

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: JEANNETTE PAULSON HERENIKO

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I used to go to high school crying, with a hand on my hand, where my mother had slapped me. That was me, going to school crying. And on Mother's Day, wondering what they're talking about. But I knew in my heart of hearts—and a lot of it was my faith, my Congregational church believing that something else was waiting for me, and I could do it.

Jeannette Paulson Hereniko first took comfort in storytelling to escape her abusive mother. She continued to tell stories in different mediums, and in her role as founding director of the Hawaii International Film Festival. Jeannette Paulson Hereniko, next, on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawai'i's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Jeannette Paulson Hereniko has spent her entire life sharing and telling stories. Whether it be through children's storytelling, television, stage plays, or film, Hereniko has always known the power of storytelling. Hereniko is best known in Hawai'i as the founding director of the Hawaii International Film Festival, which has become one of the premier film festivals for showcasing Asian and Pacific films. She's also gone on to be a filmmaker in her own right, producing the award-winning film, *The Land Has Eyes*, with her second husband, Vilsoni Hereniko. Jeannette says her childhood years were the hardest days of her life, but they also helped her develop her love of storytelling.

I consider myself an Oregonian because those first nineteen years of my life were very influential. The people there were independent people. They vote a lot; they vote on everything in Oregon. You really had to think. And I like that; I love politics. My father was a fireman, and a labor organizer for public employees. So, I was kind of, on his side, anyway, kind of political at an early age, and very interested in changing society and making it a better place. My mother, now I know, looking back, was mentally ill. But at the time, I didn't know it. And it was a very, very difficult childhood. It was not a happy family.

How did you realize later that she was mentally ill?

I was emotionally and physically abused. You know, I was hit around, and told I was terrible and an awful person. And I really believed it. I escaped a lot, and I escaped in stories, I escaped in making up my own fantasies about life. And I was determined not to live a life like I was brought up. And I think that gave me enormous drive. And like, when I was ten, I had my own radio show.

Ten?

On what radio channel?

On Public Radio.

On Public Radio?

In Portland.

What did you do at ten as a host?

It was called Tots and Teens, and I was a storyteller. And I told stories that I wrote, and I had my sister come and imitate animals to the stories.

I had my girlfriend play the piano. I'd give little reports on the news.

What gave you the confidence to do that?

Well, that's kinda what I'm saying. Because my family was so screwy, I just kind of thought this other life at a very, very early age. I was giving children's sermons in my church. I found people liked that, and I got a lot of feedback that was positive, which I didn't get in my family.

You said your dad gave you inspiration for public affairs.

Right.

What was his role in the household?

Gone and apathetic, and leave it to Mom to do the work. And not terribly supportive. But never mind; he had that fireman outfit, and he came to my school on Fire Prevention Week, and told us the number to call if our house ever caught on fire. And I had a sign when he ran for city council up in my bedroom posted. So, he still inspired me, in spite of being kind of an absent, apathetic father.

Were there other children in the house?

There was my sister. And part of my mother's illness really was to pit us against each other. So, we never did become close. And my sister died at an early age, in her forties, and that's a huge regret that I never was able to be close to her. But on the saving side of all the family stuff, I had an incredible, strong grandmother on my mother's side. And she was from Russia. She was Volga German; she migrated when the Communists came in and took over. They didn't want any Volga Germans. They didn't want any Jews, they didn't want any Volga Germans, didn't want any gays. And so, those people left, if they could. And my grandmother ran away from her family home at eighteen, and somehow made it to Ellis Island, and somehow made it to Seaside, Oregon. And in between, fell in love with another Volga German, Jacob Bartholoma. And uh, they bought cottages, little cottages to rent. That's where my solace was. That's where I spent my summers. My grandmother was a storyteller; she told me all the stories about Russia and German, and she cooked and she loved me. And so, it was in Seaside, Oregon that I really felt nurtured.

While still living in Oregon, Jeannette Paulson Hereniko struggled to make ends meet to put herself through college. At age nineteen, she felt there weren't many career options open to her, so she quickly set her sights on marriage.

So, I worked two jobs, and I went to school. And I thought, what I'd really like to be, you know, is maybe a lawyer, but I can't be a lawyer, there's no women lawyers, and there weren't any women going to law school. So, I'll marry a lawyer. I was very self-determined, so I went to Willamette University to the law school, and stood down at the bottom of the steps and watched the guys come down the steps. And one of them said to me, Hi, stranger. And I remembered he had been a guard at a booth where I was a hostess during the Oregon bicentennial. And three months later, we were married. How's that for a story?

You were consciously looking for a husband?

I was consciously looking for a husband who was an attorney. Yeah.

Wow.

Uh-huh.

But the marriage was not successful.

It was not successful, because we were so entirely different. He was a conservative Baptist Republican, and I was liberal Congregationalist Democrat. But you know, there were good years. There were good years.

You had children together.

We had three beautiful, wonderful children. And we came to Hawaii together, you know, and I learned a lot about business from him. I learned a lot about law from him. And I really was close to his family. It was kind of a substitute family, and they were wonderful. So, not all black and dark.

What was it like breaking into Hawaii, when you didn't know anybody, and probably didn't have jobs either?

So, we moved May 20th. So, May 23rd was my birthday, and I wanted to go to this place called The Sty in Niu Valley.

I've heard of the Sty.

I remember that, in Niu Valley. And we walked into The Sty, and I heard the Sons of Hawai'i play.

M-hm.

And I started bursting into tears; I cried and cried, 'cause the music just—it was Eddie's voice. There was something very deep.

Eddie Kamae.

There was something in his voice so channeling something that touched everything inside my soul, with such storytelling like I'd never heard before. And I just knew this is where I wanted to live forever.

Before relocating to Hawai'i in 1975, Jeannette Paulson Hereniko worked as a professional children's storyteller in Oregon. She even started a storytelling guild and children's festival in Southern Oregon, and hoped to continue telling stories when she reached Hawaii.

Ray Okamoto was his name, and he was in charge of the Artists In Schools Program with the Department of Education. And before I came, he said, We'd like you to be a storyteller with the Artists In Schools Program in Hawai'i. So, I did. But it was part-time, and I needed to work a little more, 'cause my husband was having a difficult time getting a job, even though he was an attorney, just breaking in. But I actually was having a great time. I was going around Waimanalo telling stories and everything. But I needed a little more money, 'cause we had these three kids and everything. So, I went to educational television.

And that's the DOE television.

That's right.

Right.

That's right. Anyway, they hired me as a production assistant, and I worked my way up as a producer and a writer. But I didn't have a college degree. But it was that switch from storytelling, because when I was going around telling stories, there were all these incredible Hawaiians, kupuna. They knew the story, they knew the stories of the aina, and they knew the stories of the history. And that's the kind of stories I love to tell. And I thought, it's like picking flowers in someone else's garden, this isn't right for me to be doing this. But film, that's another way. That's another way to tell stories. And so, I quit being the storyteller in the schools, and devoted my time to educational television. But still, as an independent contractor, 'cause I didn't have a degree.

Jeannette Paulson Hereniko would go on to earn a college degree from Chaminade University in Honolulu. In 1980, she started a new job in public relations at the East West Center, an educational and research institution on the campus of the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Her new job would soon lead her to the creation of Hawai'i's premier cinematic event, the Hawaii International Film Festival.

Where I really wanted to work was the East West Center. And people would say, Well, why? And I said, 'Cause I'm really interested in cross-cultural relations, and I'm really interested in bringing people together from Asia and the Pacific and the United States. Where do we meet, and where do we differ, and how do we negotiate those different. That's always been a real strong interest in those questions. So, when they had an opening in the public relations department for a community relations director, I applied, and I was hired by Everett Kleinjans, who was the president at the time. And he directed me to think of three ideas that would bring the community closer together to the East West Center. And one of the ideas, why don't we create a film festival, and why don't we put the emphasis on Asia and Pacific films, made by Asians and Pacific Islanders, and have some from America. And why don't we have an academic symposium where we talk about the difference and the similarities, and why don't we have it free, and why don't we take it to the neighbor islands, and why don't we take tours all around and show these films with scholars, you know, and talk about these issues. He said, Oh, I just love that idea. You go for it. Of course, I'm not giving you any money, you have no budget, so you go raise the money. And I said, Fine, I like to raise money.

You like to raise money?

I do like to raise money.

You like to ask people for money?

Because here's what I believe, and you know this. You bring people who have money, and a cause that they want, and they're waiting for you, because they want to meet the artists, they want to be part of a bigger vision. I really believe that. And so, I like to put people together, I like to do that. So, I thought, I've got to have Jack Lord be for this, 'cause he's got money and he's got a name. But I didn't know him. So, I talked to Cobey Black, and she introduced me to him, and we just hit it off famously. And he wrote a check; five-oh-oh-oh, you know. First check we got. And then, we gotta have theaters, so who owns the theaters. The person in town was Art Gordon. Do you know Art?

Remember him.

One of the most wonderful men I've ever met in my life. And I went to him and explained this idea, that we had this theme of when strangers meet, and we wanted to have Asian films. And he said, You know what, it's free, and you're gonna have Asian films. And he loved Asian films, particularly Japanese films, which he'd shown a lot. He says, I'm giving you the Varsity Theater. So, that's how we got it started, until six months in, a new president come to the Center. He didn't like the idea of a film festival, at all, and asked me to stop.

This must be Victor Li.

Yeah; it was Victor Li, Victor Hao Li. But he really did not believe that the East West Center, with the mission as he saw it, included anything to do with film.

I see.

And he didn't think anybody in public relations should be creating program, that that should be left to the scholars. So, it was legitimate policy differences. But, you know, it affected my life, 'cause he told me to stop. And I said, You know what, it's too late, 'cause the tickets have been given out. So, he says, Well, just the first one, then. But the first one, the papers called. Maybe you called; I don't know. Where were you? And there were lines around the block, and people were loving the festival. And he called me in the office and presented me with flowers. He said, You did it, this is great. But it's gotta be small, it's gotta be academic, and yeah, just keep it controlled, and you gotta raise all your money outside.

You didn't keep it small and controlled, Jeannette.

Well, maybe that was my fault, you know. And maybe because of my background, I was used to people kind of on my back and telling me, No, no, no, you can't do it. Maybe that's why I did it.

Under the leadership of Jeannette Paulson Hereniko, and with an army of volunteers, the Hawaii International Film Festival grew, and eventually became an independent nonprofit organization, splitting off from the East West Center. Jeannette went through a divorce from her first husband, and tried to find balance in her new role as the festival director, single woman, and mother raising three children.

When one has an abusive parent ... unfortunately, that that sometimes shows up in their own parenting. How was parenting for you?

Great question. You know, again, you have to ask my children. And I still ask them. And it drives them crazy. They say, Oh, Mom, stop asking that. I had three, and one of them was extremely difficult, and she is no longer with us. And you know, maybe there's a gene there; I don't know. It was kind of almost like reliving my mother's story through my daughter. Except my daughter was much more bright and loving, and a wonderful parent herself. But the other two say that I was okay, but I know in reality that I was gone too much, with throwing myself into the film festival, as almost sort of an escape thing. And I regret that; I wish I'd spent more time with them. But they keep assuring me that I was a good mom, so I hope they're right. And they turned out great.

Jeannette Paulson Hereniko poured her passion into growing the Hawaii International Film Festival. After living as a single independent woman for over a decade, Jeannette says she has the Film Festival to thank for introducing her to the man who would become her second husband and soulmate.

We wanted scholars on our jury, and we wanted people from different Asia and Pacific places. And I didn't have a lot of Pacific Islanders that knew a lot about film, so I asked my friend Jean Charlot, who was on the film selection committee with us, Where can I find a Pacific Islander? And he says, Well, you know, there's this student that's getting his PhD from Fiji, and he's at the East West Center, and he's smart, he's written books, he's written all kinds of plays; he'd be great on your jury. He didn't actually say student; he just said this person. So, I thought that he was gonna be an old man after I read his resume. And so we had the jury. And he walked in and I thought, Oh, my, that's an old man.

He was younger than you were; right?

Yeah. He was pretty cute, too. But he was married, so I left my hands off of him. But I made him my friend and put him on my film selection committee; okay? So, when he got divorced, I decided I would fix him up with some of my young girlfriends. Then, he

finally said to me, I'd like to take you to dinner. And I thought, This is really strange. I mean, we've had lunch, we'd gone to meetings, but why would he want to take me to dinner? Oh, he wants to announce that he's gonna marry this woman I'd fixed up. So, we went out to dinner and he says, Before I open this bottle of wine, I want to tell you that I've been in love with you for two years, but you've been so busy with the film festival. I'm imitating him.

And you haven't even noticed. And I thought, Oh, my gosh. So, I said to him—he's a Pacific Islander, and I'm Caucasian. Okay, I can get over that, but I'm much older than you are. And he said to me, I have been in love with women younger than me. Where does it say I can't be in love with someone older than me? I have learned in love, age and race make no difference. Do you think you can do the same? And I thought, Here I am running this film festival, When Strangers Meet, and I haven't dared to think like that. So, I said, Let's give it a try. And that man's name is Vilsoni Hereniko. And a year and a half after that dinner, we were married, and we've been married nineteen years.

And you have very similar interests.

Oh, yeah; we're both storytellers. My my kids say, You finally found someone as crazy as you, Mom.

You know, we're storytellers, we're filmmakers. He's written plays, I'm starting to write plays now.

In 1996, Jeannette Paulson Hereniko decided to walk away from the Hawaii International Film Festival, the organization that she created and to which she gave so much of her personal life.

And why did you choose to quit the film festival?

That's the object of my first show called Wild Wisdom. And it was because my mother, who I've talked about quite a bit in the show got early Alzheimer's. 'Cause it ended that there was a gene from the Volga Germans that my family had, and fifty percent of those people, meaning me, Volga Germans, get early Alzheimer's. I saw it on CNN News one night, and I realized my mother, my grandfather, my sister, and three of my cousins had all died of early Alzheimer's. And I thought, What if I have that gene? So, I called the Alzheimer's Association, and they didn't know, there was no way to test. I thought, Man, I've just been giving my whole life to the film festival, a single woman, I don't even know if I like apples and oranges. I'm quitting, and I'm gonna go around the world, and I'm just gonna enjoy my life, because I might lose my mind. Who knows? And that's why I quit the film festival. But people didn't know that at the time. So, I've been doing that; it was 1981 to '96. So, that was long enough. Fifteen years. So, they

did find out about a test, and I did take the test, and I don't have that gene. I wouldn't marry Vili until I knew that. And he told me; he said to me when we went in to get the results of that test, he said, I don't care if you have it or not, I still want to marry you.

In the year 2000, Jeannette Paulson Hereniko stepped out of her comfort zone as someone who shares and promotes films to someone who creates films. She and her new husband, Vilsoni Hereniko, set out to make their first feature film, The Land Has Eyes, filmed on her spouse's tiny home island of Rotuma, Fiji.

Yeah, we decided to make a feature film together. And he had a film in mind, a script in mind. And we took it to Buddhadev Das Gupta from Calcutta, who was on the jury the same year Vili was on, and a very, very dear friend. And he said, You can't make that film; your first feature film must be your own life. You have to go fishing deep inside and write your own life story. That's your first feature film. And Vili took that advice literally, and he threw that away, and he started writing his own life. And then, he got writer's block, 'cause it was getting very personal. And I said, Change it to a girl. So, Vili became Viki. And we made The Land Has Eyes. We were on the Island of Rotuma for three months to make it.

And you didn't have a big budget, and you had villagers playing roles.

Yeah; it was wonderful.

And it was just very courageous.

Thank you.

It was a gamble; right?

Yeah.

And it's a beautiful movie.

Oh, thank you. Yeah. Well, it was probably the uh, deepest experience. And talk about shattering illusions. That takes the cake; that did it. Because being married to him, and seeing him in Honolulu, and then to go back to his island, which I had not been to, where he's the director and I'm the producer, and living in his family's home. Yeah; it was the most challenging and the most rewarding experience of my life.

You know, I look at my life from where I am now, and I am so satisfied. I'm so happy with my life. I don't think I've ever been happier. And one reason is, a lot of my dreams have been realized. And I'm still dreaming, and I'm still realizing more dreams.

You're still working; right?

I'm still working. But I just wanted to say that the secret has been what Joseph Campbell said. And that's, follow your bliss, follow your passion. I really honestly believe that each one of us has been born with a very special, unique gift, and it's our job in our lifetime to find out what that gift is, and to shine it as bright as we can, to treat it like a precious diamond. And you don't have to do everything. Like, you know, I can't sew, I can't can fruits like so many of my Oregon friends can. But I can tell stories, and I know how to make a movie, and I know how to get things done, and I really love involving other people in projects. That's my little diamond. We each have that diamond, and you've gotta find it and shine it, and give it away.

The film, *The Land Has Eyes*, produced by Jeannette Paulson Hereniko and directed by her husband Vilsoni Hereniko, debuted at Robert Redford's prestigious Sundance Film Festival in 2004, and went on to win Best Film at the Wairoa Maori Film Festival. At the time of this conversation in 2016, Jeannette had been out of the Film Festival spotlight for some years, but she continues to curate and distribute Asian and Pacific films to universities and libraries through a film distribution company called Alexander Street Press; and Jeannette and husband Vilsoni were setting out to make a new short film atop Mauna Kea on Hawai'i Island. Mahalo to Jeannette Paulson Hereniko 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, a hui hou.

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I'm not afraid. When I stand before a crowd, I'm not afraid. Again, maybe it goes back to that childhood. That's my home. Ten years old; you know, I was performing at ten, live audiences as well, and I've just never been afraid. Sometimes, it's harder one-to-one.

[END]