

TITLE: MAHINA ELENEKI HUGO

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For me, athletics is definitely my success in my career. And I think it's just there are so many things; you learn; you take risks, you fail, but you get right back up. You know, there's challenges to be had, there's discipline, there's others to be considered on the team, but each person has to do their responsibility in order to make the organization work. And when somebody doesn't, then as the head of the school, it's my job to either fix it or make the change. And so, that kinda has that team, you know. You have to find that right combination.

That's Mahina Eleneki Hugo, the head of school at La Pietra Hawaii School for Girls, at the base of Diamond Head. And she knows about athletic success. When she discovered volleyball in seventh grade, she dedicated herself to the sport. She was a member of the beloved University of Hawaii Rainbow Wahine Volleyball Team that won the 1987 NCAA championship. The lessons she learned as an athlete continue to serve her well. Mahina Eleneki Hugo, 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. Mahina Hugo was Mahina Eleneki when she played for the University of Hawaii's Rainbow Wahine Volleyball Team. Besides being a member of the team that won the National College Athletic Association Championship in 1987, she was named the NCAA's Women's All Conference Player and NCAA's Most Inspirational Player of that year. Her family nurtured and supported her passion for athletics at a young age.

Home is Kailua, Oahu. It's Enchanted Lakes, more specifically. I was born and raised, and in fact, my parents still live in the same house in Kailua. It was a fun neighborhood, growing up. It was a fun childhood. We always played barefoot on the road, or rode our bicycles, and it was all outside. We would build our own kites, or try to build a go-cart, and the neighborhood kids would come with one piece of something to add to the go-cart to try to make it go. Mom is Caucasian from Colorado. And my dad is Hawaiian, Chinese; he attended Kamehameha Schools, and went off for a football scholarship in college, and he met my mother, and they moved and lived here ever since. Mom is Caucasian from Colorado. And my dad is Hawaiian, Chinese; he

attended Kamehameha Schools, and went off for a football scholarship in college, and he met my mother, and they moved and lived here ever since.

I did; I have an older brother and an older sister. And so, I think I was always the brother that my older brother didn't have. And so, I sort of was a tomboy growing up, and could very much hang with my brother and the football, and the this and that.

And when it came time to go to school, your parents sent you to town.

They did. I think being that Dad went to private school education, Kamehameha, and through athletics, we're a very competitive family, and I think that's due to both parents. They were very competitive. And so, we were all into sports very early. My brother played all the major sports in Kailua, and I found the love for volleyball probably in the seventh grade. But back then, they didn't really have club teams in Kailua. And so, we had to travel into town to play sports. And so, I think finding a school in town made sense, because right after school, then I would go to my club practice. And I'm very proud to be a Sacred Hearts graduate, and I think it served me well.

Did you like being in an all-girls school?

You know, to tell you the truth, it's so funny, because I don't think I really recognized it at the time, because I had so many other things that I did that involved either guys or just other friends from other schools. I didn't really feel like I was missing at school that sort of school. And I did my best at school, I played for the sports team. And then, I had lots of other friends from different associations of either sports or other activities. So, I didn't necessarily feel like I felt anything different. Just the comfortability part, I could feel then, as far as not having to act a certain way or dress a certain way.

I'm not quite sure what the pressures are of having boys in class with you.

Well, it's the comfortability, and I know I keep saying that. But it really is. There's things like, there's no silly questions. I mean, I think when you feel comfortable, or not having to dress up. You know, having a uniform, first of all, was a big help. And I know some people would think that's kind of boring. But really, what the focus is, is the academics or whatever school's all about, and not having to worry about what you look like, or if you were having a bad hair day that some guy was gonna be there to, you know, say, Oh, bad hair day. You know, I'm sure girls can do that to girls as well, but I don't think it happens as often. So, having that comfort zone of being with peers, alike peers, I think really took off a lot of pressure. And sometimes, that pressure's undue pressure. It's put on by you, not others. And so, not having that, or that pressure to have to feel like we needed to do that made going to school pretty easy.

You discovered volleyball in, you said, the seventh grade?

I did.

And did you know it was gonna be something you needed to play every season?

Not at first. Actually, one of my mentors to this day—he has since passed, but in the volleyball world, Uncle Bobby, as we call him, Bobby Yomes was a mentor to me, a very good coach. And he was actually watching. My dad was a big handball player back in the day, and he was watching a game and watching my dad. And I got introduced to him through my dad. And he said, What is your daughter doing? And at the time, I really wasn't involved in a club sport. And he said, Have her come out; we're having practice next Saturday, volleyball. And so I said, Yeah, I think I'd like to try that. And so, we went to practice, and I pretty instantaneously fell in love with the sport.

What was it about it that made you fall in love with it?

I think at first, the challenge. Like you said, we grew up so competitive. And not being able to find it so easy when I first started made me want more and made me want to perfect. And so, it was quite funny how, Oh, I want to go back for more. As you know, there's so many aspects of the game.

What did you like first? What was the first thing you liked?

Hitting.

Everybody loves to hit. So, it was that. And then, Uncle Bobby was a very old school coach. And what I mean by that is, very disciplined, could raise his voice. I mean, you know, those were things back in my day that were acceptable and parents supported it. It wasn't like, Don't raise your voice to my daughter. It was, You better listen to Uncle Bobby. So, it was very old school coaching, but very good coaching as far as the finer points of the game. So, you learned the basics and then each year, the details that he provided to the game, and looking at it as a chess match. And just the intricacies of the game that he shared through my years with him has been amazing.

Was that sport offered through the school as well?

So, right after the regular school season was over, then everybody would go to the different club play. So, he was one of the clubs that was available for people to try out. So, yeah.

Your parents really supported sports, as you mentioned. And you all supported each other in your sports?

Yes. I was very fortunate. I mean, I think about my parents and the sacrifices that they made for me as far as they didn't miss one practice or one game growing up, and drove me to all my practices until I could obviously drive myself. But even when I was of age to drive, they still made every game. And even all the way through my career when I eventually went to UH, the games were back-to-back Thursdays and Friday, and they were there every Thursday and Friday. And we had a little neighborhood contingency that also came with them. And so, very supportive parents and family; my siblings would attend all the games as well.

So, you go through Sacred Hearts, and what academic subjects have captured your attention at this point?

Favorite subjects. I liked history. I enjoy reading things from the past. Math, I enjoyed. Not to say that I was really good at it, but I enjoyed it, I think credit to the teachers there. And then, believe it or not, it might be equivalent to today's technology, but they had typing, and I thought that was pretty intriguing. I think my class was one of the first where we got the electric typewriter. So, we started our classes with the old, you know manual, then when they said, Oh, we have two new electric, we all sort of--

And they'd have speed tests; right?

Yes. And we all fought for those. But those were some courses that I think just inspired. And Hawaiian history in particular, there was a teacher that I really appreciated, and I think that's what I loved so much about the course, was the style that she taught it in made it so interesting for me.

And at this point, teaching is not shaping up on your career horizon yet?

Not at all.

Not yet.

Not at all. No. You know, at this point, it was really volleyball.

What about the competition did you like? Did you like being better than everybody, or did you like winning as a team? Or did you like the way you could hit that ball?

I think at first, you start to develop your individual skills. And so, you like to see the things that you can start to do that you couldn't do before. But the magic comes when the coach and the coaching puts it all together, and then you start winning, because each individual is taking care of what they need to. And when you put it all together, and now you're winning game after game, or tournament after tournament, that's exciting.

What was your role? I mean, everyone sort of finds their place on a team, generally.

Right. So, outside hitting and setting; those were primarily my roles. But the other beauty about the coaching style was that all the players had to know all the positions. And so, that was really exciting.

But you did get the positions you liked the most?

I did. I did. So, that was fun. Uh-huh.

So, the volleyball bug had begun to bite.

Yeah.

Mahina Eleneki Hugo practiced and competed in volleyball matches during the school year, while summers were spent at University of Hawaii volleyball camps. Her dream was to someday play on the U.H. Rainbow Wahine Volleyball Team.

I still remember this day; I was at home in the living room. This was my senior year in high school. My mother was cooking. And we only had one car back then, so my mother would take my father to work and then, she'd have to pick him up. And so, the phone rang, and it was Dave Shoji. And he said, Hi, Mahina, this is Dave Shoji from U.H. And I'm kind of the deer in headlights going—

Had you met him?

He came to one of my games. I would go to the U.H. summer camps, and so, I met Dave there, and I would attend the camps and stuff. And so, at the end of the camp for that summer, he said, Can you send me a school schedule going into my senior year so I can maybe watch your game? And so, he did come in, and we're warming up. And when you see Dave Shoji come in, it's like, Oh, my god, Dave Shoji's in the room. And so, fortunately, I had a good game, and so I hadn't heard from him, and then I received the phone call. And I remember my mom saying—I said, Hi, Dave. And my mom was cooking and she sort of looked at me, and I went ...

And so, he said, You know, I'm calling to offer you a full scholarship to UH, and that would include, you know, books and tuition, and room and board, and getting a full scholarship on the team. And I just remember, Wow, thanks Dave!

And you know, kinda trying to play like I was a little Joe Cool, but not really. And then hung up the phone, and I looked at my mom, and I just screamed, and tears came down. And she said, Okay. She turned off what she was cooking, and said, I'm gonna get my purse, let's go hop in the car, we have to go tell Dad. So, you know, there were

no cell phones, right, back then. So, we got in the car to go share the news with my dad. But that was the start of it.

Were you going to UH anyway, or was this a change in course?

Well, that was my dream. Now, I know a lot of people—you know, remember back then, they had just come off of back-to-back national championships, and my parents would take me to the games and I would aspire to be some of the players. And so, it was a dream, because Hawaii was a number-one program.

A powerhouse.

So, I thought, wow, if I could get a scholarship to UH and play. And that was a dream for me. If not, I did apply to other schools and sent them, you know, volleyball materials and see. But once I heard the news, I didn't even bother.

Did you have any trepidation? You know, 'cause a lot of students think, Am I gonna be good enough for college ball?

Right; right. You know, I didn't, and that's just either being naive to maybe the bigger picture, and just trusting that I was given so many tools. And when you're that young and fearless, I think you don't really put boundaries. You're just, I got it, and I'm going for it. And that was sort of the attitude I had. And so, I just felt like, once I got it, I was thrilled, and I couldn't wait to be out there on the court.

And how was it, when you joined that team that you had emulated or aspired to?

Well, at first, it was a bit intimidating, because some of the ones that I would go to watch didn't graduate yet, so they were gonna be either juniors or seniors. And so, you know, it was like, Ooh. But the nice part were some of my teammates that were coming in in the same class as myself, we were the newbies together. And so, it was nice to have that comfort zone of, I'm not the only new one. And of course, Tita Ahuna, who was at Kamehameha, we're the same age and year, we knew each other from playing all those years of high school together. And so, the two of us immediately would click and say, Okay, here we go, and let's do this together. And so, it was okay. And once you get into the groove of what you feel comfortable doing all these years, but actually on a bigger stage and the drills were more intense, there's a challenge there that's very exciting. And so, it was hard. I'm not gonna say it was easy, but it was exciting and it was challenging, which I loved.

There was that wonderful '87 year of the national title.

Yeah.

Can you tell when you're on a potentially national title winning team? I mean, does it feel different than other team play?

It does, especially at a college level. You know, now you're bringing the best of the best; they've all been recruited. And so, there are no weak spots, so to speak. I mean, when you're in high school, you know, maybe you have to sort of go with kids that are there. Now, you're actually out there recruiting. And so, the level of intensity, the level of the game—

You can't count on a break.

No; no. And so, if you're having an off day in your position, there's somebody really in arrears here ready to come in and take your spot. And so, it is business in one sense, where you know, you must perform every day, because there's somebody else there. And so, it does; it makes the joy of that special unit, when you feel that you have the right six on the floor, or the right girls coming in to sub at the right place, and you don't lose that momentum, then there's a magic that happens.

The magic certainly happened for Mahina Eleneki Hugo when her team won the NCAA Championship during her senior year. With college graduation came ... no guaranteed future.

Did you have your future all locked up as soon as you walked out the college doors?

Can we swear on this show?

Hell, no. No. In fact, it was just one of those things where you get out, you just go, Okay, I don't really feel like I needed to be pressing and finding a job right away. And as it landed, I applied a few jobs. I had a friend and a neighbor at the time who was in Customs as a Customs inspector, and Hey, why don't they do part-time work. I applied, so was an intermittent Customs inspector for a while, which is all the international flights and things. And so, that was for a little while. And then, I had a friend who called me one day and just said, Hey, there's a P.E. position at La Pietra, and the only thing is, the resumes and things are due today. And this was kind of in the morning, and I hung up, and I said, Yeah, P.E., that sounds like something up my alley that I would love. And so, got off work and put together a resume, and drove it to La Pietra, and turned it in. And so, that sort of was the next phase when I obviously got the job at La Pietra. So ...

And did P.E. teaching seem like that was gonna be it for you? You really enjoyed that?

I did, for so many reasons. I mean, teaching the girls, something that I love. Working out every day and getting paid for it, having my summers off, thinking, This is pretty good life right here, and being able to catch up on some of the things. And so, I thought for a while that might be something that I might do.

But then, the lure of paperwork attracted you.

No!

I think what attracted me was the opportunities. Because when you're at a small school such as La Pietra, we wear many hats.

And how big is La Pietra in number of students?

We have two hundred students, and we're Grades 6 through 12, all-girls school. Our tuition is comparable to or a little under your Punahou and some of those other schools. But you know, the individualized attention that the girls are receiving. They go to great colleges and universities, the environment, you know. I mean, the beauty. I mean, even things as simple as P.E., our girls get to make use of Kapiolani Park, they will go down to the beach and surf. You know, to be able to use what's given to us up there as the facilities.

Come to think of it; how did you get ownership of that wonderful land?

Well, our co-founders Lorraine Day Cooke and Barbara Cox Anthony, they had daughters, and they were at Punahou back in the day. Other schools at younger ages, but eventually at Punahou. And just felt that there were differences in what they wanted for their daughters, and thought, Well, you know, it might take us trying to come up with a different type of school—or environment. Not school, but different school environment, and more nurturing, so smaller. And so, I think these two women, with their vision and direct relationship to how it would affect their own daughters, lucky for us, came up with that and they purchased the land, and the rest is fifty years old. And so, even as teachers, you wear your class advisor hat, your regular class teaching hat. There's a lot of opportunities that exist. And so, I started getting more involved with either the different clubs, or leadership programs that we have there. And so, through the various opportunities and doors that opened up within La Pietra, I just enjoyed it, and I think administratively, did it pretty well, I guess. I mean, somebody obviously saw something in me, and I was able to develop those skills further. And then, you know, of course, it took me to assistant admissions director, and then dean of students.

You got your master's degree along the way.

I did. Along the way, I went back for my master's in education, and with an emphasis on private school leadership. And so, that was a great not only opportunity to get a master's, but to network with other leaders from other independent schools. And so, those opportunities just kinda came up for me at each stage of the way, and here I am twenty-three years later at La Pietra. I've been with La Pietra for twenty-three years.

Well, you didn't really jump to apply for the head of school position, though, the top position.

I didn't. And it was quite incredible. I had been the dean of students for a while, and when our head announced that she was gonna be retiring, the board of trustees formed a committee, a search committee, and I was asked to be on that committee, and gladly, you know. But even prior to that, actually my head at the time did ask me, Are you interested in applying for the position, or in the position? And I thought about it for a brief minute or two, and then I just said, No, I don't think so. As the dean, there were long hours involved, and I just thought, you know, my family time. I'm very family-oriented, I still love to do a bunch of activities. And I thought, I'm already spending some long days, but I still want some me time, and thought, No, I think I'll pass. So, I joined the search committee, and had a lot to say as far as, you know, what the school was all about. And I think when I was talking to our trustees, the third meeting I walked in, and I noticed they were sort of in a different arrangement on the table, and kind of got quiet when I walked in the room. And so, I was just waiting for the meeting to start, and they said, Okay, Mahina, we need to talk to you. And I said, Oh, okay. You know. And long story short, it was just sort of they said, We actually want to offer you the position as head of school. We've been listening to you, we know your record here, and we'd be silly to bypass somebody who already is on the job and knows the school, and has an appreciation. I mean, they said some pretty kind words. And at that moment, you're supposed to sound highly intelligent, of course, and being just baffled by this opportunity and what they have just presented me, it was like, Oh. I mean, I was very honored. And so, I went home, and of course, I talked to my husband, and you know, it was a no-brainer for him. I said, Well, you know, it's not just me taking on this role; it will be you as well, you know, supporting and sacrificing the hours and whatever needs to be done. And so, never looked back, and I'm happy I've been able to have this opportunity.

And how long have you been on the job now in that position?

I'm going on my ninth year, this year; ninth year as head of school.

Mahina Eleneki Hugo's ability to not only be a team player, but to become a strong and caring educational leader, grew out of her lifelong competitive spirit and passion for sports. Now, as head of school at La Pietra Hawaii School for Girls, she inspires new generations of women to work hard with self-discipline and achieve their dreams.

Mahalo to former UH volleyball star Mahina Eleneki Hugo for sharing her stories for 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 did you learn about coaching people from Dave Shoji?

Dave is a wonderful individual. And it's so funny; the joke of the team was, when I was playing with Dave, he's a very detail-oriented coach, which in a close game it's a wonderful thing to have. I mean, you know, we would play each girl across that net a different defense. And these were life lessons. He taught a lot more than just the game. But the joke that I was getting at was, he was also a very private man. I always said, If I got stuck in an elevator with him, I wouldn't know what to say.

It's not 'til later in life where you can really appreciate and actually go back and say, Hey, thanks, Dave, there was a lot, you know, you shared with so many of us through the generations.

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