mm, it's kind of, you know, racy. But of course, it's Red Cross; I need those red suits.

Have any of the people who formerly owned a suit you bought at the thrift store, the carnival, have they approached you and said, Hey, I used have a suit like that?

[CHUCKLE] No, they haven't; not yet. But a lot of people compliment me on my clothes. And really, if I spend twenty dollars on a dress, that's a lot.

Coralie Matayoshi's parents taught their children to live within their means. It's a lesson that has served Coralie well, and one that her children have also embraced. Coralie Matayoshi, 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. Attorney Coralie Chun Matayoshi became the chief executive officer of the Hawaii Chapter of the Red Cross in 2003. Although she has spent most of her career as an executive director of nonprofit organizations, she had a very different plan when she was growing up.

I went to Lincoln until fifth grade. And then, in sixth grade, I transferred to Punahou. And one of the reasons was, I was a little nerd with glasses, and you know, kind of meek, and I just didn't want to get hijacked in the bathroom of Stevenson. [CHUCKLE] Which is what was happening at the time. But I also was a bookworm, and I really wanted to go to Punahou, and so I got in, and I went on scholarship. I come from a family of four girls. And my parents always wanted a boy, especially my father, who was a star basketball player. And so, if any one of us girls had been a boy, our name was already picked out.

What was it?

Derek.

[CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE] So, they really wanted a boy. And so, we kind of grew up half Betty Crocker, half jocks. You know, all of us ran track. I had a bruise on my leg from jumping over the hurdles. [CHUCKLE]

So, the best of worlds; athletics and home ec.

Yeah; really. We learned how to bake pies and things, and it was really neat. All of us learned how to sew at an early age. When I was in fourth grade, my mother taught me how to sew, and then you're on your own. Everything that I wore, I sewed.

Throughout high school?

Yeah.

Going to Punahou?

Yeah. And I even sewed all of my curtains in my house, and all of the kids' clothes.

What didn't you make?

You know, I think I made everything. I made bumper pads for cribs. I made blankets, baby blankets for people. I even sewed suits, like this. I wouldn't do that anymore. [CHUCKLE] But at that time, it was far more economical, because you could get fabric at a reasonable cost. And I like to be creative. I remember going into the dressing room at Liberty House at the time with my sister, and we'd get a dress that we liked, and we'd go in the dressing room and draw it out, and then make our own patterns with newspaper [CHUCKLE] and duplicate that.

Now, were your parents well off?

No, they weren't.

So, you had to live within your means.

We had to; yes. And that was the biggest lesson, I think, is to live within your means. So, my parents were both the eldest of large Chinese families, and so they didn't get to go to college. They had to go to work to support their siblings, so that they could go to college. And so, it was really important for them to have a better life for their children.

So, first, they sacrificed for their siblings.

Yes.

And then, they sacrificed for their children.

Yes. In fact, they waited seven years. And in those days, having your first child at twenty-seven years old, that was old. People used to have them at twenty, right, if you didn't go to college. They waited, and they saved their money so that we could have a better life.

What did your father and mother do?

My father was an insurance executive. He just worked his way up.

So, sales was the engine.

Uh-huh. And he became a manager of one of the insurance companies. And then, my mom was like a part-time Realtor, part-time homemaker. With four girls going, you know, to different classes and things, you needed somebody like that.

You talked about living within your means. Does that mean you were frugal?

Oh, yes. And I really passed it down to my children, as well. If it's not on sale, and you don't have a coupon, then wait. [CHUCKLE]

Did they resent that at any point?

No. It's really interesting. They never wanted the fancy clothes. To this day, they're not spenders, and neither was I.

To me, if you live within your means, then you can pursue your passion instead of worrying about money. It's not how much you make, but how much you spend. You can make millions of dollars, but if you spend it all, then you're in the same place as if you didn't make money.

So, that's how you define living within your means?

M-hm.

You've taken so many steps in your life, from the time that your dad wanted a boy, and you ran track and did other sports, and your mom showed you around the kitchen. Was your dad also skilled in the kitchen?

He was the best cook.

Wow; isn't that amazing?

Yeah. And you know, food really does bring families together. So, he used to cook for so many people, and just make, like, seven-course Chinese meals. You know, with the wok and everything. And I think that's how we learned how to cook. We were so spoiled, we didn't have to cook, but I would follow him around and say, Well, so how do you do that? And he'd never have a recipe; right? And I don't use recipes either. Oh, little of this, little bit of that. Okay; wait. What does that mean? A teaspoon or a tablespoon? You know. So, that's how I had all these recipes from him. Just orally, he'd just, you know, do it by feel.

As he went along, he would tell you?

Uh-huh.

Tell us about your life. I know that you were a beauty queen.

[CHUCKLE] A hundred years ago.

[CHUCKLE] You went off the track, and you went onto the stage.

Yeah. And actually, that helped me develop poise. It's all these little things that you never think you're gonna use in life. And so, I always tell people, just make best use of all of the things you can learn, 'cause you never know when those skills are gonna pop up and make you better.

Why did you decide to run for Narcissus Queen, I believe it was, in '76?

Yes; yes. I actually ran for quite a few contests, and I was in modeling school, and it was just fun. It was a fun thing to do when I was in high school, and we earned extra money and things. And then, I also was a flight attending for

Aloha Airlines uh, during part of my college years. And all of that built confidence and poise, and things that I needed later on in life.

But all along, that was not your eventual destination. What was that?

Not at all. Ever since I was in high school, I had the single-minded passion of being a lawyer. I just loved the idea of being on the right side of things. And in those days, you know, Chinese families, you're either a doctor or a lawyer. And I didn't like the sight of blood, and I really excelled in writing. Not really speaking; that came a little bit later on. And so, I chose law, and I loved it. When I went to Berkeley, I took constitutional law. I was just so into it.

If we could back up one more time; and that would be to meeting your husband.

It was very interesting. You know, I didn't really have time to date that much, because I was always working fulltime and going to school fulltime. That didn't leave me a lot of time.

But you met a lot of people in your job as a flight attendant, and at school.

Yes, I did.

But didn't date.

Interesting story about meeting my husband. I was in a sorority, and my sorority sister's boyfriend was roommates with Ron, my my husband. And so, we went to a party, and they said, Oh, he's graduating. And you know, I went there to meet him and others. And at the time, he had kinda long hair, and he didn't pay much attention to me. And I thought, Okay, whatever. You know. [CHUCKLE] And then, I got a call a week later, and it was him. And I was a flight attendant for Aloha Airlines, and I was the bottom of the totem pole, so you didn't know your schedule, you were on reserve. You wouldn't know if you were gonna fly at all until the day before. And so, when he asked me for this date, it was to the tennis match between Ken Rosewall and Arthur Ashe at HIC. And I said, You know what, I'm sorry, I don't know my schedule. You can ask somebody else; whatever. But I'll let you know what my schedule is. So, I'm glad he didn't ask anybody else, because I got my schedule, and did you know that Aloha Airlines wanted me to go to that tennis match, because I was Narcissus Queen at the time. That exact match. That was my job to go. So, it just was so neat; it was meant to be. So, I went out on that date with my crown and sash in my bag, and whipped it out afterwards, and I got to give leis to

Arthur Ashe and Ken Rosewall, and the fifty-thousand-dollar check, I think, to Arthur Ashe.

All while on a date.

Yes. [CHUCKLE]

And so, what was it about him that got to you?

I just love him so much. And we think alike. We finish each other's sentences. We just fell in love. It wasn't love at first sight; I think it was at second sight. And then, we just knew it, we were gonna get married. I mean, we didn't say it, and it took about five years. I followed him to Berkeley, because he got into graduate school, and I said, Okay. So, we did a little bit long distance for about half a year, and then I applied to Berkeley, and I went there. And I don't think I would have gone to Berkeley, had it not been for Ron. I would have graduated from UH, which would have been great too. But that experience of going to Berkeley was just wonderful.

When she graduated from law school, Coralie Matayoshi worked as a trial attorney with the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington, D.C. Meanwhile, her husband Ron went on to earn a doctorate degree. After he finished school, Ron and Coralie moved back to Hawaii with a new family member; they had a baby boy. And Coralie started having second thoughts about a law career.

We had our first child in Washington, D.C., and that really changed things. I just didn't think that it would change me so profoundly. The priorities, the balance, the stress; it was so hard, because I came back with a two-month-old child. I was supposed to start right away, and I thought I was gonna be able to do that in private practice.

Because in the past, you'd always been able to do anything you wanted to; right?

Yeah. Right. It was just, well, why not? You know. And then, I had to beg the law firm; Can I have one more month? I'm still nursing and things. And they let me. But when I got there, it just changed me so much. We'd drop our son off at the babysitter, and pick him up late at night. The baby had a longer day than I did. You know, I just felt so guilty. And my husband helped so much as well. If I hadn't had him doing what he did, it would have been impossible. So, it was just my happiness. I just wasn't happy. I was the only woman attorney, they didn't have a maternity leave policy. It wasn't their fault they didn't; they just didn't have one before.

When was that?

That was in '84. So, I graduated in '81, and in '84 we came back. And I remember that one of the partners came back from China with gifts for the three associate attorneys. Two of them were men, and then there was me. And I had just came back with the baby; right? So, there was a picture of a baby panda snuggled with his mom. And I thought that was so sweet. I loved it; it was so endearing. But the men, the other attorneys got pictures of these fierce warriors. And we were all litigators. And I thought, Hm, is that how they view me? So, I was a little bit conflicted there. Loved being a parent, loved being a mother, would never trade it. But I can also be a fierce warrior, too.

So, how did you work that out?

It was really difficult. I was just always conflicted, and just felt that I really wanted to explore other avenues. And at that time, I thought, Oh, boy, I'm gonna disappoint my parents. You know, they spent all this money for me to go to law school. That was what I wanted, that was my dream. How could I possibly change so much? So, it was really hard. I kind of decided after my second child was born not to go back to the firm, and to try to explore other things. And so, I worked for Tony Chang at the Legislature, something that I had always wanted to do. I'm a political science major; I just never had time to do it, because I worked fulltime with Aloha Airlines, and went to school fulltime. And so, there was not time for anything else. So, I went there, and I had some time to think. And then, I got tapped on the shoulder. I never look for jobs; they always find me. [CHUCKLE] And there was this struggling nonprofit called The Hawaii Institute for Continuing Legal Education; it was housed in the law school. And nobody told me that it was so struggling; it was really bankrupt. I mean, later on, after they hired me, they said, We were gonna hire you or else we were gonna close it down. And frankly, in the early days, I thought, Should have closed it down. [CHUCKLE] It was just really hard, but it made me struggle and learn all kinds of things, and use my creativity. I got artists from the University to help me just perk up the whole program. And I got Jim Burns to help me revitalize the board and get the people that really cared about what we called HICLE. And we were able to dig ourselves out of the hole. It was a thriving enterprise after two and a half years. So, that was a really hard learning experience. I mean, I'd be at midnight eating cold bento, trying to do my financials, which you don't learn that in law school. So, I learned a lot.

And so, you had moved from lawyer to executive director?

Yes. It was executive director of a struggling nonprofit.

Nonprofit.

With nothing planned, and one staff that I hired. I came into an empty office.

You know, to go back just a bit to your corporate trial litigator role. You were struggling with the idea of time and priorities. But what about the actual practice of law? Because I think people get so enamored of, you know, the vital debate, and that concept of justice, and fighting for right. But I mean, in reality, there's a lot of drudgery.

You know, I think it's the fighting part of it. When it's an adversary system, you have to do what's best for client. And so, you are trying to hide information. I think now, with arbitration and mediation, there's a little bit more openness and trying to get to the bottom line and what people's needs are. But when you're in adversarial case, there's a lot of angst. And I got that really big dose of it when I was doing really high-powered litigation with the Department of Justice in Washington, D.C. We were against these big old law firms from New York, and here we were, you know, young, out of law school, because it's a government job; right? And we were able to do Grand Jury and Federal cases, and all of that.

But was it the adversarial part of it you didn't like, or was it having to so position yourself, so as not to see certain information or use it?

I think that the adversarial part of it. And don't get me wrong; I like to win, and it brought out the worst in me, you know. So, actually, I started ending up doing pro bono adoptions, and things that were more—

To make up for the adversarial go-for-it?

Yes. And when I went to the Bar Association, I really promoted arbitration and mediation. Because that's something that's a little less costly and also, it gets to really what the interests of the people are. Because when you go to court, somebody wins, somebody loses.

That's right; there is no win-win in courts at all.

Right. But also, just the practice of law, you know, was not conducive to family life. You go according to the court's schedule or the client's opportunities. So, if your kid has a birthday party, or you're not feeling good, too bad.

For Coralie Matayoshi, being a good mom had become more important than courtroom combat. And with her newfound passion for nonprofit work, other doors started opening. After spending thirteen years as the executive director of the Hawaii State Bar Association, a new opportunity opened up for her; she was named CEO of the Hawaii State Chapter of the American Red Cross. At the time of this conversation in 2014, she has served there for eleven years.

There's never a dull moment in the American Red Cross. And people talk about it; it's so funny, because it's like, Well, were you here for 9/11, or did you start with Katrina? You know. It's according to storms. And so, we're always ready to react. And you know, it's not only the big ones; it's the little ones, and a lot of people don't understand. We are twenty-four/seven, three hundred sixty-five days a year, on all islands, every time, anywhere. Right? And we respond to disasters every four days. In fact, within the two weeks during when hurricanes were coming and going, we had about six fires in Hawaii. And we normally respond every four days. It's a lot to balance.

It is. And are you directly related in those operations?

I'm glad I don't get woken up. In fact, nobody could be on call twenty-four/seven, really. I mean, I am when there's a big one, but we empower our volunteers. We could not do without our volunteers. They're the ones that work twelve-hour shifts, that sleep with the phone underneath their pillow. And what happens is, the first responders call hotline operators on every island as soon as there's a fire or other emergency.

So, an unpaid staffer or unpaid person gets the first call?

Yes. And they get the second call, too. Because that phone operator then deploys volunteer disaster action team members. We call them DAT teams, that are on call twenty-four/seven, you know. And they then respond to the fire or the emergency within two hours anyplace, anywhere in Hawaii. And that can be without any of my small staff being involved at all. We want them to do that. If it's a big one, or if there's a problem, of course, we're available. But that's the only way we can do it. How can we be on call twenty-four/seven?

It's a giant scope of a mission.

It is.

Especially since you can't plan it.

Right.

In this fiscal year, I can handle, nine major crises. But you can't do that.

It's true. It's a wacky kind of a budgeting. You know, you kinda guess how many you're gonna have, but if you have too many, then you have to cut back on everything else you do. So, it's a very difficult thing. And on the larger scale, the American Red Cross, you know, you run into problems when there's huge things like Katrina, where you need to go and help those people before you're able to raise the money. And then, you have to borrow from the bank, and then you have debt service.

And raising money after—

Afterwards.

--a disaster must be difficult, 'cause it's over.

It is. Right.

At least, for the news.

That is true. And you spent the money. And so, that really is hard.

Are you good at asking for money?

I'm good at asking for money, because it's not for me, and I'm so passionate about it. It's for the people that we serve. And so, I feel like I'm not really asking for money; I'm giving people an opportunity to learn about our mission, and to give with their hearts. And, you know, people in Hawaii especially, they're so giving. And there are so many great causes. And it's just trying to get them to look and see whether our cause matches theirs. So, a lot of people don't know that we do so much for the military. We have a twenty-four/seven, three hundred sixty-five day a year hotline that responds to emergencies when somebody is deployed in Afghanistan or wherever. If their family is here, they can get word to that family member to come home and say their last goodbye, or whatever is happening at home. And then, we provide casework for that family to be able to deal with that crisis.

And is most of that volunteer-driven?

There's a lot of volunteers as well. In fact, I have interns from the University of Hawaii doing that. But you have to have, you know, twenty-four/seven access to that. But we run the entire volunteer program at Tripler Army Medical Center.

We have hundreds of volunteers. They're all volunteers. Every one at Tripler is a Red Cross volunteer, including we have about thirty-five four-legged volunteers, therapy dogs. And they come with their handlers, and they have their little Red Cross badge with their little face on it [CHUCKLE], I.D., you know, and they visit all of the soldiers in bed. And it's just great what we do.

I live in Waialua, so there are chickens visiting nursing homes.

Oh, really? [CHUCKLE]

Yes. [CHUCKLE]

But animals are so great, because they accept you for what you are. If you don't have a limb or your face was blown off, they don't care. So, it's just a great way to open people up to therapy, and acceptance, and you know, just love and rehab.

Coralie Matayoshi's work with the Red Cross keeps her busy. But at the time of this conversation in 2014, she was logging in hours at an additional position as a non-paid appointee.

You're a University of Hawaii regent.

It's almost a fulltime job, and it's volunteer. I would never have done that when my kids were small. And so, you do the kinds of things to fit your life. And now that they're all grown, and one is married, two are lawyers, the other one's getting her master's, they're all great. They're doing fine. And so, I decided to embark this really difficult thing of being a regent.

Especially now. And as we talk, we have a new UH president, and we have an interim Manoa chancellor. Lots of leadership change.

Yes, there is.

Including among the regents.

Yes; we lost four people because of that disclosure requirement. I wouldn't do it unless I wanted to make a difference. So, it's just a time in my life that I can give back.

But can you make a difference in such an unwieldy institution? Is it doable? You know, with things being what they are.

It is very difficult; it is very frustrating. I have made a little bit of difference; we're chipping away.

And you got caught early on in the Steve Wonder blunder.

Actually, I was there a year. It was like the honeymoon period. Oh, this isn't so bad. And then, the Stevie Wonder thing hit. So, I was there throughout that whole thing, with MRC Greenwood leaving, and all of that.

And regents were subject to a lot of criticism.

Yes.

And I remember you being on TV and being asked, Why didn't you know all this? And you said, Well, I wasn't at those meetings.

It's really hard to know everything, you know, like in a huge policy manual. So, I'm the chair of the personnel committee, and I know the policies in that chapter. But I don't know the policies for the whole University. How could you? You know, with all of the executive policies and the Board of Regents policies, you just can't. It's just too amorphous.

You could have ducked out the door when that new policy came in of revealing all of your assets, and as you mentioned, four regents chose to go. You could have ducked out, but you chose to stay, even though it's difficult without a permanent Manoa chancellor, a new president, and four fewer regents.

Yes.

And an election going on. So, you don't have relief any time soon. Four new regents won't be appointed any time soon.

Right. And we are struggling to maintain quorum. I mean, right before this interview, I was at a budget and planning committee. And I said before I left, If I leave, are we gonna lose quorum? You know. You're that close to losing quorum to do the business that we have to do.

You know, for people who attended the UH Manoa, as did I, and people at other campuses too, it's sad to see what's happened at the UH in terms of gaps in leadership, and some leaders who didn't do us proud. I'm looking back to Evan Dobelle's days. Some people just throw up their hands and say, you know, They want us to be proud of having gone there, but we're not proud of how it runs.

My son went to University of Hawaii, and so did John Waihee. You know, a lot of the political leaders have come from University of Hawaii, as did the doctors.

So, lawyers, doctors, and PhDs.

Right. And now, pharmacy students. So, I think that that will change. So many people coming out of University of Hawaii, and we need to work harder, we need to be more businesslike, we need to treat the institution as a jewel. Because it is the future of Hawaii. It is so important for all of us, and that is why I'm still there. It'll drive the economic engine for the future, it's our workforce. We really need the University of Hawaii to do its best.

Coralie Matayoshi discovered her passion for serving the community because of her early decision to put her family first. Mahalo to Coralie Chun Matayoshi of Honolulu for sharing her stories 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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Why would you think it so farfetched that you be the head of the Hawaii Chapter of the American Red Cross?

Because I always wanted to be a lawyer; that was my dream, that's the only thing that I wanted to do. I wanted to do that so badly, and when I got there, it changed. Life changes. And so, you have to be flexible, and you have to be open-minded so that when that door opens, that you can go through. I remember when I first applied to the job of the executive director of the Hawaii State Bar Association, I didn't get the job. And I was so heartbroken. But you know what? Everything worked out, because a year later, I got the job. And in the interim, I was able to have another child, which I would have given up in order to have that job that I really wanted. So, things work out. You just have to trust in your abilities and trust in the timing.