

GUEST: KEONE NUNES

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You know, there's a lot of lore that has been built up around you.

Really? [CHUCKLE]

You were the first to do this that I'm aware of. And people wanted you to do their tattoo, and this is what I've heard, that they wanted you to do a certain design, and you'd say ... No.

Yeah; that's true. [CHUCKLE]

Why?

Primarily, it is because I'm not a tattooist, I'm a practitioner. And ... as a practitioner, I have certain responsibilities. And if I know that design is not appropriate for you, I'm not gonna do it, because it's my responsibility to give you something that is appropriate.

Keone Nunes of Waianae, Oahu, has made hundreds of tattoos on Native Hawaiians and non - Hawaiians. Yet, as he says, he is not a tattooist. His cultural practices didn't initially include tattooing, but his life journey took him in that direction. His dedication to the practice has made him instrumental in reviving this Hawaiian art form that was nearly lost. Keone Nunes, next on Long Story Short.

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Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Since the Hawaiian Renaissance of the 1970s, Native Hawaiians have revived many of the traditions that had been nearly lost when Christian missionaries banned Hawaiian cultural practices. Tattooing is one of the customs that has been revitalized, and many Native Hawaiians today proudly display their cultural identity through their tattoos. Keone Nunes is a well - known Native Hawaiian tattooist not only in Hawaii, but through Polynesia, and even in Europe where tattoos are also popular. He was raised in Waianae on Oahu, but that isn't where his story begins.

I actually was born in Japan. I was born in Morioka, Hirata - ken, Japan. My father was in the civil service; he was actually stationed in Japan at that time.

And my mom was from Morioka, and so, I was born there. And I came to Hawaii when I was two and a half years old.

Who was the Hawaii connection; your father?

My father is Hawaiian, Portuguese. And the interesting thing was that before, there was this term that really meant something, and it still continues. It's FOB, fresh off the boat. I actually was fresh off the boat. [CHUCKLE] We came over on a boat, and I remember that journey. I went back to Japan in 1980; the early 80s. And I was very surprised at how much I remembered, even though I was like two and a half. My mom took me over to her friend's house, and I looked at her, and I immediately knew who she was. So my mom asked me, Do you know who this is? And I said, Yeah. And the woman was very, very surprised. She says, No, I don't think you know who I am. And I said, No, I remember you. She said, Well, you used to do one thing, and can you tell me what it was? I said, Yeah, sure. I used to chase you with a bamboo snaking saying, *Hebi, hebi, hebi*. *Hebi* is Japanese for snake. And you used to run away. [CHUCKLE] And she was very surprised, but I remember that.

Is that your earliest memory?

Yeah, pretty much. I remember taking a lot of joy in doing that. [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE] 'Cause she ran; right?

Yeah; she ran. [CHUCKLE] Yeah.

So, when you got off the boat, you moved to Waianae.

Yes; our family land was in Waianae.

Your last name is Portuguese, but you don't identify as Portuguese, I know.

No; I was never really taught Portuguese things. It's kind of sad in a sense, but I don't know that much. My grandfather kinda identified more with being Hawaiian; he spoke Hawaiian and he was very dark. My father also is very dark, and unfortunately, my father and mother split up in the early 60s. And so, I never was raised with my father. My grandfather died shortly after; I was about seven years old, I guess, when he passed away. And so, his identification was more along the lines of being Hawaiian. He was a paniolo in the west side, in the Waianae side, and so I remember him making saddles and seeing the saddles, and things like that.

And you were close to your grandfather?

Yeah; I was very close to him. And I remember him rolling cigarettes [CHUCKLE], and how quickly he did that.

With one hand?

With one hand. Yeah. [CHUCKLE] And I remember that kind of stuff. And he actually spoke to me in Hawaiian. So, I didn't really have a real good comprehension of English until I was in the first grade. Because my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Onzuka, gave me instructions in Japanese.

Why?

Because I couldn't speak English.

Oh, so you spoke Japanese in the home, and then your grandfather ...

Yeah; Japanese, and pretty much Japanese, Hawaiian, with a little bit of English smattered in. But my English was not as prevalent.

Did your mom speak English, though?

She did.

Along the way.

She did. And in fact, after I started learning, she kind of felt bad, because she thought that I was having a hard time during first grade, and she felt that it was her fault because she was speaking to me in Japanese. And so, she spoke to me more and more in English.

After your father left, and your grandfather passed away, did you have other father figures in your life?

I did. And it was kind of interesting, because throughout elementary, it never really bothered me, because I was surrounded by a community that was very, very caring. When you mention Waianae, you don't think of a caring community, but it really, really was. And it still is, to a large extent. And our neighbors would watch out for us, and all of that. And when I was growing up, if we were coming home from the beach, oftentimes, neighbors would see us walking up; they would tell us, Come over and eat. And we would do that; me and my brother would go over there, and we would eat dinner and stuff. They would call my mom up and say, Don't worry about your boys, they're over here, and all of that. And so, that actually was a reality for us. And so, I never felt that I was lacking anything.

You just felt embraced by a community.

Exactly. And when I went into intermediate school -- I went to Waianae Elementary, Intermediate, and Waianae High School. And when I went to intermediate school, there was one teacher that took a liking to me, Mr. Ben Lapalio. And he really kind of mentored a lot of young Hawaiian boys.

I've heard his name before.

Really?

He's had a wide influence, I think.

Yeah; he was great. That's how I started knowing what the responsibilities were expected from me. And so, that's the first foundation that I had.

As a student, as a boy, as a man?

Yeah; as student. He instilled that to us. And he instilled the importance of education. And so, that was really, really important to me. Then, when I went to high school, I had another really strong male influence by the name of Kona Smith. And he passed away several years ago. But he was another one that instilled pride in who you were, and things of that nature. And he kind of got me started dancing hula and such. There were other influences in high school, too. I think the educational influences was basically from Kona Smith and also from Mrs. Korenaga. She was my counselor, and she influenced me a lot, and she wanted me to go to college, whereas other counselors felt that it would be best if I went into the military or something like that.

Because?

Probably because I came from a single parent family and other issues.

They thought that was your best shot.

Yeah. I don't really fault them for that type of thought, but I think that if a person shows interest in bettering themselves, then you be as supportive as you can. And Mrs. Korenaga was; yeah.

Keone Nunes graduated from the University of Hawaii at Manoa. His career path went in a direction that he was not expecting.

I majored in anthropology, and I had a certification in Hawaiian language. I taught Hawaiian language at Hilo Community College for a while. Then after I came back, I worked for the Bishop Museum, then Kamehameha Schools. And also, a year with Office of Hawaiian Affairs. I landed at Kamehameha Schools, and I was working for a program that did a lot of outreach to Hawaiian communities. And so, it was really an opportunity for me to give back to the community. And I always wanted to do that, so I took that opportunity. And it was there that I really got a little bit more focused. It offered me the opportunity to give a presentation where we had some national facilitators from Washington, D.C. who was in the audience. And they approached me afterwards, and asked if I would be willing to facilitate on a national level. And I told them, Sure.

Were you surprised?

I was very surprised; yeah.

Did you know you were good at what you did? Because obviously, that's why they asked you; right?

[CHUCKLE] Yeah. I didn't know that I was good. I think that there's a lot of local people that have good facilitation skills, but they don't know about it until somebody tells them.

What do you have to have to be a good facilitator?

You have to have the ability to listen. You have to have the ability to think on your feet, and you have to have the ability to put things in ways that will not offend anyone else. And so, as far as that's concerned, that's the path that was opened up to me, and I chose that path.

How did you develop that style?

I don't know; I really don't know. I can't really say. A lot of it is from talking story with a lot of the older people. Because when I graduated from high school, that was one of my passions. When everybody else was going out to nightclubs and such, I was talking to elders, a lot. Auntie Muriel Lupenui was a tremendous influence to me. That's Darrell Lupenui's mother, and I danced for Waimapuna. And so, she was a very, very strong influence for me. Auntie Emma Defries and I had a lot of good conversations. Papa Kalahikiola Nalielua was another. Uncle Herman and Auntie Frieda Gomes really, really took me under their wings and

taught me how to do musical implements, and things of that nature. And so, I had a lot of different influences. I think part of the facilitation skills that I picked up was through them. And I definitely know a lot of the cultural things that I know was definitely through all of them.

And so, you got noticed by national people, and trained by them?

Yes. I went for training in 1990, and I was working freelance with them until 2006. Yeah; about there.

And then?

I started working with ACO Incorporated, and they're the largest Native American corporation. They needed someone in Hawaii to work the Pacific region, and so they asked me to do it. And they kind of mentored me and encouraged me to have my own company. And so, I opened up my own company, and that's what we do now.

Was that a passion for you, the facilitation?

Yes. Facilitation has always been a passion, I guess because I could see the good things that would come out of it. As far as my cultural work is concerned, I can only reach out to a finite group of people; whereas if I do something like facilitate a meeting that's, say, for a nonprofit organization, that network really, really spreads out.

Keone Nunes' ability to work with organizations to help them understand their common objectives and achieve their goals is a skill that came naturally to him, not only because he was a good listener, but because the *kupuna* had also taught him how to resolve conflict without taking sides. Yet, he is better known in Hawaii and the Pacific for doing something else that stirs his passion.

You're running a business, and you do all these other cultural things. Are you the *kumu* of your *halau*?

Yes.

And you do what else?

A lot of people know me for tattooing. [CHUCKLE]

Because of all the Keone Nunes tattoos I see around town, you must be busy.

Yeah, I'm pretty busy.

But you only do it ...

On weekends.

-- in your off hours.

Yes; for the most part.

Non - hula, non - facilitation, and non - grant - writing.

Right; right. And so, I hardly have days off. And sometimes when I have one day out of the week off, I cherish it. [CHUCKLE] But it's important work, I was really, really fortunate to have strong influences along those lines. I learned a lot from a lot of these *kupuna*, many of which I mentioned before. People like Auntie Muriel Lupenui knew quite a bit. And Papa Kalahikiola Nalielua; he knew

quite a lot also. As well as Emma Defries and Auntie Martha Lum Ho, Johnny Lum Ho's mother; she remembered family members that had traditional tattoos and all of that.

So, when you were just talking story with these elders because you enjoyed it, you were actually learning something that was to be a game - changer for you, and also for many people who are looking for tattoos that spoke to their family and their genealogy.

Exactly. At that time, I never recognized the importance of what they were saying. I never thought that I'd be a tattooist. It's not something that I would have chosen. And it was really interesting, because these people would talk about it, but not force it upon me, but just give me enough, just enough *palu*, enough bait for me to ask more questions. It was really, really important.

Do you think they were trying to pass that on to you?

In retrospect, yeah; definitely. And because I know with several of them, they never passed it on to their blood relatives. Although, I was related to Auntie Muriel Lupenui, the others didn't really pass that much of that information on to their blood relatives.

That's so interesting, because many *kupuna* have passed on without passing on their knowledge, because I think they perceived that no one was interested in taking it forward. But you're saying, that's not what you were planning, either. But you must have shown interest.

I think part of it was that I was willing to sit down and listen, and I would ask some questions afterwards. I think a lot of *kupuna*, and I can kind of understand that now as I'm getting older; a lot of the *kupuna* didn't want to just give the information out to everyone. They wanted to give their information out to someone that they felt would appreciate what was being told to them. And I did appreciate things. I didn't have full comprehension of it, but I did appreciate every second that I sat on the foot of all of these *kupuna*.

When they spoke of tattooing, did you get into the details? Like, what kind of bone did you use for your tool, and all of that?

I got more into the design element. Auntie Muriel knew about the tools, and she talked to me a little bit about that, and also the making of ink and all of that. So, I knew those type of things from one source, and that's my one source for that. But everybody else knew about the patterns, the meanings, what families was connected to, and all of that kind of stuff.

Did you sit down and look at patterns with them?

Yeah. They actually drew some patterns for me, and all of that.

Did you keep any of the drawings?

Yeah; I have them. It was quite exciting. And I never realized, though, how close we were to losing that. Because at that time, I thought it was common knowledge. I thought people in all families were having discussions like I was. And it wasn't until much, much later that I realized that that was not the case. And so, it's important to understand these things, especially when

you're going through it, because I think if I had not recognized that, then you know, I might be doing something else. [CHUCKLE]

But you saw it was a need.

Yeah.

And it would be lost.

Yeah.

You eventually did.

I eventually did, and that came about in 1989 when I got my first tattoo. I was looking for about eight years for someone to do work on me. Auntie Muriel gave me a pattern that she said would be appropriate for me.

Appropriate is a vague word for me. What does that mean?

Sometimes, some people will give me a design and say, Oh, well, this is a family design, and all of that. Then I look at it, and I recognize that it's borrowed pattern from other cultures. We never had curvilinear designs, with the exception of round and half - round designs. If I wouldn't want someone walking around with patterns that belong to my family, then what makes it right for me to appropriate patterns from another culture, that may belong to someone else's family?

I guess it goes to what one's reason is for having a tattoo; right?

Exactly.

I think you think of it as identification.

Yes.

And other people may just want a cool design.

Yeah. And that's fine. If you want a cool design, that's great. But there's hundreds, thousands of other tattooists out there that would probably be better than me. [CHUCKLE]

Does that mean if somebody who is not Hawaiian comes to you, you won't do their tattoo? You won't give them a tattoo?

If they're a good person, it doesn't matter to me. Because they have to defend, and they have to defend who we are as Hawaiian. And so, I think it's a good thing. It was done traditionally; it wasn't just Hawaiians. There are *noa* designs, there are designs that do not belong to anyone, or that signify certain aspects in life. And with those *noa* designs, just about anyone could wear them.

Did everyone have tattoos in the ancient Hawaiian culture?

Not everyone. I think to one extent, a lot of people did. But all of the intricate extensive tattoos were primarily for the people of the upper echelons. Because they could afford to have it done, one, and they were people that didn't need to go out to the *loi*, they didn't need to go out to the taro fields, they didn't need to do any of that kind of stuff, so they could heal properly. So, I think that that's important to understand, is that the people of higher status oftentimes had more tattoos. One of the things that is unique being someone putting on *uhi*, putting on tattoos on someone else is that that was the only class of people that could spill the blood of *ali'i* without being killed. And it was us that

controlled the protocols. And a lot of people don't understand that, because we had to control the protocols. The protocols were important for us; we could not adhere to other people's protocols because it might not be congruent to what we needed to do. So, we set the tone. And a lot of people don't realize that.

And what's the tone?

The tone is, we determine who comes, who goes, where it's done, and even to an extent the designs. I mean, at this point in time, if you were to come and watch me tattoo, I would make several lines, some hash marks on a person, and not draw any of the design on, because that's all in my mind. And the people who are getting it do not know until it's done what it's gonna be. For a lot of people, they have a hard time with that.

'Cause it's forever.

Yeah; it's forever. But for other people, they trust me enough to put something on them that would be aesthetically pleasing, as well as significant. And that's how it was traditionally. And so, in that regards, it's moving back towards how it was before.

The Hawaiian *kupuna* passed on their knowledge of tattoo patterns and designs to Keone Nunes, but no one was left who could help him with making traditional tools. He would have to find the knowledge elsewhere if he was going to truly revive this ancient art of Hawaiian tattoo making.

The person that taught me how to do traditional tattoos was Paulo Suluape. Amazing tattooist.

That's a Samoan name.

Yes; he is Samoan. You see, we had not had anybody that had tapped in Hawaii, from what I know, since the 1920s.

It's like Hokulea folks.

Right; exactly.

Nainoa going to a Micronesian.

Yeah; exactly. And I never, ever, ever expected to learn. I mean, because when I first started on this path, I made tools and I tried, and it was so difficult. And so, I realized I couldn't do it. So, that's why I turned to machine. And in 1996, I went to Samoa, and I saw his brother Tele Suluape tattoo. But I knew that they would not teach someone outside the family, so I never even asked. But in that same year, this gentleman by the name of Henk Schiffmacher, Hanky Panky, who is from Holland, he was running through Hawaii, and he videotaped me explaining some of the tattoos, and videotaped me working. And he told me that he was gonna visit Paulo. And I said, Oh, I met Petelo. He said, Well, Paulo is his older brother. And I said, Oh, okay. So, he went over there, and he showed Paulo the footage that he took while in Hawaii. Paulo got excited, and called me.

That's cross - cultural Polynesian right there.

Yeah; exactly. He got excited, because his vision was that he wanted to teach someone from each of the island groups in Polynesia. Because it was our right to do, it was our culture. It was who we were, and who we are now.

That's interesting; but he couldn't put out an all - points alert, 'cause it has to be the right person.

Exactly. And so, he called me, and we spoke on the phone, then he invited me to take a trip with him to Samoa. And I did. And on that trip, he taught me how to make tools. The first tool he took, and he put it in his rack. And he said, Oh, this is really good. And he said, Okay, make another. So, I made another. And he looked at it, and he said, This is good. He said, There's only one thing missing. And I said, What? I was excited to get some criticism. And he said, The only thing missing is that you don't know how to use it; would you mind if I taught you? And there was no question; that's when I first became his student.

Do you believe you're the first to start doing the cultural tapping for tattooing?

As far as I know, yeah, I've been the first one that has done that. I started in 1996 as far as using traditional tools. At that time, I was still learning, and so I had the traditional tools as well as using machine. And I think in 1998, my teacher Paulo came to Hawaii and saw what I was doing, and he gave me a set of tools. He encouraged me to start using it more. Since 2000, that's all I've been using.

There are hundreds of people who wear the traditional designs that you gave them now, and other people have come up inspired by you and now, I think you probably trained them. Did you train all of them?

Yeah; there's a couple other people tapping, and I did the initial training. I have not yet graduated anyone, but I have students. And so, my whole vision is to be able to pass this on. Because it's way too important for us as a culture, for it to be lost. And so, it's gonna be passed on. I'm very confident in that. But even with that, we're not strongly established; still handful of people. Sometimes that's concerning for me, and other times I think, Well, you know what, that's how it should be.

The kupuna passed on their knowledge to Keone Nunes, and now he's sharing it with the next generation, helping to assure that this Native Hawaiian cultural practice of tattooing will never be lost. Mahalo to Keone Nunes of Waianae 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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What part hurts the most? That's what I want to know.

For everybody, it's different. For some people, it's a walk in the park for the whole thing. For others, it's a struggle. So, everyone has different sensations, so I really can't answer that. It depends on you.

I've heard people talk mostly about their ankle. That hurts over there.

Any place that's right by bone will be a little bit more sensitive.

So, the knee, too?

The knee; the knee hurts a little bit. But for some people, the knee doesn't hurt at all, and the ankle doesn't hurt at all. So, it really is different for everyone.

Have you had people who say, 'Nough already, I can't finish?

That happened only once, and that was about ten years ago.