

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: PHIL ARNONE

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He's been paid to direct and produce Hawaii's number one local newscast, a groundbreaking kids' show, and practically everything in between. Television producer director Phil Arnone, coming up 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. When you think of a television director, especially one who's made his mark working on live broadcasts, you may picture someone who's confident, diligent, dedicated to perfection, and perhaps wound a little tight. Producer director Phil Arnone was all that during his time with KGMB, by far Hawaii's number one television station in the 1970s and 1980s. Arnone's love for Hawaii is evident in the work he did then, and the work he's involved with now, telling the stories of the people and places of Hawaii. This producer, who has so carefully archived the lives of people such as Israel Kamakawiwoole, Eddie Aikau, and Rap Reiplinger, began life an ocean away from Hawaii.

You've spent a lot of time in the Bay Area growing up.

Born and raised in San Francisco. My father was a second generation Italian, and my mother was second generation Norwegian. And as a result, of course, I speak no Italian or Norwegian, and never have any food that isn't American. That was in the era where people that were born elsewhere and moved to America were such patriots immediately, and they didn't really want to talk about their history in the old country, if you will. My father was more outgoing and more Italian. I mean, he was, so he was out there and friendly, and reaching, and approachable. And my mother was a more conservative, quiet person. But it was a good family life. We didn't stay in San Francisco too long. In the end of the sixth grade, we moved to Marin County at the other end of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Marin County; what was your life like as a child after sixth grade?

It was good. I mean, very normal. The town that we lived in, Corte Madera, probably had, I don't know, eighteen hundred people living there. It was quite small. And we walked to school. We'd walk down the railroad track, and then ... grammar school. So, it was pretty normal for me.

Phil Arnone led this normal life through high school, then on to college. In his search for what to do in his life, Arnone looked to the military, which in turn, brought him to Hawaii.

I started off at a junior college at College of Marin in Kentfield, and mostly looking for things to see if I ... something I wanted to do. And I didn't find any. Then, I tried forestry and civil engineering, and took a class in all about religions, and took a business class. I did okay, but it never turned me on, it never excited me.

Did you think, I'll have to get a job and not be especially excited, but I'll do it?

Well, here's what I did. At the end of the two years, I joined the Army. Actually, I volunteered for the draft. There was a draft then. So, they just took your name and put it up on top, and boom, you're in the Army.

Why'd you do that? Because ...

Well, it was between wars, for one.

It was safe?

It was pretty safe; yeah. So, I did that, because I needed a little experience living away from home, and growing up, and seeing how I failed the growing up part, but I did get some experience just living away from home.

Where'd you go?

Well, after all the basic training and then the six-week training or whatever, they said, Well, Phil, it's time for you to go somewhere. You have a choice; you can go to Alaska, or Hawaii. And I said, after waiting a good two or three seconds, I'll go to Hawaii. I'm one of those guys that listened to Hawaii Calls on the radio in California when I was growing up. And they painted a wonderful picture, and I painted another one in my head, so, I thought, well, this is wonderful. So, I was at Schofield Barracks for about a year and a half. We're talking about the late 50s. So ...

Soon after statehood.

When I got off the plane for my first time here, it was on the other side of the airport, Lagoon Drive. You walked down the stairs, there was no ramp coming up to you, and they give you the fresh pineapple juice. I mean it lived up to what I'd heard, certainly, and I loved it a lot.

Did you get to know local people very much when you were at Schofield?

No. I really didn't, because I was at Schofield, or I was at Waikiki. I might have met a few people locally at the beach, but not out at Schofield Barracks.

So, thanks to the U.S. Army, Phil Arnone was able to get that experience of living away from home, in the place that he would later call home, Hawaii. But he still needed to find a career. He left the military and went back to San Francisco, where he continued his college education.

When it was time to get out ...

After one hitch?

Yeah; one hitch, which was really only a year and a half. They let you out early if you were going to school. So, I was going to go to San Francisco State, so they have a new student orientation that you have to go to, regardless of whether you're going as a freshman or a junior, as I was going to do. And at the end of that, they said, Well, now, if you'll all stand up, it's time for you to go to your major advisor. I said, Oh, major advisor. Hm; wonder what that's gonna be. So, I walked out of the auditorium, and I looked up, and the first sign on the left said, Radio-TV. And I went, Uh, let's try that.

Really?

Yeah.

Randomly?

And I did; I walked in, and I loved the people, I loved the work. And I went, God, this is fun, I really like this. I thought, well, maybe I'll be on radio. I could do that. And then, at one point, there was a fieldtrip to a television station, where they were doing a local Dick Clark dance party kind of show. So, I went in the control room, and I watched the director standing up, listening to the music, calling the shots. I said, Now I know what I want to do.

Do you remember how many cameras the director had?

He had two.

Only two? Okay.

Yeah; black and white. And the turrets on the end. I mean, this is in the, what was it, the late 50s, early 60s. Yeah; it was early 60s. Well, that was in San Francisco, the CBS affiliate. And then, I got a job there.

But they don't just let you be a director all at once; right?

No; I wasn't directing. I started in the film department as an editor. But in those days, what that meant was, all the movies were on film, and you had to cut them to fit the commercials in without destroying the storyline. So, did that for a while, and then, I got the job I wanted, which was to be a stage manager. So, I was stage manager for the rest of my stay there.

You were bringing people in and out to appear on programs?

Well, yeah, you're calling, you're cueing people. You know, it's like doing a newscast, and you're on the floor, and you're telling them when they're on, and counting back from commercial.

You were doing a lot of live television, then.

It was almost all live. I don't remember hardly ever taping anything. Dance party show that I saw earlier, I did direct some of those episodes.

Despite directing a few episodes of the dance party show at KPIX in San Francisco, Phil Arnone was still considered a stage manager. Being a director was really what he wanted to do, so he moved back to Hawaii, where he had no job lined up, no connections, and no knowledge of what the television industry was like here, and where he teamed up with a man who would become Hawaii's dominant television anchor of the 1970s.

I came to Hawaii, because I'd been here in the Army, and thought, Hey ... maybe they'll have a job for me.

So, I would have thought your best job prospects would be in San Francisco.

Well, they weren't.

They weren't; okay.

And Hawaii seemed nice. I mean, you know, when you're young, you do things that may not make a lot of sense sometimes. And maybe that was one of them. But when I got here, at least I had like three years of experience at the television station in San Francisco, so it looked like, hey, this kid knows something, he knows something about television.

Did you know anything about the television industry here?

No; not really.

So, what did you go about doing as soon as you arrived?

I went to all the stations and left resumes, and almost immediately, I started working at Channel 2, which was KONA then, I think, KONA-TV. And I was doing a little switching, audio, camera stuff, editing film things. Things that I wasn't actually terribly skilled at. And then, when a directing job opened up at Channel 4, I went over there, and I was there for three years. That's when I met Bob Sevey. He was the PanAm News anchor. Bob was one of the guys that I certainly learned a lot from, just watching him work on camera, how he handled himself. And Bob was the same guy on camera, or off camera; a wonderful man.

He had this great gravitas that didn't get thrown off by untoward events that happened during newscasts, like a tripod falling down, or somebody walking into the studio not aware that you're on live television.

Yeah; he could handle the worst situation.

What did a director at that time do?

Ah. The main thing that I did was, directed all of Bob Sevey's Pan American Newscasts. Directing meaning, I had a script in the control room, and give the commands to roll in tape, and when to go to it, and when to go to this, or that, or whatever the graphic might be, and go to commercial.

So, on your end, it wasn't just following a list of commands in your head or on the script. Sometimes tape comes in late, or things happen, and you're always on the fly as far as adjusting. And when Bob Sevey is gonna drop things, you make that happen; right?

There's an energy that is created when you're delivering the news, when you know it's live, and you know it's just happening, and everybody's breathing hard and excited.

And you're waiting for the last information, or the last film clip to come in.

And people to come out and hand you a page of script, or a new bulletin has come in, or somebody has just died that we need to talk about. All of that happens, so it can be very exciting, and it can be very stressful. We try not to make it too stressful.

The career that Phil Arnone had been working towards, that of a television director, had finally been realized. Arnone soon earned a reputation as a producer and director who accepted no less than perfection from himself, and from the people with whom he worked. Bob Sevey picked you when he switched stations, I take it.

Well, he was hired by Cec to run the news department. And within what seemed like a couple of weeks, the director that Cec had hired had a heart attack in the control room, passed away.

At Channel 9.

At Channel 9. So, Bob had suggested to Cec that I could come over and do that job.

You and I worked in the same television station, in the Bob Sevey days.

Yes.

**And you could be one of two things. You could be steely, and scary.
Or you could be staccato sharp, and scary.**

Ah ...

But scary was pretty much the defining approach.

Yeah.

I mean, you were a no-tolerance, perfection director. There are others who go, That's okay, no problem, you know, we'll make it back on this next show. You; no prisoners, take no prisoners. What do you mean by that?

Well, but you're right. I mean, I tried to have the perfect show. But I think every director wants that. It's not like they don't want it. And what you have to do is, if there's a mistake made that's on the air already, nothing you can do about it, you need to talk to that person after the show about what happened.

Yes. Your conversations with people about this are very memorable. To them.

Well, sometimes, I would open up the microphone from the control room that went into the newsroom on a PA system kinda thing, and tell somebody right after they made a boo-boo that it wasn't nice, don't do that again, please. In a different choice of words, perhaps.

Were you looking for something that would work, because you wanted that perfect newscast?

Oh, yeah. I mean, that was the job. We didn't want to see a lot of blank screen or ... lot of things catching people unawares. We can't do that.

Were you as hard on yourself when you made a mistake?

I'd like to think so. I've changed, I've grown up a little bit. I realize that perhaps ... saying certain things doesn't really help you in the long run.

Phil Arnone was in the right place, at the right time. Under owner Cec Heftel, KGMB was the market powerhouse in local news and entertainment in the 1970s. In addition to directing the top-rated Channel 9 News, Arnone also produced and directed live coverage of local sporting events, he created the Hawaiian Moving Company, he produced music specials that featured, amongst others, Cecilio and Kapono, the Peter Moon Band, and Emma Veary. He directed 50th State Wrestling, working with Lord Tally Ho Blears, Gentleman Ed Francis, and Handsome Johnny Berand. And there was also a kids' show, one that even today is still very fondly remembered by many Hawaii residents.

When I started, the infamous Checkers and Pogo Show was either just starting or about to start. And the show was successful almost from the very beginning, 'cause Cec was looking for something that kids would want to watch, but also advertisers would want to be in with kids' products.

Did you direct the Checkers and Pogo Show?

I may have directed an episode or two along the way, but I was more the producer. I do remember one of the infamous episodes where—you know, there was a lot of pie-throwing on that show. When they were desperate for someone to hit with a pie, I would put on a coat and tie, because it was much more fun to hit a guy with a pie if he was dressed up. And they called me management, if you will. So, I would walk out there, and demand that they give me that pie. I don't want say it, of course. And the kids are screaming, Yeah, give him a pie! Okay. This is good. Watch this.

You had a huge local audience. I still run into adults who are now maybe collecting social security, and they just can't believe how much fun it was being on that live television show as a kid.

There was the penny jar that they could stick their hand into. There were funny-faces. I don't know if you remember that, but that was a chance for kids to make a face, and it was okay to do that.

Different vibe. It was a station that kind of did what it wanted, and was very successful at reading what the audience was willing and happy to watch at the time.

You know, free-for-all was a big part of what Cec did, on radio and television at the same time, which was giving away money. And he always said, If you're giving away money, people will watch or listen to the radio. I mean, he went right to the base core of, this will work.

We're talking about the fun and the games, and the money giveaway, but the newscasts were sacrosanct. Bob Sevey didn't tolerate any funny business.

No, he didn't. But Cec totally kept his hands off the news department. He hired Bob, and Bob made the decisions about hiring people, and what the newscast was gonna look like, and be like. And so, Cec was certainly smart enough to realize that he can't be commanding every inch of the station, and Bob knows what he's doing. So ... yeah.

And you did both. You could go crazy, and you could go very serious.

I was ... yeah.

Were you as intolerant of mistakes on the Checkers and Pogo Show, as you were on the news?

Yeah. Well, no, probably not to the same degree. I mean, the news is a serious show that needed to be handled in a certain way, and look professional. You could look goofy and make a mistake on Checkers and Pogo, and no one would know it was a mistake. You know, we'd just go, That's fine, get another pie ready.

While Phil Arnone's passion for television brought him professional success, he acknowledges that the same passion can consume so that you sometimes forget the more important things. And he considers that a factor in the in the end of his first marriage. But sometimes, work can also create social opportunities. Arnone met his current wife while he was producing a show at KGMB.

That's an interesting story. We were doing a Bingo show. It was a short-lived ... or is it lived? Short-lived show. It was an experiment, and Karen Keawehawaii and ...

Kirk Matthews.

Kirk Matthews were the two hosts. And Michelle came down with a friend, a girlfriend, to watch the show. And I was looking at people on the camera in the control room, and ... and there she was. And I went ... I need to go out and talk to her. I think it's important. You know, she's new in the studio, needs ...

Needs help.

--a friendly face, and ... that kinda stuff. So, that was pretty much it. You know, at the moment, we kinda left it that way, and then I saw her at some other gathering, and I think I got her phone number. But we did go out on a date. I think we went to Hy's, where Michelle says I interviewed her. I think she actually said, third degree, as opposed to interview. But that was interesting. But anyway, that was the first date, and then we went on from there. So, I mean, Michelle is my best friend. I can talk to her about anything, and vice versa. And she's a joy. I'm so lucky to have her in my life. I really am.

And you have a blended family, although the kids didn't grow up together; right?

No; because yeah, the age difference is considerable. But yeah, Michelle's daughters and my daughters, obviously, we're all happy. We don't spend a lot of time all together, because people are living all over the country. But yeah, her daughters, as I think I've mentioned, they're really very bright kids, and have done well for themselves. And Tony, my son, is a professor at University of Iowa, a cellist and has a couple of CDs out, actually.

In 1989, after working in Hawaii for twenty-six years, Phil Arnone returned to the Bay Area. As director of local programming at KTVU, he was working in a major market, with major budgets. He was in charge of shows for San Francisco 49ers football and Giants baseball, as well as live coverage of local cultural events such as San Francisco's Chinese New Year Parade. He produced the Orange Bowl Parade for CBS Television. Arnone's career was soaring. But in 2002, it was time to come home, to Hawaii.

How'd you know it was time?

Well, let's see. I was turning sixty-five, and I promised my wife that we would come back at that point. And it was fine. I had no idea what I was gonna do when I got back.

Did you consider retiring?

Well, I thought I was retiring. I thought that's what was happening to me on the plane back. And I go, Well, but you know, I love this, I don't know anything else. Was that a good move? Mm. But it turned out to be a great move.

Rather than retiring, Phil Arnone continued to combine his talents as a producer and director with his love for Hawaii, producing specials about the people and places of our islands.

That is what you found to do in, quote, retirement. How did that happen? You're doing film, after film, after film for Hawaii News Now; local programming.

Well, when I came back, I went around and visited all the stations to see what was going on. And as I got into KGMB, realized that this was in fact their fiftieth anniversary being on the air. So, in talking to ... I can't remember the general manager. It was a woman that was there ... nice lady.

Lynn.

Lynn Mueller?

Yes.

Yeah. And she said, Well, why don't you do this fiftieth anniversary show for us? You know, so that's how it started. And then we went from there to another show, and another show, and another show. The truth is that I've learned so much about Hawaii and about these people, and about the culture, that I never learned when I was here working at KGMB. I mean, we never did shows like this, and I never left that station. I was always in the station doing things. I feel almost like Lou Gehrig when he said, I'm the luckiest man alive, because I'm still doing something that I enjoy at this age, and in this time.

Don Ho, Tom Moffatt, Duke Kahanamoku, Dave Shoji, Jim Nabors, Kapiolani Park, Romance in Hawaii. These are just a few of Hawaii's stories that have been told by Phil Arnone and his team, writer Robert Pennybacker and editor Lawrence Pacheco. At the time of our conversation in the spring of 2016, the seventy-nine-year-old Arnone and his team were working on their twentieth film about the life of local jazz legend, Jimmy Borges. Mahalo to Phil Arnone of Portlock in East 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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I did commercials for a while in the 70s. It was on-camera kind of stuff.

Were you the earnest pitchman?

I was. Well, I wasn't pitching it, but I was very serious. Except the McDonald's spot.

Grand prize, Datsun 280z in either the two or four-seat model, thirty all-expense-paid trips via United Airlines to Boston and Philadelphia, other prizes; a console piano, a sailboat, an outrigger canoe, a refrigerator freezer, six color TVs, two electric typewriters, four stereo music systems, twenty calculators, four tape recorders. Not so bad so far, huh, folks? Twenty solid state radios, six pop-up toasters, ten hairdryers. We're rolling now. One hundred trail bikes, three ten-speed bikes, two surfboards, two cassette tape recorders, hundred record albums, and two all-beef patties, special sauce, cheese, onions ...

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