

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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I used to tell my students that if you're somewhere and you're singing a song, and then you hear all the tutu's laughing, you will know why, because you probably mispronounced a word, and you didn't even realize it. But when you mispronounce a word, it changes meaning. And so, in Song Contest time, I would go around and talk to them about the different meanings. And so, you know, you have to draw pictures for them. So, you say the word ma'l and mai. And so, you want to use the word mai, and you say ma'i. Well, you know, ma'i can be to be ill, but ma'i can also refer to the genitals. You know, so, as in a mele ma'i. Um, another word that comes up in songs often is the word li'a. And li'a has to do with yearning desire. And so, you're desiring someone. And if you don't put the okina there, you're saying lia. And do you know what lia are? Like liha, they're little baby uku's.

They're uku nits, baby nits. And so, then they start, Oh, no! You know. And you show them these differences, and then they realize, wow. So now, well, and you know, for many years, the students are really, really concerned about pronunciation.

Sarah Keahi expected to be surrounded by Hawaiian-ness when she started teaching at Kamehameha Schools in 1966. Instead, she found that there were no Hawaiian studies courses, and that she was the only Hawaiian language teacher. She advocated relentlessly for Hawaiian language and culture to be taught, and by the time she retired thirty-seven years later, there were ten fulltime Hawaiian language teachers, and a mandatory Hawaiian studies curriculum firmly in place. Sarah Keahi, 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. Sarah Patricia 'ilialoha Kwai Fah Ayat Keahi is remembered by many of her students by her previous married name, Mrs. Quick. Generations of high schoolers at Kamehameha Schools took her Hawaiian language classes. In the broader Hawaiian language speaking community, she's known as a champion who fought to perpetuate the language when it was increasingly marginalized. Today, the Hawaiian language is thriving, thanks to the efforts of Sarah Keahi and other like-minded people in the 1960s and 1970s. Sarah Keahi's love of Hawaiian culture and language started with her family, and with growing up on Hawaiian Homestead land in Honolulu.

Well, I was born and raised on this island in Kaimuki. And we were living with my grandmother, my maternal grandmother, Sarah Keahi Smythe. Eventually, we moved to Papakolea and settled in Papakolea.

Because you were granted a homestead lot?

Right; my mom was granted a homestead lot in 1950. And when we moved to Papakolea, my mom was pregnant with my youngest brother. You know, her tenth child. And so, we moved up there in December, early December in 1950, and my brother was born in February of 1951.

Ten kids.

Yeah.

Mom and Dad.

Yeah.

How big was your house? I mean, I can't imagine—

I know.

--twelve people in house.

We all had bunkbeds, and of course, in those days, you only had one bathroom, you know. It was a wonderful life, we had chickens and ducks to eat.

You raised your own chickens and ducks, and then you'd have to kill them to eat them?

Yeah.

Farm to table.

Yeah. See, my mom would go out, get a chicken, kill it, clean it, cook it, and serve it. I couldn't do that. I'd have to go to Costco, you know.

Well, those feathers that your mother took from the chickens; did they go anywhere?

Oh, yes.

Since she used everything.

She made feather leis.

She did?

Yes; she did.

Where did she get the time to do all that?

That's a good question. You know. But she was an incredible woman. Her thing was, If you see something needs to be done, you do it. Don't want to be asked; just do it. She was amazing. I mean, she was a homemaker; my dad worked. But my mom made all our clothes. She cleaned the house, and she'd put fresh flowers and plants every week. You know. She'd go out and cut things, and bring it in. And I think that's why my love of gardening—I love gardening and I love flowers and plants. My friends would call and they would say, Who was that Haole woman that answered the phone? I said, That's my mom. Your mom? Is she Haole?

[CHUCKLE]

I said, Well, yeah, she's half Haole. You know, half Hawaiian, yeah.

So, she spoke Standard English.

Oh, yes.

And she insisted you do, too.

We had to speak Standard English in the house. Yeah. If we were outside with our friends, you know, we could speak Pidgin and everything, but when you came in, you had to speak Standard English.

Was there a drill with the kids so that the older kids would take care of the little kids, to take some of the pressure off her?

Yes; yes. And she assigned each sister, older sister to one brother. And so, we had to make sure, you know, that their teeth was brushed and everything like that. But my mom ran quite a tight ship, but she was super-organized. And then, she went out and entertained at night. My mom had studied hula in the early days. In fact, Iolani Luahine was one of her hula sisters. And so, we were involved with hula. And we were involved with pageantry and Aloha Week. And when Auntie Elsie Ross Lane was living, they had wonderful pageants every year. And we were always in the pageants, 'cause my mom was costume director for Aloha Week. So, she even made costumes.

[CHUCKLE]

What was your dad like? What kind of a match were they?

My dad was a really easygoing guy. He was really easygoing. Hard worker.

Two hard workers.

Two hard workers. You know, my dad, he would come home from work after working all day, and if there was a pail of clothes to hang up, he'd hang it on the line. If there was something to iron, he'd pitch up and iron. I mean, he was ... you know. He painted our house about every five years; my dad did. We had an imu in our yard, so my dad, you know, every so often he would kalua pig and all his friends would come over. He went fishing with his friends. If my dad got extra fish, he'd share it with the neighbors.

Even though he had all these kids in the house?

Yes; yes. And my mom, she sewed clothes for our friends across the street because, you know, they didn't have a whole lot of stuff. If we had extra whatever, you know, bananas or whatever, we'd share it with people.

Your mom was half-Hawaiian, your dad half-Hawaiian. That was the time when people were really trying to be Western, wasn't it?

Right; right. Yeah. They were. Some people, you know, they were embarrassed about, you know, their Hawaiian. In fact, some people, you know, some of my ... people even didn't want to say where they lived. They didn't want to say they lived in Papakolea. And Papakolea didn't really have, you know, a very good reputation. And I think the media tends to, you know, sensationalize and maximize the negative and minimize the positives, you know. I was proud. I mean, we had people from Papakolea, Danny Kaleikini's family, Iolani Luahine, Hoakalei Kamauu, Auntie Genoa Keawe. We had people who went to the military academies, you know. The Kukea family, Kala, Kahele, and his sister Mele. So, we had lots of people who, you know, were notable people. They don't talk about all of those things, you know. They talk about the negative things. And I had wonderful years there. Parks and Recreation was a really wonderful program. We had a wonderful director, Mealii Kalama, and she was a very, very influential woman in my life, very firm and organized, and just wonderful, warm, and compassionate, you know.

From the time she was a little girl in Papakolea, Sarah Keahi knew she wanted to become a teacher, and she knew she'd need a good education to accomplish that, even though it wouldn't be at the school that comes to mind first.

I think everybody who's ever come to your class to learn has probably been surprised, if they didn't already know, that you did not attend Kamehameha Schools.

Right; right. You know, my students would say to me, Well, Kumu, what year did you graduate? And I would say, I am a proud public school product. What? You didn't come to Kamehameha? And I said, No, you know, unfortunately I didn't, but I'm a proud public school product, and you know, I have no regrets. Roosevelt was a really good school, academically aggressive, and you know, I think I learned a lot from it.

As a matter of fact, your mother didn't really want you to go to Kamehameha.

Yeah. [CHUCKLE] Yeah; she didn't. Because you know, she said to me, Well, you know, part of the girls' training is, they learn how to take care of a baby, and they learn how to cook, and sew; and you know how to do that. You know. You already know that. I said, But Mom, that's not all they learn; they learn the basic stuff. You know, they have to take the classes of math, science, and English, and so forth, so that's in addition to that. Well, she still thought it was—you know. So, I just went to Roosevelt, which was, you know, a good thing. I enjoyed my years at Pauoa Elementary and Stevenson Intermediate, and Roosevelt.

Right in your neighborhood.

Right; exactly.

At that time, there were no career days. Kids weren't channeled into, you know, Try to think now what you might want to do for a living.

Right.

Was that something you gave thought to?

Oh, I knew; I knew from the very beginning, I wanted to be a teacher.

Because?

Well, you know, my grandmother, she wasn't a formal teacher, but she did some teaching. And she told me about her experiences teaching. And ever since I was a little girl, my mom said, Do you know that you used to call the neighborhood kids and bring them over, and you'd play school. You'd pass out pencils and paper, and under the house, and you'd play school. And I said, Really?

You were comfortable with having authority, because you'd been in charge of a younger brother, and you'd seen your mother as the head of the household on the homemaking side.

Right; right. So, yeah. But my very first teacher at Pauoa Elementary was Manu Boyd's grandmother, Julia Boyd. And the teachers then were very strict, like the Gladys Brandt

type people. I just admired and loved Gladys Brandt. But they hapa Haole teachers, and very, very, you know, strict.

Did you get in trouble?

Oh, no; no.

You were always a good student.

I know. My brothers and sisters teased me; You're such a Goody Two Shoes, you know. And I guess I liked school, and I did well in school. I studied hard. It didn't come to me naturally. I mean, I had to study hard. And I did, 'cause I really enjoyed it. All my friends said, You're so studious. And you know, at Roosevelt I was kidded about that, how studious I was. I was one that didn't go out very much. You know, I was such a homebody. I wasn't a real social kind of person. Like, you know, I didn't care to go to proms or stuff like that. My brothers and sisters would say, We go to the beach, and there you are under a tree reading a book or something. You know. I mean, I went in the water and all that, but I just wasn't perhaps as active as they were. But we did go hiking. You know, we lived in Papakolea, and behind our house up the mountain and Tantalus, and we explored all the trails.

Sarah Keahi had always wanted to learn Hawaiian so she could speak the language with her grandmother, who was a manaleo, a native speaker. After graduating from Roosevelt High School, Sarah Keahi enrolled at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, where she had her first opportunity to learn the Hawaiian language in a formal setting.

Now, was Hawaiian spoken in the house at all?

Well, my grandmother spoke Hawaiian with my mom sometimes. And I was fascinated. You know, I would talk to my grandmother a lot, ask her zillions of questions, and I really did want to learn Hawaiian. And it wasn't until I went to the University that, you know, I saw Hawaiian 101, and I'm gonna take this. But my mom spoke Hawaiian with my grandmother, and my dad spoke sometimes. The only time we spoke Hawaiian was when they were scolding.

Scolding ...

Scolding; they would scold us.

And you would know what it meant?

And we knew all the scolding. Like, you know, kulikuli, and you know, some of those things.

What does kulikuli mean?

Kulikuli is the not-so-nice way of saying, be quiet. It's more like, shut up. You know. And so, we knew those kinds of things.

You were spoken to in Hawaiian as a way of scolding you, but it was also kind of a secret language too, among the adults.

Well, yes. 'Cause like, when friends would come over, or my grandmother would talk with her friends, it was all in Hawaiian, you know.

It was the adult language.

Yeah. They never really sat down and taught you anything, because that's not how they do it. You know. If you're interested, you would sit down and listen. But it wasn't until I was in college and when I started studying Hawaiian, and then you know, I think the day when I could understand my grandmother was just like, Oh, yes. You know?

She was a manaleo?

Yes; she was a manaleo.

And you were learning textbook Hawaiian.

Right. But I had my grandmother to practice with. I was really fortunate, because when I was at the University, I worked in the recording lab at the Bishop Museum with Eleanor Williamson, who was like my second mom to me. And Ele worked with Kawena Pukui, and they went on the road and they interviewed native informants. So, I got to go. And Kawena wanted to interview my grandmother, 'cause she knew my grandmother; they were in the Royal Society together. And she said, I haven't seen Grandma for a long time, I think I should go interview her. So, I went with them up to my grandmother's house, and did the interview. And so, on the way back to the museum, Kawena said to me, You know, Grandma used so many words I haven't heard for so long. You know, it's so nice to hear those words again. I said, They're probably archaic; right? [CHUCKLE] Only you native speakers know those words. And you know, my grandmother was a really fascinating woman because she was born when Kalakaua was King. And she lived through the Provisional Government, she lived through the Republic, Territory, and ten years into statehood.

Wow.

So, she saw all of those periods.

What was her take on statehood?

Well, she told me that on the day of the annexation down at the Palace, you know, the women who came, and she said as they saw their flag coming down, they wept, and they thought they would never see their flag again. So, they all went home and made Hawaiian flag quilts.

Wow ...

And my grandmother made one. She made one. And I remember there was a time when Napua Stevens was having a program at the Ilikai, and she announced that she would honor Liliu's birthday. Anyone who has a Hawaiian flag quilt in their family, if they would bring it forth, and they would have a display of them. So, Mom took Grandma's quilt. And it was incredible, because as you looked at all the different quilts, there was no two alike. We still have that in our family, Grandma's Hawaiian flag quilt. She signed the petition against annexation. I have a copy of it with her signature. You know, she said the Queen was imprisoned in her own home, and how it was done. I'm amazed, because to me, Liliuokalani epitomizes humility, that in the song she wrote, The Queen's Prayer, in verse three, she says to her people that, you know, let's not look at the evils of men, but let's forgive them for what they did. I mean, that to me, you know, Liliu was just an incredible woman, and I really admire her a lot.

Earlier, you said that your grandmother didn't like the way it was done.

Right.

But did she come to think that annexation was a good thing?

Well, you know, down the road, she did say to me that other powers were looking at us too. You know, she said the Russians were here; you know, they had built a fort. The French were here. I said to her, What about the British? Don't you think the British might have been a good thing? You know. [CHUCKLE] I mean, look; Vancouver gives Kamehameha a flag, and Kamehameha asked, What is this? And he says, It's a symbol of our country. So, Kamehameha has a Hawaiian flag made, and that's why the Union Jack is in the corner of the Hawaiian flag. So I said, What about England? What if we were English, you know, under England? She goes, Well, you know, it could have been. But I think she kind of came to terms with being part of the U.S.

Was there a Hawaiian major when you entered UH?

No. In fact, I had to go see the dean. It was Dr. Elbert who actually encouraged me to consider Hawaiian.

This is Samuel Elbert.

Yes; Sam Elbert.

Who co-wrote the Hawaiian Dictionary.

Yes; and everything else. Place names.

What was he like?

Warm, you know, kind, compassionate person. I loved him. I remember when I saw Hawaiian 101, I told my grandmother; Grandma, I'm signing up for Hawaiian 101. And she said, Hawaiian, at the University? I said, Yeah. So, I walked into class, and there was this man with gray, white hair, dark skin. And I thought, Wow, he looks like a Hawaiian grandpa. You know. And I sat right in front of him and I looked at him, and I smiled. And he introduced himself, and then he said, You know, I am not Hawaiian. And everybody was like, Really? He said, I am full Danish.

And he taught you your first Hawaiian language class?

M-hm. He called me up one day after class, and he said, Now, what do you want to do when in college? I said, Well, you know, Dr. Elbert, I'm gonna be a teacher. He said, Oh, maikai, maikai. And he said, Well, do you know what kind? I said, Well, I'm thinking English. He looked at me and he said, English? English? He said, What about Hawaiian? And I said, Hawaiian? There were no schools teaching Hawaiian, you know.

It seemed like bum advice.

Yeah.

Because you couldn't get a job.

I said, Dr. Elbert, there's nobody that I know, except the University. And he looked at me, and he said, There will be a day. And he just looked at me; There will be a day.

And he was right.

And he was right.

Sarah Keahi continued her English and Hawaiian studies at the University on her way to becoming a teacher. She was set to be a student teacher at Farrington High School in Kalihi during her senior year when she received a phone call that changed everything.

When it was time student teach, I got this call from Donald Mitchell from Kamehameha Schools. And he said, You don't know who I am, but I know who you are. And I said, Oh, really? And he said, I know you're gonna be ready for student teaching next year, and I would like for you to come to Kamehameha and student teach. I said, Really? Wow. I said, I'm already assigned to Farrington, you know, with Marion Lee Loy. And he said, Yes, I know, and I talked with the University people, and they said if it's okay

with you, it's fine. [GASP] So, I got to student teach with Dr. Mitchell. And that was just transformative in my life. That man was just incredible.

You had already heard of him?

I didn't, until I got there.

And then, he turned out to be—

Yes. Because see, if you were a Kamehameha student, you would have known him. But I wasn't, see? And so, when I got there and really mentored by him, he was just an incredible person. I consider him Mr. Hawaiian Studies at Kamehameha. I really do. Because if it weren't for him, you know, and Auntie Nona Beamer, those two people just welcomed me with open arms and thus, you know, we began a wonderful relationship. And Dr. Mitchell wasn't even Hawaiian. He was from Kansas. But he was culturally Hawaiian. I student taught with him, and then he went on sabbatical, and I taught. And he would come and sit in my language classes. He would actually come and sit in my language class, and then I'd go sit in his culture class and learn everything that I could. So, it was a really wonderful relationship.

What was there of Hawaiian language at Kamehameha when you went there, I think, in 1966?

Yes. Nothing. We proposed a requirement in Hawaiian culture and history for years. Seven years, I think it took. Nothing happened, nothing happened. Then the Hawaiian community, you know, got involved in it. But I think when they did a graduate survey, and the graduates said—the five-year graduate survey, that they were deficient. The school prepared them well for math and science, and all, but they were totally deficient when it came to anything Hawaiian. And as they were in college on the mainland and people would ask them questions, they couldn't answer them intelligently. Like, where did the Hawaiians come from? Or, could you say something, could you speak your language? Or, is there a language? I mean, they were embarrassed. So, the graduates said that they were really deficient, and finally, the requirement materialized.

And you were no easy teacher. You were no softie.

No. You heard about that?

Yes. I heard so many of your students who just admire you greatly; they say, She's tough, but fair.

Yeah.

And you're really adorable, except when you're really not happy. You know, you have high standards.

Yeah.

And you're just not gonna accept less.

Right; exactly. I said, you know, you cannot expect maximum grade if you put minimum work. You know? It doesn't work that way. When I started in 1966, I was the only teacher. I couldn't take sabbaticals because there was no one to replace me. You know, so I had to put it off, and put it off. And finally, you know, I was able to take a sabbatical. But I'm really happy to say that when I started, you know, yes, it was only me for years, and years, and years, and when I retired, there were like ten fulltime Hawaiian language teachers.

And you taught them all, I bet.

And most of them were my former students. Yes; I'm so proud of that. I could pass the baton.

And yet, she is still Kumu Keahi. Even though Sarah Keahi has retired from teaching, she continues to share her knowledge with the community, including serving as senior editor of the Hawaiian Bible project. Not only was she able to share her love of the language through her work on the Hawaiian Bible manuscript, she calls this the best job she ever had because she got to work at home in a tee-shirt and shorts. Mahalo to Hawaiian language champion and retired groundbreaking Kamehameha Schools teacher Sarah Keahi of Honolulu for sharing your stories with us. And thank you, for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, hui hou.

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If you look across the State, a lot of people in the Hawaiian world and the Hawaiian language field are Kamehameha graduates. And I'm really happy about that, you know. Because I said to them, you know, you need to share what you know, and go out there and spread the aloha, you know, and help your people, help your people.

[END]