

# LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



**TITLE: SABRA KAUKA**

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My cousin had a science project, and he collected pupu, the kahuli, the land snail. And they have the most beautiful coloring. And it is said that they sing. And what really happens, though, is when they move to edge of a leaf, and the breeze is blowing, it catches in their shell and it hums, it whistles. It does make a sound; it's a lovely sound. We didn't know at the time that they would become endangered, and he has a collection now of several hundred shells. And he called me the other day from Maui—he lives on Maui, and he was kinda picking my brain. What should I do with this collection? And you know, we thought about Bishop Museum, but they have quite a big collection already. I said, Find a school on Maui, and continue the story there. Yeah.

**Wow. And don't keep them in your house, 'cause now everybody knows he has them.**

No. Well, now, everybody knows he has them. But they all tell a story. And I'm so glad, because I was up on the range a few years ago, and the kahuli—bless the Nature Conservancy and their project up there to shelter them, and make sure that they continue to live. They're so beautiful in the wild. So, all of these outdoor experiences, you know, just kinda made who I am today.

**Sabra Kauka experienced many different cultures living around the world as the daughter of an Army officer, and then the wife of an Air Force pilot. She was enjoying her career as a photojournalist in Alaska when the calling of her Native Hawaiian community brought her home. She landed on Kauai, where her knowledge and care for the environment and perpetuation of Native Hawaiian traditions have made her a respected cultural leader of the community. Sabra Kauka of Kauai, 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. Sabra Kauka is the go-to person on Kauai for almost anything to do with Hawaiian culture. She's a master kapa maker and kumu hula, and she's called on as an expert in natural resource management, be it marine mammal protection, preservation of historic sites, or ethnobotany. She will even bless your home or new canoe. But Sabra Kauka was not always a Hawaiian cultural practitioner. For much of her early life, she lived away from Hawaii, in places with very different cultures.**

Dad was in the Army. He was the University when World War II broke out, and so then he had to join the service, and he joined the Army and became an officer. And so, we lived all over the world. It was really a wonderful experience. I didn't realize how unusual it was until I came home and met people who had never left Oahu.

### **Where did you live?**

Dad's first assignment was in Bremerhaven, Germany. And the cool thing is that I am still in touch by Facebook with the granddaughter of a woman who was our nanny there. She's still alive; she was my mother's age, she's in her nineties. And after Bremerhaven, Dad was assigned to San Francisco, and we lived at Fort Mason at the end of Van Ness Avenue, and my brother and I went to school there. And then, after that, Dad was assigned to Saigon, Vietnam, and we lived there for a few years. So, a couple of years ago, I went back to Vietnam, and my guide found the old house that we lived in. It was amazing; it was still in really good shape. Following Vietnam, Dad was assigned to the Pentagon in Washington, DC, and we lived in Chevy Chase, Maryland, a beautiful area. And then, after that, there was a reduction in force, and we moved home to Hawaii.

### **What was your family life like as a kid?**

Phenomenal; really, really phenomenal. I didn't know how great my family life was until high school years, and I'd bring friends home, and they'd say, Wow. You know, they'd look around, they'd just ...

'cause they didn't have that kind of support. You know. So, it wasn't really until high school or college that I realized that not everybody had the support that I did as a youngster.

### **What kind of support?**

A safe place, a home. You know. Food, education, adventure. Because wherever we moved in the world, it was an adventure. They enjoyed traveling, my parents; they enjoyed learning, they enjoyed going to all these great different places. And they made it an adventure for us, as well. But they were also very cognizant of the community around them. My dad's first assignment after World War II was in Germany, post-war Germany. And I think it was integral to him as a Hawaiian to feed people, and he brought people home for dinner. My mom never really always knew who was

coming home for dinner. And one particular family that he invited home for dinner, they returned the next day with some of the most beautiful crystal, ever.

**And wherever you lived, your family went outside a lot. You were outdoorsy.**

Yeah, we did; very outdoorsy. Because when we lived in San Francisco, we went camping up in the Sierras, and that's the first camping trip I can remember. It was really cold, but really fun, and catching trout in the stream, and cooking it over a campfire, and the trout was as big as the pan. Yeah; good fun stuff. So, ever since then, I've loved it. I mean, I love the outdoors; I love camping, hiking.

**You're comfortable with just a few things around you.**

Very comfortable. Very few things; yeah, minimal.

**Did your family even go hiking in Germany?**

Oh, yeah; skiing, in fact. Tobogganing, skiing. I was still pretty young, but I can remember the skiing and tobogganing, and the snow activities in the Alps.

**And what about back here in Hawaii?**

Our recreation was either in the mountains, hiking in the mountains with my uncle Elmer Williamson, or playing at the beach, like down at Queen's, in canoes and surfing. Mom and Dad were both University of Hawaii graduates in the early 30s, I guess; in the 30s. And it was always emphasized that we would get our educations, and graduate.

**Where did you decide to go?**

I was first at Oregon; I went to Linfield College for a couple of years. And then, I wanted to major in anthropology; they didn't offer it there, so I came home to University of Hawaii here at Manoa.

**And why anthropology?**

It just put together everything that I was interested in. I was interested in different cultures, I was interested in different people, and I had a lot of questions.

**And you'd had a lot of experience watching people from around the world.**

Oh, to the max; yes.

**So, you did graduate with a degree in anthropology?**

I did.

**Kauka means doctor.**

Kauka means doctor.

**Does that mean you come from a line of doctors?**

I come from a line of traditional healers. And the name Kauka, though, was given to them when they lived in Waipio Valley. And I have a Chinese grandfather who very quickly learned laaulapaau, or Hawaiian medicinal herbs, and people came to him to be healed, and they called him Kauka Lau; Dr. Lau. And from then on, his sons all became called Kauka.

**Have you gone into healing at all?**

Just a bit. I studied with Levon Ohai for a year, and I grow the plants that I need for some basic healing, like olena, like mamaki. And uhaloa, I know where to find it, you know. I haven't done as much as maybe I should in that area to explore it a little more, continue it.

**After finishing college, Saba Kauka got married, and once again, left Hawaii, eventually settling in Alaska to raise her family and pursue a career. She was in remote village in Alaska when she saw a newspaper article about the Hawaiian people. That changed her life.**

I was married then, '67, and my husband at the time was ... this was during the Vietnam Era. Then the Vietnam War came along, he also had to join the service, so he went into the Air Force and became a pilot. And we lived in various places, upper North America over these years, eventually ending up in Alaska, for fourteen years.

**You were raising two children.**

Yes.

**You also became a photojournalist along the way.**

I did, because I was looking for a way that I could make a living as an Air Force wife, because you move every couple of years, and still be able to stay at home, take care of my children, too. And I had a friend who was editing a magazine. She said, Can you do a story on something? I said, Sure. So, I started writing, started publishing. And every time I wrote and published, they'd want photographs to go with it, so then, I'd start providing the photographs. And then, very quickly learned that one photograph can bring in a lot more money than maybe a story can, even though the story takes time, takes effort, takes refinement, takes skill. They both do; both fields.

**That was a good call; but it's not what you do now, at all.**

No; no, it isn't. But what happened was, in 1983, there was a Native Hawaiian Studies Commission report that was published. It came out in Associated Press around the world. But in Alaska, there was a fantastic AP writer called Ward Sims, and Ward expanded on this report. And it came out on the front page of a native newspaper.

And I was working in the bush at the time; I was working lower Kuskokwim River Delta, photographing the salmon processing ship. And there were Japanese on the ship who totally pre-purchased all of the salmon roe, and they treated it like gold, because it was worth quite a bit of money. But as I'm sitting there on the dock of a little native store reading this story about Hawaii, about the poor condition of Native Hawaiians in Hawaii, I said, What happened to everybody? What do you mean? And so, it talked about the high rate of high school dropouts, teenage pregnancies, diabetes and cancer, high blood pressure, all of these things. And I went, Oh, yeah, that's right, isn't it? Not all of my cousins had the opportunity or the support to continue on to college, like I was, quote, required to do, expected to do, supported to do. And oh, that's right, my grandmother had diabetes, you know. So then, I began to turn around and look very closely at things that were happening in Hawaii. And it just goes to show the power of a written or a spoken word, the power of words. Because that was a turning point for me, is reading that article and beginning to inquire, What happened in Hawaii? Because it's hard to believe now, but in the 60s, I don't feel that we were really taught the true facts of history, of what happened here in the islands. And when I began to ask questions about it, my mother would, you know, send me books and things.

**Was she one of the old-timers who wouldn't give up secrets, they wouldn't tell you, they wouldn't explain?**

Definitely, my grandmother was one of those. Whenever she had things that she didn't really want us to hear when she was talking to her sisters or her family, it was in Hawaiian. And you know, we'd catch a few words here and there, but not the deep meanings of them. And in Mom and Dad's time too, they were products of the 20s, 30s, 40s, it wasn't talked about as much. Even though we visited Iolani Palace; Iolani Palace in the 60s was some office building. There desks and file cabinets, and offices in there. It's not the beautiful place that's respected today.

**It's true; it took the Hawaiian resurgence.**

It did; it did.

**The renaissance to bring to light the details of history, when and what.**

It did; it did. And that renaissance, and you know, the beginning of Hokulea, and all of that stuff. I have classmates, you know, quite involved with all of this. And I had to ask myself, and my friends were asking me, What are you doing in Alaska? I said, Well, I'm raising my family.

**Had you planned on staying in Alaska indefinitely?**

I was in Alaska for fourteen years. I was in Fairbanks for eleven years, and Anchorage for three.

**And were you happy there?**

Very happy. Great job, working for the statewide system of University of Alaska, and freelancing quite a bit on top of that. And I took some post-graduate classes there in journalism, had some awesome, awesome professors who encouraged me and believed in me.

**So, you didn't feel a call at that time to go back.**

No; not necessarily. Not until I read that article in AP. You know. And then, I started pitching ideas to magazines here. Well, national magazines, of ideas that I could do in Hawaii. And Hawaiian Airlines; I asked Hawaiian Airlines, Hey, can I come home and do the story on something on Molokai? They said, You're in Alaska; please do a story for us up there. So, I pulled out those three interviews that I had in my files, and wrote about the kupuna there who are related to people from Hawaii from, you know, over a hundred years ago. And so, I started pitching more and more. Those were the days that you'd write a query letter, and put it in an envelope and send it off or at the most fax, because we didn't have email.

**M-hm.**

And darn if, you know, you didn't get phone calls back or, We like that idea, go for it, here's X-amount of time, X-amount of money. I liked that stuff. That was fun. You know.

**You're in Alaska.**

Right.

**And you're concerned about what's happening.**

Oh, yeah. Every time I came home, my friends here would ask me, you know, What are you doing up there, besides making money and raising your family, and this kinda thing? They said, We need your help at home. I said, Lawdy me, what can I do? I mean, good grief. But my focus and my interest returned here to Hawaii. And eventually, I moved here.

**When did you move back?**

Oh, it was after '87, '88; in that area, in that time zone. Yeah.

**When Sabra Kauka moved back to Hawaii, she didn't have a specific career plan in mind. She took one step at a time, trusting that the right path would reveal itself to her when she was ready.**

I had an assignment from a national magazine to do a story on Kauai. And that was one of my transitions. So, it enabled, supported part of my transition home, and I chose to return to Kauai on my return home to the islands.

**Did you know anyone, have a job there?**

I had some friends there. Really, it was the beauty of Kauai that I said, This is where I want to live, this is where I want to make my contribution, for the rest of my days.

**But you didn't make a living the same way. I mean, so many things changed.**

Yeah. I didn't want to leave Hawaii anymore. And what I found in Hawaii in the 80s was that it was almost like there was somebody with a camera behind every coconut tree. So, the day rates and the pay that I had been getting in Alaska, or from national, it just wasn't the same here in Hawaii. And then, I realized that I didn't want to do commercial work; I didn't want to do weddings, I didn't want to do portraits and studio. Even though I appreciate that, I admire good work, I wanted to continue to learn and to, you know, share stories. And you know, you reach a stage in your life where you ask yourself, What are you gonna do? You know, you're in your thirties or like forties, whatever, in there. What are you gonna do with the rest of your life? Where are you gonna put your energies? You know. Can you make a difference, and if so, how, when, where, how, why? You know. And so, I returned home to the islands, and I freelanced for a couple of years. I had some fun projects that I worked on. But then, I was very, very honored and very lucky to be appointed as the first public information officer for Mayor Joanne Yukimura, her first term in office. And through that job, I learned quite a bit about the community, I learned a lot about protocol, what to say, what not to say, when to say it.

**And you got connected all over the island of Kauai.**

Very much; yeah. When I was working in the Mayor's office, there was a band of merry music makers that came through during Christmas; they were Christmas caroling. And they were mostly Hawaiian, and they were having fun, and I said, Well, who are you people? Well, we teach Hawaiian studies in the schools. I said, Oh, do you, now? Tell me about that. And there was a woman who worked for them, Wilma Place who started to come by my desk once a week, for weeks, and she'd drop off something for me to read, or she'd tell me about something interesting. And I said, Oh, this is cool stuff. So, she said, Well, when you're finished working here, maybe you want to come work for us. I said, Yeah, let me think about that. And sure enough, you know, the day after I left the Mayor's office, I went to work in Hawaiian Studies.

**Why did you leave the Mayor's office?**

Because my heart was leading me over there to Hawaiian Studies.

**And you had a Hawaiian upbringing in many ways, but were you trained to be a Hawaiian educator at that point?**

No; no. As a matter of fact, my mother was a teacher, and as a child, I thought, No way, I'm not gonna do that. Lookit, she's always got papers to correct. She had a long dining table, you know, and there were always projects on that table. And I said, No way; I'm not gonna do that, that's too much paperwork. And she's working all the time, you know. But it turned around, and I found my calling as a Hawaiian Studies

kumu, teacher. I was offered a job at Island School, I think in '95, after the hurricane, to teach Hawaiian Studies, kindergarten through fifth grade. And uh, it's a great schedule, because I teach there every other day. And on my even days, then I go and support Department of Education, the public schools, and I have a great job of coordinating the Hawaiian Studies Cultural Personnel Resources, they're called. They're known as kupuna and kumu in the schools all around the island, from Hanalei to Kekaha.

**Did you go to school?**

No; it's all been on-the-job training. I mean, I picked up classes here and there. Like, I took evening classes in olelo Hawaii, in the language. So, at this stage of my life, it's also my objective to pass it on. You know, to share with the next generation, as well.

**You're known for many things; your lauhala weaving.**

Oh, I love lauhala.

**Kapa.**

I love kapa.

**Which is just ...**

I love kapa.

**I mean, you beat the kapa, but it beats you up too; right?**

Really does; it really does. So, that's why when I have a project now, I open it up to anyone who wants to learn.

**So, Sabra Kauka, who at the time of this conversation in 2016 doubles as a Hawaiian studies teacher at Kauai's private Island School in Lihue, and as a public school coordinator of Hawaiian cultural personnel, found her passion and her livelihood in sharing the Hawaiian culture. With her students, she embraces the Hawaiian value of observing silently first; not the Western style of students piping up with questions as they occur.**

As part of my lesson, I always begin with an oli. And there are so many to learn. And then, they go to looking, actually, the lesson itself, what the basis of it is. But at the end of it, I do observations. And my classroom is adjacent to a reservoir, and in that reservoir, we have alae ula, which is endangered; alaekeokeo, the ones with white head; I have aukuu, the heron that come in.

**Those are beautiful.**

And there's fish in there. I mean, you know, it's tilapia; it's not a native fish, and there's bass in there. But they observe, and I have them record what they observed. And they



point out butterflies, dragonflies, birds. We have kolea that come on our campus. So, our campus, we have two or three, four, endangered species that lay their eggs there, nest there. I was always a curious kid, and always observant, and always asking questions; sometimes too much, as a child. 'Cause in a Hawaiian home, you're kinda raised to not be niele, not be too inquisitive, not just ask what, what, why, why, why everything. So, it took me many years to kinda curb that.

### **Why is that, anyway?**

It's polite; it's not being nosy. Don't ask people too many questions. Oh; oh, my god. Okay. When I first came home, I was in a halau with Roselle Kanihonipua Lindsey Bailey; right? So, I'm getting this new chant that we're learning, and I'm asking all these questions. And the answer came back ... don't ask too many questions, the knowledge will be clear to you when you are ready for it. I went, oh, man, this reminds me of my childhood, you know. But she was right, and if you just keep quiet and observe ... in other words, observe, listen.

### **But that was very different from how you were trained in the other areas where you lived and traveled.**

Oh, golly. Oh, yeah. I mean, you know, that's Western world. Western side, and then Hawaiian side. Yeah. It was like, yeah, be inquisitive, ask your questions, da-da-da-da-da.

### **Be proactive; right?**

Be proactive. But this Hawaiian side which is, observe, listen, the answer will come.

### **The knowledge will come to you.**

The knowledge will come to you when you're ready to understand it.

### **How do you teach? Is that how you feel, too?**

Yeah; yeah.

### **You do? You switched?**

No; no, no, no, no, no. Yeah, there are different times in the lesson and different times in the class, there's different techniques. You know. I'm like, Save your questions for the end, or Save your comments, I'll give you time. Yeah. Yeah.

### **You're a person of tradition, and then you're completely open to new ways that don't conflict with your values.**

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I think you have to be. You have to maintain some flexibility, or you're gonna break. You know, someone years ago told me, You gotta do what brings you joy. You know, whether you get paid or not, do what you love. And so, when I

have high school seniors or whatever come to me, and you know, need a letter of recommendation for college, or need advice on their senior projects, that's what I tell 'em, that's what I tell my grandsons. Find out what it is that you love, and follow that path. I certainly have.

**Mahalo a nui loa to Sabra Kauka of Kauai for sharing your stories of keeping Hawaiian culture alive through traditional practices, and inspiring the next generation on Kauai to find their own passions. And big mahalo to you, for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, hui hou.**

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I did a lesson recently on ha, on the breath of life. And I asked the children to tell me what words they knew that have the letters H, A in them. And they were good; they were pretty good. They said, Oh, aloha, mahalo, Hanalei. You know. And then, I had them hold their hands to their mouth like this, and exhale. What does that feel like? Oh, it's warm, it's moist. I said, That is your ha. Then we continued, and I said, Where does it come from? The air, oxygen. I said, Where does that come from? Oh, the trees, the plants. So, they're making these connections. And then, I had them blow bubbles, 'cause they could see it. And it was just a fun lesson; it was a quick and fun lesson. But I think it's important that our children know that they have a place here in Hawaii, that they have a purpose here in Hawaii. And it is my hope that the children that I teach grow up to appreciate the beauty that we have here, the unique communities that we have, the unique cultures, and that they want to come home and take care of the place.

[END]