

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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Both Mom and Dad encouraged me to dream. That you can be a lawyer someday; you can you can go to college; you can do this. That you can. And that you-can attitude I think is what kinda has pervaded, you know, my life and continues to do that, that I can, you can do that, if you want to do that, you can.

As the child of hardworking blue collar immigrant parents from the Philippines, Big Island boy Bryan Andaya took his parents' advice to dream big. These days, Andaya is a role model for other children of immigrant families through his role as chief operating officer of L&L Hawaiian Barbecue, which is well-established in and outside of Hawaii. Bryan Andaya, 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. Bryan Andaya spent his early career as a labor law attorney before being courted by L&L franchise CEO Eddie Flores to be second in command of the growing plate lunch chain known as L&L Drive-Inn and L&L Hawaiian Barbecue. Andaya had no background in the restaurant business, but his love for all things Hawaii and his ability to relate to people led to his success. As the only child of divorced parents who worked long hours, Andaya learned to be independent at an early age in the plantation communities of Honokaa and Hilo on Hawaii Island.

So, I was born in Honokaa, Hawaii, on the Big Island. My parents were both from the Philippines. My dad was from Narvacan, Ilocos Norte, for people who are familiar. And my mom was from Paoay, Iloclo Norte. And my dad immigrated here when he was ... it was 1946. So, he was much older than my mom. I think there might have been a thirty-year spread between them.

Did she come later?

She came later. He worked on the plantations.

Doing what; what was his job?

I think it was just general labor. So, I know the last job he had was riding around in a truck and planting, and then, you know, I don't know, what do you call that? Throwing seeds out of the truck so that the cane would grow.

He was there for the closure of Hamakua Sugar Company.

He was; and I still remember that.

It wasn't just a job, it was way of life that was lost.

It was. You know, it was tough. And fortunately, by then, we were sort of in transition. My parents were divorced by then. And so, my dad was by himself, and so, I handled a lot of his affairs. So, I kinda knew, and I kinda saw it coming.

You handled his affairs when you were in seventh grade or so?

Yeah. You know, I was kinda forced to, because there was really no one else to do it.

For example?

So his paychecks; I would collect his paychecks, and go to the bank for him. If there were bills to pay, I'd sort of try to handle some of that.

Was there a language difficulty with him? Is that why?

Oh, there was; there was. So, he spoke mostly Ilocano.

Do you speak Ilocano?

I do, actually.

So, he depended on you for your language and other ability from a young age. And so, he never really learned to communicate in English?

Yeah; I would say, yes. He could communicate on a very basic level. But things like, you know, even like balancing a checkbook. And back then, it was mostly cash anyway, but, yeah, things like that. Like, he would need help for even reading documents, or what a document meant. And I think perhaps that's one of the factors that influenced me to get a law degree and become an attorney.

I notice in reading your bio, your mom was a waitress at the big Chinese restaurant in Hilo.

Yes, yes, yes.

Where everybody goes.

Yeah; yeah.

And so, that meant she always had money in her pocket, right, because she got tips.

Yeah. You know, I mean ... you know, for ... I'm really grateful for everything my parents have done. I mean, my mom, she worked three jobs to make ends meet. I mean, at that point, it was just she and I at that point. I mean, my dad, of course, helped, but I lived with my mom, and you know, I was with my mom, and it was very, very difficult for her. And she even helped my grandpa immigrate, who then helped all my uncles and aunties come over from the Philippines and immigrate from the Philippines. And that was all as I was growing up, and that was all during the divorce, and all of that. So, she really worked hard for that. So, yeah, one of her jobs was at Sun Sun Lau as a waitress at night.

What else did she do?

She worked at Big Island Candies, during the day. And this was before Big Island Candies was a big hit. That was before—I don't even remember them having the shortbread.

So, she had a day job and a night job.

Day job, night job.

And you were home alone.

Oh, yeah. So, I'd be home alone, so again, you know, it's that independence.

M-hm.

When my grandfather finally came from the Philippines, then finally, I had someone to watch me. But for me, it was more like a buddy. I had someone to talk to. Except, he didn't speak any English.

That's when you learned—

That's when I learned Ilocano. I mean, talk about immersion, you know. It was either sit in silence, or learn how to communicate.

And you mentioned your mom had a third job?

Yeah. Once in a while, she'd like do odd jobs here and there on the weekends, you know.

Wow.

So, I know at one point, she was working at the macadamia nut factory, Mauna Loa Macadamias.

So, you were on good terms, as the child of divorce, with Dad and Mom.

From my perspective, I don't think there's ever good terms. I wouldn't say it was an ugly divorce, but it definitely wasn't pleasant. I'm not blaming my parents for this, but you have to choose, you know. I felt like I had to choose; I had to choose my mom or my dad.

You were the only child, too.

And I was the only child. And I think there was animosity between of course Mom and Dad, but also the families. So, I'm really close with my mom's side. And it really was one of the tougher things that I had to deal with as a kid. I think it really had a profound effect on some of the choices I made, and what I had to do. And you know, as a father and a husband now, I definitely think about that all the time, and it really shapes my attitude towards marriage and family.

Later in his legal career, Bryan Andaya would use that ability to deal with conflict and balance priorities. At the time, he continued to split his time with both parents, but lived primarily with his mother in Hilo, Hawaii. Despite little parental supervision, young Bryan excelled in school.

So, I did very well. You know, in intermediate school, high school, I think early on in high school, ninth, tenth grade, I did quite well. I was on the honor roll, things like that. I was looking at colleges. And then, you know, I think the hormones hit. And you know, okay, I'm a teenager, and you know, I started hanging around friends. You know, different friends, and we did different things, and ... my grades suffered as a result.

So, right at the time you're applying for college, you grades were slipping?

Right before that, too. So, my choices in terms of colleges and where I went to school were very limited.

Well, where'd you go?

I went to Portland State University. So, it's in Portland, Oregon. I had a choice to go to the UH, UH Manoa; so they actually accepted me. And I wanted to go there, but I thought to myself, if I go there, I'll have my friends, you know, and they were a big part of my life at that point. I said, you know, I don't know how it's gonna be. I don't know how it's gonna be going to UH Manoa, and you know, you hear about all of the different parties, you know, which I loved, you know.

So, you were trying to protect yourself from the parties.

Yeah; so I said, I better go somewhere, where I don't know anyone.

How was that?

It was tough. It was horrible. It was miserable. For the first couple of months, it was miserable. I didn't know a single soul in Oregon. Not a single soul. The homesickness never went away. Never, ever went away, even when I prospered, so to speak, as a student and made friends. I still have, you friends and will have lifelong friends from college and law school.

But the friends didn't take the homesickness away. How did you handle it?

So, like I mentioned, I just did everything I could to be as close to home, to have Hawaii close to me as much as possible.

How'd you do that?

So, well, at first, remember, I don't know a soul; right? So, I'd walk around, you know. I was like, hey, I think she looks like she's from Hawaii. I was like, Hey, are you from Hawaii, by any chance? And you know, sometimes it's like, No, no, no, I'm from California, or whatever. And I was like, Oh, okay. And finally, I finally bumped into a bunch of, you know, Hawaii people, and instantly became friends with them. And same thing. So, that was one way I coped. Another way you cope is, you read the news. And I don't know if this made it worse, but you read the news. I think the internet was first starting, and so, you could actually go online and get, you know, Honolulu Advertiser, or whatever it was called back then.

Mostly funny.

Yeah. And read, you know, and read the news online. Do stuff like that, or sometimes, I'd just go to the library and just, you know, look up Hawaii books, and read about Hawaii, and really started to embrace things that I never really embraced before. Like

Hawaiian music; never liked it, never listened to it. But I remember, you know, the first time I heard, um, C&K and Kalapana, that was it.

While attending college in Portland, Oregon, Bryan Andaya's newfound appreciation for all things Hawaii would motivate him to reboot the school's Hawaii Club. And years later, his love of the culture would inspire him to perform on the ultimate Hawaiian stage.

And finally, we got this club going. So, we revived it, and we decided to have a luau. Okay; so we need entertainment for the luau. What's gonna be the entertainment? Oh, well, the other schools, they've got the students dancing. I'm like, Dancing? Oh; okay. And it was very small; there was like maybe twenty of us, so we were the entertainment. And fortunately, someone knew how to do the hula, so they kinda taught us, you know. And of course, I'm kinda embarrassed. I hope nobody has it on film or anything like that. That would be terrible. But I remember, yeah, we put on the luau and I danced, you know, couple of numbers. And then, I was going home that summer, and I said, I am going to take it up, I'm gonna take up the real hula from a real kumu, and be part of a halau. And I did that. So, I went back to Hilo. I had to work during the summer. But I also joined a halau, Kahikilaulani; Ray Fonseca was my kumu. I did that for the summer. Really liked it.

So, you made your way to the stage of Merrie Monarch?

Okay; so you just keep going for the summer, just keep going for the summer. And then, finally, after law school—so this is a few years now, I got a clerkship with Judge Amano. So, was gonna be there for a year. I don't know how I did it, because Judge Amano required a lot of hours to be put in, but somehow, I did it, and it was one of the most fulfilling accomplishments I've ever had.

What did you dance to; what song?

Kamapuaa was our chant.

Which is the pig.

Which is the pig god. And I hope I'm not oversimplifying it. But yeah, that was our chant. I think there were five or seven of us.

So, that was hula kahiko, the ancient hula.

Hula kahiko; and we placed third. The kahiko, placed third; and overall third. And you know, that was great.

That's a great accomplishment.

Yeah, it was. You know, for a very short time like that, you know. Nobody thought I could; I didn't think I could do it. But there I was, you know, Merrie Monarch night.

And it was all because you were homesick in Portland, to begin with.

Yeah; it was all because I was homesick in Portland, you know. And I'm not Hawaiian, you know, ethnically speaking, but definitely Hawaiian at heart. And yeah, I was just so proud to be on that stage and represent the Hawaiian culture, and be part of the culture.

What about the Filipino culture; what does that mean to you?

Okay. So, that came later. And yeah, that was tough; that was also tough for me. You know, growing up in grade school, I don't remember a lot of Filipinos in my school. I'm sure there were, but you know, I just don't remember. Or maybe there were, but they were immigrants that had just emigrated from the Philippines. So, it was a little different.

M-hm.

And then, I remember back then, it was okay to make all these jokes and, you know, put people down. You know, it was tough for me, 'cause growing up, you know, I wanted to fit in. And you know, I really didn't have the confidence or the knowledge then that, hey, you know, you gotta be proud of who you really are, and you gotta represent your culture, your heritage. And nobody's taught me that; nobody teaches you that kinda stuff. You know, definitely, I didn't get that at home.

M-hm.

It wasn't until I started my term with Justice Ramil, who is also Filipino. So, he introduced me to different organizations, and introducing me to um, some successful Filipinos. And Justice Ramil himself was a huge role model. Like, he was this guy ... very similar background ethnically speaking, and you know, as a budding lawyer, that's what you want become, right? You want to become a Supreme Court justice. And so, I was like, Wow, you know. And then, for the first time, I lived on Oahu, and for the first time, there's a Filipino population in enough concentration where you can relate to people.

Bryan Andaya says the world didn't beat a path to his door after he graduated from law school. But after several law clerkships, including one with Hawaii Supreme Court Justice Mario Ramil, Bryan Andaya began practicing law, which led to a fortuitous introduction to Eddie Flores, the CEO of L&L Drive-Inn. The two men hit it off, and the business chemistry would start Andaya down a much different road.

I actually met Eddie because Justice Ramil introduced me to the Filipino Jaycees, and then I happened to meet Eddie at a party. Who said, Hey, you know, What do you do? I said, I'm a lawyer. You know. And you know, I was maybe not even a year in practice; maybe six, seven months in practice.

And what kind of law practice were you—

I was doing labor law.

Labor law; okay.

So, I said, I do labor law. So, he said, Oh, I've got a problem, you know, I'm this, X-Y-Z. I'm like, Oh, yeah, I can help you with that; the answer is this. You know. And I mean, it was an easy one. It wasn't a very tough problem, you know, the way I saw it. But you know, so he did; he sent the cases over, and we disagreed, you know. I said, Well, this is what it is. And he said, No, I disagree, I want a second opinion. And you know, I was a new lawyer, you know. So I said, Yeah, go ahead. And he eventually came back and said, Okay, you're right.

And then, what happened? I mean, how did you make it to COO?

And then, you know, I think that bought a lot of trust. You know, and I'm one that if I'm hired to do a job, I'll do my job. And a lot of times, one of the worst things you can do as a professional is to be a yes person, and just say yes to everything, because you're really doing a disservice to your client, to your organization. And so, I think he kinda knew that, Hey, okay, this guy is gonna be honest with me.

When Eddie asked you to come and join in a leadership position at L&L, that was a wonderful invitation, but it didn't mean you'd be successful. How did you make a success of it?

You know, I knew that it was life-changing. I mean, you know, at first, I was like, Can I practice law on the side? Like, no, you know, you gotta focus on L&L. You know, you can't serve two masters. And then I go, Well, what is COO, what does that do? How do you do that? I don't know anything about being a COO.

And L&L had not had a COO previously?

No.

So, you were the first.

Yes. And I said, I can't cook, I can't be in the kitchen, I'm horrible. What am I supposed to do? So, a lot of it, again, is about figuring it out. Figuring out what a COO role does, and then of course, it has to be specific to that organization.

And his daughter is the CFO.

Yup.

So, you've got family on either side of you.

Yup. And she's the one that's good with spreadsheets and numbers, and everything else. So, I'm really happy that she's around. But no, it's again, figuring out, putting yourself in the shoes of the people who rely on you. So, the people in the office, in our corporate office; what is it they need from my position, from me. The people out in the stores, the franchisees, our clients; what do they need, what is it that I can do to be as useful as I can to them. And all the way down to the employees, the line employees on the cook line, the cashiers; what it is they need, how can I best serve their interest. And really, that takes a little while to figure out. Certainly, one thing I learned from the very beginning is that it's impossible, no matter what your title is, even if you're the owner, if you've got an organization that's got an established culture—corporate culture I'm talking about, you can't just come in overnight and change it.

M-hm. It's interesting, you chose to think about what other people need from you. You could have said, I gotta look at what I need from these people

Oh, absolutely. To be an effective leader, it's not about you. You know, it can't be about you. Because really, it's about the organization that you're serving, or the company that you're serving, or the people, your constituents. It's about them. You've been put in a position, or I've been put in a position to make choices for the best interest of the organization. And I take any leadership role with the same attitude, whether it be for a nonprofit, or my kid's swimming club.

Bryan Andaya's ability to relate to people helped him gain traction in his new role as the Chief Operating Officer of L&L. In 2011, Pacific Business News named him the Young Business Leader of the Year. These days—and this conversation is taking place in 2016—Andaya frequently finds himself in the air and on the road, with nearly two hundred L&Ls to oversee.

Literally, we're from New York, New York State to Malaysia and Indonesia. You know, I would say that's a lot of miles between them. And all in between, up to Alaska, Japan, Philippines.

How many is that; how many stores?

We've got a total of two hundred now.

And what are you aiming for? Is there a goal?

Well, it depends who you ask. But if you ask me, in my position, it's five hundred, one thousand, you know. I mean, I think sky's the limit. You know, I don't think there's any limit or any set goal in terms of we should, okay, it's reach for. Most immediately, I think, because you always have to set a short-term goal, I think most immediately, if we can maybe grow two or three per month, I think that would be great.

That sounds like it's a very intensive job, since you're the chief of operations.

It is very intensive. It's very intensive, but what I like is that because I'm passionate about it, because it's about Hawaii, and because it's about helping immigrants like my family and myself to some extent.

Is that who a lot of the franchisees are?

Yes; yes. Almost every one are immigrants, and a lot of the workers are immigrants.

And not always Filipino immigrants.

No, no; not always Filipino. Actually, in Hawaii, it's mostly, you know, Chinese. There are some Filipino franchisees on the mainland, and Korean and Vietnamese, you know, we've got a whole mix, and Indian. But really, I identify with them, because they're just like my family. They came to America, you know, in search of a better life. And having a business—and that's something I wish I had, you know, early on and something I wish my family had early on—is a means to that. So, to the extent that I can help them achieve their goals and achieve their dreams, I'm really playing out, you know, what I want for my family.

What's your ultimate dream? Or are you living it?

I think I'm living it, but of course, the natural progression would be to become, you know, CEO of L&L, to be able to provide even better for my children and my family, to be able to have freedom at some point, financial freedom so that I can do what I want to do, really, really want to do on my terms. I am very fortunate to be where I'm at, and to be in this place. Number one, I'm home, I'm in Hawaii. And so, there's very little that can go wrong, the way I see it.

Just being here is something I appreciate a lot. I've got a family, I've got my wife and I've got my kids. That's everything. You know, of course, I'm very fortunate I've got Eddie Flores, who has allowed me to pursue this opportunity with L&L. And every day, I wake up, and I know that I can pursue my passion, is really to spread Hawaii, the spirit of aloha throughout the world. And I actually get to do that.

Bryan Andaya continues to spread the Aloha Spirit through the local plate lunch, as well as with his involvement and leadership in community organizations like the Filipino Community Center and the Filipino Chamber of Commerce of Hawaii. He's tied in with political leadership, too. In 2013, U.S. Senator Brian Schatz picked Andaya to serve as one of his five field representatives to help identify the concerns and needs of Hawaii constituents. Mahalo to Bryan Andaya 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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I always like to read Dr. Seuss, and there's a book called, "Oh, the Places You'll Go!" And I read that, and it reminds me of my life.

But I think it's all about marveling at things.

Marveling at things, and it talks about ups and downs. It talks about dreaming, and it talks about dreaming of the places that you want to go, and it's kind of an allusion to the things that you want to have, or things in your life that you wish were part of your life.

[END]