

GUEST: MITCH D'OLIER

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I wanted to be able to own a house and have a family. And I wanted to be able to pay my bills and be okay. I wanted to give my kids more stuff than I had. That's really how I was. 'Cause like, my old neighborhood, there was the private school guys and the country club guys, and all that stuff, and I was never one of them.

Mitch D'Olier worked hard not only to give his children more than he had, but to become a successful leader in land development in Hawaii. Now, his passion is improving public education. Mitch D'Oier, 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. Henry Mitchell D'Olier, better known as Mitch D'Olier, is a familiar name to many on Oahu for his role in the development of Ward Kakaako, and more recently, for leading development in Kailua on the Windward side of Oahu. He was born in Chicago, where he grew up in the late 1940s and 50s in a working class neighborhood. His education outside of the classroom proved to be as valuable as what he learned while in school.

My dad didn't make as much money as my mom would have liked him to, and ultimately, my mom had to go back to teaching. My mom was public school teacher, and right now, you'd say she taught in a Title 1 school. And she was a major influence in my life about education.

What did your dad do?

My dad was a business forms salesman; he designed and sold paper forms for a big national company, and then started his own company when he was about forty-five years old. And with the technology of today, that's not around anymore.

And the south side of Chicago ... how tough was that?

You know ... I was young, and I wanted to play basketball. And I started playing basketball, and so, I got to know the Black people at my high school, and the other people at my high school. And our high school was about forty-five percent Black American, and we got along okay. And it's a little bit 'cause I was a basketball player, and I knew a lot of guys that I didn't have problems. Was it challenging? Sometimes, yeah. Was there gang warfare? Was my division teacher shot on the back stairs at my high school? Yeah; all that happened. You know, I think no matter who you are and where you are, when you grow up, you kinda think that that's, like, normal. And that was my perception at the time. I look back at it, and I say, Wow, that was a little bit crazy.

And sports was your protection.

Sports was one of my protections. It was something I did.

You said one of the protections. What else?

I did activities. I mean, I was a good student. I was involved in the yearbook, and led some organizations; Boy Scouts, stuff like that.

Did your parents give you explicit advice, or did they teach you by example?

Okay; my mom was more explicit advice, and my dad was by example. And maybe this was like when you grow up with a teacher. But I would, like, get tests. On the morning that I had tests, I would get tests at breakfast time. I'd come to breakfast, and there would be a little board, and there would be all these questions. That's just how my mom was.

Because she knew what you were already studying?

Yeah; she knew what I was studying, and she wanted to be engaged in it. And she was convinced that I needed one degree beyond college. And so, my goal from about the time I was in seventh grade was—my goal, I knew I was gonna have to get one advanced degree beyond college, 'cause that's what my mom wanted.

Did the tests make you feel loved and appreciated, or did they irritate you?

Both. [CHUCKLE] Depends on the day. There were irritating days, but looking back on it, loved and appreciated, for sure. You know, I was really lucky, 'cause I never doubted that my mom and dad loved me.

So, when you realized, Okay, I have to have a degree past college—

Right.

What were you thinking? [CHUCKLE]

My mother wanted me to be a doctor. Okay; that was like, my mom's plan. My kid's gonna be a doctor. And my grandfather once saw me clean a fish, and he said, Helen, that boy's never gonna be a doctor.

[CHUCKLE]

And I got to college, and I didn't like the science as well as I liked the writing. And I ended up with a double major in English and general science, because I was more interested in reading and writing. And that led me to law school.

Why did you take science, if you weren't as interested in it?

'Cause my mom wanted me to.

Oh, I see.

I was trying to be a good son.

And did you always conclude that she had been right?

I thought she was probably right. And it's like ... I have a theory that guys are pretty clueless when they're younger. I think women learn quicker, and we try to catch up, or maybe we spend our lives catching up. But ... I was just doing pretty much what my mom wanted; it sounded like it was gonna work out okay. And then, I get into organic chemistry and physics, and I'm like, You know, this is just drudgery.

M-hm.

I found out when I got to college that my high school wasn't as challenging as it should have been.

Ah. So, it was hard for you?

Well, it was hard to learn how to work. 'Cause I really had to work when I got to college, 'cause the stuff didn't just come because I showed up in class and I could figure it out. It was easier than it should have been for me to do well in school. And then, part of it was obsessive compulsive mother at home. So, you know, it was a combination of those two things.

Mitch D'Olier went to college at the University of Iowa. Away from the daily influence of his mother, he discovered his enthusiasm for the legal profession, and after graduating, stayed on at the University of Iowa to earn his law degree. That's when he met his future wife, Bambi.

You learned to work harder without your mom being around in college.

You know, at some point for a guy, you have to realize that he's doing this work not for Mom and Dad; doing this work for you and your future. And then, I went to law school.

How was law school for you?

I loved law school. Actually, see, about my junior year in college, I had that snap-on moment, when I realized if I was gonna be somebody, I had to do it for myself.

And you wanted to be somebody.

Yeah. I wanted to be successful.

Had you met Bambi at that time?

Nope. Met Bambi when I was in law school. So, I ended up at the University of Iowa, and then I got serious about career, started to be a better student in college, and then did well in law school. And by this time, I had known Bambi. Bambi was from San Juan, Puerto Rico; she was also in Iowa City, 'cause her family, her grandparents were all from Iowa. And it was very cold, and I knew I had to get out of the cold. So, I thought I was gonna go to work in Florida or California. And it was like freezing, and I went through the law directory and found relatively good-sized law firms in Honolulu.

You were looking, because of the warmth factor?

Oh, yeah. I was looking because I had to get out of the cold.

It's a long way to go out of the cold.

Oh; yeah, it is. And you know, San Diego or Florida would have been closer. My mom reminded me about that a lot of times. But I sent a resume with my photograph to ten law firms in Hawaii. And one wrote back and said, Here's a summer job.

Did you know anybody in the islands?

I knew nobody.

Huh.

I knew a couple people that had been here and said it was a really nice place. By then, Bambi's parents, who were living in San Juan, Puerto Rico, they left Iowa and went to San Juan, Puerto Rico. They thought Hawaii was a wonderful place. I'd seen their movies, but I didn't know anything about it. And so, I came for a summer with Bambi. We got married just before we came. And fell in love with it. I got off the plane and said, Oh, my god.

And did she feel the same way? Because that often does not happen.

No. See, Bambi's parents lived in San Juan, Puerto Rico. We lived in a little walkup apartment in Waikiki. And it would cost twenty-two dollars a minute for her to call Puerto Rico.

Oh ...

So, she'd, like, have to make an outline of what she was gonna talk about, and then talk for no more than three minutes. So, this was a really nice place, but it was too far away for Bambi. And that's how Bambi felt.

How did you work that out?

Bambi is one of the most rational people I've ever known. And I said, How about we go to Hawaii for a year? That sounded really rational to me. And she says, Okay, that's fine, we'll go for a year.

But you wanted to be there longer, or you didn't know?

Well, I had no idea how it was gonna work out in the long run. But I wanted to go back; that was for sure. And so, we came back for a year. Then we re-

upped one year at a time for seven or eight years, and then my oldest son was born. And our roots in the community really grew with Jason being born.

What year was that?

'77. So, came in '72, like five years later, Jason's born, and all of a sudden ...

Your roots go deep.

Yeah. 'Cause you know, you're at Kapiolani, you're meeting all these other new parents. You have all the kid stuff going on.

Well, it could have gone the other way, because many people move back to the mainland when they have children, and their parents want to see the grandkids.

Right. I was lucky that Bambi's parents and my parents were not afraid of travel, and did come. Bambi, 'cause she was from San Juan, Puerto Rico, adjusted to Hawaii a little quicker than the average bear. And Hawaii was a good place.

So, where did you begin developing friends? Was it in the law firm?

Yeah; for sure. It was first law partners, and then, it was clients, and clients became my friends. And it's like ... I think of like, three people. I think of Henry Wong from Kaneohe Ranch, I think of Laura Thompson, and I think of Laura's mom Clarinda Lucas. And I would come home from a trip and they would say, Welcome home. And it was, like, that simple. It was like ... yeah, I guess it's home.

What about acculturation? We do things here that other people don't do.

See, I always liked the people. I mean, I think I stayed because of the people. And I really got to know some of the people just from kids and contacts. I got to know more people as my jobs grew. I've always liked people, and just made an awful lot of friends here.

The grandfather of Mitch D'Olier's wife gave D'Olier advice about raising his children. He never forgot this guidance, and while he was building his practice at Goodsill, Anderson, Quinn & Stifle—that's a Honolulu law firm, he made sure that he had time to spend not only with his three sons, but with other young people as well.

Bambi's grandfather, my wife's grandfather told me when I was an impressionable twenty-six-year-old; he said, Mitch, you're gonna have a very involved career, there's gonna be a lot that the world's gonna want you to do. Don't miss your children. And then, he looked me in the eye and cried a little bit and said, I missed my kids. 'Cause he was bringing penicillin to Iowa, and doing surgery at a time when medicine was really changing.

And he thought he was doing the right thing, because he was working hard?

No question; no question. And as a result, I spent a lot more time with my kids than I would have otherwise. And I was really lucky to have mentors that tolerated that throughout my career. But I coached soccer and baseball for seventeen years in East Honolulu, so I knew a lot of kids.

You had really demanding jobs your entire career, as a lawyer and as an executive.

I had fun jobs.

But I don't know how you managed to get time to do afternoon coaching and to spend the type of time that I understand you did.

Okay; so some of it was, I had tolerant employers, and I had to get the work done.

But I don't think you got a break on how much work you did; right?

No; I didn't get a break on how much work I did.

So, how did you do it?

I did it in the evenings, and I did it on Saturdays when I wasn't coaching. I did it on extra time. And probably, Bambi sacrificed a little bit and was very supportive of me doing that.

'Cause she gave up her weekends.

Yeah. 'Cause, like, it would chew into into some of my personal time. You know, I'd put the kids to bed, and then I'd work a little bit. And then, I was lucky enough as different opportunities came along. When I talked to other people about the opportunities, I said, You know, I'm a coach, and I really need to do that. And I remember John and Peter Ueberoth looking at me and saying, Well,

will you have your cell phone with you when you're coaching? Then we think that's okay.

Would you have been prepared to say, I'm not gonna take that job if I can't coach?

If I couldn't have been able to continue the things I was doing in the community, including coaching, I would not have taken jobs. That was who I was.

But nobody made you take that walk.

And that's a big blessing.

I think that's 'cause they weren't really missing out on anything; right? You were getting all that work done. I heard you had more billable hours than anybody else.

That was true for a couple years.

And you were coaching at the time?

Right. But see, my partners, as long as I was getting my work done, were very supportive.

It's like doing the same thing, plus coaching.

Right. Yeah; it is. That's right.

So, how many days a week was that?

Well, you coach couple days a week, and then you'd do Saturday games.

So, spare time; how much?

Oh, how much time would it chew up?

M-hm.

It would chew up an hour and a half two days a week, and then three hours on Saturday or Sunday. Mostly Saturday.

Seems like it would take longer, because there'd be consultations with parents and, you know.

Well, didn't take that much longer. I mean, you'd have a meeting, you'd tell parents what it was about. You'd try make kids have a good experience in sports, which was really what I was about. I wasn't the greatest physical fitness coach in the whole wide world, but I wanted to make sure every young man that I became associated with left feeling good about himself.

Mitch D'Olier was legal counsel for Hawaiian Airlines at Goodsill Anderson when he was offered an opportunity in 1991 to leave his law firm and become president and chief operating officer of the airline. He accepted the position, knowing Hawaiian Airlines was undergoing financial difficulties, to say the least.

We had a negative net worth of two hundred and fifty-two million dollars. We had twenty million dollars in the bank, and we were losing fifty thousand dollars a day in cash. That was the starting point. And the question was, How will we keep it alive? And Bambi was a really good sport to let me do it. I knew I could go back and practice law. I wasn't afraid that I wouldn't have a job afterwards.

Why would you be drawn to something that was failing?

I think of myself as a little bit of a crusader. I thought it was really important for Hawaii to be served by an air carrier that served Hawaii from other places, and that decisions about transportation to and from this place were not made only in Dallas, Texas, Elk Grove Village, Illinois, and Atlanta. I thought we needed to make those decisions from here. Because I'm very convinced now we're twenty-five hundred miles from anywhere, and we need air service.

So, you went in to fix it, because the community needs it.

I wanted to try to fix it, because I thought it was important for the State.

What kinds of things did you go through in trying to make that happen?

My hair is a different color as a result of my two years at Hawaiian Airlines. We had to downsize staff, which was very hard. We had to make financial decisions about what we were going to do. We were limited in our financial capacity. I mean, it's like, one of my favorite stories is, when I was at the airline business with that bad financial situation, I had a hard time getting bankers to return my phone call. When I went to work for Victoria Ward, they'd do house calls on me. Can we come see you on Saturday at your house? I mean, it's like just flipped

around that way. It was a little bit afterwards that I realized how hard it was. And it's a wonderful industry, and they were an incredible group of people that joined hands and held it together. And that we got to the opportunity we got is a tribute to all those people, many of whom stayed behind when I left.

How far did you take the airline?

We were providing bad service when I started. And I think when we finished, we were providing acceptable service levels. We weren't always late.

Mitch D'Olier took over as president and chief executive officer of Victoria Ward after he left Hawaiian Airlines. He spent the next nine years developing Kakaako, which opened the door to a new job as president and CEO of Kaneohe Ranch Company, where he led the development of Kailua. He has since retired as the CEO, but has stayed on at the Harold K.L. Castle Foundation as board chair. He works on charitable causes, primarily public education.

When I was at Ward, I was asked by the Castle family to become a director of their foundation. And so, I said, yes, and participated in that philanthropy. And I watched Randy Moore, who was the leader at the time, come up with a wonderful idea about a principal's leadership academy, and watched him create from an idea to an entity to funding, an academy that taught business principles to public school principals. And that was our start in public education. And it was that, and then I was a member of the Hawaii Business Roundtable. And the Business Roundtable's biggest community activity, 'cause they're trying to build a better Hawaii, was public education. And so, it was a combination of the Castle Foundation opportunity, the Hawaii Business Roundtable, and then my mom was a public school teacher in a Title 1 school. I knew what that was like. And I can't think of anything that we can do in Hawaii that'll help us build a better Hawaii.

Or anything harder, it seems. Because it really does seem that progress is so slow. And then, by the time progress is made—

It's really frustrating.

--the times have changed, and that's no longer the right idea.

Well, we change our idea about what the right idea is a little too often. I think stay the course can really help with some of that. Public education is public education. But we've also seen a lot of enormous positives happen. And it's like, there's out-migration from private schools to public schools. People aren't talking about that a lot.

What schools are they moving to?

They're moving to charter schools, and they're moving to public schools. 'Cause there's a perception that public schools are better.

And this migration you speak of; that's not caused by, I'm broke, I really can't afford private anymore?

It's partly that. But it's also partly people not being willing to stretch the way they were stretched, because schools are better. I tip my hat to every teacher in the State of Hawaii, to every principal, to every administrator, and to all the charter schools, 'cause they do really hard work every day, and it's really important. I was at a fundraiser for Teach for America last night in Kona, and I listened to four teachers and one student talk about their lives. And before I stood up to close, I had to wipe the tears out of my eyes, 'cause I was so moved by what I heard. So, there's a lot of that going on every day, and that's what keeps me going and will keep me going on this whole thing, that's what'll do it.

Mitch D'Olier had a health scare in 2014. His faith, family, and positive attitude helped him through.

I did my normal colonoscopy last September 20th. And you wake up from your colonoscopy, and they show you the picture of your inside. And there's this little ugly dark guy in there. And I'm like, What's that? He said, Mitch, that's a colon cancer tumor. And so, nine days later, I lost six inches of my colon in surgery. And so, I'm like the poster boy for why you should do your colonoscopy. 'Cause all kinds of people don't want to do it. I did it, I came out really well; I'm on the mend.

What went through your mind during those nine days? Did you do anything legally with your loved ones?

That's a great question. Well, I told everybody, and my family was understandably concerned. You know, faith is a part of my life, so I'm a little bit like, Okay, so God, you're doing this to me, and at least I think that all things work together for good. So I'm like, Okay, how come this is happening? And I just trusted God and went forward. But it was really an unbelievable opportunity for an outpouring of love and support in my direction from a whole lot of people. So emotionally, it was an incredibly affirming experience. Weekend before my surgery, my son from San Francisco came home out of nowhere. My three boys spent the weekend with me, with Bambi. It was awesome.

You said faith is a part of your life. What priority would you place it?

My priorities go like this. They go, faith, family, work. You have to determine what your faith is, or not have faith, and you think that through. And then, follow your heart as to where you conclude. And then, family, you need to take care of your family. And if there's a person that's done those two things, they can be incredibly useful in a business. And if there's problems in those two, the problems are gonna get in the way. So, I told the employees, I want to be third; faith, family, work. The real job of a leader is to support their team. And if you support your team, your team will support you, especially in Hawaii. 'Cause this is an incredible community of loyalty.

Did you always have the ranking that way; faith, family, work?

It evolved over time. I thought it through more and become more convicted of it over time. But even like when I started at Hawaiian Airlines ... this is an interesting thing. One of the things I did is—I'm sorry. Okay; three thousand employees. I went from a law firm with about a hundred and thirty employees to three thousand employees. How do I tell everybody who I am? So, I did a video.

[CHUCKLE] You did?

[CHUCKLE] This was before You Tube and all this stuff. And we did a video with a camera, and we showed it in all the different stations. And one of the things that I mentioned in the video was that I worshiped at a church. And I probably had five hundred emails back on that subject. I go to church too, and I'm glad to know you go to church. And that started me in thinking that all through. 'Cause there's a lot of faith in this wonderful place.

When did your faith emerge?

A little bit Campus Crusade for Christ in college, a little bit going to church here. First, Central Union Church, then First Presbyterian Church, a little bit friends. Just over time. Probably been there all along, and I noticed it.

At the time of this conversation in 2015, Mitch D'Olier has retired from fulltime corporate executive work and is devoting his time and considerable energy to serving the community. Mahalo to Mitch D'Olier of Honolulu for sharing his 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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I told my kids, try to, to the extent they can, discover what they're passionate about, and work in that arena.

The hard thing is finding out what you're passionate about, sometimes.

I don't know the answer to how to do that. What I do know is that it's okay not to know, like when you're in high school or when you're in college if you're not like, really sure. 'Cause I've watched myself change a number of times, and the changes at least have worked out positively for me. And so, I think it's okay not to know. And I also think to the extent you can tap into what your passions are, then you don't have a job. Then, you're working on your passion, and that's a whole new kind of energy.

[END]