

# LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



**TITLE: HOLLY HENDERSON**

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When I hit the world, it was the 60s, and we were looking at whole different model of what society was like, and what we wanted to be and do. People do focus on the sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll, and there was plenty of that. And I certainly am not gonna deny any of it. But I also remember how many serious people there were talking about issues and what we wanted to do, and what kind of world we wanted to live in, and how to make that kind of a world come about.

**Holly Henderson came of age in the 1960s, a member of a generation that redefined values and spoke up for change. For decades, she has trained and advised nonprofit leaders in Hawaii. Holly Henderson, 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. Holly Henderson has trained nonprofit leaders in Hawaii for decades. Her social conscience serves her well in advising executive directors and members of boards of directors. She's an original, known for wisdom and wit, and for speaking truth to power as needed. At the time of our conversation in the summer of 2015, Henderson was letting go of the reins of the Weinberg Fellows Program in which she taught executive directors of nonprofits serving the poor and needy. She continued to serve as the executive director of another nonprofit training and mentoring program with emphasis on early childhood program leadership, Castle Colleagues. She is keenly observant and analytical, perhaps as a result of her upbringing as the daughter of two scientists.**

I was born in Stillwater, New York to Robert William Eric and Henry Hoskem Eric. And he was an anthropologist, and she was an archeologist.

**Did they travel the world like in Raiders of the Lost Ark?**

Yeah. Actually, that was how they met. They met on a dig, which I think was in Turkey. And they did travel the world after that. And then, my mother came

home to have my sister in 1939, when the war clouds were pretty much gathering, and I was born in 1941, two years later, three days before Pearl Harbor. So, my father was gone most of the time when I was a small child; he served in the Pacific, which was the first time he came to Hawaii.

**And your father; was he more open and forthcoming?**

Yes. I was my father's pet. That is true; I was.

**Because?**

I could make him laugh. My start at standup comedy.

**And your mom was an archeologist?**

Yes, she was.

**Wasn't that uncommon at the time?**

Yeah, it was. She was a biological sport, I think. And when I look at her family, I have no explanation for how that actually happened. 'Cause she was born in 1908, you know, and there she was, photographing the steps of the acropolis as a young woman, as a young archeologist. But there was really a dark side to that, you know. The 50s were a terrible time for women. Because what happened during the war years is, the women had to basically run the country, because really, almost all the men were in that war. And actually, it was a wonderful opportunity for women to get out of the home and learn trades, and do things. But then, they all had to be stuffed back into the kitchen when the men came home.

**Your mother could have gone back to work. No?**

No; she was more complicated than that. She was caught, as so many of the women at that time were, between the idea of your own competence and your own interests, and all of that, and although she would never have wanted anything to do with Tammy Wynette, but that general philosophy, stand by your man and be the good little woman, and all that.

**And commitment to family means staying at home.**

Yeah. And it was just a very, very confusing time for women.

**So, how was that bad for your mother? What was the effect on her?**

She spent her whole life restless, I think. Because she had that wonderful education, she had that early career path, and never went anywhere.

Like her mother, Holly Henderson had a restless life in her younger years. She had a love of literature and a thirst for knowledge, but rejected the formality of prep school, and later, college.

**It's interesting to think of you not enjoying school, 'cause you're so literate. I mean, you love information and knowledge.**

I loved to read, but I hated most of my schooling. Except for the last two years of high school.

**Okay; so where did you go to school before the last two years? Was it at a dreary school?**

It was an incredibly pretentious place. The kind of place where you called your French teacher mademoiselle. And we had gym tunics.

**Gym tunics?**

Yes.

**And I remember you called it hideous.**

It was.

**I bet in the eyes of other people, it was this elite prep school?**

Perhaps. But it didn't do a thing for me, except cause me to think like a prisoner.

**I don't know how old you were, but along the way, and not early, you found out that you were German and Jewish on your dad's side.**

Yes. I was thirteen.

**And considering the war that had been experienced, you know, it was odd that you didn't know that.**

Well, it's obviously deliberate that I didn't know that.

**You know, at that time, it must have been so hard to grasp; German, Jewish. At the time.**

It still is. It still is.

**Did you finally find happiness in college?**

No.

**Never did?**

Never did. Nope. Wanted to get out there in the big world.

### **Did you know where you wanted to be in the big world?**

I knew I wanted to be a writer. My parents really encouraged us to do what we were drawn to, but to work hard at it. I mean, they weren't overly permissive about it. They just wanted us to be who we are, and I give them a lot of credit for that.

### **And off to college. Where'd you go?**

I went to Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, and crashed to the ground because we had all been told since babyhood that the main goal in life is to get into a good college, and it was gonna be so wonderful. Well, compared to where I had just been, it wasn't. And it was very common among the people at that school to think, Oh, I just picked the wrong college. So, we all transferred like crazy, trucked out, took leaves of absences. We were the bane of our parents' existence, because college was a big comedown after that.

### **So, where'd you go? Or did you end up staying?**

I went to New York University. I went to the new school, and I realized it wasn't that I had picked the wrong place. I should have stayed in high school.

### **You should have stayed in high school.**

**In her early twenties, future nonprofit consultant Holly Henderson took a job at a respected national business membership organization, The Conference Board. She started out as an entry level typist, but a series of what she calls "flukey" events would quickly advance her career.**

I actually was only working there, I guess, about a week or so. But the lady who ran the pool was interested that I was writing these stories. So one day, she came to me and she asked me if I could take dictation. So, I did, and I was able to do a version of it that passed her test. So, she took me to meet the controller of the company whose secretary had just quit. And when I walked into his office, his radio was on and was playing an aria. And I said, Oh, Puccini! And that was it. I mean, he wouldn't have cared if I couldn't type at all. The fact that I knew Puccini when I heard him was enough. So, I now left the pool within days of being hired, and I became his secretary, and then the following week they made him treasurer of the company. So, I was now an executive secretary. Picture this, 'cause I was a hippie in those days; right? So, I had this long, straggly hair, and I had black tights with holes in them, and I was the bane of the actual executive secretaries. Oh! They thought that I was the most awful ruffian.

**After her stint as an executive secretary, Holly Henderson became a reporter for The Conference Board's publications. As the turbulent social issues of the 1960s swirled around her, she began to incorporate them into her articles.**

So, I tried to get into it various pieces on social issues that were important to me, and discovered the most amazing thing. In the belly of the beast, there was this old guy who was there for the same reason.

**Which was?**

To begin to get them to think a little bit differently about social issues. And so, we colluded. I was in my twenties, and he was in his sixties or so. I would report on these conferences that they had, where they invited all the Fortune 500, and they had various speakers talking on various issues. And I would write in such a way that I would ... I guess I was asking diabolical questions, now that you mention it. I would go up to the speakers afterwards and ask them some questions, and those would make it into the articles. And I remember one that was about the unreliability of lower income employees. And what they didn't know was that those employees, first of all, had to cross gang territory to get to work. So, if there was a problem, they had to go around, and they were frequently late for work, and they got a bad reputation for that. But I was trying to show the other side of what was going in these people's lives. So, things like that; I wrote about things like that.

**Lasting marriage was not in the cards for Holly Henderson. However, her ill-fated relationships would lead Holly to discover Hawaii, which would become her home.**

**I did not know that you had three husbands before you got here.**

I did, in fact. I mean, that was what I did. I was a slow learner.

**Yeah; tell me about that. You were young. How old were you at the time you were married?**

The first time I got married, I had just turned nineteen.

**Oh ...**

And that was a marriage because of the morays of the times. I had drunk the Kool-Aid, I was a good girl. I wish I had already been a hippie at the time. Because I wouldn't have married him, and that would have been a much better thing for both of us.

**So, divorced, I take it.**

Yes. That was the baby marriage. Yes.

**But then, you also went through the deaths of two husbands.**

Yes, I did.

**Were those marriages happier?**

I don't know; they didn't last very long. The first one died when we had been married for only about eight months. And then, the second one ... actually, when I married him, I was in therapy because I was anxious, and the therapist felt that this was because I was coming up on the eighth month, and that I was nervous about that. And then in the eighth month, he died of a heart attack.

**Two husbands died at the eighth month?**

Yes. So ...

**So, what was the effect on you?**

It was like being hit in the head with an ax or something. Yeah. That's not the sort of thing you expect is going to happen to you once, let alone twice. But your life goes on; that's the amazing thing. There wasn't a whole lot of money, but there was a little. And when somebody that you love dies, and there is money as a result, you feel like you should do something special with that. And what I did was, I traveled, and I went to a number of very interesting places. I was really happy that I got a chance to travel. But the last place that I had been before Hawaii, I had gotten hassled considerably because—I mean, this was fifty years and a hundred pounds ago, so ... you know.

**So, you were a single woman traveling alone.**

I'm a single woman traveling alone. And I just wanted to go someplace where I could wander around and feel safe, and not be harassed. So, the first night that I spent in Hawaii was on Kauai, at Coco Palms.

**When you were there, Grace Guslander owned it.**

Actually, Amfac owned it.

**Oh, she ran it. But didn't she own it at one point?**

Yeah. I think she and Gus did, her husband. But she was the most magic person. And I really think that I am in Hawaii today because of her. Because she managed to show people what Hawaii was really about. Which is interesting, because she did it while at the same time there were the hokey things, you know.

**Yes. There's a lot of hokey-ness in a sweet way about the old Coco Palms.**

Yes.

**With its channels of water, and its palm trees dipping into the water.**

But that's royal ground, you know, and she never forgot that it was.

**How did she bring Hawaii home to you, the authentic Hawaii, from her tourist accommodations?**

Oh, so many different ways. The staff at Coco Palms really was a family. And when you would go back year after year, they would whip out the pictures of their grandchildren, they would invite you to their homes. After I saw what Grace had shown me, I thought if I lived in Hawaii, it would make me a nicer person.

**Did you think you weren't nice? Not that nice?**

I'm not.

**You mean, you're still not?**

Well, I'm nicer.

It did sort of work.

**Well, I mean—okay, I'm trying to figure out what you mean by that. Do you mean that you had a wicked sense of humor?**

No.

**Not that. You just were not a kind person?**

Not the way someone who has been born and raised in this culture is.

**After several visits to Hawaii during the 70s, Holly Henderson decided it was time to make the islands her home. In 1977, she quit her job at the United Church of Christ in New York, and made the move to Hawaii. She didn't have a job, or even a plan, but Hawaii welcomed her. She secured a position that she called a perfect fit at a human services nonprofit organization.**

There used to be a wonderful man named Wally Smith in this town. And he ran Health and Community Services Council, which later morphed into Hawaii Community Services Council. I got a job with them. And it was based on a model that came out of United Way of America, to train boards of directors on what their responsibilities should be. You see why this was such an ironic thing for me. Because up until that point, being on a board of directors was often just a sort of honorary thing. They weren't really expected to do that much.

**Names on the stationery.**

Yeah. And at that point, it became important that they step up and know what they were supposed to do, and do it. So, my job initially was to train volunteers, and they were volunteers, to go into all sorts of organizations all over the islands and work with them, work with the boards of directors, so that it functioned on all the different islands. And I did that for many years. And it was while I was in that job that Harry Weinberg died, and Alvin Awaya was one of his trustees, and he thought from his kitchen cabinet ideas for what to fund initially. And the Weinberg Fellows Program came out of that. And then, Al Castle, who was involved in the early years of the Weinberg Fellows Program, and still is to this day, said, You know, we really should do something like this for early childhood centers. And so then, the Castle Colleagues Program came out of that.

**Holly Henderson continues to train and refine the leaders of many nonprofit organizations in Hawaii.**

**And you've been minting nonprofit executives.**

No, I haven't been minting them. They come to me already minted. But the thing is that very few people, when they're sitting outside playing with mud pies say, I'm gonna grow up and run a not-for-profit organization. And there are management responsibilities nonprofits have that sometimes they're not prepared for. But I know the expectations of them are merciless. Because if you think about the model that we use in the Weinberg Fellows Program, and we look at the different areas that we're talking about in terms of governance and board relations, HR, personnel issues, financial management, fundraising, planning, evaluation.

**And your core mission.**

Your core mission.

**Besides that.**

And vision and values at the center of it. And then, marketing and community relations. You tell me what human being is good at all of that.

**I was one of your Weinberg Fellows.**

Yes, you were.

**And I was one of your Weinberg Fellows in the great recession. And I recall you had a board speaker come in, who turned out to be my board chair, Robbie Alm.**

**And I thought, Okay, this is the Fellows Program, this is going to be high level stuff. And what happened was, just profound simplicity. I think he came in and he**

said something like ... You guys look terrible. How can you take care of an organization unless you take care of yourself?

And it's true. You know, everybody was just kind of working really hard, and burning the candle at both ends, and apparently, we looked unkempt or something. I don't know, but he called it right. And then, that's the basis on which that particular Fellows session started. You chose that as the starting point.

M-hm.

**Holly Henderson has a deep respect and appreciation for the Hawaiian culture. Throughout her nearly forty years in Hawaii, she has considered it a privilege and a joy to live here.**

The word that's important to me is, guest. I think of myself as a guest in Hawaii. And I have been here since 1977 as a guest, and I will die as a guest. Because there is etiquette involved in being a guest, that's why that word is so important to me. You know. When you're a guest, if you expect to be welcomed, you do not criticize what your host says, does, eats, drinks, values ... what they believe, where they go to church, how they dress. You don't try to change who they are; you try to adapt yourself to the way they live. That's what a good guest does, I think. But the situation of native Hawaiians in their own land ... it just breaks my heart. Whether they agree with each other or not is not the point. So, it's important to me to do what I can, which isn't a whole lot, but to try to speak up about it.

**And you made a film?**

I did make a film.

**And that's the subject of it.**

That is the subject of it.

**To remember that you're a guest. You don't come here and bulldoze your way around.**

Yes. Because that's what my people have been doing for a long, long, long, long time, and have no right to, in my view.

**Nonprofit consultant Holly Henderson says that one of the most important moments in her life was being arrested. In 1983, Henderson stood up for the rights of Hansen's Disease patients who were being evicted from a State housing complex called Hale Mohalu in Pearl City, Oahu. It was to be torn down, with patients offered quarters in Leahi Hospital in Honolulu. State agents forcibly evicted the residents, and Holly Henderson was arrested, along with seventeen other protestors.**

I'm proud of it. I'm proud of it. Because I think there are times when you've tried everything else, and nothing has worked. You have to know that about yourself, that when the time comes, if you have to go to the mat, you will. Martin Luther King said something I really like. He said, If a man hasn't found something he will die for, he isn't fit to live. And you just have to know that when the time comes, you'll stand up. It took eleven years from then 'til when they broke ground for the new place in Pearl City, but it does stand as a testimonial that sometimes you do win, if you persist.

**Holly Henderson was acquitted of the charges for her protest at Hale Mohalu. Her social conscience has not diminished with time; it is felt as she trains nonprofit leaders and consults with nonprofit boards of directors. And you will sometimes see her name on well-crafted letters to the editor about community issues. Mahalo to nonprofit consultant Holly Henderson of Honolulu for sharing your story with us. And thank you for joining us. For PBS Hawaii, and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.**

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No matter how imaginative you are, you could never imagine a better life than fate provides. You know? I couldn't have planned a path like I've had, and I'm so grateful that I didn't try.

**You clearly weren't following a formula.**

I definitely was not.

[END]