

GUEST: KITTY LAGARETA

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You said you got in trouble a lot. Was that a trend that would continue later in your life?

Well, I really try not to, but I tend to be a little bit outspoken, and I tend to have opinions about things, and I tend to get involved. And I think when you do all that, sometimes it looks like you're causing trouble.

When you raise a question, or when you are outspoken, is it with the intent to shake things up?

No; it really isn't. Sometimes it's just a question, or sometimes it's just wanting to delve a little deeper into understanding something. I'm kind of an introvert, actually, in my private time. I'm not looking to cause trouble.

Kitty Lagareta is not one to back down from a challenge or hesitate to go against the grain. Honolulu business owner and operator, Kitty Lagareta, 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. Katherine Lagareta, better known as Kitty, joined the public relations firm Communications Pacific in 1986 as a junior account executive. Nine years later, she became its president and CEO. Kitty has always been a risk-taker, having grown up with teenaged parents who gave their children lots of independence.

In small kid time, I grew up in the Mojave Desert in California. I was there from about the time I was eleven, twelve. And my parents still live there, so it's a place I go back to as home. And in those days, it was about five thousand people in this vast desert, and it was an amazing place to grow up.

What did you do for playtime in the desert?

You know, rode motorcycles. I love motorcycles. I hardly wear dresses, 'cause I have all these motorcycle burns on my legs from falling on the tailpipe. But rode motorcycles, and chased lizards all the time. I can't even believe I did that, but we chased lizards and we caught things, and looked at 'em. And we played hide-and-seek on this vast desert. It's amazing to me how much time as kids we had, unstructured, alone, to explore or hang out with friends, where parents weren't hovering over us. Some of the best adventures are the ones that were misadventures.

You lived in a place that may be considered more dangerous than others, because of the climate, where you could get lost, and there's too much heat in the desert.

Yeah. You know, way out in the desert, you never know who's out there. And honestly, I was a very protective mom. My kids were born and raised here. I was a very protective mom, and I thought, You know, this would have never flown when I was a kid. But you know, it's the way it was, and I'm grateful for it.

Were your parents people who explicitly gave you life lessons, or did they teach you by example?

They always tried. My parents were very young; my parent were sixteen. My mother was sixteen when I was born, and so, it was kinda like ... there were times in my childhood where it was, which of us is raising which one? But I have wonderful parents; I adore them. They were very responsible parents, they were great parents. But no, they were not overprotective parents at all.

And what of life did you grasp from them?

You know, they always made me feel like I could do anything. You know, it was like, they gave me the freedom to make mistakes, take risks, do things that maybe were different or new, like ride motorcycles when you're twelve, thirteen years old on the desert. They kinda gave you the sense that the world may not be a perfectly safe place, but you can handle.

And what were they like individually?

They both came from sort of broken homes at a young age, and my dad grew up in Pennsylvania. When he was eleven, his dad left, and he has a much younger sister and his brother was an infant. And he kind of became the man of the house then. Very responsible, great values. He ended up going to trade school to become an engineer and had a very wonderful career, did very well over the years with that kind of vocational education. And when I was a kid, he

was managing cement plants by then. That's why we were in the desert, because there was a large cement plant there that he managed. And then my mom, you know, had my sister two years later when she was eighteen, and then we adopted my two brothers, one when I was about twelve, thirteen, and one when I was about fifteen.

So, no sibling rivalry there; they're so far apart in age.

But think about it; she had toddlers and she had teenagers at the same time. That's got to have been a very difficult thing. And she was kind of a 50s, 60s mom. And she hadn't finished high school, 'cause she had me. And basically, she got me into college when I was sixteen on this special program, 'cause she was so determined I would go to college as her oldest. And in the course of being counseled and all of that about my education, the counselor said to her, Where did you go to school? And she said, very embarrassed, I didn't finish high school. And that counselor, I think my mom is grateful to her, but I had to love that woman. I don't even know her anymore. She got my mom to start taking classes, take the GED test, and my mom got her master's in psychology. It took her a number of years, 'cause she went to a few classes at a time, but she had a great career as a clinical psychologist. And I'm really proud of her.

Is that right?

Yeah.

When did you leave the desert?

You know, the first time I left was, one summer I thought I was gonna go to school in Santa Barbara. That was the summer that they burned the bank, and then I went down to the beach. My apartment was on Sabado Tarde Road, this little road, and I loved this town. And everybody was playing naked volleyball, and so all it took was my Italian Catholic parents to come down and it was, You are out of here, you are so out of here. So then, I went back up to the community college, and met a boy from Hawaii. Grown up in Hawaii, not originally from Hawaii. And I had started college young; I had two years by the time I was eighteen. And he was a couple years older, and he was from Ewa Beach. And we got married when I was like, nineteen, and came here shortly thereafter.

That's what brought you to Hawaii.

Yeah; that's what brought me to Hawaii. The marriage lasted about thirteen years. We have two great sons from that marriage. And I think a lot of people thought after I got divorced, I would probably leave.

Did you ever consider it?

No; no. My kids' father and I wanted to have them in the same place together with us, so even though we were not together, it never occurred to me to go anywhere else. And I love this place; I felt at home here from almost the first moment. My first husband was kind of a hanai family member with Al Harrington and his family, and Al was a big entertainer when we first came over here, and he worked for him. So, we immediately kind of got into cultural things with him, a lot of the people in his show, native Hawaiian, a lot of the people were Samoan, Tongan. And we hung out with them a lot in those early years, and so, I kind of got exposed to different cultures almost immediately, and I loved it.

Did you finish college at the University here?

I did; I went back. I took a couple of years to just kinda get settled here, and then I had my second son, and then I went back to school. And then, he got spinal meningitis when he was eleven months old, and that took me on a journey. I thought I was gonna go to law school; that was my big goal, was to go to law school. And I was like, vice president of the pre-law society, and all of that. And after his hospitalization, I heard about the Ronald McDonald House and some people here were starting one, McDonald's and some community people. And that took my life in a whole different direction.

Your second child had spinal meningitis, or bacterial ...

Yeah; bacterial spinal meningitis. He was born very, very healthy, big huge healthy baby, and I was one of those all natural childbirth and breast feed, and all that kinda stuff. So, when he got sick, we almost lost him, and he was in the pediatric intensive care for weeks at Kapiolani Hospital. And I really credit them, because the care was so good. There was another child with something similar, older child who died in the bed next to him. He was in a coma for almost a week, and it was a very scary, scary thing. He lost his hearing pretty much as a result, but that's not stopped him in any way.

I can't imagine the fear of having your child in a hospital bed next to someone who passes away from the same thing.

Yeah; it's terrible. It was like moment-by-moment, and you get through it with your child. That was absolutely the most horrendous, scary thing I've ever gone through in my life.

How long did you go through it?

It was several weeks. And then, he had a long recovery.

And that's when you came across the concept of Ronald McDonald House?

What happened was, there was a mom there from the Big Island, and she was a single mom, and they'd flown her over on a medvac. And I got to know her over a period of the first week or two. And I noticed she didn't have any clothes, she was kinda living on whatever she got at the vending machine. And as we got to talk, I realized she didn't have a place to stay. And then I kinda looked around, and I realized that a lot of neighbor island families, they rent a car and get an ice chest, 'cause they want to be real close to their kids. They were essentially living in the parking garage and kinda using the facilities at the hospital, but that was it. 'Cause you can't afford a hotel if your baby's in neonatal intensive care for months, or your child's in the hospital for weeks. Nobody can, and nobody wants to be that far away. So, I was concerned about it, and I went down and talked to the hospital administrator. He was very kind; he said, You know, we can't take care of all the parents; we'll try. If there's somebody special you think needs our assistance, we'll send up our social worker. But we use all our resources to take care of the kids. So, he remembered me, I guess, because a year later, he called me up and said, You know, you were so concerned about that; well, these people are having a meeting here, some people from McDonald's and some people from the community, and I think they want some parents who had kids in the hospital. And I think you should come down for this meeting. And I said, Okay.

That meeting was the beginning of a new journey that took Kitty Lagareta into the world of fundraising. The efforts of the group were successful, and after the Ronald McDonald House opened, Kitty became its first staff member. While this experience eventually led to her future career in public relations, she pursued another interest; one that pushed the limits of risk-taking. She became a standup comic.

Some friends of mine were auditioning for a comedy troupe that Rap Reiplinger was putting together. So, in the middle of that for a couple years, I did standup comedy with this group called Hats. And I was working on Ronald McDonald House during the day, and at night we would perform, and in between somewhere I would write stuff. It was a great adventure.

What kind of comedy did you do?

You know, it's very common now. You see a lot of kind of feminist comediennes, and they do some pretty risqué stuff. And that's exactly what I was. You know, I grew up as a tomboy and I cussed a lot. I didn't cuss in my monologue. I finally have tried to wean that out of my vocabulary. But it was edgy stuff. I did a whole thing on masturbation; a whole monologue on masturbation.

Personal subjects, and then to go in front of a whole bunch of people ... didn't it frighten you?

Well, for me, it was a weird plaything. It was, Do women do it, or not? We only hear about men. Is that because they have language to describe it, and we don't have any? And so, the whole thing was about what kind of language women should have to even talk about it, if they did it. And it kind of ... you had to be there.

[LAUGHTER]

And it got laughs, good laughs?

It would bring the house down, once I especially got my rhythm. Rap loved it. And I remember my proudest moment, 'cause it was a very short career, was when we had a big review by Wayne Harada. And he said—I thought it was kind of a play on words; She talks about some very touchy subjects, but it's a display of astonishing wit. And I said, Okay, maybe this is something I can really do, because he said that.

And you wrote your own lines.

I wrote my own.

It wasn't improv; it was something you wrote.

We did some improv, Rap wrote some skits, but we were all responsible for our own monologues, and we wrote our own stuff.

They say that's one of the scariest things to do, public speaking, especially when you're mining for laughs and people may not find it funny. You don't know.

I think because Rap was there, and Rap was so brilliantly funny, and when we were trying out something new and it didn't quite click, he would mentor us and

say, You know, that's actually a good piece. And he did that with all of us; there were eight of us. But here's what's not working; here's what would really make it work. Try this. And so, that gave us kind of a safety net, and he was almost every time right; but I wouldn't say he was right every time. And you'd go out there, and people would howl, and that was the most exhilarating feeling, ever.

I bet. At what point did law school go off the table?

Law school kinda went off my radar screen when I discovered that side of me that like to be creative. You know, I really think I would have loved to do comedy forever, but other things intervened, and living out here in Hawaii, it was kind of a small market for it. Rap kept trying to get us all to go to the mainland, and we actually had a couple of chances to do that. But it just never was the right time to do that.

Did you think you'd found your profession at the Ronald McDonald House?

I did. And the fundraising part of it is a skill I learned, that I use a lot still today in things I do, and the communications part. I was terrified; I was the client of the PR firm I now own, and I was terrified.

What a switcheroo. I mean, you were the client of the public relations company you now own.

Yes.

And you hadn't gone to school for public relations or marketing.

No; even though I guess I was doing a lot of it. I like to write, we did a million presentations.

And you were an advocate.

And an advocate. And the PR firm was supporting; I was the client again. When they offered me a job, 'cause the House went into a phase where they were looking for somebody to be there that was more social work background and all of that once it opened, and I totally understood that. And they offered me a job, and I said, So, what exactly do PR people do? And it was kinda like, Well, you've been doing it.

I see.

I was like thirty-two, and I started at a very junior account exec level. Usually, most of the people that age were vice presidents in the company, so I kinda started at square one, so it gave me time to learn everything.

You got immersed almost immediately in meeting with people who were decision makers and influencers.

When I look back on Ronald McDonald House, I was such a newbie to any of that kind of thing. And that experience, I always tell people, volunteering if you have a passion, even when you go into it [INDISTINCT] yourself, you have amazing experiences. And I sat in a room; Sully Sullivan was our fundraising chair, and I think he was probably about eighty then, or late seventies. And there was like Sheridan Ing, and Bill Wall, and Bobby Pfeiffer, and we'd all meet once a week for breakfast, and I was like the fly on the wall note-taker. And they'd do their fundraising reports really quick, and then they would stay around. And they always said, Oh, stay around, kid. And I'd listen to them talk about business stuff, and I don't even know if I fully appreciated it at the time, but years later, so many of the things that I heard by being in that group for a year or two, just fundamental stuff about business and the way people think, the way those types of people think, was brilliant. And I use it every day, I think. And it's an incredible memory when I think about it. That came through Ronald McDonald House. So, that was an experience.

It's so interesting that you're not an MBA.

No.

And yet, it all sort of evolved naturally. You know, these things happened, you took advantage, you thought about it, and you made it work. You were Pacific Business News' first Businesswoman of the Year.

I know; can you believe that? You can learn every day from people. If you go in thinking, I don't know it all, it's amazing what you can pick up. And I think my whole life has sort of been that way, especially starting with Ronald McDonald House and just feeling like I didn't know what I needed to know, but I would find out, I would figure it out, I would learn from people around me. And my first client was Dr. Richard Kelley; he was probably in his early fifties, and he was the CEO of Outrigger Hotels. And because I had fundraising background, and he was trying to put together the Hawaii Convention Park Council to raise money to lobby for a convention center, that was my first project for almost the first two full years.

Well, that was an auspicious first client; Dr. Kelley.

Yeah; yeah. And you know, I still do a lot of writing for him, and work with him, and I admire him fiercely, and his family. They are some of the hardest-working people I know, and most down-to-earth people I know. And he was just a very dear mentor to me.

Communications Pacific had downsized considerably by the time Kitty Lagareta bought it and became its president and CEO in 1995. Under her leadership, the company started growing again, and revenues reached new highs. Then, in 1998, she was given an opportunity that many people in her position would probably have turned down.

A lot of times, public relations companies will not take on politicians, because it's a good way to find yourself a couple years later looking around and saying, Where's our business?, because the other side one. A lot of people stay away from it like the plague, but you didn't.

Yeah; no. Well, people always give me a lot of grief. You know, that was a switch for me, and I think because I had become very disillusioned with a lot of things in Hawaii, and I'd actually been offered a job to run the FleishmanHillard office in L.A., and it was after my kids had just kind of grown up and they were out the door to college and everything. And I was seriously thinking about it, because Hawaii wasn't a place that I liked so much anymore.

Because?

I kept volunteering, and trying to change things at the not-for-profit level, and it started to feel like it was political. It was around that time when a number of legislators went to jail. You know, I'm thinking of the Milton Holts and others, City Council members going to jail. And I thought, You know, I just don't know if I want to live in a place like that, and it felt like it was sort of inbred politically. And I thought, I don't know if I want to deal with that. And I went and explored this job and thought, I can't live in L.A. I came back and I thought, You know, maybe I should pay more attention to politics, and maybe I should get involved there. And I looked around, and I'd met Linda Lingle when she was mayor of Maui through some volunteer work with high school students that we'd gone over there to do, and I didn't know her very well at all. And she called one day and wanted to meet with me. She was thinking about running for governor in a couple years, and I knew nothing about politics. And she said, That's okay, we'll figure it out; it's a big race, I need a communications person, I think you're kind of a smart person. So, I started helping her in '98, and I immediately got calls from a lot of people around town, friends, my parents and kids. You know, if you're gonna do politics this time, it's really kinda stupid to get involved with the

party that has no power. [CHUCKLE] And I said, Yeah, but I like this candidate, and I really want to do this. And I didn't lose any clients; no clients said, I'm gonna quit. They just, I think, were kind of bemused. And Linda came within five thousand votes, and it was a huge learning and a wonderful experience for me, except for the losing part. But we all took it harder than she did. And before we had even let the dust settle, she was saying, We're gonna do this again in 2002. And I remember thinking, Ee, I don't know. But of course, I was onboard for 2002.

You weren't following the playbook of most public relations executives. You were following your mind and, to some extent, your heart.

Yeah. You know, I believe in that, because I think a lot of executives, if they can, they do that. And I just feel even when it's a learning experience, having the experience makes me better overall. And that was a learning experience. And oh, gosh, in 2002, we pulled it off, and that was interesting. And that was the other thing, kind of still in naïveté, not having been in politics, it was like, Okay, we're done, I can go back to my life. And I remember Linda called and she said, You know, I think you would be one of the people I want to recommend for Board of Regents. And I remember saying, Oh, why that? I mean, you know, I don't know.

Talk about political. [CHUCKLE]

She had to talk me into it. And it was my alma mater, it was something that sounded interesting. And that was another journey. But I thought we were done. So, that was the first lesson; you're not done when you get somebody elected.

That was such an interesting chapter in your life. For those of watching as well. I remember thinking, you know, what you got into was a mire with the president of the University, Evan Dobbelle.

Yeah.

And a very slippery situation. And your expertise is public relations, but it was very hard to manage it.

Yeah; and it's hard to be in it and manage something. I know that.

And as the chair of the Board of Regents.

Yeah.

I mean, I think there was a perception at some time that you were bungling it.

Yeah; yeah. I actually thought it was. I knew it was bungled, but I also had the perspective of there was a whole bunch of stuff. You know, it was an employee-employer relationship between the Board and Evan. And there are certain laws you have to follow, confidentiality and things. So, we were not in a position to say, Hey, we tried this, we did this. And I think the employee can say whatever they want pretty much, really. And you see that over and over. So, that was a disadvantage, and it was hard. The other part was, you know, you will never know the effort we made to do it carefully. And the sense, I think, that was there was that, I have this contract, no way you're gonna get me out of it, and I'm not going anywhere. And as time went on, I think it became clear the University was suffering, and we had to do something. And in fact, our creditors told us that. And it felt very bungled. It felt like there were lots of pieces that you couldn't control. It was horrible watching the public perception of it, and knowing there was another story, but you can't be the one to tell it. You're the employer.

I recall the Kaleo O University.

Kitty Litter, or whatever.

Their banner headline, the student newspaper said, Bad Kitty.

Yeah, yeah. Yeah; yeah.

So, that had to be a low point in general when people were saying, What are they doing over there, can't they get their act together on the Board of Regents?

It was a low point in terms of not being able to do anything about it.

Especially since you were used to the other party, in your view, bungling it. And then now, you're perceived that way.

Yeah; absolutely. That was really rugged; that was really rugged, I think for all of us. And yet, I found the decision we made to be the right one. I've never regretted that decision. How it unfolded and what it looked like on the outside; yeah, there was a lot of regret about that, but not the decision. And I don't think any of us did.

So, the right outcome.

The right outcome; and it really was. You know, that's the decision. I mean, there were regents who quit because they didn't want to go down. They knew what needed to be done, but they didn't want to be in the middle of all that. And there were some amazing people who stuck around and said, This needs to be done for the good of our university. And I think there is some vindication in what happened at Westfield College.

Many times, especially over politics, you felt, no doubt, uncomfortable.

You know, I've never found discomfort to be an inhibiting factor.

I'm sure you had some sleepless nights over the regents matter.

Many; I think I didn't sleep for like a whole year. I think that's what you call political courage. I call it that when I see it in other people. And when you're in it, it doesn't feel like any kind of courage; it feels like a nightmare. But in the end, if something good came out or a group of people were able to come together to make something happen that was right or needed to happen, or bigger than they could do on their own.

What if it fails?

Yeah; it does. I failed in '98. Do you know how many people wouldn't even talk to me after '98? She's the one who went to the other side, you know. I lived through it.

It sounds like you've been able to do what you want to, what you feel strongly about, and not really suffer too much for it in business or personally.

I mean, I don't know if somebody may be out there trying to get me, but I'm still here, and I'm probably not even aware of most of the time. And what I am aware of is that I have a whole lot of folks in the community I love working with, I have fabulous clients and a team that I work with day-to-day. I pretty much wake up enthusiastic and say, I want to go make this happen today. And so far, nobody's stopped me. [CHUCKLE]

From riding motorcycles, to fighting for her child's life, to risking her reputation, to making difficult decisions, Kitty Lagareta has shown herself to be a risk-taker and a fighter. Mahalo to Kitty Lagareta of Honolulu, 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 started skateboarding when I was nine with those little metal wheels, and I thought it was the most exhilarating thing ever, and I just loved it. And I continued doing it past my first child being born, and then I used to skateboard with my sons. I remember we were at Manoa Elementary School, and there was a big driveway down to the school, and we were going down it, and it had a lot of loose gravel. And I was about forty-three and my sons were, you know, older. Anyway, I hit the bottom, and I was so excited that I'd made it down that I put my foot down, and I went sliding across the gravel, and just took all the skin off. And I had to go to the doctor to get cleaned up. He goes, You know, a woman in her forties has no business skateboarding. And so, I kinda took that to heart, but when I turned fifty, I started again.

[CHUCKLE] Do you remember saying this? There's nothing quite like rolling along with the wind blowing by, not sure if you're going to crash.

Yeah; that's sort of my motto, my life experience, yes. Yeah. There's something about kind of pushing the edge. I think if you can keep that feeling you had as a kid in some of your life day-to-day, those are things that felt good then, and they still feel good.