

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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I found college very hard. I found it hard academically. Because I had not been prepared well. My county was the worst county in the State of Virginia at the time. When they publish the test scores of all the public schools, my public school, my county had the worst test scores in the whole state. I don't think I even had a biology lab. So, when I got to college and was thrown in with students who had had a very superior education, I decided early that if I was going to survive, I was going to have to work three times harder.

Three times harder?

Oh, yeah. And I did. I had a lot of catching up to do.

Growing up in a rural Virginia county where few high school graduates went on to higher education, Betty White and her six siblings all graduated from college. Now, as head of school at Sacred Hearts Academy, her goal is to make sure that her students receive an education that will prepare them not only for college, but for life. Betty White 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. Betty Orr White, who is head of school at Sacred Hearts Academy, started her journey at this all girls school in Kaimuki as a social studies teacher. While being an educator has been both her career and her passion, she didn't start out wanting to become a teacher. Growing up in a rural county in Virginia in the nineteen forties and fifties, she was one of only a small handful of graduates in her high school class who left home to pursue higher learning.

I understand that you grew up in one of the poorest areas in the country.

I did.

Where's that?

I didn't know that it was poor until I'd left and gone to college. It was in what we call Southwest Virginia. It's in the thirty-five-degree triangle where Kentucky and Tennessee

meet. And if you're on the eastern side of the state, you have Washington, Alexandria, Richmond the big cities. And they had metropolitan areas, good school systems. Now, in Southwest Virginia we had something like ninety-eight counties. My county was Lee County, and that was named for Robert E. Lee. And it was the poorest country in the state. And one of the biggest poverty pockets in the whole country.

But you say you didn't feel poor.

I didn't. I didn't know. I really didn't know I was poor. And I won't say the word poor, but very humble, very humble upbringing. The area is noted for timber, for coal mining, for having big cash crops. At that time, it was tobacco. And, I had a very loving, secure family. And our daily needs were met. We didn't go to the supermarket much. We had our own gardens, we had pigs, we killed a cow every year for beef. We had our own chickens.

M-hm.

And our summers were hard, because we had to tend that garden, and well, it seemed even now, it seems like that garden was at least an acre.

You ...

Green beans, corn, tomatoes. And at that time, we didn't have a freezer, so we would call it canning them, in a pressure cooker. So, it was I can remember sitting and breaking four bushels of beans in one sitting. My parents they were not college educated. They were, back in southwest Virginia, they would be called humble, good, country folk.

M-hm.

My father went into the Army at an early age. Picked up, auto mechanic skills, and then was able to open his own automotive mechanic shop. My mother was a coal miner's daughter. And she lived in a coal mining camp; that's where she grew up. Such a good woman. She was never able to go to college, but she was such a beautiful cook, she sewed our clothes for seven children. Never had a pattern. And she loved country music.

Did she like the song, Coal Miner's Daughter?

Oh, yeah. On Saturday night, you know, when we didn't have book work, she would play the guitar. And she would sing for hours with us. And I had a couple of sisters that were also good singers. I wasn't a good singer. But we had real, real good times. When I went away to college I saw a completely different side of my hometown, and the area in which I lived.

After Betty White graduated from high school, she went on to higher learning at Mary Washington College, the women's division of the University of Virginia. Even though she didn't leave the state, Mary Washington was a world away from Lee County. Yet, it wasn't until she read a book in her freshman year that she realized just how far away and how different her community was on the other side of Virginia.

Was it an assumption in your family that you would go to college?

No. I was one of seven children, and we all ended up going to college. But I think it was, there was never any pressure from our parents to go to college. It was just our own inner drive, our own inner ambitions to go to college.

And they supported you in that?

They supported us emotionally. But at that time, one could go to college and they could, work their way through. I worked every year, and I had scholarships.

So, you were going to college with what intention? What was the plan? Did you have a plan as a young woman?

I'm not so sure. I don't ever remember having a plan. I just wanted to go to college. And so I graduated in a class of fifty-one students. So, out of that fifty-one students, about twenty to twenty-five percent went to college. And I just wanted to be one of them. So I cannot remember thinking that I wanted to be a teacher. And I think maybe that that happened because at that time, the State of Virginia had a scholarship; they wanted teachers. So, they would give quite a lucrative scholarship to those that were going into education, with the idea that you would give back a year of teaching for every year you got the scholarship. So, I needed the money. I needed the money, so that's what I did.

I wanted to study, I studied political science. Even in graduate school, I studied government. So I was taking education courses just on the side because my parents did not have the money, the financial resources to help us. So, with seven children, we needed, we needed the scholarships.

Where did you go to college?

Well, I went to college in Fredericksburg.

So, you went ...

I went all the way

To the city area.

across the state.

M-hm.

I went across the state. I always traveled by Greyhound Bus.

How long did it take you? How long were the drives?

About, a good trip was about twelve hours.

And you rode alone?

I rode alone. And I always rode behind the driver. Right. So at that time, Mary Washington was the ladies division, the women's division of the University of Virginia. And I will never forget in one of my freshman courses one of our required readings was a book called Night Comes to the Cumberlands. Of course, it's all about the Cumberland Mountains, the Cumberland Gap

M-hm.

where Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett came through. And I sat in class and I thought, This is talking about me, this is talking about my area. And it was a whole different, a different mindset after that.

Because what did the book say about your area?

Well, it, what the author did was the insensitivity for the land, the insensitivity to the environment. Was poor, not a lot of wealth in the area, but one of the most beautiful areas you could ever visit. But big companies had come in, cut the timber down.

And you mentioned coal mining.

Coal mining was big. Coal mining was sort of king. And they not only, you know, did, went under the earth, but they also coal mined from the surface. And it's called strip mining. And they just raped the land.

And you saw that as jobs for people in the neighborhood, but

Well, but it's even more than that. The biggest part of it was several valleys over. And I didn't even know what was going on. After I read the book as part of my required freshman reading, I remember going home at Christmas and I was very interested in driving through. And I saw, you know, all the erosion of the land where they had cut

trees down, dug into the earth's surface. Environmentalists today would have a heyday, you know, criticizing how insensitive the people were to the environment.

Did it make you look differently at the people with whom you grew up, and the way you grew up?

I think I became a bit more humble, a bit more understanding. But never a lot of money, but we had enough to get by. We always had a lot of love in our family. The significance of a family was first and foremost. My parents were very strong on a faith-based family.

After Betty White graduated from college, she attended graduate school at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. That was where she met Emmet White, a law student, who soon became her husband. After he graduated, Betty moved with him to Hawaii, where he started a law practice. It was the first time she would experience cultural diversity.

You lived in what I assume was pretty much an all-White neighborhood when you were growing up?

Definitely.

So, not

No

No diversity of

No diversity. They all looked just like me.

And those were when you were growing up, those were times of segregation, so there were bathrooms for African Americans only.

Segregation, although it was illegal, was definitely still happening. So, on the buses, I was always a little afraid, and so I always sat behind the driver. But I remember so well the Black people having to go to the back of the bus. We always had stops in Richmond, Virginia and you would go into the bus terminal. This would be a Greyhound Bus terminal. And they had the water fountains; you had to go to a particular water fountain, a particular bathroom. And even to get little snacks, they had special ones for Black people and special ones for White people.

Now, was that something you became accustomed to, because that's all you knew?

I became accustomed to it because I'd studied it. Right? But I never lived in that type of an environment. And then on the college campus, both campuses that I attended in Virginia had very few Black people. It was mostly Whites, Caucasians.

What was it like coming to Hawaii, with no one having a majority in terms of race?

Well the thing I remember about coming to Hawaii has to do with a cousin who was quite a bit older than I was. And I guess he was in the Korean War. And he married a Chinese lady. And he brought her back to Virginia. She was the most beautiful person. You know, kind, generous. But I will never forget when I saw her, and her slanted eyes. I'd never seen an Asian or Oriental person. And then, when my husband and I moved here we saw plenty of Asians. Right? And so, then I happened to see this cousin-in-law again, and I didn't notice her eyes at all. Because, you know, she blended into the environment here.

So, you had no trouble acculturating and getting used to everybody, getting to know other people's cultural

Not really. Not really. No. It was, certainly a learning process, and it's still a learning process even today, because there's so many diverse groups. But, I take it in stride.

How did you get to Hawaii?

Well, my husband had gone to undergraduate school at Lafayette College in Eastern Pennsylvania with a young man from Hawaii. And I believe they'd even been roommates. And after they finished college, both of them went to law school, although it was different law schools. And so when both of them graduated, my husband decided that he would come to Hawaii. And they worked together for a while. And that's what brought us here.

So, what did you think about coming over? Did you think it would be for a short time, I'll try it out, or were you eager for a different life?

No. I think I came because I loved my husband, probably. But it was a long way from home. And the biggest thing was the distance from family.

This has been home for how long now? Longer than it was

Well

in Virginia

About forty-six years. Yeah.

Betty White had taught third grade at the only Catholic school in Williamsburg before following her husband to Hawaii. After moving here and having three children, she decided it was time to start teaching again. She landed a job at Sacred Hearts Academy.

You've been there for more than four decades.

I have. And the school's changed a lot in those four decades. I was hired as a social studies teacher. And I loved teaching. I'd never been, in a private school before. I loved working in a religious environment. I loved working with the nuns. And I just loved working with the girls. I enjoyed still think of myself as a teacher, although I've been out of the classroom for about twenty years.

Are you Catholic?

No.

And not required to be, to be head of Sacred of Hearts?

Well, when I was appointed as head of school, it was not a factor. I think that my replacement will probably be required to be Catholic.

Did you aspire to be head of school?

No; No. What happens is in many Catholic schools, there are just fewer and fewer religious. So, the religious look to what we call the laity or lay people like myself to take over some of the positions. And at that time the sister that I replaced was going to be assigned to other places. And first, I went in as the vice principal. So, I was the vice principal for about, I'd say eight years. And then, finally, as the head of school. Now, there are lots of lay people that are in either as principals or heads of school, and it's become quite common for the boards to require them to be Catholic.

Was it a topic of conversation, or a contention that you were not Catholic?

No. I'm very comfortable with it. It, certainly forces me to have a good team with me. We have, a fulltime campus minister who is a sister. The chair of our religion or theology department is a sister. So, I feel very comfortable.

Let's talk about all-girls education.

Okay.

You've written a number of essays and articles about the subject. And you know, you've heard people say, Well, there's no need for it anymore, girls should get used to the business and other environments where it's gonna be—you know, you're gonna be with the opposite sex. What do you say?

I think a lot of it's personal. But I've spent a good portion of my career in an all-girls school. I attended an all-women's college. I think that boys and girls learn differently. Not you know, girls don't learn better, they don't learn worse, but they definitely differently. Girls thrive in a collaborative, reflective experiential environment. And it just so happens in a girls school, and it's the same in single gender for boys, that our teachers are trained to teach to those learning styles. And they thrive. They, we have huge numbers of our girls going into science, going into math, going into pre-engineering.

And you don't think they would if there were boys in the school?

I think some of them would, but I think that those doors are opened to them. We stress it. You know, we emphasize it from the time they are in ninth grade that they need to check out these fields. And they feel very comfortable in math and science. A lot of it's experiential today, a lot of reflective learning going on. Boys not so much experiential, because they have, especially during science, if you're in physics, a lot of the things they do in childhood give them, sort of an edge when they start applying that to book learning. But a lot of the girls have not had those toys, they've not had the robotics, they've not had you know, how a bicycle works. So, they need a little more attention in those places.

I find parents today very involved with their kids' education.

Too involved?

I'm not so sure too involved. -I think that lots of parents understand that they are spending a lot of money. They're spending a lot-of the family budget for private schools, and they're going to make sure that the girls and boys are getting a good education.

Lots of pressure on the school, but on the children as well.

Oh, it is. I think that high school should be a time for learning, but not a pressure cooker atmosphere.

And the job of an adolescent is to find a personal identity. They're separating

Oh, yeah.

from their parents' identity, and that must be—is that part of what you consider your job in the school, to help them find that?

I think especially if you're dealing with girls. Because with girls the transition from adolescence and their personal identity journey certainly happens for the most part in high school. And they need attention, and they need adults catering to that, and helping them with it. The big advantage to all-girls schools is that it gives girls a time of their own to really develop confidence. To really develop confidence, to develop a sense of self-esteem. And if boys, but especially if girls can develop that, we don't have to worry about the academics. Because once they've got the confidence, they can soar academically. So, I think it's very much a part of our job.

Who would you say are some of your better known alums?

Oh the late Loyal Garner. We have quite a few performing artists. Noelani Cypriano, Cathy Foy, Mamo Howell.

Mm.

Cathy Lee is an up and coming designer in the State; she's from Sacred Hearts. And then we have lots of lawyers, lots of doctors. Now, we're getting more and more engineers. So they're all over town.

Betty White credits her parents and her husband as the people who have had the most profound influence on shaping her life. Their emotional support combined with her own inner drive gave her the courage to leave Southwestern Virginia to see what the rest of the world had to offer. Now, she shapes the lives of other young women through the leadership and direction she sets at Sacred Hearts Academy so that they, too, will have confidence to set out and achieve their goals.

Mahalo to Betty White of Honolulu for sharing her life story with us, and thank you, for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha a hui hou.

Close:

I think it was the broadcast journalist Barbara Walters who said, A woman can have it all, but not at the same time.

That's right. Well, you've got to make, you've got to make concessions, as far as I'm concerned. In order to get the tasks done of the day, I very seldom will go shopping. But I usually get all my clothes online. Right? I love to cook every once in a while, but lots of times I don't cook.

M-hm.

So, to save my time, I will go to Costco and re-plate it, and

M-hm.

nobody knows that I didn't make it.

Except now.

Except now.

[END]