

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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I had a retirement luncheon on the day I retired from the courtroom in Hilo, and the clerk who was kind of in charge introduced me that afternoon as, the judge who said I hear you. And so, I left the Big Island court job taking with me the understanding that if the staff had heard me that clearly, that the people who were in court had heard me as well. And so, that was the best I could do.

William “Yama” Chillingworth racked up a lot of mileage in his twenty-five-year career as a State judge on Hawaii Island. He traveled widely throughout the Big Island to hear cases, and he retired content that he gave voice to every defendant who came through his courtroom. William “Yama” Chillingworth, 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. He was known in courtrooms throughout Hawaii Island as Judge William Chillingworth; but to family and friends, he is “Yama”. While that may sound like a Japanese nickname, it’s based on the Hawaiianized version of William, Wiliama; Yama. He is very proud of his Native Hawaiian heritage. Chillingworth’s family line includes Princess Victoria Kailulani, who was next in line to the throne when the Hawaiian monarchy was overthrown in 1893. Kaiulani was sister to Chillingworth’s great-grandmother. It was while researching part of his Native Hawaiian ancestry that Chillingworth discovered he comes from a family of Native Hawaiian bird collectors on Hawaii Island, and that’s where he spent most of youth and most of his career.

I was born in Honolulu in 1943. My dad was in the Army in New Guinea when I was born, and he was with General MacArthur. And my mother was from Hilo, and having no family in Honolulu after I was born, she returned to Hilo and stayed with my maternal grandparents. And then, after the war, my father came back, and we lived in Hilo, and I grew up there. My grandfather was the proprietor of the Hilo Drug Company, and it was this wonderful 50s fountain and drugstore on what they described as the busiest corner in Hilo. And it was.

Back when pharmacies had fountains.

Absolutely. It was a 50s fountain.

So, there were the stools.

The stools.

And the milkshakes.

The straw containers that you lifted up and pulled. It had everything. And my grandfather was a pharmacist. He came to the Island of Hawaii after he graduated from the University of California at Berkeley, and settled in Hilo and met my grandmother, who was half German, half Hawaiian. My grandfather was Harry Arthur Wessel.

How many pharmacists were there?

There was one, and that was my grandfather. He was it. And so, growing up in Hilo at the Wessel's Drugstore and having my grandmother, who was a public school teacher, and my mother, who followed in her footsteps as a public school teacher, it was a mixed blessing. They were both rather strict about using proper English. You were not able to mess around with Pidgin.

In Hilo, you couldn't speak Pidgin?

Absolutely not.

How did that go over with the boys and and the girls?

Completely forbidden it was easy. But when were in school, especially junior high, it wasn't so easy, because most of the kids we were in with were not speaking English; they were speaking whatever it was they were speaking. And my brother was better at socializing that way than I was. I was kind of stuck. And until I got to Punahou, I was having a very hard time in school, because I had to hide that I was interested in doing well.

You went to schools in Hilo.

Right.

Public middle.

Public schools.

You went to elementary school and then intermediate school as well in Hilo?

Right.

And did you really not speak Pidgin during that time?

Well, when my mother and my grandmother were around, I wasn't speaking Pidgin. But quite frankly, in a classroom where you were having to deal socially with kids who were not on your scholastic level, it was difficult; it was difficult. There was liable to be recrimination and, anger.

Because you were showing them up with grades?

Exactly. I was doing better than they were. And so, I had to hide that.

How'd you hide it?

Just pretend that I didn't care about what I was doing, and you know, not answer questions in class, et cetera, et cetera.

So, what was it about Hilo; was the social norm to pretend you didn't hear? Or did you people really didn't care?

It was tough; it was tough. My friend, Stanley Roehrig refers to the aama crab syndrome, where the crab that is climbing out of the bucket gets pulled down by the crabs that are underneath. Stanley is that way, and he talks about that. There was an element of that in what was going on.

Mm. So, what do you think would have happened if you stayed in the public school system in the area?

Good question; good question. I'm not sure. I'm glad I didn't have to make that decision myself. I'm awfully glad I ended up where I did.

Where William "Yama" Chillingworth ended up was Honolulu, in a top private school, Punahou. His family moved to the city at the start of his tenth graded year. For the first time, he says, he felt at home in the classroom.

Getting into Punahou was like going to Heaven. I mean, because I was in a classroom environment with equals, and everybody was in there.

People who wanted to do well in school.

Doing the same thing that I wanted to do. And it was heavenly. I mean, I had the best time.

So, you had to make a social transition to Punahou. And was it hard in class?

Only in math and science I was terrible in math and science. I sucked. I was fabulous for the rest of the way out, so you know, that made it fairly easy. I wasn't going into science, and I wasn't going into any field that required mathematics.

William "Yama" Chillingworth received that political science degree from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Next, he earned a law degree at the University of Denver Law School.

And of course, I'm sure it was expected that you would go to college. Had your parents been to college? Your mom was a teacher.

My mom was accepted to Stanford, and then they couldn't send her because they didn't have the money at the time, and she went to University of Hawaii at Manoa. And my dad had been headed in that direction, and then he got into the National Guard after he graduated from high school. My grandfather was the CEO of the Territorial National Guard in the 30s; he was the head man. And my father was the best soldier in Punahou ROTC program his sophomore year. So, my father was being groomed for the Army, and got into the Territorial National Guard with my grandfather, and was actually in charge of a detachment that was tasked with going down the Koolaus and refurbishing the pillboxes that were on the top of ridges just before the war started. And so then, he was in the war.

New Guinea; that was rough fighting, wasn't it?

Oh, it was one of the worst theaters in the war. They talk about that theater as being a knife fight from the Stone Age.

But then, you became a lawyer, which you know, you don't have to know a lot about great English literature.

The best part about law school was, I learned how to be specific in the use of language. I hadn't intended to be a lawyer in private practice. I graduated from law school in June of 1968 and within a week, I'd gotten an induction notice, and I reported, so I was off to Vietnam. And I'd broken my arm in an accident the year before, and the doctor in the induction center looked at it and said, I'm sorry, son, we can't take you. And I was completely stunned. Completely stunned.

You wanted to serve?

There was no Plan B. You know, my grandfather was an infantry captain, my father an infantry captain. I was going. And all of a sudden, I wasn't going. And then, it was, what now? You know. What now? And I'd just graduated from law school, so obviously, it was, decide where to take a bar exam and at least have a license. So, I went ...

Back home.

Came back to Honolulu, got in a bar exam review course, and took the bar exam. And then, things started to happen in a hurry.

William "Yama" Chillingworth became a law clerk for the late Federal Judge Martin Pence. He credits Judge Pence for showing him how to command respect in a courtroom.

I passed the bar exam, I got a call from Judge Pence's office. We want you here next week Monday and it was a dream job. It was my perfect job out of law school, going to work for Judge Pence as a clerk, and a bailiff, because he was so good at what he did, and so willing to teach the clerks who came to work for him. He was in control; he told you where you stood. He was extremely good at controlling the courtroom and inspiring confidence in the people who were coming to hear him and coming to the court. Even, you know, as I did as the lowly clerk who was opening up the court sessions, he taught me so much about the courtroom process.

How did he gain the respect of people who came before him?

It was by demonstrating respect. Demonstrating confidence, demonstrating respect, and you instill it, you inspire it in the people you're with.

So, that was your first job out of law school. And then, what?

Well, then I went to work for a law firm in Honolulu, a guy who's turned out to be a really good friend of mine, Allen Wooddell. And I worked for Allen's firm in Honolulu for about a year, and they had talked about opening an office on the Big Island. It didn't quite come together, and I had an opportunity to talk to Judge Pence about it. And he said, you know, my law partner in Hilo would be really happy to join forces if you're interested in going back to work in the in the Hilo courtroom setting. I did; I did. I went to work with Ron Nakamoto, who was Judge Pence's former law partner, and spent twelve years there, and was a trial lawyer, and got to go to court every day. So then, one day, I was in the office and got a call from Judge Kubota in Hilo. He says, Come on in, I want to talk to you. I figured I'd done something wrong. Judge Kubota was kind of a curmudgeon that way. And he called me in, and he was with someone I didn't know, and they had called me in because Judge Mark had retired from the District Court bench in Hilo and they were looking for a replacement, and they wondered if I was interested. Of course, I was. After I was sworn in as a family and district court judge by Chief Justice Richardson, the Chief Justice said, I gave you the job because you were the only one who got a unanimous vote from the commission.

And so, for twenty years, you rode circuit on the Big Island.

I did.

You went to all the courts.

I did.

And heard cases which took you ... I mean, high level legal argents to you know, probably assault and battery stuff.

High level, low level; I heard everything that came in the door.

Divorces.

I put three hundred thousand miles on my cars at the rate of a hundred and twenty miles a day. It was a bit arduous, but there were moments. There were moments. I heard so many stories. So many stories. And all I had to do was, be able to distinguish fact from fiction. And sometimes it was easy, and other times it wasn't. And there were moments, there were moments. And those moments, for a long time, they kept me going back. One day in the traffic court, I guess it was in Honokaa, and a sixteen-year-old boy had been charged with a seatbelt offense, and I was hearing the sergeant who had issued the citation. And the sergeant was talking about how he had seen the event occur. And then I heard from the boy, and the boy told me he was wearing the seatbelt. And what you do in that kind of a circumstance? And so, I asked about the configuration. Well, it was a convertible, and most cars have the seatbelt coming down a post which is above the shoulder of the operator. This one didn't; it came off the back of the seat and came around like that. So, this officer probably had a difficult time seeing whether it was being used or not. I found the young man not guilty. And about that moment, I see a hand going up in the gallery, and I'm going, Uh-oh. And turns out that the boy's father is back in the gallery and is wanting to talk to me. And I'm going ... he came up and he said, you know, after my son got the citation, he came home and said, Dad, I was wearing my seatbelt. And I looked at Dad and I said, I'm really glad I got it right. And he looked at me and he said, I'm really glad you got it right too, because it taught my son a lesson about how justice is administered here.

That you can trust the system.

And I said, Thank you, Dad. Those were the kind of moments that kept me going back. You know.

You probably saw the worst common denominator in people's character, as well.

There were difficult days. There were enormously difficult days, and they were hard to leave behind at the end of the day. I found myself getting into canoe paddling, I found myself getting into yoga, I found myself getting into distance running; anything to get rid of the acculation of courtroom emotions. And most of the time, they were negative; extremely negative. The grief, the desperation, the hurt, especially in the family court setting.

'Cause you're not in a position to do rehab with them. This is, yes or no, here's the ruling, and off you go.

Right. And half the time—well, I wouldn't say half the time, but a lot of the time, the ruling would be significant enough and emotional enough so that I'd reserve it. You know, otherwise, if I issued it, there would be a fistfight going on in the courtroom on the way out the door. So, I would withhold the ruling. I'd say, Okay, I'm gonna look at this a little bit more and I'll have my clerk call the attorneys. And then, as soon as we were finished, I'd tell the clerk, call the lawyers. Tell them this, tell them that.

Because you really you really did think violence would erupt?

I didn't want any more emotion than was already piled into that courtroom to come out of the decisions.

And of course, in courts, you know that a lot of times, whatever you rule, one side's gonna be angry or distraught. What was that like to live with?

That was one of the difficulties of the job. I knew that no matter how I ruled, somebody was gonna come out of the courtroom unhappy with the ruling.

Did that make it hard to go to shopping centers and parties?

No; and for this reason. I made sure that if I couldn't do anything else, I let everybody know that I heard them. And I made sure that when they were finished presenting whatever they wanted to present, I looked them in the eye and I said, I hear you, what you're saying is this, so that even I couldn't always rule in their favor, they came out of the courtroom with the understanding that they had been heard.

Did you get that from Judge Pence?

I got that from Judge Pence.

After William "Yama" Chillingworth saw the last of his three children off to college and retired from the bench on Hawaii Island, he tackled something his mother always wanted him to do; and that is, to trace his Native Hawaiian ancestry on her side of the family. This research led Chillingworth to an unexpected family connection, and a new passion: capturing images of the Hawaiian Hawk.

We had two names, and the ahupuaa where the old family home was located, the family home that was the the grass hale's. I started with the location of the ahupuaa, the translation of the ahupuaa name, and the fact that it was located between Hakalau and Ninole. Hakalau is well-known bird center. One of the translations is, many perches, so it was a bird center in old Hawaii. My great-great-great-great-grandfather and his brother, his name was Kanehoalani, and it was the most auspicious name; it was the name that had me sitting down where I was living in Kohala and saying ... Great-great-great-great-grandfather, how in the world did you come by this auspicious name?

Which means?

It's the Hawaiian Zeus; it's the ruler of the heavens, the grandfather of Pele. I had a feeling that an answer was coming, and in fact, it was. I'd always had a love of landscape photography, and I'd invested in some rather good equipment. Began taking it out, and one morning, I'm out in the eastern Kohala valleys, and this great bird comes over and screams at me. I mean, literally screams at me, you know And it's this enormous Hawaiian Hawk, and he's looking right at me. And his wings are spread, and

he is the most incredible thing I had ever seen. And there was this immediate connection.

Did you know what it meant?

Not at that moment. All I knew was, I had made a connection, and I wasn't going to be doing any other photography than that bird up there. And I started coming back every day after that, and waiting for the arrival of my royal friend. You know, there was no understanding the connection that was happening with the need to get myself out of bed in morning, get the camera, and go to where the hawks were and begin collecting the images. It just went on, and on, and on. And then, there was just that one final piece which had to do with my mother giving all of her children a copy of the book that Isabella Bird wrote.

Oh, Bird.

Right.

Somebody you never met; somebody from England.

Miss Bird, who was here in 1873 on the Island of Hawaii. Oh, she loved Hilo. So she describes, Miss Bird describes how she went off to Waipio with my great-great-grandmother as her eighteen-year-old guide. My great-great-grandmother spoke Hawaiian, spoke English, rode, and had been on the Hamakua Coast for her entire life, and guided her up to Waipio, and then came back. And on the way back, they went off the trail and went mauka a mile to where my great-great-grandmother had a family ancestral home. They went up there because my great-great-grandmother was receiving a wedding gift; she had just been married to Ben Macy from Nantucket. And the wedding gift turned out to be a feather lei. And not just any feather lei; lei hulu mamo melemele, a yellow feather lei of mamo feathers. And then, when I finally read that, everything came together. It was as if I finally understood that Miss Bird had met my ancestors, Kanehoalani and his brother Manohoa. And from what she said, I was able to clearly identify that we were from a family of bird collectors and feather workers, and that Kanehoalani is one of the most auspicious names you can give to a male Hawaiian son of a family of bird collectors, the ruler of the heavens. And his brother got the name Manohoa, the friend of the birds. Of course; it all fit together.

A friend urged William "Yama" Chillingworth to have his collection of Hawaiian Hawk photographs published. The result is a book titled *Io Lani, the Hawaiian Hawk*. It won a 2015 Ka Palapala Pookela Award from the Hawaii Book Publishers Association. Post-retirement, Chillingworth, a divorcee, married again. His wife is a former Punahou School mate who is a New York Times bestselling author, Susanna Moore. Mahalo to William "Yama" Chillingworth of North Kohala on Hawaii Island 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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So, next, feather making?

Feather lei making?

No more mamō's, I'm afraid.

Capes?

The mamō are gone.

Yeah.

Aole, unfortunately.

And how are the Hawaiian Hawks doing?

The Hawaiian Hawks are doing pretty well. They're estimated at twenty-five hundred or thereabouts, and I'm seeing more of them, which is very, very rewarding. I so enjoy seeing them.

[END]