

GUEST: BEN CAYETANO 2

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I told Lorraine, let's leave Hawaii. We started to save money. And one day, football season, I won two; so thousand dollars apiece. And that was like ... somebody up there likes me. And that accelerated, our ability to move to the mainland.

That's right, gambling money helped to fund the future Hawaii governor's pursuit of higher education on the west coast. It was a twist of fate in the lives of Ben Cayetano and his wife at the time, Lorraine. More on the life of former governor Ben Cayetano, in his own words, next on *Long Story Short*.

Aloha mai kakou, I'm Leslie Wilcox. In this edition of *Long Story Short*, we continue our conversation with former Hawaii Governor Benjamin Cayetano. He's retired from politics, but maintains the same tough mindset he had while running our state for two terms. In his book, *Ben: A Memoir, from Street Kid to Governor* his candor is fascinating, and he is no less so here on *Long Story Short*. He complains about Hawaii politicians who have little life experience, narrow horizons, and no appetite for making the tough calls.

You say something in your book that really surprised me.

[chuckle]

I wonder; is this true where you say ... I think it was time for your second term as Lieutenant Governor. I mean, everybody knows that lieutenant governor is often, not always, a stepping off point or spring pad for governor.

M-hm.

But you never thought about it before that, seriously?

When I was in the Senate, I was part of the dissidents. Neil Abercrombie and I were close, and 1986, I told Neil; Neil, I'm leaving the Senate. And he said he was gonna leave the Senate also. And so he told me, Ben, I'm gonna run for Congress. And I told him, I think you'd be a good Congressman. And he said, What you're gonna do? I said, I'm gonna quit, I'm gonna go out and make money, buy a nice home for my family and all of that. And he told me, You know, Ben, after all we've been through as—as dissidents, because we both got into the Legislature in 1974, and here it is twelve years later. He said, We can't leave this place to them. And he's talking about the guys—

M-hm.

—you know, the establishment. And I thought about it. But politics is funny, because once you get a taste of it, if you really believe in public service, you sometimes say, I can't leave this. Because I gotta do the job this way, and there are not enough people in the Legislature who believe as I do. And so Abercrombie, me, Toguchi—part of the dissidents, we all decided to stay in public service. So I ran for lieutenant governor, only office that was open at that time. Because I didn't want to go to Washington, DC. And what's interesting is that when I was a Senator, I introduced a bill to abolish the office. [chuckle] So I didn't think much of the office. And all of a sudden, here I am, running for lieutenant governor. These things happen. You never figure out why, but it happened.

And the lieutenant governor's office, as you pointed out in your book, is sort of what you make it.

Yeah. It's what you make of it, and it's what the Governor allows you to do. John Waihee was very good to me. So when you mention lieutenant governors running for governor, I'll never run against him.

M-hm.

Because for all of the people had issues with him, uh, but I never did.

Did he actively encourage you to be the next governor?

No. We were both elected in 1986, he came to my office and he said, Ben, I was lieutenant governor for four years, I know how frustrating this office can be. So I want to work with you to get some things done. And I did the A-Plus Program for him.

You know, coming from a former latchkey—

M-hm.

I always thought that was your idea. But in your book, you say, no, wasn't your idea.

Well, what happened was one day Waihee called me. Ben, can you come over to my office; Charley Toguchi is here. And Charley was the superintendent of education at the time. So I go into the office, and we meet, three of us. And Charley says, Frank Fasi is thinking about developing an after school program in the city parks. Now, Waihee was thinking about the election. [chuckle] Because Fasi was a perennial candidate for governor. So then John asked Toguchi, Is this a big problem, latchkey children? And Charley said, Yeah. About half of the kids, about thirty thousand estimated, after school, they're wandering the streets, they go to the libraries, they go the shopping malls, or they go home, and nobody's caring for them. So how come we didn't do anything about it? That was Waihee's next question. Because we decided to leave it to the private sector. So then, Ben, can you put, a program together? Well, I know how important it is, because I was a latchkey kid myself. So I said, Okay, we'll do something. And Charley and I, because we're close, I knew that we could do something.

And you came up with a name for it right away.

Yeah. Well in the end, he said, What will we call it? I said, How about A-Plus? And then we called it the A-Plus Program. It was not easy to set it up, because I found out how rigid and inflexible the DOE bureaucracy is. They were all opposed to it.

Because?

Because they didn't want us to use the classrooms. See, the teachers are very territorial about their classrooms. The thought of it being open for an after school program didn't sit well with many of the teachers. And so we had to get over that. And if Toguchi was not the superintendent, we would never have done it. Now, where I think that Waihee and I had a different approach was, he said, Let's start a pilot program. And I told him, No, I don't want to do a pilot program, because I know what's going to happen. You do a pilot program, even if it's successful, the rest of the schools will oppose it. So I said, Let's do the entire system. And he looked at Toguchi, and he asked Toguchi, How many elementary schools are there? Hundred and forty, or something like that. Charley, do you think we can do it? I think we can do it. If not all, I think we can do most of it. And we did it; six month, we did it.

It was a little messy.

A little messy. [chuckle] A little messy. Some of the legislators and the Board of Education got a little bent out of shape, because here was the lieutenant governor and the superintendent doing this by themselves. So Francis McMillan, who was a member of the Board of Education, publicly criticized Charley. He said, Since when does the Lieutenant Governor run education in this State? You know. We had some challenges from the Legislature. But as soon as the idea got out this is what I find. You gotta communicate to the people that you're doing something. Because if we didn't, this program would never have gotten off the board. Because it didn't have any support. I mean, the parents didn't know about it. It had only opposition. So once we said we're gonna do this after school program, we're gonna charge, I think was a dollar a day or something like that, some crazy amount, uh, then the parents started taking notice, you know. And pretty soon support for the program developed, because we were able to show people how great the need was. And myself, once I found out how many kids were at risk, it motivated me and Toguchi to put the program together. And we did.

That's a perennial problem of politics, isn't it?

Oh, yeah.

You try to do something that you think is really good, and instantly, so many people have a problem with it.

Well, what had happened is that the teachers and principals who were opposed to have their classrooms being used would complain to their legislators. And then the legislators would re—would react. The edge that we had was, the superintendent, Toguchi, was on board. And because we knew each other, we worked well together. The Governor asked us to put a committee together, and we did; and even the people on the committee were

reluctant. So finally, it was a two-man committee; me and Charley Toguchi. [chuckle] And it was one of the most rewarding things that I was ever involved in politics. Because the first year, twenty thousand kids; the next year, the program grew to twenty-eight thousand. And the reviews by the parents were ninety-eight percent approval rating. Can't do better than that, man.

Ben Cayetano grew up in a working-class family on the hard edges of old Kalihi. His mother left the family when he was a young boy, and his step-father worked tirelessly to support Ben and his brother Ken. Living in the shadows of Ben Cayetano's life was his biological father, a man who never made an effort to spend time with or get to know his son. All of this toughened the Kalihi kid and helped shaped his no-nonsense style as Hawaii's governor from 1994 to 2002.

How do you get used to any position of leadership, being able to stand your ground? I mean, were you always like that, willing to defy or deal with opposition, or did you have to learn it?

I think my nature and personality kinda made it easier.

What about in political decisions, where people who are opposing you may have a point? I mean, you're not always right, or you're not completely right.

M-hm.

How did you handle that?

Well, if they had a point, and if they persuaded me that I was wrong, or you know, it wasn't feasible, I'd back off. I've done that at times. I don't mind when you talk about the merits, you debate the merits back and forth. What really used to get me frustrated was, even though we'd make an argument for this or that proposition, the other guys, it's when they say, Well, we can't support it because the union is against it, or We can't support it because this one group is against it. Tell us what the other side of the coin is; it's all political. That's very frustrating.

And yet, that's the job you had for decades.

Well, I had, especially for eight years.

As they say, it's lonely at the top.

But it's a great honor to be at the top. You got selected out of a population of 1.2 million people to be Governor for eight years. There's honor in that, and you feel obligated and duty bound to do what you think is right. Now like when I was a criminal defense lawyer, my own client this one guy charged with a crime. When I was Governor, my client was the public. And so I remember when the teachers wanted two hundred and forty million contract. We couldn't give it to them, because I tried to explain, if we agree to this, I'm gonna have to cut all these programs for poor people. And they basically said, Well, we're gonna strike. Well, you're gonna strike, you strike. So they struck. And we finally settled the contract for like half of what they wanted. And I think you cannot be effective if you covet the job. You know what I mean? If you say, I want this

job, and I want to be here forever, because this is the biggest thing that happened to me; if you feel that way, you're not gonna be effective.

You always have to be willing to leave it.

Right. You gotta be willing to leave it. Like, I'm gonna make a decision, and that's it. It's like, playing professional football. That one day your playing time is gonna be up. Well, while you're in there, you just do the very best you can. And that was my philosophy.

Well ... you're a guy who has clear ideas and likes to execute; but politics is all about accommodation and—

M-hm.

—group. How did you get through that? How did you get good at that?

Well most of the guys that I served with, they were reasonable people. Some of these guys had tremendous life experience. Guys like Jack Sua; they had gone to war, so they lived through some hard times, and they had all of this experience. They were also people who you could sit down and really talk about the merits and demerits. Today, it's different. These kids in the Legislature—and I call them kids because many of them have never worked at any job what they're doing today.

M-m.

They were former staff members of a Senator or a Representative, decided to make politics a career, and they're in it. What frustrates me about government, and which is why I wouldn't want to be in it today; you can't talk to these people, you cannot reason with them. That's why there's very little debate in the Legislature. Senator Les Ihara made a comment a couple days ago on the Civil Unions Bill. He said, You know, it's such an important bill, but there's so little debate; people just voted. They vote, they vote on alliances, they vote on anything but merit. Whatever works for them politically, they'll vote that way. Now, I can't put up with that. We've always had that, but it's more pronounced today than ever.

Why do you think that is?

Well, one reason you don't have a lot of debate is, these kids don't have any experience. They can't get up or they worry about their pet projects. I had one guy, a former newsman, come in one day and talk to me, and he said he didn't like what was going on with the leadership. So I said, Why don't you say something? He said, Well, otherwise they're gonna kill my pork. Meaning the projects for his district. Well, if you feel that way, you shouldn't be in the business. You gotta do what's best for everyone. I tried to tell him that. He still doesn't say anything. Just sits there and, Do I get my swimming pool for my school? If I get that, that's all I want. That's how limited the horizons of these young legislators are today. Very limited.

H-m; h-m. So you think it's a function of simple experience and having a broad outlook?

Well, I think events shape people. And if you were, like Dan Inouye, and you were in a war, those kind of things shape you in terms of what's important. The guys who went to war, like Dan Inouye, Tom Brokaw called them the greatest generation. They came back from the war, and they built this country into the most powerful and richest nation in the world. They had a goal. These kids today, they never had to struggle for anything. Because my generation gave them everything that they wanted. There's a book called *Generation Me*, written by a couple professors, and it talked about how this generation is different. If you don't run into adversity, if you don't struggle, if you're not forced to postpone instant gratification so that you can accomplish something later, when you come up and face adversity or face failure, it's harder to deal with it.

Some of Ben Cayetano's other political stories in his book—*Ben: A Memoir, from Street Kid to Governor*—are real grabbers. He names names of politicians who he feels let down voters. And Ben Cayetano isn't the only one in this political town with a long memory. He doesn't make it on all of the A-list social invitations.

What's been the reaction to your book? I know a lot of people—

[chuckle]

—at the Legislature thumbed immediately to the index to see if you wrote about them, and what you said. But you did skewer a few people in the book.

Oh, yeah. But you know, one thing that I tried to do was, I said to myself, I'm gonna be honest and candid in this book, and critical of people, but I'm gonna really make sure that my facts are correct, that what I say is not out of pure spite, but is borne by the facts. And not one of those guys have complained publicly about what I wrote; the ones that I criticized. Because they can't complain. That's the way I look at it. What they said in the newspapers, what they said on the Senate floor or the House floor, whatever they said publicly, you know, to make my point.

I've heard a couple of people say about your book; Just when is Ben gonna mellow out? Why does he always have to carry this chip on his shoulder? He's been the governor; why does he carry this stuff around with him?

[chuckle] You know, someone asked me if I miss holding office. I said, No; the only thing I miss about it is not stopping some of the foolishness that these guys do. Because too many things that I see today are being done for political reasons, because people want to get from here to there. And if you're so ambitious that you're always thinking about politics, then you're always gonna be conducting yourself as if you're walking on eggshells. As far as my family is concerned, I'm a mellow guy. But when it comes to public service, people need to hold other people accountable, because there are big stakes involved. So when people say that, I want to ask them, Well, what did you do for the people? You want everybody to shut up and not say anything? And that's why you don't have debate today, 'cause they don't want to say anything about

each other. They complain privately, but that's about it. When I wrote this book, one reason I did write it was that I wanted to give people in the future, especially, a glimpse of what life was like at least during my time. And there's some big issues in the book, like the ceded lands and the Bishop Estate. I'm not comfortable with the amount of scholarship that goes on in this state anymore, and if someone were to write about it, ceded land issue, I want to make sure that they knew another side of the story. Because I was right on that issue when I was chairman of the Ways and Means Committee in 1980. And Dennis O'Connor and I. And I didn't like the way it was set up. And sure enough, the concerns that I had are shown today.

In fact, you say in the book that you think the time for Hawaiian sovereignty has passed, because of a previous court ruling.

Well, when the Supreme Court ruled in the Rice Case, the OHA elections had to be open to everyone, everyone could vote, because the OHA law violated the 15th Amendment, which prohibits race-based voting. I thought that there's no way that the Hawaiians are gonna get the kind of sovereignty that they want, because they want a nation that's only for Hawaiians. And how do you choose? How do you choose such a nation? Congress would have to go pass a law that gives them the power to do it. Supreme Court says Congress cannot do it. You cannot have elections under United States law which are race-based. And so I think that the whole sovereignty movement has developed a life of its own, and it's very difficult for the leaders to kinda say, Let's forget about the idea. Unfortunately, young Hawaiians are gonna have to figure it out for themselves. So I wrote about those things because I want people to understand I'm not comfortable with the economic inquiry that goes on in this town, whether at the Legislature or the newspapers. The newspapers are terrible today. Maybe it's the business. I don't know.

And they weren't always terrible?

They were better in the past. I mean, they would investigate, follow up on leads, and things like that. Today, basically, regurgitate the news. That's basically it.

So what's ahead for you?

[chuckle] Yeah; I told my wife, Vicky, that unless we were, in the poorhouse, I didn't want to go back to work as a lawyer. I've been out for a long, long time, and the only kinda law that I did was trial work. And that's very stressful. I don't want to be a consultant of any kind.

What about boards and commissions?

I'm gonna be serving on a board. It's unpaid. I forgot the name of the organization, but basically, it's an organization that sets up programs in the schools for intermediate school children; after school program like A-Plus.

M-hm.

So I'm sitting on that board with quite a few people that are well known. So I'm I'm catching up on my reading. I'm learning a lot about different things that I— that I didn't have the time to pursue when I was in office. I have a ton of books at my house that I haven't read fully, and I'm doing that.

Ben Cayetano didn't pull his punches growing up in Kalihi and he doesn't pull his political punches even well into retirement. I hope you've enjoyed this conversation with Hawaii's gruff, tough fifth governor and author of a candid 560-page memoir. At this time in 2009, he's comfortably retired and living in east Honolulu. For *Long Story Short* and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

Video clip with production credits:

Neil Abercrombie—

M-hm.

—your friend and ally, wrote a foreword for your book—

Yeah.

—in which he quoted Shakespeare, saying, Every man has his fault, and honesty is his. And he said, your virtue is your vice.

[chuckle]

Ben played the game straight, he said. Is there any other way you could have played it?

I don't think that holding office would be worthwhile if I had to make all these accommodations, just to keep the office.