

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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I remember coming to Kamehameha and, you know, it opened my eyes to a bigger city, and all kinds of opportunities that I never knew existed. The classic is, I was so afraid to get on the escalator at Sears because I was sure it was gonna eat my toes. And you know, that kind of is the local girl coming to the big city. Honolulu was the big city. It really took me a while to get on the escalator.

This Hilo native and Kamehameha Schools graduate is now a standout in the big city of Honolulu as a lawyer known for her tenacity and success in some of Hawaii's most watched civil cases. Crystal Rose, 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. Her name is Crystal Rose, but flowery is not a word many would use to describe this respected business and commercial litigator. For more than two decades, Rose has taken on complex civil cases, reshaping Hawaii's banking industry and the island's largest private landowner. Her peers call Rose fearless, tough, an astute problem-solver. These are traits that Rose didn't necessarily see in herself when she was growing up in Hilo on Hawaii Island. Rose says her life changed when she switched schools in the seventh grade.

Tell me about your parents, and growing up in Hilo.

My family, both sides born and raised in Hilo, multiple generations. I was, you know, obviously born in Hilo, went to elementary school at Hilo Union, and then at seventh grade, applied and luckily got accepted and attended Kamehameha Schools at that point in time.

And you were a boarder.

A boarder.

In Oahu. From what age?

I was eleven when I got there.

Eleven, moving away from your family.

Oh; for everyone, it's difficult at that time and that age. And you know, my first year, I think most of us are homesick, and you know, hated it, and I thought my parents sent me to prison.

It must have been hard for them, because they're very family-oriented people.

Yes, yes; very hard. But they valued education, and this was an opportunity that they felt would enhance me as their daughter. And so I knew that, and made sure we used it to the best of everyone's advantages. After your first year, I really enjoyed Kamehameha and the friends I that I had there, and the people I've met. They were like my sisters in the dorm after six years. And so, it's all good.

What was life like in Hilo? What part of Hilo?

My parents um, lived on a street called Wailuku Drive, which is above Hilo Hospital. And so, my best stories of Hilo was, I went to Hilo Union, and for some reason back then, if you lived more than two miles away from the school, they'd take you home on the sampan bus. So, there was a group of us that were able to go home every day on the sampan bus.

What was that like, riding on—

It was very fun.

A ferry, essentially, took you home.

Exactly; exactly. So, it was quite fun, and I see them now and it warms my heart to see those little buses.

Were you quiet, boisterous, athletic, studious? What?

Not athletic. Probably in the middle of it. I don't think I was super-smart, but back then, believe it or not, they had three classes. There was the A Class, the B Class, and the C Class. I was always in the A Class, but I never thought of myself as being the smartest um, kid in the school, if that makes sense. But I think I did well.

**Did you sit in the back of the class? Did you sit in the front row and raise your hand?
What was your personality like?**

Probably in the middle. You know. You know, just more in the middle, I think. I wasn't one to sit in the front, and I don't think I carried the back of the room. Those were for the cool kids.

You were not a cool kid?

I wasn't a cool kid.

What were you like?

What can I say? Uh, I danced hula. Kind of just the normal everyday kid. I enjoyed hanging around after school with the neighborhood kids. We all played. My mom had a bell, and she'd ring us for dinner. And that's what you did.

What did you play? What kind of games?

Hide-and-Seek; all kinds of little, you know, kid games.

Your dad was a policeman.

Yes.

Does that mean you had to be a good girl out there, not embarrass your dad?

I probably felt that more in high school than I did in elementary school. I didn't quite focus on it at that point in time. I think in high school, I was a little bit more sensitive to his role. At that point, he had been promoted and he was the district commander of the South Kohala-Waimea area. My family had moved to Waimea, so he had a little bit more prominence in the community, and I think we as a family knew that we had to be a little bit more straight and narrow then. And I think it was good, I was at Kamehameha.

Because teenaged.

Teenagers didn't always have to work out.

Do you remember what the conversation was about the idea that you would be living on another island, if you just got the chance?

Back then, Kamehameha had started in one of its programs called Explorations, so you got to go at the end of your fifth year summer and spend a week there. So, you would then apply in sixth grade. But having come off of Explorations, which was a fabulous experience, and a wonderful program, and I'm glad that Kamehameha still does it 'til today, I came back like knowing what the school looked like, and met some people

that actually became my classmates when I got accepted. So, the conversation, I think, was easier, having had that.

What happened at Kamehameha?

I was on the honor roll, and I did well certainly, but I was not the top of the class, I was not the valedictorian. But I did do enough to get into college, and all of that. I'm the first in my family to go to college on the mainland, and that was a big deal. My dad is a college graduate, but primarily through UH night school, so he did it, you know, as he was working. And we're proud of that. But for someone from my family to go to the mainland to college was pretty big of a deal. And back then, we didn't have the resources where you go to see schools and visit, and all of the decision making pretty much occurred by looking at a brochure and a publication from various schools.

So, yet another culture you had to navigate.

Yes, yes, yes, yes. But Kamehameha does a good job of doing that. I went to Willamette University in Oregon. There were nine of us from my Kamehameha class that went there. So, you know, there was at least some friends or familiar faces when you were there, but definitely some navigation involved in the transition.

At Oregon's Willamette University, Crystal Rose studied hard, with a double major in psychology and sociology. After graduation, Rose found herself heading to law school at the Hastings College of Law in California.

So, I didn't start with thinking I wanted to go to law school; I ended up there. And I think it was a good decision for me. I spent one study abroad in England, in school in London, and you know, that was another cultural shock experience. And so, the next was an easy transition, and I went to law school in San Francisco.

You know, I notice you got hired by Carlsmith Ball, a leading Honolulu law firm when you were in your second year of law school?

Yes. Actually, it's very typical. Between your second and third year of law school, most large firms—Carlsmith was one, Goodsill is another, Cades does it—they hire second year students between your second year of law school and your third year for the summer. And it's a good opportunity for the students to get an experience in a law firm, and it's a good opportunity for the law firms to then kinda handpick the ones they would like to see as permanent attorneys in their offices. So, many of us worked in different firms, and I happened to accept a job with Carlsmith, and then at the end of that summer, they offered me a permanent job. So, when I got out of school, I already had a job, and I knew I was coming home, and that part was easy.

That must have been nice.

It was very nice; very nice.

And then, so you were a young woman working at this illustrious law firm.

Yeah.

And you ... bagged. You left. Tell me about that. After several years.

Yeah. I'd been there little over three years, and there was a lot of change at Carlsmith during that period of time. But more importantly, the group I worked with had some conversations about going off on their own, and included me in those conversations. So, there was eight of us that left in '86. I joined Carlsmith in '82. I was, you know, twenty-eight years old, and it was a big deal. It was a big deal.

And are you still with the same—well, different partners, but um, same law firm.

Same firm. And of the original eight, there's three of us left. And on January 3rd, we'll celebrate our thirtieth anniversary. So, I'm very proud of that. 'Cause, you know, longevity, and we have some staff that came with us, and they're still with us from the beginning.

That's wonderful, especially since I know that there have been a lot of reductions over the years in legal offices.

Correct. So, like I said, it's been a good ride. You know, I've enjoyed it. We have about twenty-something lawyers, and young group, and it's very dynamic, and that's good. You know, it's good for us.

Throughout her legal career, Crystal Rose has calmly tackled complicated and contentious cases that made headlines. She represented former Bishop Estate trustee Oswald Stender in a case that helped bring reform to the mismanaged institution now known as Kamehameha Schools. Rose also led the legal strategy for Central Pacific Bank in its hostile takeover of City Bank back in 2005.

I've had the privilege, and actually the opportunity and I look at it as an incredible privilege, of being able to work on cases and issues that have been multi-faceted, complex. It really does make me tick. I love being in the middle of that, and being able to help strategize a solution that will be the best one, ever. Most of the time, you need to be flexible, 'cause what you think may work may not, and you have to be able to adjust accordingly. A lot of it has to do with people and responses, and reactions, and where you can take opportunities that are given to you that you didn't realize were going to happen. And so, yes, I really enjoy that type of work.

There's a lot to what you do. For example, when you were helping Central Pacific Bank take over City Bank, it was an incredibly complex. I mean, there were a lot of numbers.

Right.

I mean, everything had to make sense for fiduciaries. But I sense it wasn't just a job for you. I mean, this was a passion, and it was something you believed in.

In the restructuring of Central Pacific Bank after we got into trouble, it was very serious. And we got to the point, you know, that some people felt we were, you know, on the verge of being taken over. And it got very close. And I felt very, very strongly that I needed to do everything I could, primarily because you know, nine hundred jobs were at risk. And although shareholder value is important, that was lost at a certain point. But what you cannot lose is the business and the opportunity, and the franchise of the bank, and the people.

Why was important for Central Pacific to take over City Bank?

I believe the two banks were of similar size, of similar backgrounds, and being in the kind of Asian, Japanese cultural support, and felt that together they would be better and stronger than if they were separate.

You didn't major in business.

No; I did not major in business.

Didn't have experience in business.

None.

So, you emerge as somebody who's helped to really transform, for example, the banking industry, in the sense of there's a new bank entity.

M-hm.

How did that happen? How did you get your business acumen?

Obviously, reading, experience, following other businesses. Knowing what you know, and knowing what you don't know is important, I think. I don't try to become the financial advisor; I will let somebody explain it to me, and make sure it makes sense, and then I can dive in to the questions I may have. But I think a little bit is just grassroots experience. Been there, done that kinda thing.

And then, you waded into the old Bishop Estate. Where you were once a student at the school.

Exactly.

And then, you're representing one of the trustees essentially, against the current leadership of the schools.

Correct.

And the estate.

And how that really uh, transpired is, my office at the time was in Alii Place, and I had the privilege of looking out on the capitol and Iolani Palace, and that beautiful view. And one day, I'm looking out of my window, and there is a march occurring by my alumni from Mauna Ala to Kawaiahao. It was the first march of the controversy. And it saddened me, because I thought it was the first time Hawaiians were marching on Hawaiians. And it didn't seem right, and there's got to have been a different way to go about doing this. And so, I called Oz; I knew him. His daughter and I went to Willamette together. And so, I asked him if he needed help, and how I could help. And I didn't expect to be his lawyer, and then he said, Can I retain you?, and I said, Okay, and off we went. And I then realized that that was a situation where the establishment was, you know, pretty entrenched, and you had to do things, unfortunately, a little bit more controversial than I would have liked. But it all worked out in the end.

You did arrange a settlement in which your client, Mr. Stender, resigned.

Correct.

Temporarily.

Yes; yes.

And permanently, as it turned out.

Correct.

And how did that help in moving things forward in this very troubled situation?

From the very beginning—and Oz was—one of the reasons he's such a wonderful man and so good about everything was, from the very beginning, when asked by the press, he very strongly felt he would step down, as long as the other four stepped down. We knew that in order to take on the reformation that needed to be done, it had to be done from the inside. He couldn't quit and then sue them; that would have been not the best strategy. And I think it made a big difference, 'cause then it wasn't about him trying to keep his job, versus standing behind the reforms we were trying to put in place.

You think that was one of the main pivots in that whole controversy?

Yes; yes.

Leading to new trustees.

Trustees; correct, correct. And if he was in there saying, I'm the good guy and the rest of them are bad, and you need to, you know, keep me and not them, I think he would have had some credibility arguments. People would say, You've been there that long, why are you okay, and they're not? You know, they would just ask. So, he eliminated a lot of questions that would ever have to be asked.

Crystal Rose later represented the new slate of Kamehameha Schools trustees in their admission policy giving preference to Native Hawaiian children. She won that case in the Federal courts. More recently, Crystal Rose handled a bitter family dispute over the estate of singer Don Ho, who passed away in 2007.

I was hired by the trustees of the Don Ho estate, and it was challenged by some of the beneficiaries. And for unfortunate reasons, we ended up in arbitration. We tried very hard to resolve it outside of that. My goal has always been to be a problem-solver, because you know, fundamentally, people don't need lawyers unless they come to you because they have a problem they can't solve. And our job is to solve it; it's not always to go to court. In fact, sometimes that means you didn't do your job, or you know, you couldn't accomplish something in a different way. So, you try all kinds of other avenues before you end up in the court proceedings. Long story short, we ended up in an arbitration, and they upheld the last amendment of the trust. But it was very contentious, and lots of different issues.

I suppose when you have access to people in these very personal matters, you learn a lot about how people tick.

What I learned from Don Ho's experience was, he loved everyone, and he told everybody the same thing. So, you know, everyone felt special in his world.

And then, when it comes down to the money ...

They all thought it should be them. If that makes sense. And he wasn't dishonest; he just was caring about each person in a different way. So, it's an example of seeing how everyone's perspective is accurate, but they never saw it all.

When you get to know people in these very emotional circumstances, and I'm talking well beyond the Ho case. But just in general, where you've had direct access at a very vulnerable time of their lives, does it help inform you in terms of reading people in the future?

Yeah; I think so. I think so. You know, I always want to expect the best in people, and want to give everyone benefits of the doubt. I think that at the end of the day, how you handle yourself can actually—how people can respond. So, you want to make sure that you do so in a respectful way.

And they'd better have their documents. 'Cause that really helps you; right?

Yes; yes. Having the documents helps. There's no question about that.

When she is not litigating cases, Crystal Rose is advising some of Hawaii's major companies. She serves or has served on the corporate boards of Central Pacific Bank, Hawaiian Airlines, Gentry Companies, and Hawaiian Electric Company. In addition, Crystal Rose gives her time to several nonprofit organizations.

There's not one road; each one of them had their own kind of story. I served on the Hawaiian Electric Light Company board, which is the subsidiary of HEI. I just got called one day and asked if I was interested in doing it, and that's how that one happened. The CPB situation came through doing my legal work at CPB. The merger had occurred, but hadn't been consummated, and they wanted somebody, I believe, that knew what was going on, and had some inside background. And they asked me if I'd step into being on the board. So, that was likewise a very wonderful privilege, and I'm honored to do that 'til today. I also serve on the board of Hawaiian Airlines, and when it came out of bankruptcy, I believe they were looking for a few local directors. And they were also in the midst of looking for a lawyer to bring on the case against Mesa, and I met with some board members and the CEO about that, and then they asked me to serve on the board. So, that one has had kind of a different role. And then lastly, I serve on the board of Gentry Homes, and Tom was my first client.

Do you sometimes step back and say, I was born in Hilo?

Yes.

And here I am, hobnobbing and bringing value to major corporations, major institutions, and going up against some very moneyed influential interests.

M-hm. I don't think about it; I don't think about it in that way. I obviously love my Hilo upbringing and I love my family, that many of them are still there. My husband I have a place in Waimea with some other people that we go to quite often, so my heart can be on that island quite easily. But I don't kind of look at it as us and them; I kind of feel like everybody does their part to do what they can to make it better place for Hawaii.

As she was building her legal career, Crystal Rose married contractor Rick Towill, with strong ties to Lanai, where his great-grandfather was the Lanai ranch manager, George Munro. Together, Rick and Crystal raised two sons who are now grown. When her boys were little, Rose says she was able to handle motherhood and her demanding work schedule with a great deal of help from her family.

Through your major cases and your large caseload, and the many meetings and calls, and unexpected things, you had a family; you had children. How did you make it work? Or did it work?

It did work. And you know, many women, or different people will ask me, you know, How did you do it?, quote, unquote. And I will always say there's not one way to find balance. I don't think balance is ever found. You strive for it, and you do the best you can. First and foremost, I have a fabulous husband, and he's always been there for me.

What's his name?

His name is Rick Towill. And he's the string to the balloon. And without him, a lot of what has happened couldn't have happened. So, I want to first say, I think it starts with your relationship. And then, my kids were actually pretty resilient, and that's good. I think they're better adults now from that experience. But I also had a lot of help. My parents from the Big Island to Honolulu, and they were there to help me in all the times I needed. My dad's name is Charley, and he called himself Charley's Taxi, 'cause he picked up the kids all the time, and my mother would have fed them and bathed them, and by the time I came home, you know, the heavy lifting was done, so I had the fun part.

Did you all live together?

No, no, no. They had a condo in Honolulu, and I lived on the Windward side. But they'd pick 'em up, take them to their house, and then I'd show up and take 'em home. Or sometimes they would take them home, 'cause it was easier. But it's not easy, and there were very, very trying times. I can't say I was always in balance, 'cause I probably wasn't. And um, you know, during the Kamehameha controversy, my youngest son was six, and he wrote in his school journal that he only got to see his mom in the morning, because I made sure I took them to school, and then he got to watch her on TV, and then he dreamt about her every night. It was very sweet.

Oh, it must have broken your heart.

Broke my heart; broke my heart. That weekend, I said, Okay, guys, I need to take some time off. So, it's hard. But you know, they wouldn't have it any other way today.

And they found their passion in sailing and boats.

Yes. And actually, it was during the Kamehameha controversy where I needed childcare during spring break, so I signed them up for sailing lessons at Hawaii or Waikiki Yacht Club. I think it's Hawaii Yacht Club. And you know, they were nine and six, and their passion for sailing took from there, and so, we are very lucky and fortunate that they found it at an early age.

You didn't have a clue that this would be something special for them?

No. My husband and I get seasick in the bathtub.

That's amazing. So, they continued with sailing. So, one of your sons is a ...

He's a professional sailor now. And my younger son is a mechanical engineer, working at Navatech, working with their boat designs. So, they've both turned out, or luckily have followed their passions, and are doing quite well. So, we're very, very happy.

In her spare time, Rose says she likes to travel, sew, and cook. In her words, you can't be Portuguese and not like to cook. Crystal Rose's success has given her the luxury of being picky; she says she focuses on clients who share her values or touch her heart. Mahalo to Crystal Rose of Kahaluu in Windward Oahu 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 when your parents, the Roses, named you Crystal, did they think they were getting a dainty flower?

No, actually, my dad will tell you that the story was, back then there was one TV station, and something that will be dear to your heart, it was KGMB. And they had a show called The Millionaire that they gave a million dollars to someone to then, watch their life thereafter. And that my mother wanted to go to the hospital, and the woman who was given the money that year was called Crystal Sands. And he said, That's what we should name our daughter. My mother wasn't quite thrilled, but I think my father prevailed.

[END]