

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: MICK KALBER

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I remember flying in Denver, before I ever shot volcanoes, flying over the City of Denver and looking out, and being very scared, for some reason. But I've never been afraid around a volcano. It's like ... looking into the Gates of Hell. You know, there's just something about that, that's intriguing and mysterious.

Hovering in a helicopter above two thousand-degree molten rock is all in a day's work for Mick Kalber, as he films the epic spectacle of Hawaii Island's Kilauea Volcano. Volcanographer Mick Kalber, 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. For over thirty years, Mick Kalber has been documenting the stunning, destructive, and creative forces of Kilauea Volcano on Hawaii Island through the lens of a video camera. With his VolcanoScapes documentary series, and his Kilauea overflight videos on news and social media, Kalber continues to share one of the longest volcanic eruptions in recent history with people around the world. Mick was born far from the fiery lava fields of Puna; he grew up in the Midwestern United States.

I was born in Peoria, Illinois. My dad was a sportscaster, and actually called the NIT Tournament in New York, and Harry Caray subbed for him when my dad lost his voice. And anyway, I was born there, but only lived there for six months. Never been back there, don't know anything about Peoria. We moved back to Omaha, and I was raised in Omaha 'til I was twelve, and then went to Chicago.

Why did you go to Chicago?

Dad got the job at NBC in Chicago. And so, he went to Chicago and the news was doing poorly. And a man named Alex Dreier was doing the news then, and my father replaced him. And they struggled a little bit the first year, and then they got it together. He was number one, basically, for fifteen years.

And what was his appeal as an anchor, do you think, to viewers?

Oh, he was good-looking, he was no-nonsense, he was believable. And he also at the end of his newscast—and this is his claim to fame, as it were. He did a final funny. So, at the end, it was, And finally ... and then, he'd do the little filler-in. And that was kind of a chance for him to let down his hair and, you know, show a different side of him.

How many kids were there in the family?

My sister and me. My sister's three years younger than I am.

And what was family life like? What wisdom did you learn from your father, your mother, your sister?

My father, I think, taught me honesty. He taught me to work hard. My mom was my saving grace. I mean, I loved my dad; okay? But it was a different kind of relationship. My mother and I were really close, we were really tight. She was funny. You know, she was a kick. One of the things that she did was, The Joke of the Day. And my father at some point said, Enough of Joke of the Day. You know.

Well, he did a finally every day.

Yeah, you're right; you're right. He picked it up in his own way. But my mom was great, and we had a lot of fun. But my dad wasn't around a lot of the time, because he did news. You know, doing news. You know, he would do the five o'clock news and the ten o'clock news, six days a week. You know, so as he said in a speech he gave, that my mother raised us. And she did. And she was wonderful. She was a great mom. You know, a real ... she was a cheerleader. Not literally, but I mean, in our lives, you know, she kept encouraging us and telling us, you know, we can do what. And uh, she's still that way.

Although future volcano videographer Mick Kalber would visit his father's television stations, he says he had no interest at all in following his father's footsteps, or going into the television business.

I wanted to be a doctor when I went to college. That was not gonna happen; I was a horrible student. And I fell into a TV production course, which cross-listed as a speech course and journalism course. And I loved it. You know, they let us direct, and run camera, and produce stories, and shoot. And I thought it was a kick. You know. But I never really got that before then, for some reason. That summer, there was an internship opening in Omaha. I was in Lincoln. A guy named **Mark Catiro**, who my father had hired years before, was now the news director at the same station, KMTV. And so, he was interviewing students for an internship in the summer, and he sees me, and so it was a natural somewhat nepotistic event that he hired me. But when I went to do that job, I did well at it. They hired me part-time, and then eventually, they hired

me fulltime. And I switched over, ended up finishing my college career there. And I was already working in the business, and so, I already knew what I wanted to do, 'cause I was doing it. You know. And it was fun; I really enjoyed it. You know, we were chasing sirens and doing all the things that news guys do, and you know, I was, what, twenty-two or something like that. I was having a ball, you know. And so, I just stuck around doing that for several years.

Did you see it as a career?

No, not really. I mean, yeah, I did, but what happened was, they put me on the noon news. And like I told you, I wasn't very good on the noon news. But I went on vacation after being on the noon news for three or four months, and they took me off the air while I was on vacation.

That's a handy little trick that I notice happens in commercial television.

That was pretty brutal, and it made me angry. But when I came back, I found out the reason they took me—this is 1972, '73, something like that. And I found out the reason they took me off the air was because my hair was too long. Now, they didn't ask me to cut my hair; they just took me off the air. So, maybe there was more to it than that.

While you were gone.

Yeah; while I was gone. But I basically just said, you know, forget this. And I left the news, and I went and did a little professional dinner theater. I did a little acting. And I worked as a night manager at a Jewish delicatessen, and I kinda fooled around. You know, ran off to Colorado, and I worked on cutting down some trees on a ski run, building a ski run. I worked in a lumberyard and pulled lumber on the green chain. And I was twenty-five, and I was, you know, just kind of exploring. And eventually, I got a ski pass, actually, for the year. I'm gonna be a ski bum, and I lasted about a month. And I couldn't find a job, even a janitor job, and just said, You know. So, I went back to Omaha, and I kept going back to Omaha. I don't know what that was all about. You know, probably six times, I went back to Omaha. But actually, there's a soft place in my heart for Omaha, you know. The people are really nice, it's an easy place to live. The weather is brutal. Absolutely brutal; summer, winter, nothing in between a lot of times. But I went back, and did a little construction with a friend of mine, and I met my first wife. And it was like, '73, hippie time, we saw what was happening San Francisco, and we wanted to go to San Francisco. So, she was just getting divorced. She moved to Kansas City, I followed her. We had jobs, we saved what we thought was enough money to go to San Francisco. I think we had seven hundred dollars. And a Camaro and a U-Haul trailer. So, we drove to San Francisco, tied the U-Haul trailer to a telephone pole, and looked for an apartment. And we found a flat in the Mission for two hundred and fifty dollars a month.

Oh, those times have changed.

Yes; within a few years, it was two to three thousand dollars a month. God knows what it is now. But lived there for about a year, had a lot of fun. Sold art on the street. Not drugs; art on the street. And then, settled down in Sacramento and decided to get married. My wife came up pregnant, and so I just thought, What can I do? TV. It's the only thing I know how to do. So, I ended up back in Omaha, oddly, at the same station I'd left before. And it was completely different, of course. And I worked there for a couple of years.

After returning to work in television as a news photographer, Mick Kalber later followed his news director from Omaha, Nebraska to Denver, Colorado. It was there that Mick found his stride in the television business.

Denver was good and bad. It taught me a lot in the business. I went out on a story one time. I was shooting news, and they sent me on a really brutal murder. And I didn't want to be there. And I went ... you know. I called them up; I said, I can't do this, you gotta send somebody else out. And so, they did, and I became a feature photographer. And they had a guy named Ed O'Malley who was doing features, and he was not without talent, but he was difficult to work with because he didn't really have all the chops of the business. But what I got out of it was, he'd let me help him, and I co-produced with him. And I shot, and I edited, and I co-produced, and he would write. But we just did features, and I ended up winning a news photographer of the year award by doing features. Which was hard, 'cause I'm up against the hard news guys.

Right.

And so, we killed it. And I ended up on a show called PM Magazine in Denver, which was Evening Magazine in some markets. It was like the Hawaiian Moving Company; very much like the Hawaiian Moving Company. And it was very successful. We were the number one show on that station. And I had a lot of fun, but I got really burned out on it, 'cause we worked sixty to eighty hours a week. And after three years, I was toast. And I visited a friend down on the Big Island, and I said, Hm, I'm gonna run away. So, my wife and I were separated at the time, and I just basically sold everything I had and packed up a VW bus, and moved to the Big Island. What happened in pretty short order was, I got there in March of '84, and Mauna Loa was erupting. And at some point, Kilauea erupted. It was doing high fountaining eruptions back then, and Kilauea erupted at the same time. And I went, Oh, man, I've gotta get some equipment. And so, I did. I got a camera, and I got a recorder. And back then, it was all separate system, you know. And called up Kent Baker.

At Channel 2.

At Channel 2 and said, I'm here on the Big Island, I'm for real, and I can shoot for you. And lo and behold, one day he called me up and he said, Go get in a helicopter and go shoot the volcano. And I did, and I was totally blown away. Never seen anything like that in my life, coming from Omaha and Denver, and like ... oh, you know, 1,000-foot fountain, 1,200-foot fountain. And it was amazing; absolutely amazing. And I thought to myself at that time; I thought, you know, I'm gonna do something with this at some point, but I couldn't quite nail it down, because it was right when VHS was starting. And there were people at that time that had other videos out that had high fountaining eruptions in them. And I thought, you know, what can I do different from that? But eventually, it created a fissure eruption and made a lava lake down the hill, took a couple houses, and went in the ocean. I said, Now I got a story. You know. So, I knew how to view that, because I'd done PM Magazine. So, I put together a show. That show was my first VolcanoScapes show, Pele's March to the Pacific. It was about a forty-minute show, and took me a while, but it was very well received, and people were snapping 'em up like crazy. You know, initially, we just sold those like crazy, like hotcakes, as they say. You know.

Mick Kalber made it his life's work to film Kilauea Volcano on Hawaii Island. He founded Tropical Visions Video, and released an eight-part VolcanoScapes documentary series. Kalber could often be found hanging off the side of a helicopter to film the 2,000-degree lava flows. But as it turns out, his newfound career was not the greatest threat to his life.

Twenty-two years ago, I came up with throat cancer, squamous cell carcinoma at the base of my tongue. And I was forty-five, and it was, what, 1993. And I went to Chicago, went to University Hospital, Rush Presbyterian, and they treated me, and it was brutal. But they saved my life with chemo and radiation. I lost fifty-five pounds. I thought I was gonna die, not from the cancer, but from the treatment. But I survived. And it took me about eight years to come back as far as I was gonna get back from that. And I was in pretty good shape. I lost all my saliva glands, so that's why I'm drinking water all the time. And my taste buds were altered a little bit. I don't taste sugar, don't taste sweet anymore, 'cause they burned the outside of my tongue with the radiation. And it's a little more difficult to swallow. But other than that, it didn't really affect me so much. But then, last Christmas, I was diagnosed with the same thing. Not a recurrence, but what they think was caused by the radiation I had the first time.

Caused by the radiation?

Yes.

Okay.

And that's unfortunate, but it saved my life the first time, so how can I complain? But this time, they took it out surgically, and it was very quick. I won't say it was very easy, but it was a lot easier than the first time.

Was it at the back of your throat?

Back of my throat, behind the soft palate. And they cut out about a half-dollar size of the back of my palate. But they didn't have to cut all the way through, so they didn't have to reconstruct my throat. But they think they got it.

Having had these threats to your life in terms of coming from inside you, cancer, does it change the way you look at life? Has it changed the way you live?

The first time, it definitely did. The first time, I got a sense of my own mortality. I decided that we're not gonna be here all that long, so if there's something we want to do, we better get it on. You know.

Battling throat cancer is not the only life-threatening challenge that volcano videographer Mick Kalber has overcome. During the 1980s, Kalber struggled with substance addiction.

Yeah; I'm in my thirtieth year of sobriety now. I moved here thirty-two years ago, so I lived here for only about two years before I got into AA. I was lucky, because I found it, and I never went back out. I hit the ground running, and it saved my life. Yeah. Everything was going south. That was part of the reason I moved here, was, I was in Denver, I was drinking, I was using mostly marijuana, got into a little bit of cocaine, which kind of was what brought me to my knees. I probably would still be kind of a high level drunk if it hadn't been for that. But that sped the whole process up, and I found myself in trouble, and I actually went and investigated the program with a friend of mine. A friend of mine's dad was in the program, and I went and talked to him about it. And I said, you know, Am I an alcoholic? And he said, I don't know. And he threw a big book at me, and he said, Read that and find out. And that wasn't what I wanted to hear. I wanted him to say, Yeah, you are or no, you're not, here's what you do, don't worry about it. You know. So, I read the book. And I knew I was an alcoholic. But I wasn't quite ready to stop. But what I did do at that time was, I just pulled a geographic. I visited a friend of mine on the Big Island. I loved the Big Island. And I said, I'm gonna leave here, and you know, get out of Dodge, and go out and have a great life in Hawaii and live on the beach and get healthy, and you know, da-da-da. But my disease came right along with me, before you knew it, I was doing the same old things again. My ex, we were separated at the time. She actually moved out, and we put the kids in school. My kids were in Waldorf at Malamalama School in Paradise Park. And if it hadn't been for that, I probably wouldn't have been able to stay there,

because I was tight with my kids. And just having them during the summer, I don't know if I could have done that. But she moved out here, and the kids went to school there, and we got back together for a little while. It was a disaster. But I did get sober during that time, and I haven't had a drink or a drug other than the medicines prescribed for me for my throat and stuff since then.

It did not save your marriage, though.

No. In fact, after I got sober, my ex was very unhappy.

This is after you divorced, or while you were—

No; while we were still together. You know, I got sober and a couple months after I was sober, she was not happy. And that's not unusual in couples, where one gets into recovery and the other one doesn't. Because addiction and alcoholism is a family disease. It's like a mobile. So, if one person is addicted, then everybody's affected. If they get clean, then everybody's affected. But everybody still has what they had when that person was addicted.

Mick Kalber would remarry in 2001. His second wife, Ann Kalber, is now a producer and collaborator in his company and in his most recent film, VolcanoScapes: Dancing With the Goddess.

You don't advertise yourself as a videographer; you are a ...

Volcanographer. I made that up. You know, that's my own creation, because I think it more aptly describes what I do. You know, I'm not a volcanologist; don't get me wrong. You know. I don't claim to be Jim Kauahikaua or, you know, in that department. But I've been around it long enough, and seen a lot of stuff that I kind of have an insight to it. And, you know, I've made my living basically for the past thirty years, over thirty years, shooting Kilauea Volcano. It's what I do. And so, yeah, I'm a volcanographer. We fly basically wherever we want to, because we're on a media flight, it's a charter flight, and so we can fly at any altitude. And we do; we go down as close as we can to shoot what we shoot.

Have you ever been in danger? Have you really felt danger? 'Cause where you fall is gonna be into fire.

Exactly; and it's two thousand degrees hot liquid rock with—

And auto rotation won't help you.

With jet fuel. You know.

Yeah; that's true.

Jet fuel and hot ...

Yup.

Not a good combo.

You'd go fast.

There was one time when my pilot, John Greenway with Hilo Bay Air, was flying me over Kupaianaha, which was a lava lake in the shape of key. They call it the key vent as well. And we were flying over the neck of the key, which is probably ... eighty or a hundred feet across or something. And he got halfway across it and he stopped; he hovered, because another helicopter was coming in front of him. And it was early on, this was the first three or four years that I'd been flying, and I didn't know anything about air speed at the time. And so, when he hovered, I looked down below me and I went ... Oh, man. You know. If the engine quits, we're toast, you know.

Right.

We're done. And yeah, it scared me. Nothing happened, obviously. When we got across that, I said something to him about that, and he said, Oh, we had thirty knots of air speed, and should anything have happened, I could have auto-rotated down to one side or the other. So, it really wasn't a problem. But I didn't know that. And so, psychologically, you know. And it's unnerving. People who go with us, we fly with the doors off.

M-hm.

'Cause you can't shoot through the window, you know. So, we fly doors off, and go close to it, and there's people who can't do that; they can't fly with us. We also stand. I don't stand on the struts, 'cause then the helicopter would be flying too far down. But when I flew in a Jet Ranger, we would stand on the struts. And so, you're basically standing outside of the helicopter.

And you're tied up; right?

Well, I have a seatbelt on. I don't have a harness on; I don't wear a harness. Seatbelt with a piece of tape around it so it doesn't accidentally come off. You know.

You mean, duct tape?

Well, yeah, if we're taped, yeah, duct tape.

Whoa.

Well, it's not going anywhere. You know. Long as you keep the buckle closed, you know.

Does your wife have any thoughts about this guy who goes up in a chopper all the time next to hot lava?

My first wife, or my second wife?

Second.

I think Annie has acquiesced. You know, she knows that's my life, that's what I do. Does she worry about it? I don't know. You'd have to ask her; she doesn't express that to me. You know, she doesn't say, Yeah, I'm worried about your flying, or you know, yadda-ya. But I think she's confident in what we do, confident in the pilot, confident in me.

And so, all of this time, these thirty years, any time Kilauea could have stopped erupting. I mean, the fact that it's been going on this long is just amazing.

Oh, yeah. It's the longest documented eruption in modern history, or in recorded history.

And you'd be out of a job.

Yeah.

A self-made job.

In a way. I mean, you know, there's two ways of looking at it. You can look at it that as long as it continues to erupt, it continues to be topical, it continues to be on people's minds, and you know, you continue to have interest in it. But as soon as it stops, then nobody can get it anymore.

So, it's a prized commodity.

So, what you have is more valuable, theoretically. But then it can be forgotten, too. So, it's a double-edged sword.

Are you gonna go up as long as you can, as long as the volcano is willing?

Yeah, I guess. I mean, you know, I'm getting to the age where it's not so easy to hike out like I used to. You know, I used to hike out by myself, four or five miles, you know. And if it comes down right now, it's probably gonna be about a five-mile hike to go see it.

And what about hanging out of the helicopter?

Well, that's easy.

No, it is. I mean, uh, flying in a helicopter, we fly for an hour. You know, I can go fly for an hour holding a camera. I love that; that's fun.

At the time of this conversation during the summer of 2016, a new lava flow from Kilauea made its way to the ocean. And Mick Kalber, now cancer-free, set out to document the latest chapter of the 33-year-old eruption. Mick and his wife Ann also were about to move from North Hilo to Leilani Estates that's a subdivision in the Puna District that's directly in the shadow of the active volcano. Mick says he's still humbled and awed by the spirit and energy of the eruption, and remains just as fascinated as he was when he first started filming in 1984. Mahalo to Mick Kalber of Hilo for sharing your story with us. And thank you for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.

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You know, I tell people all the time that if you move to the Big Island, you know, you're dealing with the fire energy, and I don't mean to be esoteric about the whole thing, but there's something about it that, in my opinion, makes things happen. It kinda forces your hand. You know, whatever is going on in your life is gonna come to a head because of the energy that's on that island. And some people can handle it, some people can't.

[END]