

**GUEST: MARK DUNKERLEY**

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When you sort of deconstruct what we do, airlines fly the same types of aircraft, we put people in the same types of seat, we fly between the same two airports on a given route. So, the scope to really differentiate ourselves from the next guy is actually quite limited. Every airline, however, has to find some way of differentiating itself. And at Hawaiian Airlines, what we've chosen is to say, you know, We want to capture the sense of hospitality and all of the wonderful, wonderful cultural attributes of Hawaii, which people so appreciate, and we want to bring that forward to the customer experience. And so far—and I cannot guarantee it'll always be the case, but so far, we've felt that the cost of providing the food—and it is very costly, it's tens of millions of dollars a year, really sets up a customer experience that helps make us fundamentally different than our competitors.

**Mark Dunkerley joined the senior management team at Hawaiian Airlines in 2002, three months before the airline filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Today, under his leadership, Hawaiian Airlines is turning a profit. Mark Dunkerley, 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. Mark Dunkerley, chief executive officer of Hawaiian Airlines, developed his love of aviation at a very young age. His unconventional childhood involved traveling, by himself, on airlines that often took him halfway around the world.**

Life began for me in Bogota, Colombia, and the child of two economists. Both my mother and my father were economists specializing in the developing world. And they spent the balance of their careers as civil servants working either for different governments, or they had a stint teaching for a little while, and then, um, my father settled in an international organization, World Bank, in Washington, D.C. looking after the urban poor around the world.

**And do you have siblings?**

I have two siblings. I have a younger brother and an older half-sister.

### **You spent most of your formative years in boarding schools.**

Given the nature of my parents' jobs, we would typically move every couple of years from one country to another. I lived in Ghana in Africa, we spent a little stint of time in Boston, and also in the U.K. during this period of time. And when my father took a job in Washington, D.C., the expectation was that that would probably only last a couple of years, and we'd be off somewhere else. So, they were keen that I should be part of a single education system. And so, I was sent away to boarding school in England on the basis that no matter where we lived, I would be part of the same system, same schooling, and so on. Of course, no sooner had they done that, then they ended up settling in Washington, D.C. essentially for good. But yes, from a very young age, I think I was seven years old at the time, I was packed off to boarding school in England. And it was six hundred years old, and we led this sort of Dickens, slash, Harry Potter type life. No heating.

### **Did you really? No heating?**

Oh, yeah. I mean, we lived in the original buildings. And to this day, actually, usually when people ask about that, you know, they come in with this view that, Ah, I mean, how wonderful would it be to live in a building that's six hundred years old. And I can tell you, it's miserable. You know, we didn't have bathtubs; we had agricultural tubs. You had to pull up to the taps and fill with hot and cold water, and then you hopped in them. It was like Lee Marvin, you know.

**[CHUCKLE]**

It's just hard to imagine, but true. And we lived in these dorm rooms with not only no heating, but because the buildings were so old, none of the windows were double-glazed at all. And so, everybody went to bed at night with a hot water bottle in the winter.

### **Seven is so young to be packed off, as you described it.**

Yeah, it is. And you know, the funny thing is, as a child, your sense of normalcy is defined by the circumstances in which you're living. Because you don't have much of a sense of the broader world perspective. So, I didn't think it was particularly odd.

**Do you remember your parents dropping you off? Was that a fateful day, or not anything remarkable?**

Yeah; I actually remember it pretty clearly. I remember being told that I was going to be going to a boarding school. And it didn't sort of compute at the time. I then have a recollection of going to school and climbing on the airplane with my mother, and driving up and being introduced to the school. And again, it was sort of unreal. The thing I remember perhaps best from that period of time was traveling alone. I mean, I was seven, eight years old, and you know, lugging my trunk. This was in the days before luggage had wheels, and you know, catching trains, and buses to get to the airport to climb on a plane to fly back to Washington, D.C., and of course, reverse it.

**You would do that by yourself? You didn't have any companion?**

Yeah; I did it by myself. And again, in the context of today's world, that seems extraordinary. But we all did. I mean, there was a train, and as soon as I got on the train, there'd be some friends or some kids obviously from the U.K. who just lived a hundred miles away, and then there'd be other kids who just got off a plane from Hong Kong or from somewhere else. Latin America, for example, all going to school. And it didn't occur to us to think of it as being unusual or odd.

**Well, that's the train. What about the plane?**

So, in the plane, yeah, we'd travel by ourselves. And this is where I think I got an early inkling that I would end up in aviation. Because these were very glamorous days to be traveling. You know, the idiom was coined, the Jet Set. You don't hear people talk about that today. But at the time, you know, it was pretty unusual to see a little kid by themselves on an airplane. And of course, I was extremely well looked after on the airplane. I mean, there was um, no lack of attention and so on, and it sort of kindled some of the interest that I've had in aviation and travel, which has stayed with me to this day.

**So, it was exciting and safe. People taking care of you on the plane.**

Oh, yeah.

**Defying gravity.**

Yeah. I remember my first ride on a 747. I mean, how good was that? You've got this enormous, enormous airplane. And I was very fortunate to have this experience at the time when very few people traveled. And I knew it, and I

appreciated it even that age, hard, candidly, though it was to be separated from home the way that I was.

**When you look back, do you wonder why your parents did that? Or was that what people did at the time, especially in their field?**

Well, my parents were absolutely resolute that they could likely only leave us the quality of the education that we had, and that was always the plan. So, I think whatever their personal feelings, getting a good education was absolutely at the top of their list, and they were prepared to make sacrifices themselves. In fact, sacrifices on my behalf, frankly, to make sure that that took place.

**How often did you see them?**

So, I would see them three times a year. I would be back for a couple of months in the summer, and then sort of three weeks in spring, and three weeks over Christmas. And you know, everybody I went to school with was essentially in the same boat, and so it didn't strike us as being quite so unusual as it appears today.

**And what was life at boarding school like when you were in your grammar school years? I mean, did you get a lot of attention from staff?**

Well, you know it was ... so, if I really focus through that period and into my high school years, um, th—these boarding schools are interesting in somewhat odd places. The quality of the education is very high; very high. And you know, it's been the great asset that my parents have bequeathed me. There's no question about that. You have very few adults supervising a lot of kids. So, some things have stayed with me ever since. I mean, the way they stopped the student body from burning the place down, which they would do, unquestionably, if left to their own devices is, you know, they made sure that you're busy from dawn from dusk.

**With what? With schoolwork?**

Oh, uh, schoolwork.

**Athletics?**

There was lots of sports, lots of schoolwork, you've got to clean the place. There were all kinds of sort of chores and things that you have to do. And it's by keeping you occupied essentially all of the time is how they sort of essentially controlled the uncontrollable, you know, great sort of mob of kids. So, you

know, that's one of the things that I took away. At the same time, you know, without very many adults around, you develop the ability to look after yourself. There aren't any corners you can hide.

**You don't wait for somebody to come kiss your boo-boo, kind of thing.**

Yeah; correct. And you know, children in that collective environment can be rather cruel to one another. And of course, they get over it a day or two later, and then alliances change. The Lord of the Flies is a famous book, which felt very biographical, frankly, from the way that things were. So, to survive and prosper in a boarding school, you learn some life lessons. You become quite self-reliant at a very, very, very early age. You don't have much adult sympathy available to you. In that sense, it's a school of hard knocks. And it's sort of an interesting contrast, because I was extremely fortunate to get a great education at one of the most famous English boarding schools that's out there, and so, I'm amongst a very privileged few. At the same time, it was a school of hard knocks.

**Mark Dunkerley says he didn't have any particular ambitions when he was kid, and instead was satisfied with just getting by. It wasn't until he nearly finished his education and entered what he calls the real world that his many years at boarding school started to pay off.**

**So, you're a kid, and you're jet-setting, and meeting your parents three times a year for summers and vacations. And what was your plan? I mean, you knew you loved aviation, but did you have grand plans as a kid?**

You know, I really didn't. In fact, I was a very sort of poor student. I mean, notwithstanding the fact that I had always managed to sort of scrape into some pretty good schools always by the skin of my teeth, once at those schools, I then set about doing as little as I possibly could.

**So, you liked to be busy, but you didn't like to get ahead in your schoolwork?**

Yeah; correct. I mean, I struggled to um, keep interested in, you know, the subject matter. And I was considered a sort minor jock at school. I mean, in the sports that I cared about, I was typically on the school team. But I was never the star, never somebody that people would be talking about um, on Saturday afternoon after the game was over. So, I had a lot of interest in in sports, but I was not particularly focused or driven. And it was, I think, a real surprise to people who knew me, when in my twenties, I became considerably more focused than I am. Because I think up to that stage [CHUCKLE], I think they probably would have said that I seemed largely without direction and focus.

Being at a boarding school makes you in some respects quite mature, because you have to deal with some very complicated human interactions. Because as I mentioned, you don't benefit from parental guidance and so on, so you've gotta learn pretty quickly. In some senses, I think was quite mature, but in a range of other senses, I wasn't particularly mature at all.

### **You went to the London School of Economics, and then what happened, then?**

So, I was at London School of Economics, and I went LSE largely because it was not a campus university; it was a university in the middle of London. And during that period of time, I wasn't that focused on work. I was focused on having a pretty good time in London, and I enjoyed that. Coming to the end of my time at LSE, my game plan, such as it existed, was to go and get a PhD in economics and follow in my parents' footsteps in that area. But I really felt that, you know, four or five more years, or given my attributes as a student, perhaps eight, nine, ten more years as a student, you know, it didn't seem like such a good alternative. And I'd had this interest in aviation, and there was a master's program available in the economics of air transportation, and I won a scholarship, so I took that. It was a one and a half year master's program, so I went and studied at Cranfield. And it was really then that I felt that I sort of found my calling and wanted to be in aviation.

### **Finally, things just came together for you?**

Yeah; they did. There was something about the real world that I found sort of stimulating and appealing. And you know, my background is sort of interesting inasmuch as it's very different. But as a consequence of that, I didn't naturally fit in, in any environment. I've never in my life been part of any sense of a majority, you know, whether it was at school. Vacation time, I went to the United States, and so I didn't share and, you know, I didn't see what movie was on, on Christmas Day in the U.K., because I was in the U.S. And so, in all kinds of kind of little ways, my background was always sort of defined by being sort of in the minority. And not to say I've ever been disadvantaged by that, because I clearly have not. It wasn't really 'til I got into the workplace where the very things that defined me in that way, I think, were an asset as opposed to a liability.

### **You were an outlier who could look at situations with detachment. And your comment about the real world, I sense maybe the net was gone, you were on the rope without a net, and that was more exciting.**

Yeah. No, has been, you know, much more exciting, and I've enjoyed that. And when I look in the professional workplace, I'm always struck by how difficult

a time people have—not all people, obviously, but many people have in making decisions. And making decisions based part on analysis, but never with perfect information, and largely based on the accumulation of one’s personal experience is something I’ve always felt comfortable with. That’s not something that keeps me awake at night.

**Do you think that came from having to negotiate these unfamiliar situations throughout your school life, without your parents around?**

Yeah; I think that’s exactly right. I mean, I’ve always had to kind of work my way through from first principles. And it’s that aspect of life that I enjoy, and I still find very stimulating.

**Mark Dunkerley earned a Master of Science degree in air transport economics, and started his career in aviation. He advanced quickly and soon made his way into senior management positions at several different airline companies before moving to Hawaii to work for Hawaiian Airlines.**

**Now, based on your track record in airlines, you know, you came here, and everyone trumpeted you as a turnaround expert. And amazingly, you led a transformation at Hawaiian Airlines, which so many people thought could not be done. And I personally was surprised that you stayed after bringing the airline to very good financial health. But I suspect you’ve stayed because it’s never gonna be easy, and you like that.**

Yeah; I think you’re exactly right. First of all, you know, people are very generous, and they give me great accolades for the transformation that Hawaiian has enjoyed. But nobody should be under any illusion; this is the hard work of everybody in our company, and you know, it’s really uh, my great privilege and benefit to be part of this company, certainly not the other way around. But you know, this is a tough business. It’s competitive every day, we’re a tiny airline in a land of giants. We are one-twentieth the size of our major competitors. And so, we are on our toes, and that challenge in a sense gives me the same enjoyment and the same thrill that being in the middle of a turnaround does. This is a fascinating business. It’s exciting, there’s a new challenge every day, there’s never a dull moment. As a manager in it, you’ve got to balance a sense of the strategic direction with being prepared to make very quick decisions day-to-day to protect your position or to improve it. And it’s full-on exercise. I’m not a golfer, but there’s not much time for taking an afternoon off to play golf. People in our business work very, very hard. And that either stimulates you and you find it really interesting, in which case there’s no business like it, or it doesn’t, in which case it’s the wrong business for you.

**Based on what you learned at boarding school, has any of that stayed with you? For example, do you keep yourself busy all the time, and do you also keep your own counsel and not look for other people to guide you?**

Yes; I keep busy all the time, and it's natural to me. I'm incapable of sitting on the beach for an afternoon. I mean, utterly incapable of doing so. So, that is a life lesson that has stayed with me to this very day. And left to my own devices, I do tend to keep my own counsel, and you know, have absorbed that aspect from growing up. Where that has changed is my wife, who's from Latin America, has the opposite temperament to mine, and she has taught me a great deal. I mean, I'm a much better and more rounded person for having come to see and recognize that there's a different strategy for succeeding as a human being to my own, and that's helped me understand so much.

**How does her approach work for you?**

She is a much more intuitive person and has much better sense of the limitations of analytical thought and logic, and where intuition and emotion take over. And it has been a valuable, interesting lesson for me in my life to see that, to appreciate that, and it's made me a far more effective uh, adult as a consequence.

**Bringing the emotional intelligence in.**

Yeah; yeah. Yeah.

**And discernment.**

Yeah; absolutely. And without that influence, I think I would be much less able to understand the sort of broad dimensions and the three-dimensional nature of people and society, and situations.

**What do you do in your spare time, and what counts as relaxation?**

In the day of emails, and texts, and so on, there really never is a day that is truly ever away from what's going on. But the things that I enjoy doing is, I enjoy travel, to this day. My wife and I enjoy going places. I'm particularly fond of the African continent, and India, and Latin America as well. So, when we can get away and do that, which isn't very often, we do that. I have taken up again fly fishing, which is the one pastime I shared with my father, which after I started work, I didn't get to do for about thirty years. But I started up about five years ago. And an afternoon on the stream remains to this day probably the easiest way to clear my mind.



**And how much do you personally identify with Hawaiian values, Hawaiian culture?**

You know, really, it's better for other people to judge that than me, myself. I would like to think that they would say a great deal. I have lived in many, many different places, and as I mentioned earlier, I've always been used to really being a minority in the context of where I am. It has made me, I think, more open and more sensitive, perhaps, to other cultures and other values than other people might be. And as I've looked around, and I've had the luxury, frankly, of being able to pick and choose those attributes that I think resonate with me, I find myself over, and over, and over coming back to what terrific values Hawaii stands for, and how much therefore I feel comfortable here. I've lived in Hawaii now longer than I've lived anywhere else in my life. Which is, you know, pretty extraordinary.

**From being a very young jet-setter, to piloting planes himself, to his career as an airline leader, flying has defined Mark Dunkerley's life. Mahalo to Mark Dunkerley of Honolulu for sharing his life 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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**And then, you do something pretty crazy, which is acrobatic flying.**

Yeah; that's been a really important part of my life. You know, in graduate school, I saved up, and I learned how to fly. And in my early professional days, I would go out, rent an airplane about once a month just to keep current. And I enjoyed doing that. But then, somebody said, Hey, have you ever flown an aerobatic airplane? And I was game to try it. By the time we came down, I wanted to learn how to do this, and so on. And that started about a decade-long time when I got into competition flying, and I flew all kinds of aerobatic contests, domestic and international ones. And it was kind of a defining hobby for me. And even when I moved to Hawaii and stopped competing, because there are no contests here and so on, I continue to do it. I'm never quite as happy as I am flying an airplane upside-down.