



All the Best Podcast
Episode 20: “Don’t Complain and Don’t Explain”
Featuring White House Aide, Ann Brock

Ann: February 3rd, 1999. Dear Ann, too much time has gone by since that sad day in Jackson but maybe my silence is okay because Barbara wrote to you expressing our condolences. But it really is not okay, for I want you to know that you are in my thoughts a lot these days. I know how much you loved your great mother. It hurts Ann, I will never forget sitting at my mother's bedside watching her fight to breathe. Truly the sadness I felt back then is distant and far away, replaced by thousands of happy memories. The hurt does go away. I hope that soon your sorrow give way to only happy memories of a wonderful woman, your dear mother, whom you loved so much. It will happen, Ann, it really will. And even though late I send you my most sincere condolences. Sincerely G. B., excuse my high-level typing.

George: In the first place, I believe that character is a part of being president.

Barbara: And life really must have joy.

Sam: This is "All The Best", the official podcast of the George and Barbara Bush Foundation. I'm your host, Sam LeBlond, one of their many grandchildren. Here we celebrate the legacy of these two incredible Americans through friends, family, and the foundation. This is "All the Best."

George: I remember something my dad taught me. He said, "Write your mother, serve your country," and he said, "Tell the truth." And I've tried to do that in public life, all through it.

Barbara: You are a human being first. And those human connections with children, with friends, are the most important investment you will ever make.

George: We spend the night before a new world of hope and possibilities for our children, a world we could not have contemplated a few years ago.

Sam: On behalf of our family and the George and Barbara Bush Foundation, this is "All The Best."

Ann Brock moved to Washington, D.C. in 1979 and worked for congressman Sonny Montgomery, who is in the same congressional freshman class as my grandfather, George H. W. Bush. Congressman Montgomery told Ann that his friend was going to be president one day and encouraged her to get on board his campaign, and has worked as the assistant director of presidential appointments and scheduling under Ronald Reagan, the director of scheduling under my grandmother, and as the assistant director of the Bush Presidential Library Foundation. We're so thrilled to have Ann with us today. Ann, welcome to "All The Best."

Ann: Thank you, Sam. I just want to tell you, I absolutely love and adore this podcast. I have listened to all of them and what I love about what you do, I learn something from every single person that you have talked to since the very beginning.

Sam: Ann, I'd love to learn something from you and I like to start with this. The main theme of this podcast is service. We are really enjoying highlighting stories of service involving dear friends and close aides who worked with my grandparents of which you tick both boxes. How did you come to work for my grandmother and serve in the White House?

Ann: Well, it all started when I had my first job in Washington, D.C. with G. V. Sonny Montgomery, Mississippi congressman who served in the Congress with your grandfather, and a very wonderful loving deep friendship began between the two of them. I started with Sonny 1979 and in 1980, and as his scheduler, I was scheduling all those paddleball games at the house gym between the two of them. But Sonny told me that one day his friend was gonna be president, that I needed to get on board as a volunteer. So, I answered phones and I was down at the headquarters in the old apothecary building in Old Town Alexandria, and then the ticket was switched to Reagan Bush. And Sonny said, "Don't worry about it because one day my friend is gonna be president." And I ended up going to the Reagan White House as the assistant director of presidential appointments and scheduling. And I had talked to Sonny about taking that job and he said, "Absolutely, go on and do it and get some experience under your belt of being at the White House.

So I did that. Several years later, I got another opportunity to go to ABC News as the deputy city producer for the Republican convention down in New Orleans. And I talked to Sonny about it as I always do, who was just my mentor and just helped really paved my path. And he said, "Take it." He said, "You need to get some national media experience under your belt because my friend

is now gonna be the nominee to become the president of United States and you need to do this." So, I took Sonny's advice, took the job with ABC News. The inauguration happened, couple of months later I got another call asking if I would want to interview to be director of scheduling for Mrs. Bush at the White House. Picked up the phone, called Sonny, his chorus of, "My friend is gonna be president, you need to get on board" became, "Sonny, your friend is now president, I've got an interview with his wife, would you mind calling Mrs. Bush to put in a good word for me?"

The day came and I went to the White House. I got off the elevator on the second floor of the private residence and your grandmother was waiting for me. And she said, "Well, I just hung up from talking to Sonny Montgomery and it looks like you're hired." I had absolutely no recollection of that entire 45 minutes of talking to her except for what she said at the very beginning and what she said at the very end. We were sitting on the couch, you know, in front of that beautiful Palladian window in that great hall. First thing she said to me was, "I want to do something every day, and I want to make it count." Then I have no idea what happened for the next 45 minutes. And then she ended the meeting by asking me, "Do you have thick skin?" And I just started laughing and said, "Mrs. Bush, I grew up with two older brothers. Yes, ma'am, I have very thick skin." She patted my knee and said, "You will do just fine." And I didn't quite know how to take that and it wasn't until she fired me for the first time that I realized, now I know why I need to have thick skin, I just got fired.

Came to find out after these alligator tears were coming down my cheeks that I was told I was not fired, to just keep on going, don't worry about it, it may happen again but don't get upset. And your grandmother did fire me several times and she actually even fired me about five years before she died. And I just happened to be standing next to her when she realized that something had not gone the way she wanted to. And she just looked at me and said, "Annie, this is not at all what I wanted, you're fired." And I just looked at her, I said, "Mrs. Bush, I don't work for you anymore." And she said, "It doesn't matter, you're still fired." And she walked away. So, that was kind of how I got started.

Sam: Ann, I wanna hear more about Sonny because they were kind of an odd couple, him and my grandfather, Sonny, a lifelong Democrat and my grandfather, obviously a lifelong Republican. Why did they get along so well? And do you have any stories about their great relationship?

Ann: Sonny was man about town in Washington, he was a bachelor and always had some just tall, gorgeous woman on his elbow. And he was a Democrat, yes, but he was also the founder of the Boll Weevils which were the democratic congressman who voted Republican. I think your grandparents just got a kick

out of Sonny because he probably took a different woman every time he went to the VP residence, or the White House, or Camp David. And your grandparents were so wonderful when Sonny's mother died, they essentially adopted him and invited him to their table every Thanksgiving and Christmas and Easter. There was a lovely relationship. When Sonny died, your grandparents were in Maine, they had asked if your grandfather would speak at the funeral and he had said that he didn't think he could really get through talking at the actual memorial service but that he would love to do one of the readings of the lessons at the church service. And your grandmother read his speech and it was just beautiful. Although Sam, I've got to tell you something funny. When I was scheduling that trip, this was post-White House, and I called friends of mine who worked at Viking Appliance, which is in Greenwood, Mississippi and they had a private aircraft and I said, "Would you mind going up to Maine to pick up the Bushes, bring them back to Meridian, Mississippi, where the service was being held and take them back, just do a day trip?" They said, "Absolutely." So, I'm putting the schedule together and getting all the information about with the aircraft. And I guess when President Bush was reading it, he didn't read the whole thing, he just saw Viking and he called me and said, "Annie, is so and so gonna be on the plane?" And I said, "I don't know who that is, sir." "Well, he's the owner of the Minnesota Vikings." I was like, "Sir, this plane is not the Minnesota Viking plane, it's Viking Appliance out of Greenwood, Mississippi." And your grandfather didn't miss a bit, "Oh, I'm really looking forward to being on that aircraft." And then I got a call the morning the plane was supposed to head on up to Maine and said, "Can you make sure that there are some brochures on the plane because Mrs. Bush, you know, Bar wants to do an outdoor grill and I think we may have some other things we want them to take care of while we're here." So, it ended up being a nice little relationship with Viking Appliance. But he was so funny, he thought he was gonna be on the Minnesota Vikings airplane.

Sam: Ann, you mentioned earlier about what it was like to work for Barbara Bush, but I wanna know more. Besides being fired multiple times, which I know you weren't really fired and actually I've heard of other people who have been fired too. I probably could have been fired a couple times as a grandchild, but she also mentioned that she wanted to help somebody every single day. How did you accomplish that?

Ann: You know, your grandmother got over 100 letters of invitations every week. So, we never were at a loss for what she could do, it was almost what can she do? She would host teas, lunches, receptions, go out locally, do domestic travel, do international travel, and she was true to her word and her word to be able to help someone, help an organization, anything that she could do, she was brilliant at that. I remember one time there was a reception for the Episcopal

Diocese that was in Washington. And I got a call from somebody from the social offices said, "Mrs. Bush wants to see you on the state floor." So, I went up there and it turned out she at that moment was talking to the dean of my church, I'm a cradle Episcopalian. And I thought just such a small gesture of her wanting me to get out there to say hello to my dean, small things go a long way. Your grandmother would do something small, she could do something on a large scale.

Sam: They both had a knack for those little special moments they had with everybody, it was amazing.

Ann: Whatever she did was just absolutely perfect, I loved your grandmother.

Sam: By the time she became First Lady, my grandmother was a full-fledged family literacy advocate, as you know, Ann. It actually started when she was the wife of the Vice President and of course, continued long after she left the White House. Ann, can you talk about how she made a difference?

Ann: Oh, she just really put literacy on the forefront and kept it there and always had that fire burning. And you know your grandfather, 1991, signed the National Literacy Act. I mean, how great was that? I love the specific initiative. She partnered with ABC Radio and read stories. She read about 10 stories, but they also had her interact with the characters in the book and then she would also give reading tips. Each little segment was about 30 minutes and it was just perfect for mothers to have for their children, daycare centers, schools, something like that will never ever go out of date.

Sam: You were one of Ganny's many friends and aides who were asked to contribute pearls for the recently released "Pearls of Wisdom" compilation of my grandmother's life lessons.

Ann: We all know who deserves credit. Barbara Bush, we need her voice more than ever. So yes, I wrote the book, sort of, but the real author is her. It's going to be her voice, her heart, her soul you're going to hear in this book. It's going to be her voice you're going to hear right now.

Barbara: One night, I absolutely couldn't sleep and found myself thinking about what I've learned in life sometimes the hard way. Try to find the good in people and not the bad. Isn't it better to make a friend than an enemy? Do not buy what you cannot afford, don't try to live up to your neighbors and be sure you pay people back. And above all, seek God, there is absolutely no downside.

Sam: What pearl did you contribute and why? Was it hard to narrow it down to just one?

Ann: No, it wasn't hard. I thought it would be when Jean first sent out the email to everybody. It was like, gasp, I have no idea, and then all of a sudden I thought, oh my gosh, I know exactly what I've learned from your grandmother. One was, do something every day, and the other one was don't complain and don't explain. I had never heard that before. Actually, this contributed to the first time that I was fired. I had screwed up and the phone on my desk whenever that little red light would go on I knew that it was upstairs. So, I answer the phone and she said, "Annie," and she just blasted me. I can't remember, had something to do with friends from Texas. I started going as a response saying I'm so sorry and I was explaining what had happened. And then I was kind of whining a little bit how these people hadn't been in touch with me and she just said, "Annie, don't complain and don't explain, you're fired." And then she hung up. You know, neither one of your grandparents would ever say goodbye in a telephone conversation. Have you noticed that?

Sam: Yeah.

Ann: They would just hang up.

Sam: Don't complain and don't explain. I like that.

Ann: That was my first time to be fired.

Sam: As a member of the Bush Foundation's Advisory Council, you continued to see and work with my grandparents for the 25 years they were out of office. Can you share some stories from those times?

Ann: When they had the groundbreaking for the library, it was gonna be about an 18 month construction period where your grandfather wanted to go on and have events, and it's like, "Well, sir, there is no library quite yet." So, the first thing he wanted to do, he had this conference called The World Transformed. And he invited all these former heads of state to Colorado Springs at The Broadmoor and had this wonderful conference about the end of the Cold War. And of course, he wanted to have a dinner the night before where people could have fun and be entertained. You know, he didn't like black ties, so it was no black tie, and he brought in Amy Grant to sing. Well, he had the best time with that. He said, "Okay, what are we gonna do next?" So, of course, I don't know why he would ask people because he already knew what he wanted to do. So, then the next year, there was a conference that was hosted by the library, just not at the library because it was still a bunch of dirt, and went to Southern

California where he had a conference on Asia and he had this magician as the entertainment for the night before.

So, that kept him busy for about 18 months before the library was built. And then before library dedication, I was doing a lot of research as to what other presidential libraries had done. And of course, all of them had black tie dinner the night before, either a small one or a big blowout black tie dinner party and I knew, I just knew that was nothing that your grandparents wanted to do. So, I said, "What do you wanna do the night before?" Didn't skip a beat, barbecue. "Let's have a barbecue and I wanna have some entertainment," and entertainment was everything from the pianist, Van Cliburn, to the Oak Ridge Boys, to the chainsaw juggler and a few others stuck in between. The guest list was everyone from former heads of state to former White House resident staff. Their devotion to people who are their friends or have worked for them, it was just unending.

Sam: I'll end with this Ann, and thank you so much for being on the podcast and sharing these stories. And you said that you learn something from other podcasts. I've definitely learned a lot of things today that I'm gonna take away and so thank you for that. I love asking guests this question because my grandparents didn't like to talk about it, and that's legacy. You had a unique perspective working side by side with them through those years. What do you see as their legacy from the presidency?

Ann: I tell you, Sam, you know the life in service of your grandparents, it continues to make a difference through funding, supporting, and creating initiatives through the George Bush School of Government and Public Service, Points of Light Foundation, The Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy. And that is something that will just continue their works for, I just can't imagine, through our lifetimes. And it's just incredible that these two people have made such a difference to this entire world. Their works just go beyond the United States, it's so incredible, and my life today is just one of doing something substantive every day. Try not to complain, and try not to explain, but also I write notes, because that's what your grandparents did. I just saw how wonderful that was to do, you know, my mother always made my brothers and I write thank you notes for Christmas presents and birthday presents, but I lost that. But working for your grandparents, I thought, you know, I'm writing notes and I also read. So, those are four things that are a part of my life that I obtained simply from being part of Bush world, and loving and working for your grandparents.

Sam: Well, and thank you so much for joining us on "All The Best." We're happy to have you and thank you so much for joining us.

Ann: And congratulations on such a successful podcast.

Sam: I'm Sam LeBlonde, reminding you to listen, share, and subscribe to "All The Best" on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and everywhere great podcasts are found. Thank you for joining me as we celebrate "All The Best."

Barbara: Both George and I believe that while the White House is important, the country 's future is in your house, every house all over America.

George: Preparedness, strength, decency, and honor, courage, sacrifice, the willingness to fight, even die for one's country. America, the land of the free and the brave. And God bless the United States of America. The greatest country on the face of the earth.