

GUEST: LAWRENCE TSEU

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Like the old saying goes, you can take a boy out of Kalihi, but you cannot take the Kalihi out of the boy. It's hard to forget the past, where you grew up. It's always gonna be a part of you, even though you're not living there anymore.

He was a resourceful kid on the streets of Kalihi and Chinatown during World War II, and his journey has taken him from poverty to the pinnacle of philanthropy in Hawaii, and beyond. The life of Lawrence Tseu of Honolulu 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, Dr. Lawrence K.W. Tseu is accustomed to being asked for money, and he has a soft spot for those in need because he knows what it's like. He grew up poor during the Depression, started working when he was just nine years old, and eventually rose to become a local titan of philanthropy. Lawrence Tseu once lived with a loving family in what he recalls as a hut on the wrong side of the tracks.**

We know you as a kid from Kalihi, but you actually were not born in Hawaii.

No, I was born in Hong Kong, because my dad is from Hawaii, born and raised in Hawaii. And after college, he went to Hong Kong to try his luck in business, and he met my mother who's from Shanghai, and I was born in Hong Kong. And when I was three years old, we came back to Hawaii.

Now, your father was an educated man with a master's degree.

Yes. Well, he was in the First World War. He volunteered, actually, at seventeen, forged his parents' signature to go to France to fight. And he received three Purple Hearts and participated in seven major campaign battles. So, on his way back on the troop ship, he stopped by in New York and decided he wants to get an education. So, he worked his way through Columbia University, and then got his master's degree from New York University, NYU.

But then, you grew up poor in Kalihi.

Yes.

Could he not get the job he wanted?

Well, here's what happened. When he went to Hong Kong to try his business, he was quite successful, met my mother in Shanghai. And my mother, of course, came from a very wealthy family in Shanghai. The father was the major owner of a large department store called Daisun, who was in competition with Wing On Company in Hong Kong and Shanghai. So they were quite wealthy. When my grandfather passed away, my uncle took over the business kinda, and he wasn't a very good businessperson, so we kinda lost some money. So my dad said, Well, maybe let's go back home and try our luck back in Honolulu.

And how did it go in Honolulu?

Well, when he came back, he started a rattan furniture business, and all of his supplies came from the Philippines. So when the war started, of course, he lost his supplies and his material to make furniture. So at that point, we were quite destitute. No income, no business, and so we just went bankrupt.

And so, what did he do? How did he fight the Depression?

Well, he was an engineer, and so, he went to work for the Navy. And then we kind of built ourselves up again from working for the Navy at Pearl Harbor during the war.

What was life like in Kalihi? What street did you live on? What was your neighborhood like?

The area that I grew up on was considered the poorest area of Kalihi. You had the area below the railroad track, and the area above the railroad track. And the railroad track is actually Nimitz Highway right now. Now, the best area of Kalihi was Kalihi Valley. That was considered the Waiialae Kahala of Kalihi.

And what was it like living there?

Well, we had a small house, just cold running water, and no garages. It was a very simple small, little hut, actually.

Did you play on the street?

Yes. Yeah.

You didn't go to parks or anything?

Oh, no; there wasn't very many parks then. The only place that really had grass was the Bishop Museum. And so, my brothers and I would go to the Bishop Museum every so often, so we can run on the grass to get that good feeling. You know how it feels to run on the—

And how did you get around? How did you get up to Bishop Museum?

Oh, we walked. There was no such thing as a bike, or riding something. We just walked. Everything was walking.

Now, you started working at a very young age, and it wasn't because you were hired, it was because you made your own job. What was that all about?

Well, right after the Pearl Harbor, my mother said, You know what, now's a good time to make money. I said, How? She said, Well, you go shine shoes. I said, But I never shined shoes before, I don't know how it's done. So, I asked my neighbors, to help me make a shoebox from an orange crate. So my brother and I, my older brother, he's just about thirteen months older than I am.

And how old were you?

I was nine and a half, and he was ten and a half. So we managed to somehow make a shoebox, and we went to town to buy polish to shine shoes. Now, we never shined shoes before. We don't have no idea how it's done. [CHUCKLE]

And how did you set the price?

Well, it was ten cents a shine.

Oh; okay. That, you knew; okay.

Yeah, that, I knew.

Well, where did you go to get your customers?

We'd go to town. And at that time, there were a lot of sailors.

Ah ...

See, sailors are the only one that shine their shoes. The soldiers had these boots, so you can't shine the boots. So sailors were mostly ninety-nine percent of our customers.

What was your corner? Did you have a special place?

Yes. The Kalihi bunch was right across the street from Hawaii Theater on Bethel Street. And we used to call that Battle Street, because we had to defend our area.

Was there competition among the Kalihi boys?

No, no.

All friends?

We all helped each other, yeah.

Do you think that says something about the Kalihi neighborhood?

Well, maybe because the poverty and the closeness, we kinda stuck together. So we were the only ones in town that had what you call a gang to protect our area. So, the other shoeshine boys were just stragglers. They'd come and go, and different areas. But we had our set street, and it was very, very lucrative.

Were there other ways to make money, besides shining shoes?

I don't know whether I should ... well—

It sounds like you should. [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE] Well, there was another way that I used to make my money, besides shining shoes and selling papers. These young sailors, they'd come into town, and they want a good time. Prostitution was legalized, and so they would show me, bad pictures and say, Hey, sonny boy, where can I get some of this? I said, Oh, I know where. And they said, Well, take me to the place. I said, Oh, I'm not gonna take you unless you pay me first. They say, What do you mean? I said, Well, you each give me a quarter, and I'll take you folks, and show you.

More than shoe shines.

Yeah. Oh, yeah, I clean up. [CHUCKLE] Some days, I really did well.

And you were how old, now?

Ten years old; I was ten. So, once we arrived at the place, I said, Okay. We called them mates. I said, Okay, mate, here's the situation; this corner is Caucasian. We used to call them *Haoles*. I said, This corner is *Haole* girls, it's ten dollars. Across the street is local girls, but young and pretty, it's five dollars. And I said, on this corner is older local girls, it's two dollars.

Wow.

I used to be the grocery boy for one of the madams. And every Saturday, I would meet her at, I think, about ten o'clock in the morning, and I would go Chinatown shopping with her. And I would carry her bags, and then we would go back to the house of prostitution.

Did your mother know you were doing this?

No, I wouldn't dare tell her.

And how long did you do that? Starting at nine and a half.

Yeah, until the war ended.

And how much of a help was it to your family? Oh, well, what did you with the money? Did it all go to your family?

What I'd usually do was, at the end of the day, I would cash in the coins for dollar bills. And on a good day, on a Saturday, we'd make as much as ten dollars on a good day. So I would cash it all in for dollar bills, and we'd bring it home to my mother. We'd give it to her.

The whole thing?

Everything.

You didn't even go get a soda?

No. In fact, we never ate lunch, when we were shining shoes. We saved as much money as we can. So one day, my mother said, Oh, what did you folks have for lunch? I said, We don't eat lunch. And she said, Why not? We want to save the money. So she gave us a good scolding and said, From now on, you have to go to eat, and you have to eat lunch. So right on Pauahi and Bethel Street was a fountain. The old fashioned fountain where you come up on a stool, and sit and be served on the counter.

Yeah, right. Ice cream floats, and everything.

Yeah, right, right. So what we did was, between my brother and I, I would eat first, because was younger. So we'd order a tuna sandwich and two Cokes.

And you'd have half sandwich each?

Yes.

Oh.

We would split the sandwich. [CHUCKLE]

Because you were saving money.

Yes.

Still.

So I would have my own Coke, and my brother would have half the—I eat half of the sandwich, and then when I'm done, he would hop on the stool and he has his half of the sandwich. [CHUCKLE]

So that ten dollars, how much did that help your family, in the money of that time?

Well, in the early 40s, ten dollars goes a long ways.

I understand you started going to private school, and paying your own tuition?

Yes.

Could that be true?

Yeah.

As a fifth grader?

The tuition then at St. Louis was only hundred fifty dollars a year. And when you shine shoes and make maybe three, four dollars on a weekday, and then maybe seven, eight bucks on a Saturday—

Oh, you were doing it weekdays, too?

Oh, yeah, after school. So that's why John Henry Felix always said, Oh, we make more than our parents.

Was that true, literally?

Well, almost. Yeah, we did make some good money.

Now, he was a Papakolea boy that you kind of took under your wing, your gang joined up with.

Yeah.

And he's your close friend to this day. And he has a PhD, he's been a City Councilman, he's a business magnate.

Yes. He is what I call a success story.

Right about this time, you decided you wanted to be a dentist, at this early age.

Yes, from the age of twelve, I told myself, I want to be a dentist.

Why?

While I was in Puuhale School, all the poorest of the poor were entitled to go to Palama Settlement for their dental work. To be poor, you don't qualify. You gotta really be destitute, practically, almost. So I would get my dental checkup by going to Palama Settlement, see? And one time, I had a very, very passionate, gentle dentist that it was so painless, and caring and careful. That impressed me so much that I said, Someday I want to be a dentist and be like him.

And from that time on, you were used to pretty much taking care of yourself.

Yes. After the war, I got a job as a service station attendant, or a mechanic helper, but I'm always working, since I was nine and a half.

So after you graduated from St. Louis, you had a goal to go to college.

Yeah. Well, I wanted to go to college, but didn't have money, so I joined the service. And so, I joined the Air Force, because I didn't want to dig foxholes. We come from a very patriotic family. My dad, like I said, at seventeen, signed up for World War I. So, when we became of age, he said, You know, freedom is not cheap. There's a price for freedom, and I want all of you boys to go in the service. I don't want to see you guys get drafted. So my oldest brother went in the Navy, my other brother went into the Army, airborne paratrooper, and then my younger brother went into the Marines, and I went into the Air Force.

So you're in the service, and you're earning a GI Bill, right?

Yes. So, the GI Bill I got was seventy-five dollars a month, and if you're married, you had an additional seventy-five dollars. So a hundred fifty dollars, I started college.

You got accepted to dental school after college.

Yes. So of course, in college, I had to work my way through college, because the GI Bill didn't cover all of it. And then she worked as well, yeah?

And did you have kids while you were still in college?

Yes; yes, uh-huh. So when I started dental school, I had two children already.

And dental school, I always think of that as, it's a professional school, and people don't work while they go. But you worked fulltime in dental school.

I had to work. There was no choice. So what I used to do was, school gets through at five, and I would go to school, and reach my workplace at six. So six to twelve every night, and then I get home by one o'clock. And then I would eat my dinner, and study, until six-thirty, and then I'd get up to go to school.

And was the dental training what you hoped it would be? Did you love it?

Because this is something you had decided so long before.

Oh, I enjoyed every minute of dental school. I really enjoyed the challenge, and what I'd learn every day was new, that I graduated tops in my class, in spite of working.

And you went to a very good school, as well.

Yeah. Northwestern, at that time when I applied, was the number one dental school in the country. It was known as the John Hopkins of dental school. Most pre-med students would apply to John Hopkins, most or all pre-dental students want to apply at Northwestern.

So you not only got in, but you were top of class.

Yes. My children would ask me, Hey, Dad, what makes you so motivated? And I would say, I'm tired of being hungry and poor, and people looking down on me, and I want to make something out of myself to escape the stigma of Kalihi.

Now, your kids didn't have that stigma, and presumably, they didn't grow up in Kalihi.

No.

So, do you consider them blessed, or do you think maybe everybody needs to grow up in Kalihi and understand the hardship

Well, that's a very good question. Because I let them know that I grew up in Kalihi, and that it takes a lot of discipline and appreciation to get out of Kalihi, and that what they have now, they should appreciate because they don't have to go through the hardship to learn what I've learned.

But do they have the same motivation you did?

Well, for some reason, they must have, because they all did quite well in their professions.

Have you actually retired? Because it seems like you're at your office a lot, you're still involved. And if you retired, you must have done it fairly recently.

Yes. Well, after my wife passed away, before she passed away, she made me promise her that after she's gone, that I would quit my practice. Because, she feels that even while she was alive, I put so much hours into my practice that without her, probably I might work myself to death. So she said, Okay, Honey, you gotta promise me, when I'm gone, you have to quit your practice and

enjoy life. So, a year ago April, April 1, 2010, I officially completely cut myself off from my practice.

And do you miss it?

I miss my patients. The dental work itself is a source of income, but I miss the interaction with my patients. They were like family. Every six months on their checkup, it's a nice family reunion. I remember their kids, and their accomplishments, and it's kind of a very, very pleasant reunion. And I miss my patients. I love 'em all, and they're really precious to me.

While Lawrence Tseu was busy running his dental practice in Honolulu, a mutual friend introduced him to the woman who would become his second wife. Bo Hing Chan was raised in China, educated in Europe, and lived in Hong Kong. She came to Hawaii to vacation, and to seek business contacts for a jewelry enterprise.

She's the daughter of a famous general and the former governor of Canton. And she came on vacation to Hawaii, and we met through a friend. I never believed in love at first sight. But after I met my wife ... it can happen.

Did she feel that way, too?

Yes, exactly.

She had inherited wealth, and you were self-made.

Most Chinese don't give the money to the daughters; they give it to the sons. A well-to-do Chinese family would send their children to Europe, at that time, to be educated. And that's where my wife went, to Oxford, and University of Paris. But the girls are not deprived of any conveniences or comfort, but they don't inherit money. If they do, it's a very small amount.

But your wife built a fortune?

On her own. She was quite an entrepreneur.

So you had a very close relationship, and she really influenced your thinking about a lot of things.

She's very philanthropic in many ways, so she said, With the money that we have, we should share our blessings; so do continue to help the underprivileged and help the poor. You can't take the money with you anyway, and you can't spend it all, so do some good with it, and help the underprivileged.

Is that something you had been involved in before?

Well, I think I got part of it from my grandfather. Most people don't realize it, but my grandfather, when he came from China to help the Damon family, promote religion to the Chinese, he established the um, Palolo Chinese Home with the Damon Family to help the single Chinese men that had no place to go when they got old. So I think I must have inherited some of that tendencies to help.

I have to say that it's such a blessing to have the money to share with others.

How do you decide who to give to?

Well, my criteria is mostly to help the underprivileged children. But it all started because I was poor myself, and my dad always mentioned, and my parents of

course, mentioned that education is one way to get out of poverty. So I thought, if I can help educate the underprivileged, that would get them out of poverty. Some people inherit wealth, yeah, and they can do well with the money. But if you have an education, to me, that's one way to meet up with the wealthy, to be on an equal level playing field, so to speak.

What other projects have caught your attention?

Healthcare is also important. I'm involved with the American Cancer Society, because my sister and my wife passed away from cancer, so I have special feelings to help the American Cancer Society.

What's the gift you've given—and you've given millions of dollars to charities.

What's the one that's given you the most personal pleasure or pride?

University of Oxford is, I think, one of my greatest accomplishments as far as getting involved with that institution. It was through, of course, John Henry Felix, and of course, my wife got her master's degree from University of Oxford. So that's how there's a tie to Oxford.

Don't you have buildings named after you at the University of Oxford?

The newest building at Harris Manchester College was named after my wife and I because of our contribution to that college.

And you also have contributed to the construction of a medical institute?

Yes, I established the Tseu Medical Institute at University of Oxford to do research in diabetes, AIDS, and cancer.

With the major exception of Oxford University, Dr. Lawrence Tseu tries to put his money to work here in Hawaii. Among the many organizations he supports are the nursing schools at Chaminade University, and the University of Hawaii, the Boy Scouts, his alma mater St. Louis School, and he also sits on a number of nonprofit boards.

Does life look really different to you in retirement? I mean, do you care about really different things?

Not really. Because while in practice, I was also involved in a lot of nonprofit organizations, and when I retired, I just spent more time with the nonprofit organizations. So there's not any difference, really. In fact, I spend more time now, because I have more time to devote to them.

You were married for most of your life, most of your adult life.

Yes.

What's it like being single now?

Well, let's put it this way. I enjoy my independence. I can come and go as I please, I don't have to account to anybody what I do. And that's very comforting.

So it's a good place to be?

Yes, yes. I had a good marriage, and I enjoyed it, and I don't think anybody can replace my wife. So, no use looking. So I'm happy with my present situation. Independent, flexible, and go as I please, and come as I please.

You've talked about the adversity of being poor. Has there been another adversity that you think has shaped you? Because, you know, you learn more from failure than from success, and from hard times than from successful times and happy times.

What affected me most was the death of my family and my loved ones, yeah? My sister, my parents, and my wife. That kind of made me look at life with a different view, that life here is only temporary, so it's better to help others than give, than to receive. So that has been sort of my philosophy in life.

The seed of that philosophy had been planted early on, inspired by a poem that resonated with Dr. Lawrence Tseu, even as a young man with few resources and an abundance of ambition.

My sister gave me a book, a poem book by Kahlil Gibran, who was a very famous poet. And I read through the book, and this one poem caught my eye that I felt was something that I would like to do and follow as a way of life in the future. So I can read it if you don't mind.

I'd love to hear it.

The poem goes like this. I expect to pass through life but once. If therefore, there may be any kindness I can show, or any good thing I can do to any fellow being, let me do it now, and not defer nor neglect it, as I shall not pass this way again. So, I feel that if I'm gonna do something nice, I better do it now, because I may not be able to have the opportunity to do it again.

You've had a long life, but do you feel life is short?

Well when I was shining shoes, it seems like only yesterday. That's how fast life went by.

I suppose, if you enjoy your life, no matter how long you've lived, it's not long enough.

Yes. You still want to do more, and you still want to help more. There's never enough time to finish your objective in life.

Is there something you really need to do, before you pass this way?

Well, I think I've done all that I wanted, and accomplished all that I wanted to accomplish. I'm very satisfied camper.

That's a lot. I don't know how many people can say that.

M-hm. No, I don't regret, and I've done everything that I wanted to do. I wanted to be a dentist, I wanted to be a pilot and fly, and raise a family, and help people, and establish whatever I can to be a Good Samaritan. So, I've accomplished everything I wanted. There's nothing I regret that I have not done.

Wow. So, does that mean you can hit the snooze button?

I can check out any time. [CHUCKLE]

This conversation took place in 2011. In his eighties, Dr. Lawrence Tseu is not slowing down, let alone snoozing. He continues to rise hours before dawn each

day, to keep up his commitments, not only writing checks, but connecting people and doing everything he can to support the educational and charitable causes close to his heart. And the kid from Kalihi has made many trips to support work at the buildings at Oxford University in England, which bear the names of Dr. Lawrence and Bo Hing Tseu. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. *Mahalo* for being with us.

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

My dad gave me a lot of advice, and so did my mom. What I remembered very clearly was what he told me one time. He said, Son, the average person learns from experience, but a wise man learns from experience of others. So when I hear things, and I listen, I would learn from what I hear, then I try to avoid that mistake.