

GUEST: RYAN HIGA

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One of the main things on You Tube you have to do to stay relevant is continuously post. If you stop posting for a long time, people will forget about you.

So now, I'm gonna tell you about this great new product. It's called the TEEHEE Band! Not the teehee band! The TEEHEE Band! Say it like that. Similar products like those magnetic bands claim to help you to fake balance tests! But thanks to the TEEHEE Band, not only does it help you to fake balance but it gives you another fist.

Not so long ago, as a teenager from Waiakea High School in Hilo, Ryan Higa had a lot of fun producing videos and posting them online for his friends to see. He had no idea that this hobby would soon make him a You Tube sensation. In fact, until June of 2011, he held the distinction of being the most subscribed to person on You Tube, and he remains very close to the top. Ryan Higa is 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. In this edition of Long Story Short, we're joined by a young man who is known worldwide for his You Tube videos. If you're of a certain age, you may not have heard of him. But if you're in your late teens or twenties, you most likely recognize him right away. His name is Ryan Higa, and at age fourteen, he discovered his family's camcorder. What he did next would set the stage for his future profession. He videotaped his family events, and found he had a knack for making people laugh. At the time of this conversation in 2011, Ryan Higa turned twenty-one years old, and he's a You Tube sensation with nearly a billion views to his credit and a thriving media enterprise.

How did you become a You Tube phenom?

The reason I started putting videos on You Tube, I actually did it before, when I had a VHS camcorder, and I wanted to show my friends. I didn't want to have to physically bring it to them, so I put it online so they could watch it. And I

didn't know all these thousands of other people would watch it. So, it was by accident, I guess, you could say that.

You thought it was just like a delivery service to your friends.

Yeah. I mean, I just didn't want to have to physically burn a—'cause I'm very bad with technology. I didn't even know how to burn like a DVD. So, to do that, it was a lot of work for me. But once I discovered You Tube, I put it online, and they were just able to watch it.

Tell me about growing up in Hilo.

In Hilo, basically, that's one of the reasons why I started You Tube, is because I mean, there was nothing to do. [CHUCKLE] We went to the movies, we went to the mall. Actually, I guess we went to the mall, 'cause the movies were in the mall, so that's all there was to do. I'm not big on, like, surfing, so a lot of my other friends went, surfing and stuff. But once I discovered how to use a camera, that was my thing, and I just loved it.

How did you discover how to use it? Did you get it for Christmas or something?

The first time I ever used a VHS camcorder was to film a family reunion.

And how old were you?

I must have been sixth grade, so eleven or twelve. How old are you in sixth grade, like eleven?

Yeah; eleven, twelve.

Probably around eleven; yeah. And I was just filming everybody, and then I was really bored, so I started having fun with it. I would put it like on the table, and make like I was an ant, an ant's point of view. And then when we watched it back with the family, they were all laughing. I was like, Oh, this is pretty cool to make people laugh with a video. So from there, I just kept doing it. Originally, all those VHS videos with me and my neighborhood friends, we used to just make those just for my family. 'Cause we'd have like a Sunday dinner, you know, every Sunday a family dinner, and then I would show it at that.

What did the other kids make of you?

I think a lot of people thought I was just really weird, 'cause that's when You Tube wasn't even that relevant to people. Especially I think I started like beginning of high school. They were like, Oh, I would go to like, I used to wrestle and do judo, I used to go to events, and they were like, Eh, you guys are those guys that do the dress up like girls and do lip syncs, right? I think they thought we were a little weird. And then, couple years later, I think they got more used to it, 'cause You Tube started to get big, so ...

And what about your parents; what are they like as parents?

They're great. They're always supportive. From the start, they always supported that. They were like, Well, it's a little weird, but at least you're not doing drugs.

[CHUCKLE] Did they ever tell you, Watch what you do on that video?

My mom at first, she was very like ... especially when I put it on You Tube, 'cause you get all these, hater comments and stuff. She was like, You need to be careful. Because I would get comments like, death threats and all that kinda stuff. Yeah.

What did they want your death for? What set them off?

There's a lot of racist people, people online. 'Cause it's to the world, so you find how people really are. And they're hiding behind a computer, so they can say whatever they want. And that's where you see people who just hate me for no reason. But at the same time, you get people who love me for no reason too, so

...

And from Hilo, as you were delivering these videos to your friends, you inadvertently gained a huge following over years.

Right. I mean, the first time I noticed, I had put up like a bunch of videos, like lip sync videos. That's how I started.

This is your buddies doing lip syncing, and you?

Well, originally, it was just me. And then, yeah, I got friends to do it with me. And then I posted all these lip sync videos. I left it alone for like months, and I didn't even look at it. When I came back, I was like, Why are my friends watching this like five thousand times? There was five thousand views on every video. I was like, it's a little weird. And then I read through all the comments, and they wanted more. So after that, I continued to do it. I just read the comments, and followed what they wanted. Yeah.

When you choose a subject for your You Tube videos—for example, one of my favorites is The Awkward Moment. And you know, it's the kinda thing everybody mentions, but nobody ever kind of puts in a group and gives examples, and—

Right, right, right.

—tells you why it's so awkward. And that's what you did. It goes to something that people think about, but don't talk about as much.

Right, right.

Oh!

Oh, sorry.

Yeah, I was gonna go this way.

I was ...

I was gonna go this way.

Yeah.

Wow.

That's really ...

I'll just keep walking.

Well, it's great seeing you again.

Yeah.

Take care.

See you.

I try to stay really honest with my viewers. And like you said, it's something people always think about, they just don't say. And I try to do that. I just want

to put out content that people can relate to. And everybody has awkward situations, so it was really easy to do.

What are some of your favorite topics? When you decide to make a video, what have been the ones you really embrace the most?

I think a lot of 'em, when I talk to the camera, those are the ones that I'm really like, I feel strongly about something.

Right.

I did one on feminism, and I did one on awkward situations, and stuff like that, and arrogant people. It's stuff that I have an opinion about, and I just try to phrase that to the people.

And it's a rant.

Yeah; it becomes a rant, yeah.

And do you have it written down, or is it all in your head?

I try to write down points, but I don't have like a script or anything. But, yeah, I write down points that I want to make. And at the same time it's tough, because now that I have a bigger following, you have to phrase things in a way that won't offend, try not to offend too many people, but at the same time, still be honest and stick to your opinion.

So you're always refining what you do, based on what you sense the going traffic is.

M-hm; yeah. Yeah. I mean, I read the comments all the time. I have multiple series. I have a series where I do parodies on movies, like the rants, I have music videos. And whatever they're craving, or whatever they want, or whatever they missed, that's what I try to cater to them.

First, we open the fridge, grab the package, open the package. There's no bacon strips in here, no bacon strips in here, no [BLEEP] bacon strips in here. Open the microwave, put it in, close the door, two minutes for ultimate thawing. It's about to get epic up in here, epic up in here, epic, epic, epic up there. Open the door, like a boss. Step down like a boss. Take a gander at the world like a boss, but run off like an assistant. Bear wrestle this bear. Spill some table all over that bear. Mother [BLEEP] Spartan fight. Slipper kick. The game is tied, you're down by three. Last second shot, blocked by yourself. Empty parking lot. No, blocked. Odor, blocked. Run around the block. Running, running out of time, running in slow-mo. Microwave, not much time left. Epic armpit hair. [SCREAMING] Clean up the mess, paper towels for [INDISTINCT].

Ryan Higa listened to his newfound opinionated audience and honed in on what they liked, and what they wanted to hear. This became his winning method for choosing his subject matter.

So, tell us about the numbers. I mean, the sheer number of people who view your videos, who, of all the many, many infinite number of things on the web, they pick your videos. How many?

I'm not too sure exactly what I'm on, but I think in total of all video views, I think I'm almost gonna hit a billion pretty soon. Soon, hopefully.

And since when? When does that ...

It started from '06.

And so far, what's the single largest number of people viewing one video?

I think it's around thirty-something million.

That's amazing. And you think of all the competition for eyeballs.

Right. But at this point, though, because You Tube is so big, thirty million is a lot, definitely a lot, but there's videos out there with five hundred million. Like Justin Bieber's Baby video. I don't care too much about the views. The views will come. I care about the ratings. I care about the favorites, like people that favored it, people that like it. I care about the comments. I just want them to like it. Even if it has less views and it has good ratings, I'll be happy.

And sheer number of hits and favorable comments have brought you to the attention of some Hollywood, would you say, heavyweights?

Yeah. I mean, I got to have a dinner like James Cameron.

Of Titanic.

Yeah, Titanic, Avatar. But he invited us to watch his—well, he didn't direct it, but he was a part of like Sanctum 3D. But yeah, he invited us to a private screening before that came out, and yeah, we had a dinner together. He was just really interested in learning about new media, because, he's always ahead of the game. He was ahead of the game with 3D. He's always one step ahead, and I believe that once people recognize that he's doing that, everybody's gonna follow him. But at this point, I think there's still a lot of mainstream people who still don't really support new media, or respect it that much.

What kind of questions did he ask you?

Pretty much the same questions here. He was just asking about, what is the viewership like, how did you gain such a big following. He had no idea that what's happening was happening on You Tube.

Well, you mentioned you're making a living off it. How do you make a living off You Tube?

You Tube has this partnership program, basically, where you can apply for a partnership, and if your material is clean, and if it has no copyrighted materials, they'll put an ad next to your video. And basically, it's like a CPM, where it's like every so many views, you get like a dollar or something.

What does CPM mean?

I'm not sure. It's like clicks per something, I don't know.

Oh, that makes sense.

Yeah.

So basically, they provide the ad. You don't have to go sell your own advertising.

No, no, no. I mean, if you were to sell your own ads, I'm sure you'd get a lot more. But, You Tube does a really good job getting ads for everyone. All these big companies, I've been approached by like Pepsi, and like Carl's Jr., and they want to put ads in the video itself, like become a branded video.

Product placement.

Yeah, product placement and stuff like that.

And are you open to that?

Yeah. I mean, for me, I turn down a lot more than I think most people. And the only reason is because I did one when I was first starting off, 'cause I thought it was crazy, to get paid for a video. But I did one of those, and I got such a bad response. Because it's like, I could understand why. People don't want to be sold. So I can do a branded video, as long as it fits my content.

I see. So what comes first, the client or the content?

Oh, the content, for sure. For sure. I mean ... all the time, it's always it has to fit my brand. If it's some random thing, I'm not gonna do it.

So you personally are a brand now.

I guess. Yeah, you could say that.

And how would you describe your brand?

I don't know. I mean, I'm just like, I guess, a personality. I try to keep it clean and appeal to a younger demo, I guess.

What about the fellow fourteen-year-olds with you back in Hilo; are they still into You Tube, and are you still their friend?

Oh, I'm definitely friends with them. One of 'em is here, and a couple of 'em are off in Portland, and other colleges. And I mean, they're doing their thing too, but I mean, I would love to get them all together and make something again, just for the people who used to watch us.

And what's YTF, the tee-shirt you're wearing?

YTF, that also started as a joke. We were watching a bunch of Will Smith videos. And like, he's really inspiring, the way he thinks. Like his thoughts are like, you can achieve anything. Because at one point, everything was impossible. Like electricity was impossible at one point. People thought flying in the air in a metal ship was impossible at one point. But YTF basically, we were talking about that, and we were like, Let's start putting that in our videos. We have like little YTF texts everywhere in our videos, if you look past it. And it was just a joke for us to find it in each other's videos. It embodies that same idea that Will Smith puts out, which is yesterday is in the past, today you have a choice, and forever is up to you.

We wish you a Merry Christmas, we wish you a Merry Christmas, we wish you a Merry Christmas, from the YTF crew. Whoo! Happy holidays! Whoo!

I always wanted to be an actor. I always wanted to be an actor, but in my mind, I thought I could never be one, 'cause I was Asian. You never see Asian

stars and stuff. So, I went the traditional route, I went to college for nuclear medicine, and I just hated it.

Why nuclear medicine?

I mean, it makes a lot of money. [CHUCKLE] It makes a lot of money, and I was like, yeah, I mean, I guess it's interesting.

And you just made twenty-one.

Just turned twenty-one; yes.

And you just took a hiatus from University of Nevada at Las Vegas.

Yes; yeah.

Why?

Just because I feel like right now, I have an opportunity, I know it's not gonna last forever, so I want to make the best of it now. And college will always be there.

What are some of the lessons of the business of video making on the web?

Well, the copyrights, for one. That's a big point I learned, I guess. Because we started everything for fun. I did all those lip syncs, so I never worried about like wearing a branded shirt, or using copyrighted music. But once I started getting more views, yeah companies started contacting me and they wanted a piece of the pie.

Because you were bringing in some viewers.

Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

They saw money. They saw dollar signs.

Yeah.

I'm gonna be ranting about something I really don't like. That's liars. I'm not saying I never lie. I've lied before. Who hasn't? There are times when you should lie. I'll give you an example. I was talking to this rather large girl one time, and she said, Ryan, do I look fat? No. I lied.

So you're really trying to be a change agent. You've already been a change agent and showing what you can do from Hilo as a kid. But you've got a lot more change to achieve.

Hopefully; hopefully. I don't even care if it's me. I just want somebody to make these people realize, these studios and stuff, that new media is important, and it's continuously growing. I don't think TV's dead. I don't think it's gonna die. But I definitely think the Internet is gonna become just as big as TV, if not bigger. Because that's where the new generations are coming from, I hardly watch TV anymore. Everything's online. And a lot of kids, thirteen-year-olds now, they only watch online stuff.

Going back to your success at an early age on You Tube. What is the nub, what do you think people related to? I mean, because there are people in DC who've been watching you for years. What do you think attracted them, and kept them watching you?

Well, for me, I just had fun with it, and I think that kinda showed on the videos. We just posted videos for fun. Back in the day, that's what You Tube was, it's like put out a video for fun. Now, it's a little different, where people are trying to be successful, so they do what works, I guess. But back in the day, yeah, we did it for fun, and I think people related to it, and they were like, Oh, that's pretty cool, they're just having a good time, I'll watch it. But yeah, I think that's like how it started off, basically.

And then, you just have to make sure you continue having fun, even though it's a business.

Well, one of the main things on You Tube you have to do to stay relevant is continuously post. If you stop posting for a long time, people will forget about you, you know. There's a lot of people who were huge four or five years ago on You Tube, but they stopped posting for a year, they took a break, say they went to college or did whatever there is, whatever they're doing, and now they're irrelevant on You Tube. So you just have to keep doing it.

Now, do you think you're in the sweet spot, where you're in this vanguard of people establishing commercial careers on You Tube, and in new media, or do you feel like, oh, maybe you're a little early, maybe you know, the big money will really come later?

I honestly don't know. But I'm not complaining right now. But, yeah, I think I got in at a good time. I did get in earlier, and right now is definitely like the best time to get into it in terms of business. I think people are gonna realize how valuable new media is.

They won't be fighting the battles you're fighting.

Yeah; exactly. 'Cause that's what we're going through, that's what we've been doing, and it's slowly changing, and I think it's gonna change. I just have to stay relevant as long as possible.

Do you think the people who are established in other parts of the media are interested, but kind of dismiss you because you're young? Is it hard to really gain an audience and make your point?

I don't think it's too bad, 'cause my audience is younger than I am, even. And I think they find it easier to relate to me, because I am young.

Now that you've lived on the mainland, looking back at your Hilo upbringing, what do you think it gave you?

Growing up in Hilo, for one ... I mean, it's very, very different, because now that I live in LA, and Vegas, mostly Vegas, the people, especially in LA, are very, very different. They will be really, really nice to you, like Hilo people, but in the back of their minds, they're like, Okay, so what can I get out of you? They're trying to get something out of you. Of course, it's not everyone, but there's a lot of people in LA, they just want to be your friend because you have something. If I didn't have this following on You Tube, all these LA people wouldn't look at me twice. But I get hit up all the time in LA for stuff.

And are you good at figuring out who's what?

Yeah. And I think Hilo helped me with that the most, is because everybody there is so—not everybody, but most people there are so genuine. I come back now, even with the following and all that's changed, and they're all still the same people.

They're not trying to get something from you.

Yeah; exactly. Exactly.

You know, in my mind, you're very young, you're twenty-one, you're just at the threshold of adulthood and success, future success. But in You Tube years, maybe you're not considered young.

In You Tube years, I mean, we were there from like—it started in '05, and I started in '06. There's people before me, but a lot of times there's like only one group, I think, that started before me that's still also relevant. But a lot of them just stopped doing it, and I think it's because they were in it too early, so there was no business side of it, so they were not able to continue doing it.

And so, that's your challenge, is you want to stay in it.

Definitely.

And it is a job to stay in it.

Uh-huh. Yeah, 'cause like I was saying earlier, as much as I want to break out into mainstream, it really is just to gain popularity, to bring back to my online following.

You don't see it as—you're not a crossover person.

I could be happy living off online for the rest of my life, even if I don't get that A-list celebrity status or whatever. I just want to keep creating. 'Cause I know that if I go into TV and stuff, it's not gonna be the same, where I can do, the editing, the filming. Whenever I get a vision, I just want to create that vision. In TV and stuff, you can't do that, 'cause it's like a team process. But on You Tube, you can create whatever you want. Well, I mean, the difference between TV and Internet is, when people watch you, they feel like they're friends with you. And I feel the same way. I feel a bigger connection, because I interact with them a lot. I just try to talk to them through Twitter, Facebook, even on You Tube. It's a little harder on You Tube, but I try to stay interactive with them. So if something happens in my life, I'm gonna let them know through a video or something.

And then, you also went to your fans and explained to them about copyright laws.

Right; right, right. Yeah, when my two most popular videos got removed ...

How did they get removed?

Well, these music companies ... I had music in it that was copyrighted, and these music companies just removed my videos. And yeah, they did that on Christmas, and that was their Christmas gift to me, I guess. But they removed my videos, and everybody noticed, 'cause they were my most popular videos, and they were really upset at me for doing that. So I made this video telling them, I didn't remove them, and I kinda wish they didn't do that, and I don't understand why they did that.

You Tube will not last lifelong if all the videos are gone. From a little stupid rule of, all of this happening just ain't cool. I thought it was a place for fun, entertainment for everyone. Now these companies are barging in, tearing up the site like it belongs to them. Threatening You Tube for having their songs? Can't we all just get along? Remove their video left and right, almost everything on their site. If there's just one thing I hate, it's all those mother-beeping copyrights.

I have a friend who's kind of Web guru, and he has all kinds of conversations going on, texting, and Facebook, and Tweeting. And he says, because he has day-to-day contact with people he's never met in his life before, he almost feels like he knows them better than his next door neighbor, or his friend in the office, just because there's more expressing taking place between them. Do you feel that sometimes?

Oh, yeah; for sure, for sure. I think even more so for people following me, they feel like they know me even more so. I wish I could get the same from them, just there's a lot of people. But I do talk to a lot of people I've never even met before, and I feel like I know them. It's a lot easier to talk to each other in texts, you know, even if you're a shy person. Doesn't matter who you are, talking in texts is like, everybody can be open, you know.

And you build trust in people you've never met in your life, and probably never will.

Yeah; exactly, exactly. What has helped me so much is I always do what I've always wanted to do. And I feel like if I stick to that, it'll continue to work out.

You know, I think of all the effort that schools put into Career Day, and guiding students into careers. And I'm thinking, nobody ever talked to you about this.

Yeah. No, not at all. [CHUCKLE], I mean, in the future, I think it's a possibility, though. It's like, Oh, you want to go into You Tube?

Yeah.

I don't know, it's a long shot, but it could be.

You'll have to go back and talk to everybody.

My dream, which would be amazing, is to start like a You Tube school. 'Cause I feel like I could teach people how to build a following on You Tube or on anything, on Twitter, or whatever, but obviously, especially You Tube. But that would be like crazy, 'cause it is like a job now, it's a job opportunity, like a college. It's like acting school. It's like, you learn how to act to do mainstream media. So why isn't there a You Tube school where you can learn how to blog.

Are you worried that You Tube might turn out not to be the number one choice? I mean, after all, we saw My Space kind of fall off.

Exactly; yeah. But the thing which is very comforting to know is that Google bought You Tube. And Google is Google, so there could always be a site that comes up. But again, if you have that fan base, they'll go with you. You'll lose the people who are not true, like the people who don't watch everything.

You'll lose them. But if you have this fan base, and you build that, they'll follow you wherever you go.

And then, yeah, and you take them with you to your new frontiers.

Uh-huh; yeah, yeah. You just have to do what you love, and then you'll be successful.

And you're very lucky that you found what you love early.

Yeah; fortunately, fortunately.

Anyway, the TEEHEE Band does many other things as well. Like help you to read, run, laugh, cry, tickle, giggle, pickle, fly, look your enemies in the eye, and figure out the end of Pi. There's never not nothing that the TEEHEE Band cannot do. For the simple price of TREE.99, all of your wildest dreams could possibly might not come true. You want a dog? TEEHEE! It's there. You want a cat? TEEHEE! It's there. You want another band? TEEHEE! Well, that's another \$3.99. All you have to do is call this number. HigaTV.com. So what are you waiting for? TEEHEE! [CHUCKLE] Ho!

There are no how-to manuals, no college textbooks for the career path that Ryan Higa is forging. This college dropout gets how technologies are merging in a way that promotes community engagement, and offers a whole new world of interactive communication and connection. It's a definite paradigm shift in how people consume information and entertainment, and in the way that businesses are being framed. At age twenty-one in the year 2011, Ryan Higa works hard at creativity and at being a Web presence. Watch this Hilo boy, now living in Las Vegas, as he rides the You Tube wave of the future. For Long Story Short and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit pbshawaii.org.

Ready? Yeah. [CHUCKLE] What? God. I missed again. [LAUGHTER] [INDISTINCT] Ow! Run, run! Aah! Aah! Aah! Okay. It looked good like silhouettes. Tee-hee. [CHUCKLE] The ending. Yeah, yeah.