



All the Best Podcast
Episode 8: “The Road to Chief of Staff”
Featuring George H. W. Bush Chief of Staff, Jean Becker

Jean: August 5th, 2004. Subject, Chief of Staff. I address this to our Chief asking that she enlist the summer lads or someone to solve this problem. All of you, each in your own way have done a good job on paper towels, Kleenex, soap, and toilet paper. Indeed, we have had very few glitches but now there is a new danger. The toilet seat upstairs appears to be misaligned. There's grave danger that if it tilts further, someone can fall off and get hurt. What if Laura re-broke her arm? What if Tommy or I had the embarrassment of having to call for help while writhing on the floor? How could we explain to Brian, that would be Mrs. Bush's aide's boyfriend, if M got seriously hurt in this unseemly undignified, unladylike manner?

Jean, this may seem a tiny matter on this big barbecue day, just as wedding plans come to fruition, just as final decisions on the cruise must be made, security problems wrestled with, but please attend to this matter. Delegate, lead us. Do not ask Ariel. The man cooked all night. Perhaps this crisis can safely wait until we all leave but suppose we've all left and special dear Amanda, our intern, while soloing in there falls off unattended? Please Jean, please do this. P.S. Do not call a plumber. After robin's nest pond work, increasing demands for more champagne, more ordering out for pizza, more can I borrow the car or truck, gampy, and more just have me met in Boston by people movers car service, I'm feeling broke. So we must fix this ourselves. The more I think about it, Tommy, just bring me a monkey wrench. Sincerely, George Bush, 41st President of the United States of America.

George: At 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 thought. 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 investments 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".

Sam: In this episode, I am joined by Jean Becker who was a reporter for many years until making a career change and becoming part of the family. Jean became Chief of Staff to my grandfather, President George H. W. Bush beginning in 1994. She oversaw many duties including the opening of the George Bush Presidential Library Center. She edited and researched my grandfather's autobiography, "All the Best, George Bush, My Life in Letters," and other writings. Jean also previously served as Deputy Press Secretary to my grandmother, First Lady, Barbara Pierce Bush, and helped with the editing and research for her books, "Barbara Bush in Memoir and Reflections." Jean, I want to talk about how you came to work for my grandparents.

Jean: In 1988, I was at "USA Today." I was part of the election campaign team. "USA Today" convinced Barbara Bush and Kitty Dukakis to write a weekly column for "USA Today." We published it every Monday in September and October, and I was their editor. And when I was given this assignment I wasn't happy because I really didn't want to be pinned down to do that. I was the campaign team feature writer and quite frankly, I thought they would be high maintenance and a lot of trouble. Well, I loved it. Every Sunday night, the two of them had to turn their columns into me. It will not surprise you that Kitty Dukakis' press secretary is the one I dealt with but your grandmother, she let her press team do it the first two times.

I would always have to cut them. They were always too long. And then I would call back the campaign and read it back and say, "Here's the 15 inches we're going to publish." Well, after a couple of weeks, your grandmother wanted to be my point of contact. So every Sunday night, I would call Barbara Bush and that's how I got to know her so well. And so after the election, they offered me

a job on her press team. And I thought about it for a couple of weeks because I was happy at "USA Today." And then I finally thought, "What am I doing? I've been offered a job by the future First Lady of the United States." So the rest is history, Sam.

Sam: The rest is history. So can you talk a little bit about those early days in the White House, working for Ganny and what's the most important lesson you learned from her throughout her life?

Jean: You know, you could not pick a better day to ask me that question because just today, I had this great conversation with a woman who used to run a place called Grandma's House. Your grandmother on January 21st, 1989, her first full day as First Lady, told her staff that she wanted to do something every single day to make a difference. And whether it was host an event or go visit someplace around the country or do something with your grandfather, it was exhausting but exhilarating. She had so many great ideas and one of the first places she visited was Grandma's House, which was a house for babies with AIDS. And she held a baby with AIDS and she also hugged an adult with AIDS and it really changed literally the conversation in this country. That is what I learned from her. It's just get off the couch and do something.

Another example. One day she read in the newspaper that a lot of malls around the country, it's Christmas time, were kicking out Salvation Army red kettle bell ringers, that it was annoying the shoppers and no one wanted to be hit up for money while they're trying to Christmas shop. Well, your grandmother was just furious. We called the press. So we went to a bell ringer. She put...I believe it was \$12 in the bucket. And I wanted to say to her, "You didn't check your wallet before you left the White House?" She had \$12. So she gave...but I loved...and your grandfather was the same way. They didn't form a commission. They didn't write an op-ed. They were the two most hands on people I knew. And you know what? That was it. That was the end of kicking Salvation Army bell ringers out of malls. They're still there today and I don't think anybody will ever try it again.

Sam: So after the White House years, you then helped Ganny write her memoirs. After which, my grandfather made you an offer to become his Chief of Staff for the next quarter century. How does one become a Chief of Staff to a former president, Jean?

Jean: Well, I lived in fear that the job would end any day. People find it hard to believe this story. Your grandmother, her book was done, and I was getting ready to go back to being a journalist. I was going to probably go to work for the "Chicago Sun-Times," which no longer exists. Getting ready to leave and

your Gampy's Chief of Staff, a woman named Rose Marie...do you remember Rose?

Sam: Yes, I remember Rose.

Jean: Everybody was terrified of her.

Sam: Yeah, she was tough.

Jean: She decided to retire and your grandfather called me in and I, you know, I've gotten to know him a little bit and he said, "Would you be willing to fill in until I hire a Chief of Staff?" He says, "I don't know who to hire. I just need time to figure this out." And I said, "Well, Mister President, I don't know how to be a Chief of Staff. I've never been anyone's boss. I've never done a budget. I don't know how to do that." And he said, "Well, if you could just be an extra pair of hands and just keep the seat warm..." This was March of '94. I called my potential new employer at the "Chicago Sun-Times" and they gave me until Labor Day to take the job or not. So I told your grandfather, "I will help you till Labor Day." He said, "Perfect. I'll have it figured out by then." We never talked about it again.

Years later, like five years ago, I told him this story and he didn't remember it and he said, "That's not true." I said, "Yes, it is. I've been your acting Chief of Staff for 25 years. I have lived in fear for 25 years you're going to walk into my office and say oh, Jean, I found someone to take the job." But I called the "Chicago Sun-Times" and I said, "Yeah, I'm not coming. Sorry."

Sam: What was the most important lesson you took away from all those years working for him?

Jean: He was the biggest thinker I have ever met and the biggest idea man. I think I have mentioned to you before the scariest five words throughout my chief of staff-dom. He would come to my office about 7:00 o'clock in the morning and say, "Jean, I have an idea." And I would think, "Oh, boy. Here we go." And sometimes it would be something as simple as let's go to Fuzzy's for pizza for lunch and I would think, "Phew, okay." But sometimes the ideas were really big and it's probably the most important thing I learned from him. Think big. What do you have to lose? You may get turned down, you may fail, but you're better off giving it a try than to spend your whole life sitting on the sidelines. He was unbelievable.

Sam: So speaking of big ideas, I heard there was a big idea involving George Clooney. Can you share with us the story?

Jean: So Hurricane Katrina has ravaged New Orleans and what very few people remember, a week or so after Katrina there was a terrible hurricane named Hurricane Rita that chewed up a big section of the Texas gulf coast and a big section of Louisiana. Everything west of New Orleans got chewed up by Rita and the victims of Rita were just getting no attention. New Orleans was pretty well sucking the air out of the room when it came to donations, and understandably so because New Orleans had been so hard hit. Well, this town, Cameron, Louisiana, a man from Cameron cold-called the office. We didn't know him. And he said, "This town has been leveled. The only thing left was the courthouse." And he said, "We need help." Your Gampy had a relationship with the town. When he was an offshore oil driller, Cameron, Louisiana is where he would go to go visit his offshore oil wells.

So anyway, I talked to your grandfather and he says, "Well, of course we'll have to help Cameron. He says, "Find out what is the one thing more than anything else they need. Richard, his name was Richard said, "If we could just rebuild the emergency room. The people in town need to have a place to go for medical care. And still to that day, the offshore oilrig workers also use that emergency room. We need an emergency room." So we raised \$2 million in addition to that \$50 million we raised for Katrina and about a week before Christmas, your grandfather was going to go to Cameron to give them a \$2 million check and we were going to break ground for the new emergency room. And then they were going to continue building the rest of the hospital.

So I'm showing your grandfather the schedule and the governor was coming and the mayor was coming. He looked at the schedule and he said, "Well, sort of boring." He says, "Jean, these people have had a really tough year. We need to make this event more exciting." With a little bit of attitude I said, "Really? A former president with a check for \$2 million is boring?" I said, "What do you want to do?" And he said, of course, "I have an idea. So we're building an ER, right?" I said, "Yes." And he said, "Why don't we call that guy, George Clooney? He is the star of the TV show "ER." And then he says, "You get it, Jean? "ER." How cool would that be to bring George Clooney, the star of "ER?" And I looked at your grandfather and I...here was the problem, Sam. He and your grandmother were watching ER in reruns on TNT. George Clooney had not been on "ER" for years. He, you know, he was making all the Ocean movies. So I said, "Well, sir, yeah. George Clooney. He's one of the biggest stars in the world. He's no longer on "ER." I'm not sure "ER" was even on the air. And he said, "No, no. it's on every single night." So I tried to explain the whole thing of reruns to your grandfather.

And I said, "And here's the other problem. He's not in my rolodex. He's a big liberal Democrat." So your grandfather picked up the phone and called his friend, Jerry Weintraub who was the producer of all the Ocean movies and guess what? Guess who came? George Clooney. He said, "If you'll come pick me up on a plane, I'll come." So did I go with your grandfather to Cameron? Oh, yes, I did.

Sam: I was going to say you were in the first thing smoking over there, right.

Jean: Oh, yeah. I definitely made sure I had a seat on that plane. But I asked George Clooney on the way home...and he was amazing. He shook every hand in town. We did not tell the town he was coming. They couldn't believe it. I mean, the whole town showed up for your grandfather but to watch the two Georges as I call them standing there, shaking every hand, it was truly amazing.

Sam: That's great.

Jean: And on the way home I said to George Clooney, "I am just curious, why did you do this? Why did you say yes?" And this is what he said, "Every TV camera, every celebrity is in New Orleans. New Orleans is getting all the attention and it touched my heart that President Bush wanted to help this little town named Cameron, Louisiana that no one was helping." And he said that's why he did it. And they remained friends forever after and every time George Clooney was nominated for an Oscar and didn't win, your grandfather would call him the next day and say, "George, Bar and I are just devastated. You should've won that award." His assistant used to email me and say, "Oh, my gosh. George is almost glad he lost because he was so touched by all those phone calls. He would write him little notes, "You should've won last night." Anyway, it was a sweet, sweet relationship.

Sam: Wow. That's a great story, Jean. That's a very funny story. Can you talk to us about my grandfather's quasi-memoirs, "All the Best," coming around to that name and the power of that phrase that he used mostly later in life on all his letters, maybe even behind the idea of doing a book of letters instead of a proper memoir that many presidents have done?

Jean: Well, your grandfather did not want to write a memoir. We could not move him on this topic. He and his national security advisor, Brent Scowcroft wrote a book called, "The World Transformed," that was all about their foreign policy but he had no interest in writing a memoir. We couldn't change his mind. So I was aware of like two, maybe three letters, amazing letters that I knew he had written in his lifetime. One of them was the letter...because it was in your grandmother's memoirs, the letter he wrote to his mother after Robin died about

losing a daughter. And so I pitched the idea that maybe we could do a letters book. It was going to be a coffee table book. Maybe 20 letters with photos and a nice coffee table book and we pitched it to Simon & Schuster and they said, "Yeah. That sounds great."

So I went off to the George Bush Library at Texas A&M to start finding 20 letters, you know, maybe 25 to put in this book. And after maybe two days, it might've been one day, I called the publisher at Simon & Schuster, the editor, and I said, "Oh, my God. This man was a prolific letter writer." I said, "We can do his autobiography just through letters he has written. What is here in the library is unbelievable, and if I reach out to all his friends, I think there's probably a lot more out there."

So they immediately were on board. So then I had to go back to Houston and pitch it to your grandfather and he said, "Well, how much work will I have to do exactly?" And he was very busy. You know, he was traveling, giving speeches, he was on...you know, head of MD Anderson board. And I said, "Well, here's the good news, sir. You've already written this book. You've written all these letters. Right now I have to do this. I will find the letters." So that was it. We probably had to cut 50 letters and leave them on the cutting room floor. He was probably one of the best letter writers in the history of letter writers.

When the book came out, one of my favorite reviews of the book was the big difference between this, as you called it, quasi-memoir and a real presidential memoir. This was what he felt, what he said, and what he was thinking in real time. I love that it's the name of your podcast, "All the Best". So your grandfather later in life used to sign a lot of his letters...if he loved the person, he would say love but he was not close enough to love them, he would say all the best. So that's what we called the book.

Sam: So there's the ex-presidents club, all the ex-presidents, and Gampy took it to the next level with his kind of odd couple relationship with President Bill Clinton. First off, to all the cynics out there, I know that I've seen them together many a times. Can you tell us that it was a genuine friendship? I mean, this is the real deal, right? Which is amazing.

Jean: I'm still comforting President Clinton over the death of his friend. It has been really hard for him to lose your Gampy. I do think absolutely that President Bush was the father he never had and he more or less told him that one time. But it all began, again, with the disaster, the South Asia tsunami that devastated big chunks of South Asia I think on Christmas Day 2004. And your uncle, the 43rd President of the United States, had this brilliant idea to ask his

dad and President Clinton to partner in doing some private sector fundraising to help the tsunami ravaged countries. Your grandfather said yes and President Clinton said yes and as part of their responsibility, they went to South Asia. And it was on that trip that the odd couple began.

And I think it began with...there was one bed on the plane and President Clinton insisted that your grandfather have it but on that trip President Clinton was so respectful of your grandfather. He was beginning to show his age. We didn't know yet then that he had Parkinson's but he definitely had slowed down a step or two and President Clinton was very respectful of that. You know, it was interesting. In some places your grandfather was the rock star. In some places it was President Clinton. They always made sure the other was included. They always made sure that they got equal opportunity. By the time we got home from that trip, the rest is history.

So that was...would've been in the early months of 2005. Katrina hit in August of 2005. And they didn't even wait for the President of United States to call them up. The two of them talked to each other and I think they called the president and said, "Yeah, we're all in on Katrina." And of course your uncle George said, "That would be terrific." They raised a \$150 million for Katrina and they went to New Orleans a lot. And then they did Hurricane Ike which was a Gulf Coast storm. And then all the former presidents did Hurricane Harvey. Also Maria and Irma, all of which was going on two years ago. But they became best friends and President Clinton would come every summer to visit and he would stop by in Houston if he was in the neighborhood. I remember one time your grandfather surprised President Clinton in New York City at a Clinton Foundation event. He just dropped in unexpectedly. It was truly the odd couple. And the whole world talked about it. They couldn't believe it.

Sam: It was the real deal. Those guys respected each other and came together to do a lot of good after their presidencies and became genuine friends.

Jean: Somebody asked him one time in Kennebunkport, "You know, why are you friends with him? It's because of him you lost the second term. What do you see in him?" And President Bush said, "Now, I really am very fond of Bill." And he said, "The other thing is at this point in my life I've run out of things to say and I never have to worry about that with Bill because he does all the talking." President Clinton loved that.

Sam: Yeah, I'm sure he does. That's great.

Jean: He does.

Sam: That's funny. Well, shifting gears again, Jean, recently the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library Foundation has changed its name to the George and Barbara Bush Foundation. What has changed in the foundation since then?

Jean: I had a lot of concerns that when the office of George Bush closed, which obviously it did earlier this year, it closed at the end of March, there were so many things that crossed my desk, I called them legacy projects. And people who wanted to name things for your grandparents or write a book or commemorate this, commemorate that. And I would talk to your grandparents and we would make a decision and I just wondered when the office closed, a lot of the work at the office would end because your grandfather was gone. But particularly a lot of what I did would not come to an end.

And so we started a series of conversations that went over a period of years and we decided that we needed to rebrand the foundation that would be more than about the library, that it really would be about the life and legacy of George and Barbara Bush. You know, we care what Points of Light is doing, we care what the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy is doing. And we needed a system in place that would include the family, that would include old White House people to be interested and involved and supportive. So that's where the George and Barbara Bush Foundation came from.

Sam: Yeah, I think it's kind of turned into a legacy conflux. In summation here, if someone asked you to talk about my grandfather's legacy of service in and out of the White House, how would you describe it? What would you say?

Jean: Your grandfather, I feel exemplified duty, honor, country just about more than anyone else who's served in that office. There was an American historian, writer, Hugh Sidey, wrote for "Time Magazine" for years. He wrote the column, "The American Presidency." He covered every president since Truman I think. He died in 2005. And Hugh Sidey once told me that your grandfather, he was convinced, was the best man to ever serve in the office. He always had what's best for the country in his mind. And I read his diaries and one of the things that amazed me the most is he reached an infamous budget deal with the Democrats in 1990 in which he agreed to raise taxes in return for big budget cuts. And we now know that it was hugely successful. President Clinton might argue with this but those people think that that 1990 budget deal set the stage for the very economically healthy and productive 1990s. But your grandfather wrote in his diary that night by signing off in this deal, he was fairly certain he just made himself a one term president. When I read that I thought, "Wow." And that was your grandfather. He did truly what he felt was right.

Sam: And finally, Jean, I have to ask you about your new book that you're working on, "Pearls of Wisdom," about my grandmother. What can you tell us about that project? When can we get it?

Jean: So "Pearls of Wisdom," as you know, no one gave more advice than your grandmother. We all learned so much from her.

Sam: Does this include unsolicited advice?

Jean: Yes.

Sam: That's a lot of advice.

Jean: Both, both. That's a lot of advice. So "Pearls of Wisdom" will be published in the spring of 2020. It's going to be sort of marketed as the perfect Mother's Day and Commencement gift. It is a collection of all the advice and life lessons that Barbara Bush gave out over the years. And the first chapter is the family, her 5 children and her 19 grandchildren. There's a wonderful paragraph in there from one Sam LeBlond. Other chapters include friends, everybody from James Baker and Bob Gates and President Clinton has a part of it. It's just fun and funny. I'm really excited about it. The family has been so supportive of this project. And all the funds go to the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy. So I hope everybody will buy it and read it and I guarantee you will learn something from the book. I'm going to ask you a question.

Sam: Please.

Jean: Tell me one thing that you learned from your grandmother and your grandfather.

Sam: So I've been married for three years. Towards the end of my grandmother's life, Lee and I asked her, "What advice you have for being married?" After saying, "Oh, you don't want to hear from me, dearie," and hoeing and humming about, you know, why do you want to get my advice. For obvious reasons, I wanted the advice. They've been married for longer than anybody I've ever known. Anything they were doing was good advice. And she said, "Go 75%. You know, instead of 50-50, if both go 75, you'll be happy and live long together forever." So that's been something that Lee and I, my wife, Lee have been working on. And then oh, my gosh, my grandfather. I'd have to say how to treat the other guy. There's so many different things that Gampy's done that, you know, I could say here but, you know, he treats everyone the same whether it's President Bill Clinton or, you know, down the line. So that'd

be my two takeaways but it's so hard to have two, one from each, but I guess that's what I'd say, Jean.

Jean: I love your answer on your grandfather. That's so true. And I see a lot of both of them in you, Sam LeBlond.

Sam: Jean, thank you so much for coming on. It's not going to be the last time because you're such a wealth of knowledge when it comes to my grandparents. So this is the tip of the iceberg.

Jean: Yes, it is. Good luck with the podcast. Thanks for asking me. It was a lot of fun.

Sam: I'm Sam LeBlond, reminding you to listen, share, and subscribe to "All the Best" on Apple Podcast, 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.

