

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: SARAH RICHARDS

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My grandmother was very musical; pianist, organist. My mother was an amateur singer. And so, I had a lot of experience with music.

And you're being modest, because didn't you win any kind of voice award there was?

Oh, I did; I did. I won several state voice awards when I was in high school.

Did you figure on a performing arts career?

Well, not really. I loved to sing. I sang in college a fair amount. I really wasn't committed to be a singer, but I also knew by going to a conservatory what your life was like if you were going to be a professional singer. You needed to be very, very good, and even if you were very good, it was a difficult life. And you either kinda got the breaks or you didn't, but you went from one backstage to another. And I didn't see that as my life, doing that.

Despite being a gifted vocalist, Sarah Richards pursued a career in a completely different field: higher education administration. Yet, after moving to Hawaii in the mid-70s, she soon found herself on a path that led her right back to the arts. Retired executive director of the Hawaii Theatre Center, and before that the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts, Sarah Richards, 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 Richards is a familiar name in Hawaii's arts community. Awarded the 2015 Preiss Honor by the Hawaii Arts Alliance, a passionate advocate for the arts, Richards is best known for her leadership role in the restoration of the Hawaii Theatre, transforming a dilapidated historic theater into a national award-winning performance center. Sarah Richards grew up in the Midwest in the 1940s and 50s. Her family had lived there for generations, but she had no intention of staying.

I was born in Sullivan, Indiana, and I grew up in a small town called Washington, Indiana, in southern Indiana.

How small?

Fifteen thousand people; fifteen thousand people. My family was from Sullivan, Indiana, about eight generations. With my parents, I grew up in Washington.

And what kind of school did you go to?

In Indiana, it was wonderful. We lived on about fifteen acres outside of town. And so, we were farmers, but we had a couple of cows, and couple of horses, and dogs. I went to a small four-room, eight-grade elementary school through junior high, and I went to school with the Amish kids. And so, it was a lovely place, with thirteen students in the class.

So, everybody knew everybody in town?

Oh, everybody knew everybody. Yes.

And did you like that?

I loved it. I could ride my horse to school. And it was also nice because the Amish students were on their schedule for planting in the Spring, so our school got out two weeks a year. The kids in town.

Did you think you would leave Washington?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes; after high school, I knew I was not going to live there.

When did you know that?

Oh, I knew that in high school. It was a very nice place to grow up, it was a wonderful time to grow up, but no, I really wanted to see the world.

Which you did.

Which I did.

What was your next step after high school?

I went to the Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music, which I went there on scholarship. I was a voice student. Loved the conservatory; it was magnificent. But you don't get a college education in a conservatory, and I did want to get a college education.

So, you gave up your scholarship?

Uh-huh. And I went to DePauw University, which is a liberal arts college in Greencastle, Indiana. I was the third generation to go there; my grandfather graduated from there, my mother, and cousins, and aunts and uncles. And I got a wonderful education. I was an English major and a music major.

So, what was the plan? And this was in ... let's see. This was in the 60s.

Yes; I graduated in '63 from college. So I graduated, and of course, you always would get your teacher's license. And so, I got my teacher's license.

You're saying that because women at the time always—

Women at that time had three choices. You could be teacher, you could be a nurse, or you could go to Katie Gibbs Secretarial School in New York. And those were the choices. Or you could get your MRS degree.

Were you affected by the tumult of the 60s?

Not really too much. No, not so much. I was not, that much. I was not sort of out there stomping the ground, and carrying banners. I was more conservative.

Were you interested in the MRS?

Not at that time. Not in college. I was not interested necessarily in getting married. Some of the gals in my sorority were, but no, I was more interested in doing something else. I wanted to travel. So, right after college, I became a teacher in Denver, Colorado. So, I taught English and music in Denver, Colorado at the Gibson County Public School System.

And you did get to travel. Did you spend a year traveling and studying?

I did. And so, two years after teaching junior high school, I said, That's enough.

You need a break.

And so, with a girlfriend, we went to Western Europe for a year. And she bought a darling little Volkswagen in Wolfsburg, Germany, and we drove all around. And we sort of were based in Madrid, Spain. And I taught there, English as a second language. And then, of course, drove all around. We had friends in Sweden, and so, I got to see a lot of Western Europe.

How did that affect you the rest of your life? They say travel just broadens you, and it's a gift forever.

Yes; yes, you see the world, and you see the way people live, beautiful places, beautiful cities, artwork. Yes; I think your perspective is widened. But I was happy to come home after a year. But it was a terrific experience. But it sort of sets up an appetite to then go back and travel more, which I have since then, of course.

You went to graduate school after your travels.

After my travels, I came back and went to graduate school at Indiana University. And so, I got a degree in higher education administration, and also in psychology.

And I understand you became the very youngest dean ever of a college.

I did become a very young dean; yes. I was twenty-six, and I became dean of women at Albion College in Albion, Michigan. And if you recall, that was the time of student unrest. And you couldn't trust anybody that was over thirty. And so, we negotiated non-negotiable demands, for all the demands that the students had at the time. And they used to say, Throw a rock in the window and say we will negotiate with no one lower than the dean. And we would reply, There is no one lower than the dean. So, they didn't have much of a sense of humor. But I was at Albion, and that was a pretty benign place to be. University of Michigan and Kent State were certainly a lot ... wilder.

So, you weren't conflicted at all about the generations.

No, I wasn't; no. Uh-uh. And also, being younger, you can relate to the students. But ours weren't really hardcore. And they were very quiet, wonderful students. But then, if you had a problem, all you did was pick up the phone and call their parents. And that took care of it.

But that didn't last too long.

I did that for two years, and then I had friends here in Hawaii who said, Get yourself out of Southern Michigan; it's cold and snowy. Get yourself out here to Hawaii.

Sarah Richards took her friends up on their offer, and came to Hawaii to visit. Even though it was just for a summer, it made enough of an impression on her that she decided that this was where she wanted to live. She wasted no time coming back and immersing herself in Honolulu, including getting her MRS; Mrs. Degree.

I was recruited from graduate school, actually, at Indiana University in the summer. I was recruited to teach creative writing at Kamehameha Schools. I got here, and nobody wanted to take creative writing. So they said, Well, we noticed you could teach swimming. So, I had a WSI, Red Cross WSI, and so, I taught swimming at Kamehameha Schools.

That's a switcheroo.

That's a switch. Well, I think what it was, was I was in Indiana, and Indiana at that time was the home of the Olympic swim team. And the real swimming coach out there, Sonny Tanabe, had been an Olympic swimmer from Indiana. So, we were all very friendly, and I taught beginning swimming to junior and senior lifesaving. And it was much better than teaching creative writing for the summertime.

And then, back to school?

And then, back to graduate school; right.

So, how did you end up moving here, and making your life here?

Well, I knew I wanted to live in Hawaii. And I think a very big decision you make is, do you want to be dean of women, or a college leader on the mainland, or do you want to live where you want to live? And I decided I would rather live in Hawaii, than just be so focused on a higher education career. I was hired as dean of students at Chaminade University. So, I came as dean of students at Chaminade from Albion College. So, I was able to keep in the same field, but I liked being out here a whole lot better than ... Southern Michigan.

And ... I'm trying to figure out when you got married, because you—

I came here in 1970 permanently, and my husband and I married in 1972. And I met him backstage. I was active then even with the Opera Theater. I was head of the education committee for the Opera Theater, while I was still dean at Chaminade. And he was singing in the chorus. So, I met him onstage, Aida, Act 2. Backstage. He was dressed up like a 5th Century Egyptian priest. And my friends were fixing me up with the star, who sang the role of the king, who was a real opera star, Archie Drake. But I went to the cast party with the king. That's where we met, was onstage. But then, we were introduced at the cast party. We were introduced in February of 1972, and we were married in December of '72.

So, so much for the king.

So much for the king. He was twenty years my senior, so I was not too interested.

And your husband is interesting. It's an interesting combination, because here you are, a transplant from the mainland, and you married a guy whose family goes back in Hawaii for generations.

Right.

What was that like?

Well, actually, it was wonderful to get acquainted with a lot of cousins. So, his family came over in the 1820s, and they were very active. They're members of the Cooke family and the Atherton family, but the Cookes at that time did the chief's children's school. And so, his many cousins have done a lot of things, been leaders in the community. And so, it was nice to get to know a lot of people that way. You learn an awful lot about Hawaii's history, and just sort of the way of life. But I had come from a small town in Indiana, and I understood about being a kamaaina, what that was all about, people who have long roots in one place. And it was wonderful.

They say Hawaii is a tough place to break into if you're fresh from somewhere else, and you don't give it time. Was it tough for you?

Well, initially, I felt it was just like a small town. And I understood sort of the ebb and flow of things, and the way people relate to one another. So, at least in the 1970s, it seemed like a very happy place. It's a small town, but it had the advantage of having different cultural groups here, which of course, Southern Indiana didn't. But all kinds of different cultures, different people, and I found that very stimulating.

Sarah Richards' husband is retired scientist and researcher Manning Richards. Sarah Richards started volunteering at the Hawaii Opera Theater six months after arriving in the islands, and later became the opera theater's board president. Under the board's leadership, the theater, which had been a division of the Honolulu Symphony, became an independent organization, succeeding on its own. With her growing reputation in the arts community, Sarah Richards was offered a leadership position at the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts, which she decided was too good to pass up, and she left Chaminade University.

You succeeded a man who has got a lot of aura around him in history.

Yes.

Alfred Preiss.

Right.

As head of the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts.

Right.

In 1980?

1980; m-hm.

What was he like? Did you know him before you took over?

I got to know him. He was a wonderful man. He was a Prussian architect. And so, he was very Prussian in character, in modus operandi. And he was the one who really initiated the Art in Public Places program, really, on a European model. He was a lovely man, with a great vision.

And when it was time for him to step down, the foundation looked for somebody who was a good administrator, and who could handle the strong voices in the arts community.

Yes.

And they selected you to do that.

They did; they did.

What kind of strong voices?

Oh, well, the arts, as you know, because the State Foundation dealt with all the arts, whether it was visual arts, performing arts, literary arts. And so, there was a lot of variety of art groups we were dealing with. And of course, since we were the granting agency, we had a lot of very personal contacts with how much money grants were gonna be given to what groups.

Right; and projects are like babies.

Oh, yes; oh, yes.

You give money to one, and it's my baby.

That's right.

You know, it seems like a dream job to have all this money that you can give to wonderful art projects. But you probably are under criticism, no matter what you do.

Oh, yes. Giving away money is not just a piece of cake. You need to be clear on what your mission is, what you want to accomplish, and then also who makes decisions and who are qualified to make decisions. It wasn't just sort of, Here's some money.

And you were criticized for not putting more into Hawaiian arts.

Right. I think some people felt I was a mainland Haole, and what would I know.

So, how did you handle that?

I found it puzzling at first. 'Cause I had grown up in a situation where I guess we didn't have conflicts. And so, I felt my job was to do the best I possibly could to get as much money in the agency as I possibly could. It helped that my husband was local, and he could kind of explain a little bit more about how the world works here. And so, that was very helpful.

What was his advice?

Well, this is the way certain things work. And certain groups have certain opinions on certain things. And just don't take it too personally. Don't take it too personally, and just do the best you possibly can, and reach out to whoever had the concern. And so, I found it hurtful at first, 'cause I didn't understand it. Did I feel racial discrimination? Absolutely; yes. But you just go on. You move on.

Did you think of quitting?

I thought about it; I thought about it. But then, I thought, no, I cared about what the agency was doing, and we were being very successful. For the most part, the conflict is, we tried to get as much out, good art, support all the arts institutions that were there, and then to purchase art when our little group would go out and get artwork. But we spent a lot of time doing a lot of things.

Could you show what priorities were, and did you have agreed-upon priorities?

Yes, we did. This is how much money was allocated to each of the panel areas. And so, what happens if one person, we didn't buy his or her artwork? They were very upset. And so, we introduced the subject of standards. Now, that's another difficult concept to get across. Because, you know, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, or in the eye of the creator. But there are certain standards that the art community has, and that's why you ask a group of knowledgeable people to review and make a judgment. We were proud we were number one in the nation in per capita state support. So, we did a fair amount of lobbying the State Legislature, and also getting money from the federal government.

You're a very determined person, aren't you? You're very goal-oriented.

I was very goal-oriented; yes, I was. Yes.

And you're a missioned person.

Yeah.

After almost ten years of working for the state government at the Foundation on Culture and the Arts, Sarah Richards was ready to leave. An opportunity opened at the newly-formed Hawaii Theatre Center nonprofit organization, with a vision to restore the ramshackle Downtown theater. With Sarah Richards' fundraising skills, including experience in navigating at the Hawaii State Legislature, Sarah Richards was the perfect candidate to become its first staff member.

In the beginning, we had a lot of the community saying this was a really dumb idea, why are we doing this, you'll never succeed.

Well, a lot of people remember, and I remember this as a little kid, I think Hawaii Theatre had turned into like a movie palace.

Exactly.

It was all movies.

It was; it was.

It was not performing arts.

Right. It began as a vaudeville theater. You know, with the stage, dressing rooms, orchestra pit. So, it began in 1922 as a vaudeville theater. It morphed into, in about the 30s, a movie theater.

Well, I wasn't a kid in the 30s, so it must have been longer than that.

Yeah; yeah. So, when we were able to buy the building, we bought the building in fee simple for a million-one from the Bishop Estate. Before that, Consolidated Amusement, who built the theater, had a month-to-month lease, and they had given that up. And so, the status of the building was dreadful. The rats were rampant, the termites were rampant.

The neighborhood was ...

And the neighborhood was terrible. So, it was all bad. The phone system for the prostitute center was on the side of my building. So, it was pretty bad down there. But we knew if we were going to make it a success, actually, we needed to do three things. We needed to restore the theater, we needed to expand the backstage, and ultimately put an extension on the theater, on part of where the park is today. There was a wonderful group of community leaders who had a vision for what it could be. But meanwhile, we didn't have anything. I bought into the vision of what it could be, and how we could get there. When I went there, we had a consultant, architectural consultant from New York and a theater consultant, and they said, Oh, this is about an eight-million-dollar project. Well, about two months after I got there, I realized that this was at that time a twenty-two-million-dollar project. Had nothing to do with eight million dollars. And so, what to do? What to do? Just forget it? So, we decided to

come up with a public-private partnership. And that's when we said, Okay, we think we can raise eleven million from the private sector, eleven million from the State. And so, we put together a public-private partnership, and then we went forward.

So, you were the point person at the Legislature?

Oh, yes; oh, yes.

Because you had gotten to know people.

Oh, yes. But I had a wonderful board of directors, of community leaders, and they weren't afraid of big numbers. So, we had some developers on the board, like Diane Plotts, Bill Mills, and we had people like Bob Midkiff, who was wonderful. And so, we had a lot of major community leaders who embraced the vision. We raised thirty-two million dollars. Fourteen of that came from the State Legislature over a period of about four years. We had three different separate capital campaigns. In the meantime, we started the construction. It took us four years, but we had some certain principles we were adhering to. And that was, we would do the best job of historic restoration we could. This was not a paint-up, fix-up job. And so, we had very high standards of quality of restoration. But we had to do everything; all new roof, all new HVAC.

And of course, it's much more expensive and—

Oh!

--time-consuming to do old, than build new.

Oh, much more.

And all this time, you can't have people in to watch shows, because you're building; right?

Right; right.

So, that doesn't help you with fundraising.

No.

You can't show people exactly what it could do.

Yeah. What happened was, in 1995, we had just about finished the interior. But we still had a loan of five and a half million dollars, then we had money from the State Legislature, and Governor Cayetano wouldn't release it. So, what to do? Do we just keep fundraising, keep fundraising, because we didn't have the money to finish the outside façade, the marquee and the façade. And the community told us, You've raised all this money, what are you doing? And so, we opened the theater before we finished the outside façade. And that was the right decision.

How do you engage people, when they haven't been to the Hawaii Theatre to see something, and they're not so sure this is going to be a good thing?

Well, what you do is, you first identify if there's been any history that they would have with the theater. So, for example, our first big gift came from Jack Magoon. And Jack Magoon's father had been the treasurer of the Hawaii Theatre initially, with Consolidated Amusement. And so, you had to do your history, had to be doing your research to find out what people would have connections. And then, we'd go after people and bring them down there, and we'd paint the picture of what it could be, so you get them involved in what could be. And then, as you know, talk to a lot of people. It's relentless, you don't stop. Bob Midkiff made it very clear. This is not personal; it's not personal at all. It's about the project, and applying what skills you have, and knowledge of the people, to support a project.

Back when you got your master's degree in higher education and educational counseling, far cry from going to well-connected individuals and making your case. And when you said relentless, it is relentless.

M-hm.

You're always looking for reaching the next level to fulfill a dream.

Right.

But it must have been a beating, too, for you.

Well, you just have to be convinced of the value. I like fundraising, but it is tiring at times. As I said, it's relentless. You have to love what you're doing, and you have to be convinced that the goal is reachable, or that you can make sure you can get there. You just sort of don't stop. So, you're very patient, but persevering.

But you always believed you could get it done.

I always believed we could get it done.

Did it ever get easier? I mean, you raised the money, you restored this theater.

I'll tell you what got easier. What got easier was, people didn't now say, You can't do it.

If you knew all that you would have to do before you did it, you might not do it.

That's true. If you thought too hard, you thought, Well, maybe I can do something else. But I was doing what I loved, and I love the joy of making it happen. So, I love the joy that the theater is built, and also it's beautiful. And so, I wish it well in its future.

Sarah Richards retired from her role as president of the Hawaii Theatre Center in 2014. In 2015, she was named the Hawaii Arts Alliance Alfred Preiss Honoree for her advocacy and achievement in arts and arts education in Hawaii. Mahalo to Sarah Richards 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, hui hou.

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And after twenty-four years at the Hawaii Theatre Center, you decided to retire.

It was time. It was time, right, for the theater too, you know, and to focus on having new people in, and take it to a new level. But also, I was wanting to do something else. I'd done this for a while. So, what I did is, I joined the Garden Club. I learned about gardening. I hadn't been a gardener before. And I spend more time with the Hawaii Opera Theater, and I joined the board at Mission Houses Museum, with this interest in history. So, I've found there's plenty to do.

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