

# LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



**TITLE: NAINOA THOMPSON**

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You know, we do things 'cause we believe they're right. We'll take voyages or we'll move forward because we believe that they're necessary to be active. The worst thing in our time is ignorance, and it's apathy, and it's inaction. And especially now, 'cause the world is changing so quick, you need to be in front of it, not behind. And so, you create an idea, you create a vision that is based on something like taking a canoe forty-seven thousand miles, going to twenty-eight countries, eighty-two ports around the only island we have called Earth in a way in which you hope in the journey that you can create awareness and better understandings and moving community towards being active. And so, inherently for the success of the mission of the Worldwide Voyage, it requires both a strong local community connected to a global community. Otherwise, you're gonna fail your intention. I see myself as part of the responsibility to do certain pieces to make that happen.

**Nainoa Thompson is a master navigator who has learned how to rely on nature and his instincts to guide the double-hulled Polynesian voyaging canoe Hokulea across vast stretches of open ocean to faraway destinations. And he's using wayfinding skills on land, navigating political and diplomatic terrain to reach with the Hokulea across the globe to raise awareness about the importance of taking care of our Earth. Nainoa Thompson, 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. Nainoa Thompson was the first Hawaiian in over six hundred years to sail a canoe between Hawaii and Tahiti without the use of modern navigational tools. He has the vision to see an island thousands of miles away, and the courage to leave the safety of land, because he feels the long voyages connecting people will make the world a better place. That's come from a lifetime of training and community, starting here in the East Honolulu ahupuaa of Niu, also known as Niu Valley, where Thompson grew up. From this place, his sense of community has grown to encompass the world.**

When does a child learn values, caring for the Earth, caring for your place, caring for ohana, caring for your family, caring for elders? When do you learn that? And for me, it was very young. And that was because my two greatest teachers were my mom and dad. Here is my primary school, in my mom and dad's house. It sets the course for my life. And right down the road, right here was my grandfather's dairy. I mean, I'm so old

that there were no supermarkets, no Costco, no Foodland, no nothing. There was nothing in Niu Valley. It was a dairy farm and a chicken farm, and Kuliouou had a meat house. Hawaii Kai marina was the largest fishpond in the State of Hawaii, and Aina Haina had a few stores. And my grandfather made milk, and it would be delivered in glass bottles at night. And the guy that would deliver it, his name was Yoshi Kawano, and he was the man that taught me kindness, he was the man that taught me compassion. He lived in an old wooden house. My mom and dad, when they would leave us with someone, we would always be with the Kawanos, 'cause they were the ones that they trusted the most. And you felt that, you know, as a child. You were taken care of, you were nurtured, you were safe, and you were clean. And so, in Yoshi's house, everything was Japanese. And so, you bathed in the furo, and you ate Japanese food. You could smell it in the house. You ate on futons and everything was Japanese. But he was my greatest ocean teacher, my primary ocean teacher. When I was about five years old, he gave me a fishing pole. Too bad for him to do that, because he gave me this little bamboo fishing pole, and then he was the one who delivered the milk at ten-thirty at night, worked all night 'til eight o'clock in the morning. And then I would be sitting on his old wooden doorsteps with the fishing pole. And then, he'd put me in the car every single time, and we'd drive what seemed very far to me to Maunalua Bay right out here, and we would go fishing. And that's where my love for the ocean started, through fishing, 'cause Maunalua was so full of life. And so, that was classroom, that was school, and Yoshi became my definition of community that was caring, that kept you safe. We were safe as children here, and we could be left here on the land or with the community. It was a beautiful time. And Yoshi, in his house, everything was Japanese, and it was fully respected. He's Nisei, so he was born in Hawaii. But everything outside of his house, once you stepped out the door, was Hawaiian. And so, this whole valley here, or this ridge Kulepeamo, this is where he taught me about the spirits and the blue light. He talked about the Menehune when Kalaniana'ole was a coral road. And that that beautiful blending and mixing of who he was, of Japanese ancestry, but on a place that's Hawaiian, and honoring both sides. It was hugely impactful on how I look at our amazingly beautiful mixing of many cultures around the world that created a fabric of a culture that is more based not on race, but it's based on values. And that makes Hawaii powerful. Not just a nice place to be, but it makes it powerful.

**In addition to Yoshi Kawano, the teachers whom Nainoa Thompson most often recognizes are Mao Piailug, one of the last traditional navigators from Micronesia; Nainoa's father, Pinky Thompson; Lacy Veach, an astronaut from Hawaii; and Eddie Aikau. Eddie was an outstanding waterman and crew member on Hokulea, and was lost at sea when he went for help on his surfboard after the canoe capsized in 1978. When that happened, the dream of a Hawaiian navigating a canoe voyage to Tahiti could have ended.**

My dad was saying that, you know, you guys, your community, you need to find Tahiti. Not for you, but for your people. And he was so forceful. You need to get up, get off your knees; you're on your knees and you can't see, you need to get up, and you need

to find Tahiti. But with me, he said—interesting, you know. He pulled us all together, our leadership. After the loss of Eddie, we couldn't even talk to each other. We were just so ... overwhelmed with grief and anger, and rage, and denial. All that kind stuff. And blaming; yeah? And that's the worst. And so, it was all of that, and so we couldn't even talk to each other. Leadership was was pau, it was finished. But my father and guys like Abraham Piianaia, they said, Absolutely not. I mean, these guys have been through the war; right? They know what it takes to stand up and fight for your beliefs. And they knew it was a pivotal time. But dad was interesting. He gets us all together, he pulls us all together, he creates the idea of finding Tahiti. We all come together around the idea in one room at the Biomedical Building and so, we were together. Then we're walking in the parking lot after the meeting, and we're all solid and the vision's clear, we're gonna go. We're gonna work hard, we're gonna take years to do this, do it right, not wrong, but almost in an angry voice. In the parking lot, the light was so bright, 'cause we were in a dark room the whole time. And he goes, Okay, Nainoa, you want to navigate? Who's your teacher? 'Cause Mau went home; yeah?

**And he said, You won't look for me, and you won't even find me.**

Yeah; and he was not gonna come back. Yeah. So, he was just so ... frankly, disgusted with Hawaii. Because Hawaii was just not together. It wasn't pono, and it was in conflict all the time. In the world he comes from, that is completely unacceptable. You know, anyway, make a long story short, Mau came back.

**After Mau Pailug returned to Hawaii, Nainoa Thompson trained with him for the next two years, learning the paths of the stars and the movements of the winds and seas, and sailed to Tahiti. Over the next two decades, Nainoa would take the canoe over enormous expanses of ocean. Throughout the Pacific, he became regarded as a wayfinder on land, as well as at sea. In the year 2000, he was appointed by the Hawaii Probate Court to serve as a Bishop Estate trustee. This, after a scandal over gross mismanagement that had placed the future of Kamehameha Schools in jeopardy. Do you know how he found his way in these uncharted waters? This is his story.**

You know, I never applied for the leadership job. I mean, actually, I don't even know how it happened. But the agreement to become a trustee was really about service. It was really about if you're gonna be asked, certainly, it's honor and privilege to be a part of that amazing institution. And it is. It's just so extraordinary. But it was a rough time. I remember it was the first month of being a trustee, and you walk in the door with four of your colleagues that you don't even know. I mean, we come from very different worlds. Why they picked me, I have no idea. But I'm not in the business field, I'm not an attorney, I'm not in real estate development. I'm a fisherman. So, in the back of my mind, two things. The primary thing, you need to rebuild trust in trustees, 'cause it was gone. It was evaporated. Nobody trusted the trustees. And the only way that you're gonna do that is to have that community of five trustees come together. And if we fail to come together, we should quit and have the courage to do it. So, make a long story short. In the first month, I don't know, I remember ... it's like where our office is, you walk

around and go through this small little kitchen into the boardroom. And that boardroom has so much mana. And it's like a brass golden doorknob, and I reach for the doorknob. I grabbed it, and then I pulled my hand away, 'cause I was like afraid to go in the room, like I wasn't ready. I didn't know how to lead this. I didn't know how to command. And then, I took a really deep breath, and I opened the door and walked into the room filled with people. They don't trust you. And then, working with a group that you don't know. It was a rough time. And then to really be able to collect and glue back the pieces of a broken trust, it was a rough time. And I didn't feel I was adequate, I didn't feel like I had the tools, I didn't have the background. But you were asked; right? You were asked to do this. And so, I remember my response to that was, I got my assistant, Stella Kutaka, a beautiful lady, to help me. And I got pictures of all my great leaders, all of my great teachers, those who I would define as leaders that navigated. So, you had Yoshi on the wall, you had my father on the wall, you had Lacy on the wall, you had Eddie on the wall, you had Kala Kukea on the wall, you had Herb Kane. There was like sixty-something pictures, and I put 'em around the whole room. And so, when I would be in a decision that was profound to a whole institution that's on the governance side, it's my job to set course for the institution, and I didn't know how to answer it, and I'm getting pressured for the wrong reasons, and you feel it, I would stop the meeting. And I would go inside the room, turn on the light, and I would sit with my teachers. My leaders that have set the course for me for my whole life, and I needed them, 'cause the vast majority of them are gone. And so, in the pictures were their story, their work, their values, and their relationship. So again, that is that community around the whole room.

**And are you saying that after spending time with the photos that you were able to find a course?**

Well, sometimes, the course, but the ability to be able to say, You gotta get up, you gotta go in that room, and you gotta make a decision. If you're not completely clear too bad; you're a trustee, and you need to decide. You can't go absent. And so, I needed their counsel and their guidance, and so, I would remember their stories. You know, what would Mau do? What would Eddie do? What would my dad do? My dad was a trustee for twenty-one years. What would he do? And so, that was the smartest thing I ever did, was to get all my teachers and my leaders in the room with me, and I could sit with them in counsel by myself. Then, go back inside and deal with the rough decisions that you're never, ever feeling that it's one hundred percent the correct thing to do, 'cause it's complex decisions, and then working on. I always say this with a lot of humility, but huge respect for my colleagues. That was an amazing group of trustees. Diane Plotts was a land developer that built all these big hotels with Chris Hemmeter, which is not my thing that I would ever do. I thought, We are gonna have a rough time coming to find a place of common ground. But Diane in the end, she was really almost the spiritual grounding of the board, because she had such solid values that she went back to. And so, I'd go pester her and ask her, you know, Where do you come up with these decisions? It always went back to her growing up on a farm.

### **And having a center.**

Where are values taught? Where do you learn them? How? When? Who? So, Diane in the end was really my guidance at the level on which, you know, she would look at me in the boardroom and say, Nainoa, vote. Vote. But no matter what position I ever took, even though it was contrary to her, she respected it. I love that lady.

### **And no Hawaiian blood in her at all.**

No Hawaiian blood. But she is of the culture of values, she is one of the navigators. If there was some way to accurately measure Kamehameha's influence on what's happened in the last four years, it would be profound. Look around in the professional fields at how many are graduates. And the interesting thing about Kamehameha is that the graduates come home. You know, there's a sense of place, there's a sense of kuleana, and they're making a huge difference. And if you think the last forty years was amazing; wait 'til the next forty. I mean, they're just everywhere. On our voyaging canoes, out of the twelve navigators that we have, eight are Kamehameha Schools graduates. The new ones, the young ones, the best ones. And so, I mean, their influence on voyaging is huge.

### **Nainoa Thompson says that as new generations of voyagers have been raised up over the years, so has their desire to undertake new challenges and achieve new goals.**

Lacy Veach back in 1992, he and my dad, right down the road, he was telling my dad, and my dad was agreeing; We should take Hokulea around the world, the world needs to see Hokulea, Hokulea needs to learn about the Earth, we need to protect it. This was Lacy. And my dad was raising the question; Are we at the point where the Hawaiian community is ready to engage the rest of the Earth as a vibrant, strong, powerful culture and build relationships around the right kinds of values? That's in 1992. We lose both of our great navigators; my father and Lacy. But it wasn't until 2007 when we were ... not me, it was Chad Paishon and Chad Baybayan were sitting exhausted on the Fukuoka dock in Japan when we sailed to Micronesia, to Mau's island to honor him, then we went up to Japan to honor Yoshi and the many Yoshi's that had voyaged to Hawaii. It's two o'clock in the morning. These two poor navigators are exhausted, and they're saying, Man, there's gonna be two thousand people down here tomorrow morning at dawn, and they're gonna want to touch Hokulea. So, you're in a country that doesn't know Hokulea, you're in a country that speaks a different language, with a different history. They're oceanic people, they're amazing ocean people, but they don't know this canoe. And yet, why would two thousand people be there? And they're gonna be there. And then, they said, Why don't we go around the world. And so, we voted on April 1, 2008 to do this. But there were a whole bunch of issues. Could you keep it safe, could you get enough crewmembers to do this, could you raise the funding? Could you build the community? And so, that was when we reached out to stuff like organizations that were just designed for this. And that was the East West Center. I mean, they're designed for this, to help us create the ability to sail the

voyage. 'Cause we needed to earn the voyage; right? We needed to make sure that all these issues, safety and leadership, and crew strength that as borne from the idea, but we had to be responsible for the idea.

**There are so many moving parts, like even fundraising and strategic planning.**

Hokulea took eighteen months of dry dock. We made the promise that the canoe needed to be better than ever, that it can go around the world. We're gonna take all rot and all damage off the canoe. Right now, the only thing left on Hokulea that's from 1976 is one inch of the hulls, that go around the hulls. And everything else, by that decision, had to be changed. But the thing about community, we had twelve hundred volunteers that put in thirty-two thousand volunteer man hours. If we didn't have that pool, we could never get Hokulea ready to go. But fundamentally, these are twelve hundred people who don't know each other, that come together around an idea, and to get Hokulea ready. I mean, enormous; enormous human effort. You don't lead that. You know what leads it? It's the idea.

**But the idea has to be shaped and nourished, and grown. At what point do you come in and feed it?**

I come in, in the beginning. You know, I'm there to be responsible for the nurturing of the idea, and to measure it. And I guess my biggest leadership decision is whether we did earn the right to go. And during the voyage, I have the very difficult situation about saying whether it's still worth it. Are you gonna call it off? Are you gonna ship Hokulea home? Are you gonna fail the mission? That would be my responsibility. And so, I do have to make that final call. But what I've learned over the years, and it's through those great teachers, is that fear is best friend. You know, it's the one that reminds you that you're not ready. It's the one that keeps you honest and tells you that the things you didn't take care of. And fear, I find it in a number of ways, but I find it in my dreams. And I will wake up and just have these horrendous dreams of irresponsibility, not following through, danger, risk, the things that are really bothering me, they come to me. 'Cause what you do is, your day is so busy and it's so complicated that you can push this all behind you. But when you're sleeping, you can't do that. But then, I also find it in exhaustion. I get sick sometimes, I get more colds, I start to create that old kinda childhood excuses for not having to take responsibility. It never goes away. It's still there. But what the voyaging has helped me do, which has been huge, it's like there's this door of fear that it's like the Kamehameha Schools door, it's like that golden handle that you don't want to open. 'Cause if you open it, you gotta be honest about all your inadequacies, all the things that make you less than perfect. But what I've learned through the voyaging—that's why I love cloudy days. I love getting lost now. And I love taking my students. I hope they get like the worst doldrums, ever.

Because it's in the blackness, it's in the cloudiness, it's in the times that aren't easy, that you grow, that you become the best. And what I've learned, and primarily from—my primary teacher is Eddie. Eddie said, Open the door.

**When Hokulea was rebuilt, the original deck was salvaged and remade into this table that sits on the lanai of Nainoa Thompson's parents' house in Niu Valley in East Honolulu. In May 2014, Hokulea left for Tahiti, the first stop outside Hawaii on the Malama Honua Worldwide Voyage, a journey dedicated to increasing awareness for the importance of taking care of our island Earth. Everywhere Hokulea travels, the canoe is joining with global communities to bridge traditional and new technologies to share the message of living sustainably.**

The oceans matter. So, the Worldwide Voyage says that the greatest environmental challenge of our time is protecting the world's oceans, because the oceans protect the world's life. I mean, the next four breaths you take, three come from the ocean. Don't mess with plankton. And so, when we look at the oceans and we look at the state they're in, we need to be very concerned, because that's gonna be the measurable defined environmental issue about what's gonna happen to our next two generations. So, if that's our story, if that's our idea, then you make the connection with places that don't know the canoe, but they connect to your values. So, when we look at sustainability, we talk about stuff that's not really the solution. But when you think about what the Hawaiians did in this land, with their system of tenure, their sets of values, how they developed things like the ahupuaa system and how they learned how to manage resources on the islands, it's so critical today, 'cause embedded in that two thousand years was an enormous amount of very hard learning that took place to be able to find some sense of balance. And in the balance is where we find hope. And so, you have all these things emerging. You have leadership emerging, you have highly educated Native Hawaiians that are coming into the workforce, coming into professionalism, namely go into medicine, go into the doctorates programs, go into economics, go into education. It's growing. What's gonna happen in the next twenty years, there's gonna be this merger between that history, that culture of living well on these islands, and with the professionalism which is required to make the adaptation for the way that we lived before, we'll figure out a way for the second half of this 21<sup>st</sup> century. I think it's vital. And you know, of course, it's hard.

**Since he attained the rare distinction of master navigator, Nainoa Thompson's courage to open the door and walk through has been inspiring communities not just in Hawaii, but around the world, to achieve their dreams. Mahalo to Nainoa Thompson of Ahupuaa O Niu, for your community building on a vast scale, and for sharing your stories 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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I don't know about that. But the ones I listen to the most today are my two little children. When I add up the signs and what we know about traditional knowledge and indigenous knowledge about what's going on, when I know that my two little children understand the Worldwide Voyage and the values and the beliefs in the context of their six-year-old world, when I know that they allow their father to go 'cause they know that he believes it's the right thing to do, but at the same time that this voyage is for them. At the same time, I don't have to have their picture on the wall, because I can see them on a daily basis. I can touch them and feel them. So, it's that beautiful world that I live in that has this legacy and this journey, and this history of extraordinary leaders that are defining your ultimate permission. And then at the same time, you can be at home and see your children, and making sure that they are believing with you too. And so, I'm not a leader, but I'm in an amazing place, and been on a lifelong journey of extraordinary leaders, and that's that.

[END]