



All the Best Podcast
Episode 21: “Pursuing the Vision of a More Literate Nation”
Featuring President & CEO of the Barbara Bush Foundation, British Robinson

British: November 9, 1992, "Dear Joan, as George and I make plans to move to Houston January 20th, I wanted to touch base with each of you on the board to share with you my views about the future of the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy. It has always been my firm belief that the mission of the Barbara Bush Foundation was a very important one and I believe this just as strongly today as I did when the foundation was established. It is my great hope that the foundation will continue with energy and commitment and I would hope, if you feel you would like to and are able to, that you will continue to be actively involved as you have been up to now. It is my thought that the foundation will continue to be housed in Washington and will continue its active program of grant-giving, providing useful, relevant publications and whatever additional projects we all deem important for the future. I hope to be personally involved with you and I feel in my heart that the mission of the Barbara Bush Foundation is an important one to continue and to expand upon. You have been extremely generous and helpful in the past with your ideas, your time, your resources, and for this, I am deeply grateful. I look forward to seeing you personally in the very near future. Deep gratitude and all best wishes. Warmly, Barbara."

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 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 stand tonight 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." British A. Robinson currently serves as the president and CEO of the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, which was established by my grandmother, First Lady Barbara Bush in 1989. Prior to joining the Barbara Bush Foundation, British served at the U.S. Department of State as the deputy coordinator and director of private sector engagement for the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief where she was responsible for the U.S. government successful establishment of public and private partnerships at the international, national, and enterprise levels to strengthen HIV and AIDS initiatives. British, welcome to "All the Best."

British: Thank you. Great to be here, Sam.

Sam: So, on October 1st, 2018, you became the president and CEO of the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy. You were selected after a national search and came to the organization with broad experiences in business in the non-profit world. What appealed to you about the job?

British: I have really dedicated my entire life and career to advocating on behalf of the most vulnerable and marginalized in our society and I saw this as an extension of my own professional journey. Like many Americans, I wasn't fully aware of what I call America's silent crisis. I was, quite frankly, stunned and angry at the statistics around low literacy in America today. The more I learned about the issue, the more I felt that it's something that we need to make sure is on the hearts and minds of all Americans and I truly believe that it's one of our great solvable problems of our time. What also drew me to the position, Sam, was I was fortunate and blessed to work for your uncle, for President Bush 43 at PEPFAR, the U.S. President's Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief. And so, really it was a wonderful opportunity to continue, quite frankly, to work with and for the family. So, I feel honored and humbled to be in this role.

Sam: You came into your job leading the foundation several months after my grandmother passed and two months after my grandfather went on to his greater

reward. That could not have been an easy time to assume leadership within the organization. Can you tell us about those experiences?

British: Well, it was an interesting time as you can imagine. Of course, I regret that I never had the chance to spend time with your grandmother, but as everyone knows, and as I now know, she wasn't shy about making her opinions known. Unfortunate that she believed so passionately in the cause and that she talked about the cause and the issue of literacy every chance she got. She really left behind a treasure trove of anecdotes, of speeches, of letters which express her thoughts about literacy in the future of the foundation and I'm so fortunate to have those tools and the gifts and the legacy that she left behind that I can really build off of that as we look towards our next 30 years. And in fact, I feel like on a daily basis, Sam, that I have her voice in my head and my heart as I lead the foundation forward. It's an incredible privilege, but also a great responsibility. And now that she's passed on, no one wants to disappoint Barbara Bush.

Sam: British, at the time of my grandmother's passing, she had raised over \$110 million for family literacy programs in all 50 states and was recognized as one of the leading literacy advocates, not only in the U.S. but globally. How is the fight to address family literacy going today?

British: Well, I think you know that your grandmother was involved in the literacy issue all the way throughout her life to the very end. You know, at the end, she was frustrated. She recognized and realized that 36 million adults in the United States today still lack basic literacy skills they need to do simple things, read a ballot, help a child with homework, fill out an application, or even read a medicine bottle. And she knew that and she thought we needed to do more. We needed to engage with folks to help them to have better access to services. And she thought it was absolutely critical that we raise awareness around the issue, but also that we begin to bring more people into the fight. She said that literacy was everybody's business, period. Since I've been at the foundation, we've taken that literally, meaning how can we bring everyone into the issue, into the silent crisis so that it is no longer a silent crisis.

Now, we are laser-focused on bringing in the corporate sector, the business community, local-level stakeholders, other non-profits, moving beyond our silos to look at the issue through a health lens, through an economic lens, through a financial literacy lens. So, that's one of the big issues that we're looking at. And then the last piece that she realized was, is there a tool that I consider to be the great equalizer? And that's technology. How can we focus on technology and innovation to scale our efforts as effectively as possible? But that means that also we bring more people into it. We actually give more people

access and we reach more people. And the other way that we are looking at our future is to create a national action plan so that we can have a plan, not just the Barbara Bush Foundation, but all of our peers and colleagues in the industry to create a national action plan around charting a new path forward around the field of adult literacy and family literacy. And that we as the foundation act as a catalyst towards innovation, implementing technological tools.

Sam: British, there's a subtle but important distinction in your particular mission in that you focus on family literacy programs. Why family literacy?

British: Your grandmother was right when she said more than 30 years ago that the parent is the child's first and best teacher. Research has proven her right time and time again. Essentially, if the parent can't read, the child can't read. We know today, evidence-based that the number one determinant of a child's academic success outweighing any other factor including income is the mother's level of education. And so, with that, low literacy is a multi-generational cycle. It cannot be broken by solely focusing on the child. It's why family literacy and adult literacy is so important. We have to focus on the parent or the caregiver and the child. So that's the way we look at family literacy.

Sam: So, British, it sounds nice to help families with literacy, but isn't there an important economic rationale for what you do as well?

British: Part of our mission today is to slightly evolve and grow and mature the original vision that your grandmother set out for us. Since I've joined the foundation, we've really focused on this question of equity. And so, when we look at the issue of literacy, we have looked at it through the lens of equity and an economic argument. So, how do low literacy rates actually affect our economy? And to that end, we recently commissioned an economic study by Dr. Jonathan Rothwell. He's an economist from Gallup and works also at the Brookings Institute. Dr. Rothwell found that in the U.S., we could be losing up to \$1.4 trillion in GDP due to low rates of adult literacy. So, it is critical that we look at literacy not just as a sympathy argument, but an equity argument, and it's inextricably linked to our economy, to work productivity, to the future of work and to jobs. We also created something we call a Literacy Gap Map. You can visit that on our website at barbarabush.org. That map shows the direct impact of adult literacy rates on health, income, and education in every county across all 50 States in the United States. So, we want to put a face on it, but we also want to let you know how much it costs when we don't help our brothers and sisters that are low literate in the United States.

Sam: British, I've seen you work magic with your first Celebration of Reading at the Kennedy Center. If you could wave a wand and fix one thing as it relates to literacy, what would it be?

British: Fix the shame around the issue. There's real shame and stigma that prevents people from reaching out for help. That same shame and stigma perpetuates the silent crisis. One in five adults lacks basic literacy skills. That means they're hiding in plain sight. So, if we could really help those millions of Americans and erase that stigma around the issue, we could raise more awareness around the problem, create a national movement, and help those adult learners get the access to services that they need.

Sam: Another unofficial member of the family, my grandfather's long time chief of staff, Jean Becker wrote an amazing book filled with advice from my grandmother called "Pearls of Wisdom." British, what can you tell us about that book?

British: Very excited about the book. Jean sits on our board. She's been quite generous in donating the author royalties to the Barbara Bush Foundation, so we are thankful and grateful for Jean for doing so. But also, it helps raise awareness that the foundation still exists, that we are still carrying on the legacy that your grandmother built, but we're thrilled that Jean included a very special Chapter entitled "Read." And that chapter is on literacy, which really details Mrs. Bush's thought process as she chose this as her cause and her passion throughout her life. So, we're thrilled that was included in the book, but also it's just this wonderful story of pearls of wisdom literally, of thoughts and advice that your grandmother gave to people. I also think it's wonderful to let younger people know about her life and legacy and hopefully, if they read the book, they will get involved.

Sam: British, I would like to end with this because I'm sure people listening want to know how they can help. How can they help?

British: First of all, we'd love for you to go to our website, so barbarabush.org, and learn a little bit more about the problem and the issue. We'd also like you to see the problem through the lens of your own local community. So, go to the heat map, to the Literacy Gap Map and see what the literacy rates are like in your community. See if there are opportunities to volunteer, but also you can really help by donating to the Barbara Bush Foundation.

Sam: Well, British, thank you so much. You said that her voice is in your head, my grandmother's, but I know she's smiling down on us right now of all the

great work you've done with the foundation. So, one, thank you for all that and two, thank you for coming on "All the Best."

British: Thank you, Sam.

Sam: I'm Sam LeBlond, 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

