



All the Best Podcast
Episode 14: "The Bushes' Very Personal Crusade Against Cancer"

Featuring Dr. Andrew von Eschenbach

Dr. von Eschenbach: January 27th, 2015. Dear Andy, Jean told Barbara and me about her good visit with you. We hate that we miss seeing you, but we appreciated your thoughtful note and that wonderful bottle of Sherry. You know what we like. All the best to you, dear friend, and love to Madelyn. We, Bushes, treasure our friendship with you. Sincerely, G. B.

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."

We're Mountaineers, volunteers
We're the tide that rolls, we're Seminoles
Yeah, we're one big country nation
That's right.

George: I remember something my dad told 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.

Yeah, we're one big country nation
That's right.

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."

Yeah, we're one big country nation
That's right.

Sam: It is a pleasure to have Dr. von Eschenbach on "All the Best." He first met my grandfather while working at MD Anderson, and they went on to establish the National Dialogue on Cancer, whose mission was to eliminate cancer as a major public health issue as quickly as possible. In 2001, my uncle, George W. Bush, selected Dr. von Eschenbach to head the National Cancer Institute. After his role at the NCI, he served as commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. We're so happy to have Dr. von Eschenbach here today with us on "All the Best."

Dr. von Eschenbach: Oh, thank you for having me to pay tribute to your grandfather and grandmother.

Sam: Doctor, I'd like to start with this. Medicine in general and certainly fighting cancer are special callings. What inspired you to start on your path to becoming one of the great cancer fighters?

Dr. von Eschenbach: Well, it was a pretty circuitous route, actually. I didn't start out deciding to go into medicine. But when I found my way there as a means of being able to make a difference in other people's lives, I really became fascinated by the intellectual challenge of cancer. How did this cell in our body suddenly go crazy and begin to spread and wind up destroying us? At the same time, I was really overwhelmed by the suffering and the death that I saw cancer causing. So in terms of trying to make a difference in other people's lives, it seemed to me that oncology was the way that I should try to do that. And in order to do that, I had a fellowship after my urology training. So as a physician surgeon, I came from Philadelphia to Houston, to MD Anderson, and they offered me the opportunity to stay on the faculty after my fellowship. And the rest is kind of history.

Sam: Early in your career, you also decided to serve in the U.S. Navy, in the Medical Corps. What drove that idea to serve? And tell us about that experience.

Dr. von Eschenbach: Well, the military was always my fondest dream and aspiration. I actually left high school planning to go to West Point and spend a career in the military. I was accepted to West Point, but in the physical examination, they determined that I had migraine headaches. And so I was washed out. But I always carried that respect and admiration for the military, much like your grandfather did. And when I went to medical school, I was the first in my family to be able to go to college, and I had worked my way through medical school. But as I got towards the end, my last year, I was pretty much out of resources. And the Navy had this program called the Senior Medical Student Program where they would commission me as an ensign, and I would be on active duty with orders to go to medical school, being paid as an active duty ensign in the U.S. Navy. And for that, I would give them three years back after my internship.

So it was a wonderful opportunity for me to continue my career and a wonderful opportunity to fulfill a lifelong dream of having to become part of the military. So your grandfather and I were U.S. Navy advocates.

Sam: Doctor, you mentioned my grandfather. How did you come to meet him?

Dr. von Eschenbach: Well, that amazing over 20-year relationship had a very interesting beginning. I was at MD Anderson observing the fact that we were making progress in the war on cancer, but we were fighting the battles in the wrong way. For those of us who were physicians and scientists, I'll use a metaphor your grandfather would appreciate. We grew up being taught how to play golf. It was a very egocentric, very self-centered kind of approach to the problem. And so we all had our disciplines, surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, etc. But like golfers, we were all out there on the course, playing with our own little white ball. It may have looked like the Masters at a place like MD Anderson, but it was clear that what breast cancer and other cancers were teaching us is you couldn't win the war that way. What was going to be required was us to bring those skill sets together.

And so, since I was a leader at MD Anderson at the faculty level, I was asked to pioneer the cultural transformation to go from golf to, if you will, playing baseball as a team. I looked at that and realized, since we didn't know how to play that game, we would need those people who came from outside disciplines to coach, teach, oversee, and direct that process. And so I was creating this prostate cancer board of directors. And I thought about that at the time and realized that your grandfather and grandmother had come back to Houston after their presidency. They had a lifelong commitment to cancer because of the death of your aunt when she was a child, Robin, and they had been supporters of MD Anderson all along.

So I took the audacious step to go to Mickey LeMaistre, who was the president of MD Anderson at the time, and asked him, "Would you be willing to ask President Bush if he would give me 15 minutes to talk to him about this prostate cancer interdisciplinary program, with the idea that I might be able to recruit him to become a member of the overseeing board of directors. I kinda gotta look like a little crazy. Would you agree to do it?" And that meeting was not only transformational for the culture of oncology, it was transformational for me. It launched a 20-year relationship in which I not only respected your grandmother and grandfather but surely came to love them.

I remember that meeting very well. It was supposed to be 15 minutes. It lasted, I think, now as I remember, about an hour. One of the first things I noted in the meeting was I got "the look." And those of you who are aware of what the look is...

Sam: I've gotten the look before.

Dr. von Eschenbach: I was there to sell, and it became apparent when I got the look that I may have been putting a little bit too much icing, and better is just focusing on the cake. And so I quickly learned that, with your grandfather, we deal with substance. After expressing to him the vision of what we were trying to accomplish, which truly was a cultural transformation to bring these tremendous talents together in a way that they would work together, collaborate together, with the vision and a focus of being able to make a difference in a cancer patient's life, he said, "I like this, let me think about it, but I really like this." And he called me back and said, "I'm in," and he was remarkable.

First of all, he came to every single meeting, was there from the very beginning to the very end, engaged, and more importantly, brought other people to the table, brought others who were of incredible caliber, could also help teach us how to work and behave in this new way. I'd be sitting in my office and I'd hear this commotion outside. Secretary would pop her head in and say, "The Secret Service is out here. The president is coming. The president is coming." And sure enough, a few minutes later, he'd come through the door and sit down, look at me and say, "Andy, how are we doing? What progress are we making?" And most importantly, he would always end by saying, "What more can I do?" And it was that question that really brought us to the level of the intense relationship that we really developed over time. Because it became apparent to me that, although we are making progress with MD Anderson, cancer is a societal problem.

And progress in science and technology and in medicine was not going to provide a holistic solution. Cancer for society was a political problem, an economic problem, a cultural problem, and we're gonna need to bring all sectors of society together to come to a comprehensive strategy that we could all participate in. Now, what I kind of just described to you is the model for the defeat of Saddam Hussein, and who was the best coalition builder in the world, was your grandfather. So I was in line to become the president of the American Cancer Society at the time, and I approached them and said, "Would you put up the resources?" And they said yes. I approached your grandfather and said, "Would you lead this coalition?" And he said, "Yes, but I have a couple conditions. First, I will only do it together with Barbara, so you better go convince her that it's a good idea. And two, it has to be nonpartisan, and that means bipartisan."

So I remember the first meeting was at their home. I was there, the CEO of the American Cancer Society, John Safran was there, Jean Becker was there. Because I knew I had to convince Jean that this was a good idea. There were people like Andy Grove, who was the CEO of Intel at the time. And your grandmother listened carefully as we all sat there with the picture of your Aunt Robin up on the wall and said, "You know, we just had the Economic Summit in Houston, and that was such a tremendous success. We need to hold a summit for cancer. Let's do this, George." And together, they created the National Dialogue on Cancer. The very first meeting was at the library at College Station. Your grandfather was stunned at the fact that here were all these leaders from all sectors who were interested in cancer, and many of them had never talked to each other before. But he was going to help us come together to formulate a strategy and figure out how to work together and make it happen.

That National Dialogue on Cancer was transformational. There were a lot of spinoffs that came from it, and I'll give you one quick example. One of the early meetings, Governor Ridge from Pennsylvania, Governor Barnes from Georgia were leading part of the governmental participation, and it became apparent in the discussion that there were only a handful of states that actually had cancer control plans. And so the two governors said, "Okay, if you're telling us that cancer control plans are important, find the best models. We'll take it to the National Governors Association." And now, today, because of that, every state has a state cancer control plan. I could go on and on with so many other contributions that came from it. Your grandfather recognized that there were content experts in the room and then there were executives in the room, and they needed some space.

So he asked Bob Ingram, who was a preeminent leader in the pharmaceutical industry, to head up the CEO roundtable, and subsequent to that, an individual

like Coach K at Duke, Mike Krzyzewski, took responsibility for leadership of that. And they, as executives, created a CEO gold standard five programs that every company should have for their employees in order to combat cancer. These were amazingly incredible joint steps in creating societal solutions to a problem like cancer and is a model system now for taking on the next challenges, like the neurodegenerative and neurocognitive diseases like Alzheimer's that are gonna present the same challenge to society today that cancer did back in 1970 when President Nixon declared the war.

Sam: You just mentioned President Nixon, who declared that there was a war on cancer in the 1970s. My grandfather, as president, declared that the 1990s would be the decade of the brain. Do such presidential declarations really make a difference in the scientific and medical realms? And if so, how?

Dr. von Eschenbach: Oh, absolutely makes a difference. It makes a difference, I think, on a number of different fronts. First of all, the president galvanizes us as a society around the questions, problems, or issues that are of most importance to us. So when they set the agenda that it's cancer or it's the neurocognitive or neurodegenerative diseases that are affecting the brain that, in many ways, will be even a greater tragedy for society, both economically as well as medically, that leadership is critical to galvanizing and bringing the parts and pieces together that are gonna be necessary to solve that problem. They also provide the opportunity for policy to be able to match our opportunities by creating infrastructures. So when President Nixon declared the war on cancer, one of the most important things that came from that was the National Cancer Act of 1971, which created the National Cancer Institute and led to the development of cancer centers like MD Anderson, Sloan Kettering, Dana-Farber, on and on and on.

So everything we see today as progress started with the president calling us together as a nation to address the problems that are of most importance to us. And your grandfather did that over and over again. He never wanted to take credit for it. He also even denied that he even understood it, although we knew better than that. But we would tell him he was the father of the human genome, and he'd say, "What do I know about the genome?" And we'd say, "What you knew about the genome was that it was the code of life, and in order for us to make a difference, we would have to decode it. And you made that happen."

Sam: I'm glad you brought up the Human Genome Project. A great contribution my grandfather made during his presidency was signing that bill in 1989. What did it accomplish?

Dr. von Eschenbach: If we think about ourselves, our body, and our cells that make up our body, they're like little computers. And in each of those cell's computer is programming what that cell is supposed to do. That program is our genome. But we never understood that program. The program was out of whack in a disease like cancer. We didn't know how to fix it. We didn't have a spell checker to be able to make it right. What we had to do was decode that genome in a way that we can understand what made it up and how it worked. That was the Human Genome Project, and it started out taking billions of dollars and lots of years to determine each letter in the message and each sentence in the message and each paragraph in the message that makes us who we are or determines why a cancer cell does one thing or another thing.

Now that we have that code, we're beginning to unravel all kinds of mysteries and secrets, not just about cancers and not just being able to apply and adapt treatment to a specific genetic abnormality in cancer, but that's becoming true of all diseases. So we're seeing progress occurring in a way that is been transformational. And to make that point just a little bit more strongly to emphasize how critically important your grandfather's leadership was, was the fact that unraveling the secrets of the genome, being able to understand the program, has become a metamorphosis in medicine. It's not even a transformation.

Physicians like myself practice medicine based on observation of manifestations of disease. So we would empirically recognize a lump on a woman's breast and then try to figure out what to do with it. Because of the genome, and now our ability to go from observing a manifestation to understanding the fundamental genetic mechanism that's giving rise to that disease, we can intuitively know how to intervene. So we've gone from one model of medicine to a completely different one, which is now being referred to as precision medicine. That's transformational.

Sam: Going back to the war on cancer, what was the state of that particular war in the late 1990s when my grandparents re-engaged in the fight? What was their impact as a team?

Dr. von Eschenbach: I'd go back to the national dialogue in which they shared that leadership role together. They were obviously the critical conveners. They opened not just their homes but their hearts. I mentioned us being at their home in memorial, there were numerous meetings up at Kennebunkport, in which we all got to see your grandfather jump out of an airplane and your grandmother tells how crazy she thought he was. But in opening up their homes and their hearts, they created a relationship and a bond among the people who assembled

there. They created the idea that we would conquer problems not by ourselves but by sharing, working, and collaborating together.

That can't be understated how important it is, because it wasn't like we knew how to do that. And so their impact in the '90s of teaching us how to play the game came together with the fact that, for the first time, we had new ways and weapons with which to play the game. So if you wanna take it into a war metaphor, we were eking our way along in terms of progress in developing new weapons to fight cancer, but we didn't know how to use them collaboratively in a way that got maximum benefit. They helped us do that. They made that opportunity available to us.

Sam: Doctor, from 2005 to 2008, you answered the bell to lead the Food and Drug Administration. What did that experience teach you?

Dr. von Eschenbach: You know, when I was at MD Anderson, doing surgery, taking care of cancer patients, I was kind of boots on the ground. I was at an institution that was living through a lot of that progress in science and technology. And I could see what some of its impact was on someone's life. When I left Houston and left MD Anderson to accept the privilege of being a part of your uncle's administration, as director of the National Cancer Institute, that was like going from boots on the ground to an AWACS plane. By virtue of being able to see our country's entire commitment to cancer, I could see the whole terrain and begin to appreciate how assets and resources, like our cancer centers, working together could achieve and accomplish so much more. And I began to appreciate the big picture that your grandmother and grandfather had of how our nation could work effectively together.

But when I went to the FDA, that was like going from the AWACS plane to a spy satellite. I literally got to go around the world and I literally got to see the secrets. I got to see the things that were still on development and could present an even greater vision for our country of what's coming, what could be, what's next. I will tell you that when one steps back and appreciates where science, technology, where progress is leading us, the fact that we're an exponential growth of knowledge, what we'll be able to accomplish if we can continue their vision of putting these parts and pieces together is beyond imagination. The blind will see, the lame will walk. People will not need to suffer and die unnecessarily from a disease like cancer. We will not have to worry about individuals not recognizing their grandchildren or being able to remember their names. All that's within our grasp if we can play the game the way the game needs to be played, the way your grandmother and grandfather knew and taught us how to do it.

Sam: We talked about your relationship that you formed through MD Anderson, but that grew. You've been to Walker's Point and you've spent time with us. I heard, not only did you visit, but they put you to work at Walker's Point. I'm not sure if you'd like to touch on that.

Dr. von Eschenbach: You're right. And one of the great privileges in my life was to have been able to develop a personal relationship with both your grandmother and your grandfather. I'll always felt treated as extended members of the family. Now, I had to come to your grandfather's aid in that regard on a couple of occasions, because when we would bring cancer experts up to Kennebunkport, one of the first things that often occurred in some of the lectures was that they would want to tell your grandfather how important diet was with regard to being able to prevent cancer and that he should be eating more broccoli.

Sam: Uh-oh.

Dr. von Eschenbach: He said to me one time, "Andy, why do they keep telling me to eat broccoli? I'm jumping out of airplanes when I'm 75 years old. I mean, how much better can I get?" What came to as rescue because of his vision for the human genome was we subsequently found out that, guess what, we now know that individuals made up of different genes, some have a gene that makes it absolutely horrible for them to eat broccoli. He really loved the fact that we ultimately could show him a payoff for his investment in the human genome.

The other thing, of course, is having grown up in modest background in South Philadelphia, I learned a few skills. I came up to Kennebunkport, we were having lunch, and he was bemoaning the fact that there was a problem with the swimming pool and that, in order to fix it, he had to get the water down in the swimming pool, but the pumps were not able to do it and wasn't working. And I said to him, "Do you have a pool hose?" And he said, "Yes." I said, "How about if we siphon the water out of the pool since the pump's gonna pump it out?" He said, "How do you do that?" And I said, "Did you ever have to siphon gas out of your car when you were younger?" And he looked at me like, "I don't think so." So I said, "I'll teach you how to do that." And we went, the two of us, out, got the pool hose, filled it with water, and he was down at the bottom of the hill, and I was at the top, and we emptied the pool. But I'll never forget the fact that there was this moment of clarity where he and I are crawling around on the deck of the pool trying to get this siphon hose to work, and I suddenly realized, "What are you doing here? You're a kid from South Philly who's got the privilege of being able to crawl around on the ground of the former president of the United States to try and fix their swimming pool." How much more natural a human being could you ever encounter when you find someone like who's

achieved what he's achieved, been who he has been, and will behave and act that way because it's just who he is, he's just a guy?

Sam: I could imagine it now in my head. There's the former president and one of the leading cancer doctors in the world are pretty much glorified pool boys at that point.

Dr. von Eschenbach: Yeah. But your grandmother and Madelyn, my wife, had to listen to us brag an awful lot about how great we were getting that swimming pool fixed.

Sam: Doctor, I'd like to finish on this. What is the state of the war on cancer today?

Dr. von Eschenbach: Well, I think there's a couple of things that your grandfather would appreciate, as with your grandmother. We were waging a war on cancer, and we've won some battles. We're winning many more battles today than we did before. So the point where I think it's now generally accepted more that the end is in sight, that it's no longer a dream. It's more a vision. It's more an opportunity and a reality that will come about. We will eliminate the suffering and death due to this cancer. But the war is not over. We have more battles yet to fight. We're making great progress in things like leukemia and melanoma and prostate cancer. We've got a long way to go in pancreatic cancer, glioblastoma. What's really important, I think, in this storyline though, is not only are we gonna win the war on cancer, but in the way we're approaching cancer, we've learned how to win the other wars. We learned what it will take to win the war on Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's, diabetes, and all the rest. That's something that your grandmother and your grandfather gave decades of their life after Washington to make possible to make happen.

Sam: Well, Doctor, I couldn't be more hopeful. Thank you so much for the work you've done and the work you continue to do fighting cancer. And thank you for joining us on "All the Best."

Dr. von Eschenbach: Thanks for the privilege. And thank you for the wonderful family that you've all well and you've become a part of.

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."

Yeah, we're one big country nation
That's right.

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.

