

GUEST: SUSAN YAMADA

LSS 817 (LENGTH: 26:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 5/5/15

I just talked with a CEO of a large company who said, If I'm feeling comfortable, I suspect something is wrong. Something has to be wrong.

Yeah. I think there always needs to be that level of discomfort, because that means you're pushing things, you know, whether it's your company, your programs, yourself personally. So, people go, Why? Why do you want to do that? And I think the more you do that—and pushing your comfort zone, in my mind, is taking risks. And it's not like, yeah, I'm gonna jump off a cliff and hope, you know, I have my parachute. It's really calculated risks that you're trying to take. And I think what that does is, it really builds confidence that, Hey, I can do it, I can talk to Leslie on TV, and everything was good, and I didn't die. And all those culmination of experiences, I think, gives you the confidence to move forward and do other things in the future. It gave me the confidence to move from one industry to another industry, it gave me the confidence to take risks that, you know, others may not have taken, and know that it's not gonna be the end of the world if it fails, because I'm building a skillset that I can then transfer to something else.

Susan Yamada's confidence has taken her from playing football in the streets of Kaneohe to leading tech companies during the dot-com boom. Even with her crazy work hours and success on the West Coast, she never lost sight of home. Susan Yamada, 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. Susan Yamada, raised in Windward Oahu, was an accidental entrepreneur who did very well in the Silicon Valley dot-com industry. She was so successful that when she returned to Hawaii to raise her children, she didn't ever have to work for pay again. Yet, she does. Today, Yamada is the executive director of PACE; that's the Pacific Asian Center for Entrepreneurship within the Shilder College of Business at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. She's mentoring Hawaii's future entrepreneurs. Yamada grew up in Kaneohe, where she realized at a young age that she loved to compete.

Tell me about your family.

Kind of a Rockwell-ian childhood. You know, my dad had his own business selling plywood in town, in Kalihi. My mom was a schoolteacher, so she taught kindergarten at Heeia Elementary School. And I have two brothers; one older than me, two years, and one younger than I am.

So, you're the only girl, and you're the middle child.

Yes.

Does that say anything about you?

Hm ... that's a good question. I think it says a lot about me in that I grew up playing more baseball than with dolls. I remember one Christmas I got a hairdryer, and that turned into a nice little pistol.

[CHUCKLE]

So, yeah.

And you're athletic.

I love athletics. Growing up, we played in the neighborhood, right? Baseball, football, with all the neighborhood kids. So, yeah, I love sports.

Did you play in the street?

Oh, yeah.

[CHUCKLE]

In the street.

And the cars had to wait a little bit 'til you could get off the road?

Luckily, we lived on a dead end, but you know, every time the ball went into, like, the mean neighbor's house, you know, everybody ran away.

[CHUCKLE]

Whoever hit the ball into that yard had to go get it; right? So, it was just kinda like that. Okay; pass the telephone pole, that's a touchdown. Okay. And then, this manhole cover, that's home plate. So, it was really cool.

That's interesting that you were an athlete and a tomboy. So, does that mean competition might have been easier for you when you hit the business world? 'Cause in those days, women were still ...

Yeah; that's interesting.

--treated differently.

I think my competitiveness helped me. I don't like to lose. You know, I like to set my goals and achieve them. But I think when I set out on my business career, that really wasn't kind of foremost in my mind.

What was high school like for you? I mean, public high school in Hawaii.

Yeah.

Everyone has fond memories, or maybe not so fond.

Yeah; it was a lot of fun. You know, I went to public schools all the way up to Castle. And so, some kids you knew, and then you know more kids as you go to King. And that's when, I don't know, there's like four or five elementary schools in the Kaneohe area that all matriculate to King Intermediate. And so, I got to know a lot more friends at King Intermediate, and then we all went up to Castle. And you know, I just met a ton of friends, and we remain friends to this day. You know, every Christmas, we have a gathering and we get together, and we just laugh and laugh.

Did your parents explicitly tell you about life? Did they give you advice, or was it leading by example?

[CHUCKLE] Yeah; well, career-wise anyway, my mom gave me advice. And she said, Be a schoolteacher, because schoolteachers, you get the summer off, all the holidays, when your kids are off you'll be off too. So from that point, I wasn't a really good listener. But, you know, I think the fundamental values that they exhibited themselves about being hardworking, being honest, being a contributing member of society; they totally led by example. And I feel that that's the foundation for my life. And on that, you grow, you know, who you are, what you become, and things like that.

Your father owned his own business, and then sold it; right?

Yes. Yeah; so, that was great, because growing up in elementary school, he had his own business, and on weekends, he'd let one or two of us come over to his—and it was a pretty small place. And you know, we'd just kinda be messing around. And he had uh, a plywood business as well as some hardware supplies. And so, all the scrap wood, we'd just be building stuff, and sometimes he'd tell us to clean out the hardware area, so we'd do that. All so we could have like, this Boulevard Saimin plate lunch for lunch. And that was like, the best Saturday, was to be able to go with Dad to work.

When you were raised, I imagine your parents really weren't giving you water bottles and ...

Oh, we drank from the hose.

--and helicoptering.

We drank from the hose. [CHUCKLE]

And telling you, Don't come back 'til—I bet you they said, Don't come back 'til dusk, or ...

Yeah; yeah.

How did you raise you kids? Differently than that?

You know, it's very different, and it's unfortunate, really. When I was growing up, it was like, you know, you had something to eat for breakfast, you were out, you were playing all day. When you got hungry, you know, you came home, you made yourself a sandwich, you went back out again, and you had to come home when you saw Dad's car coming down the road, because you're either gonna have to do yardwork, or dinner's gonna be ready soon. And so, we had so much freedom. You know, we'd get on our bikes, we'd ride down to the river, catch fifty fish, put 'em all in an aquarium and try to name 'em all. I mean, it's crazy; right? And you know, I'm sad for my kids that they couldn't have that level of freedom at that young age anymore.

Well, why couldn't they?

You know, I don't know how much is reality and how much is perception in parenting at this point, where you know, even if my kids, when they were in elementary school were playing in the front yard, I felt like I had to be out in front

watching. If there's even a miniscule chance that your kid's gonna get abducted, then of course, you're gonna be out front and you're gonna be watching. But it's just a different world. And because, you know, our neighborhood wasn't full of kids, you know, you would have to have play dates, you would have to invite kids over to play with them. And you know, when you were talking about helicopter parents, you know, I don't think I am one. But, you are, when your kids are young, kind of setting their life up. It's less creative for them, I think, at this point. You know, that's where I think some of the old charm, I guess, of Hawaii is being lost. And I was just commenting to my friends; I go, I know I'm getting old because I'm grumbling a lot now about how it used to be and how it is now, and how it's, you know, losing some of that ohana, that inclusive community sometimes.

After Susan Yamada earned a bachelor's degree in business administration at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, she went into the hotel industry. Eventually, her love of the ocean led her to greater opportunities.

I learned some interesting things that they don't teach you at the Travel Industry Management School. And that's when you work at a hotel chain, if you want to move up, many times you have to transfer out of one hotel into another. And at the time, I know it's hard to believe, but there was just one Marriott in the State, and that was on Maui. That was the first Marriott that they built. And so, I was there, and then I found out I would have to travel. So, my big goal in life after the university was to move to Maui.

Why?

Because my cousins were there, and I used to spend all my summers there, and I just loved the lifestyle there; it's just so laid back. But I found that, you know, being single and in my twenties, after about two and a half years, it was just a really small place. And so, it was time for my promotion, or I was up for promotion, and so, they asked if I wanted to either go to, I think it was Torrance or Santa Clara. So, I got out the map, because to that point I had been out of state once. And I went on my second trip right before I moved, but I knew nothing; right? So, I looked to see what the proximity of those two areas was to the beach. So ...

[CHUCKLE]

Santa Clara looked much closer. So, I chose Santa Clara. And little did I know that Santa Clara is Silicon Valley. So, that was ... a good move on my part, but I can't say that I planned it.

And you had the beach.

Yeah.

But, you know, you're going there to work in the hotel industry, not to work in Silicon Valley.

Yes; uh-huh. And so, that's what I thought; it was just a next step, I would go there, spend two years there, and then I would come back home. And so, I got there, and ... and this is why I feel a lot of local kids, they should really get out, because it's such a big world. You know, I thought tourism; hey, being from Hawaii, wanting to stay in Hawaii, that's where my career opportunities were gonna be. And when I got to Silicon Valley, it was just like, Oh, my gosh. It was just ... you know, drinking from a fire hose, there were so many different opportunities. So, I went, I got my MBA after two and a years at the Santa Clara Marriott. And then, I got into the technology industry.

Susan Yamada left the hotel industry to pursue work that would give her experience in running a business. She got an opportunity to test her skills when she was offered a job at Upside Magazine, a publication that was on the cutting edge of the digital revolution, and groundbreaking in its time.

What did you do in those years between your MBA and that?

Okay; so I was a research analyst for the technology industry for a couple years, and I worked in a head injury rehab organization, doing the business side of it. My father-in-law had a contact with a magazine publisher, and he said, I've got a failing magazine that needs to get turned around, and I'm looking for somebody to run it. And so, I think maybe it was four years out of my MBA, my father-in-law introduced me to this guy. And that's how I got my first opportunity to run a company. And it was a failing company.

What was that transition like?

The one thing that I learned is, business is business, no matter what you're hawking. So whether you're in the hotel business, or whether—you know, I was a consultant soon after researcher and analyst, you know, you have a product and you need to sell it. And so, that, I think, was one of the first lessons that I had of, Okay, how do you make money? You know, what is my business, and how do you make money.

So, you go from head injuries and research and analysis to magazine publishing.

Yes.

Of course, that is in the middle of, at that time, a digital revolution.

Right. So, the internet was just starting to come out and be a big player. And so, the magazine that we had—and again, it's hard to believe, but there was no wired, when you picked up Business Week, they didn't have an extensive editorial about the technology industry. Technology industry was just starting to come out. The PC was just kinda transforming all kinds of things. We were trying to figure out all the different things PCs could do. So, our magazine really focused on those sorts of needs to a higher level audience. So, they were executives within the technology industry that wanted to know what other people were doing, because the future of technology was still unlimited.

So, did that put you in touch with the titans of technology?

Yeah; yeah. So, every month, we would have an interview with one of the leaders in the technology industry, whether it was Bill Gates, or Larry Ellison. It was just an incredible time. And I'm not sure it would be so easy to get those interviews today. But during that time, you know ... most definitely.

And did you think that was your calling, magazines?

I loved it. Yeah. It wasn't so much magazines as it was I loved the fact that you never knew if you were gonna make payroll.

[CHUCKLE]

I know; I know. And people were like, That would drive me nuts. And you know, obviously, it wasn't just like wishing. You actually put together a plan and start implementing the plan. But when things start working, it's so exciting to see that.

Susan Yamada was the publisher of Upside Magazine for five and a half years. During that time, the magazine became profitable, and the connections she made there opened doors to new opportunities in the digital revolution.

That's when the internet was starting to take off. And that was a super-exciting time. It was like the second coming of the Gold Rush in California, because there was so much excitement in the Bay Area. People were flocking to the Bay Area to take part in, you know, the internet mania. You know, if you graduated from college with a bachelor's degree and you were halfway decent, you were making six figures already. It took me all my career to that point, to get up to that point. And here these kids are, and just because there was such a shortage

of talent, they were making incredible money; there was so much money going around in the Bay Area at that time.

And so, what did you do? What was your next step?

I joined an internet startup company called Trustee. And if you look at a lot of the major websites now, they all have privacy statements, and many of them have a Trustee seal. And it was an interesting time, because the internet was so new, privacy was an issue. Privacy of your personal information; your name, your address, your phone number. Because the internet is a global marketplace, and unlike the United States, the European union considers your personal information yours. In the United States, any information you give, that's a database for somebody to sell. And we used to sell that database extensively when I was at Upside. Now, we're dealing with the fact of having to train U.S. websites that they have to state what they're using that information they're collecting it for, and they have to do it.

Your company came up with that limitation?

Yeah; right.

And Trustee is still working?

Still there; yeah.

Still operational? Wow. So, what happened to your time there? Because clearly, you don't do that anymore.

You know, the first time a big site came in, like the first time Yahoo said they were gonna use our seal, you know, the crowd goes wild; right? But, you know, when Microsoft comes in, it's like, Mm, all right. Then, when, you know, Netscape was really big at that time came in, it's just so anticlimactic already. It's like you were expecting it to happen. And I don't know; for me, it just kinda gets boring, really. So ... I just find eighteen to twenty-four months, it's time to move on.

Now, it seems to me that at that time, there were very few women, probably very few Asian women.

M-hm.

Very few Asians, period.

Yeah.

What was that like for you?

My married name was Scott, so it was Susan Scott. And when I would make an appointment to see people, they were expecting Susan Scott; right? And so, I think first impressions are very important. And I think if I went in on the mainland as Susan Yamada, there would be a ton of stereotypes. I don't know; I think it's just human nature. But right in that little time when they were like, looking around in the waiting room for this Susan—

Where's the blond?

Yeah.

[CHUCKLE]

That's exactly right. A tall, statuesque blond woman; right? Isn't that what you would think? And so, right in that moment of confusion, it was my time to make a good impression. So, you know, that's when I would just be, you know, very forthright and go, Hi, I'm, you know, Susan, and just try and break any stereotype they may have had about me already. So, I use that as one specific example. But the one thing that I felt about the technology industry is, for the most part, it's gender-neutral. It's like, What can you help me with? And if you have the skillsets, I never felt like gender was a big, big issue.

But you did have to get in the door.

Totally. Yeah.

Susan Yamada moved back to Hawaii in 2001. She had made enough money to retire, and she spent her time raising her children and volunteering in the community. Over time, plans changed, and in 2008, Yamada started working part-time at the Pacific Asian Center for Entrepreneurship in the Shidler College of Business at the UH. That turned into a fulltime role.

The job with Shidler, I mean, it's not something I have to do, but it's something that I've come to love to do. And part of it is a bigger issue of being able to give back to Hawaii. I mean, it's been fantastic for me, it's where my roots are, I love it here. The seventeen years I was in Silicon Valley, you know, my main purpose was a goal that took me too long to attain, 'cause as I told you before, it was just supposed to be two years that I was up there, was to come back. Because this is my home. And so, having the opportunity to be able to give

back to my community through the university, because I'm very passionate about education, it's an honor for me to do that. So, yeah; I could be messing around and playing golf all day, but I don't think I'd get the same level of fulfillment.

In your opinion, what are the things that drive entrepreneurs? I mean, are they very different, and you can't generalize, or do they tend to be hardwired in a certain way?

I think there are certain characteristics that make a successful entrepreneur. Number one is, they have to have a vision and drive. And they can't be easily dissuaded. You know, so you talk about entrepreneurship and passion a lot. And I think a big part of that is passion; it is very important. You need to be able to really believe that what you're providing will be a significant improvement to your life, whoever your buyer is. And the first year, the first two years, the first five years, it's very, very difficult, and you have to work really hard. So, I think the work ethic and passion are two things that we always look for. And then, there's the coach-ability stand point.

It seems like such a tough deal, where an entrepreneur has to be able to be able to persevere, despite rejection and hard times, and yet, has to know when they're hearing advice that they really should take and leave it, do something else.

Exactly. I mean, it is not easy, for sure. But it is something that almost every single startup will go through at some point.

Have you ever been wrong in saying, That's not gonna work, don't do it?

Rarely do I say that. Because, you know what? If I was that smart, I would be ... I don't know, sitting on a beach right now; right? 'Cause you never know; right?

So, what do you say?

If they wanted to open a restaurant, for example, serving hamburgers in Waikiki, the first question I would ask is, How are you different from these ten other competitors that are—

So, you ask probing questions so that they make their own conclusions.

Now, if you are different, right, if you're a Korean style taco truck, for example, which is wildly successful in L.A., okay, maybe that's enough of a difference; right? If you have a social media campaign ... I need to see different. I can't

see the same. Because if you're copying the same thing, it's very, very, very tough. A goal is hard work. And if you're easily dissuaded from your idea, or you don't have that passion, or perseverance, not gonna happen.

And how do people even support themselves for four or five ideas, while they're just refining this?

Yeah. So, that's what I tell my students. I go, If you ever have entrepreneurial aspirations, do it now. You don't have kids, you don't have to pay, you know, for tuitions, you don't have to pay a mortgage or your car loan. I said, You have the least to lose right now, so do it now.

But whoever doesn't have that when they're an adult?

And that's where it gets much harder. But it is possible. So, you know, I was adult when I started my business. So it's possible; you can do it. You just have to be able to manage what resources you have.

And yet, Susan Yamada credits her time away from Hawaii for challenging her to grow in ways that she may not have if she'd stayed home.

If people could have seen you in Silicon Valley at the time they were working at their jobs in Honolulu, would you have had a markedly different style from your style now?

I think I'm more forward, and I'm less concerned about what people think about what I say. So, maybe less filter. And I think part of that has to do with, you know, where I am today or who I am today, and not being overly concerned about, am I gonna get a promotion, or what are people gonna think about me. I mean, they can think whatever they want to think, actually. It's just who I am, it's what my opinion is. And we can agree to disagree, and I'm perfectly happy with that. I don't have to win an argument. So, I think, you know, it has changed me. I think it's given me more confidence to say what I want to say, and just be who I am, and not try to be someone that someone else wants me to be.

Do you recall being that way before?

I think when you're younger, you're a lot more insecure. And so, you know, you take everything to heart, and maybe you create self-perception issues that might not even be there. But I think the great thing about getting older is ... who cares?

[CHUCKLE]

You know, I am who I am, and you know, I try to be a good person. And so, I try and let that guide me. I have mentors for everything; right? For how do I raise my kids, to you know, business mentors, to you know, my friends from high school; right? They all form this very informal kitchen cabinet, if you will. And so that I can call them and share different things with them, and get feedback.

And do they always agree?

I have mentors for everything; right? For how do I raise my kids, to you know, business mentors, to you know, my friends from high school; right? They all form this very informal kitchen cabinet, if you will. And so that I can call them and share different things with them, and get feedback.

And do they always agree?

Who?

Your friends in the kitchen cabinet.

Oh, I don't want them to agree with me.

You just want to hear some ... how you would handle this, and then you decide what you do.

Because I don't want them to tell me what to do. I want them to give me their opinion. Because they don't what specifically I'm going through. And so, you take their opinion, and you make your own decision based on that.

But you never said formally to any of them, Would you be willing to be part of my kitchen cabinet?

No; no.

How did that evolve?

I just make them.

[LAUGHTER]

What's the worst thing that's ever happened to you?

Professionally, the magazine. So, we brought in the chairman of the board, the guy who hired me. He eventually wanted the job back after it was profitable. And so, I did conferences; that's what I wanted to do, I wanted to get back into a startup routine. And we weren't really quite seeing eye-to-eye on things, and I came home from a conference, and there was an envelope on my front door. And it was a termination letter. And so, it's like, he didn't even have the courtesy to call me. You know, it was something he gave me, something that wasn't successful, I was able to turn it around. And I was like, How can this happen? How can the board allow something like that to happen? So, that professionally was probably the worst thing that ever happened to me.

Didn't the magazine later go into bankruptcy?

Mm.

How long after that?

I think they expanded too quickly into the internet, and they put too many resources there, and they were under-capitalized, and so it didn't work out. So, I think within the three years after that, it was pretty much on the ropes and down.

But that is quite the rejection, isn't it? Especially after you'd put so much into it.

Yeah. After five years into it; right? And I didn't think it was very well done, either.

Since you've headed PACE, what's the best thing that's come out of it?

I don't think it would be a specific business idea. It's the students that come out of there. You know, I see them going in, and I see them experiencing the joy of discovery, of the aha moments like, Ah, I get it; okay, I've gotta do this and this. And you know, they're students; they're so eager to please, they really want to do a good job. And when I see them working hard, when I see things coming together for them, I'm super-excited for them. Because what I think I'm doing is, I'm teaching them life lessons.

Susan Yamada is inspiring and challenging new generations of entrepreneurs through her passion and perseverance, qualities that continue to guide her own life. Mahalo to Susan Yamada of Honolulu for her enthusiasm and her commitment to serving our community. And mahalo to you for joining. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.

For audio and written transcripts of all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit PBSHawaii.org. To download free podcasts of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, go to the Apple iTunes Store or visit PBSHawaii.org.

Do you see yourself making another change in the future?

Yeah; I definitely do. My son is in ninth grade now, and I've always said that—and this should be no shock to my boss, that once my son is into college, then I think that opens up a whole 'nother chapter in my life as far as, what do I do next.

[END]