



All the Best Podcast
Episode 23: “Shine a Light”
Featuring former Director of Projects, Julie Cooke

Julie: January 23rd, 1989. After the hard work of the campaign, the excitement of winning the election and the inauguration. I'm getting settled into my new office in the East Wing of the White House where traditionally the first lady's staff work. My phone rings with an invitation to join Mrs. Bush and her senior staff in the residence. I quickly scoop up a note pad and pen, take a deep breath and join Mrs. Bush and my colleagues in the lovely west sitting room with a beautiful lunette window.

There's a feeling of anticipation. I want to pinch myself. We are meeting with the new first lady on the first day of work in the new presidential administration. That day is still fresh in my memory. Looking back, it was obvious to me that Mrs. Bush was not about to waste a moment in fulfilling her new role. She said, "I want to do something to help every day." And then she turned to me and said, "Julie, what am I doing tomorrow?" Thus began four years of action-filled days of Barbara Bush working on behalf of causes dear to her heart. A truly exciting time.

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."

Lyrics

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

Man: 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.

Lyrics

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."

Lyrics

We're one big country nation, that's right

Sam: Julie Cook began to work for my grandmother, Barbara Bush, when my grandfather was elected as vice president in 1981. She assisted my grandmother with her projects, travel, and correspondence through the VP years. When my grandfather was elected to the presidency in 1989, my grandmother invited Julie to serve as her director of projects. Julie also has served for 25 years on the advisory council for the George Bush Library and Museum. After leaving the White House staff, Julie worked at Washington National Cathedral and has served as a volunteer teacher for English as a second language. Julie, welcome to "All the Best."

Julie: Thank you, Sam.

Sam: As someone who worked for Ganny for many years, what was she like is both a first lady and as a boss?

Julie: Well, Sam, first as a boss, she was wonderful. Working for her was a joy. She trusted her staff, she wasn't a micromanager, but she was very clear about her expectations. She was wonderful to work for. And as a first lady and as a second lady, remember she was second lady, as they say, for eight years, she never rested. Often at an event, some reporter would ask her about some current issue of the day and she'd reply, "Oh, but I don't want to talk about that. I'm here to talk about the Ronald McDonald House or the Food Bank of the Rockies." She said, "I don't want the light to shine on me, but if it's going to, I want it to shine on whoever and whatever is standing beside me." Your

grandfather was an energetic, devoted first lady and she wanted to make every day count.

Sam: You worked for my grandmother during her early efforts to help more American families become literate. Can you talk about that and why specifically family literacy?

Julie: Sam, your grandmother was an avid reader and when your grandfather was elected to the vice presidency, she was very deliberate about choosing a cause. Her initial interest was in the problem of adult illiteracy. She said, "I thought about all the things I cared about, homelessness, school dropouts, poverty and more, and I realized that everything would be much better if more people could read and write and comprehend."

So she set out to learn about the problem. She traveled all over the country visiting literacy programs, bringing attention to literacy volunteers and meeting with practitioners. You know, less media attention is given to a second lady and so much of her work really didn't get much attention, but she stayed very committed to the issue and it was a time of learning for her. This was the beginning of her focus on family literacy as the years went by.

She even ghostwrote a book to support literacy programs. The book was written by her dog C. Fred, that is C. Fred, a golden cocker spaniel. And she wrote about his life in "C. Fred's Story." Proceeds went to two fine volunteer literacy programs. C. Fred told about his exciting life living in China with the American liaison officer, moving to the vice president's house, and all the famous people he met, Charlton Heston, Christopher Reeve, Margaret Thatcher, President Reagan.

That book was so successful that later as first lady, your grandmother ghostwrote a second book, "Millie's Book," also benefited literacy. Millie, a springer spaniel, wrote about life in the White House and included photos of her meeting Billy Graham, Audrey Hepburn, and many more. Lots of important people including one little boy, three pictures in the book, Sam LeBlond. As your grandmother continued to support adult literacy programs, she became more and more interested in the value of children and families learning together. She said "Home is the child's first school, the parent is the child's first teacher, and reading is the child's first subject."

The proceeds from "C. Fred" created seed money for the creation of the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy to promote the value of reading to children and support programs where children and adults learn together. Today, 30 years later, the foundation is going strong supporting programs all over the

country. And as you know, Sam, your mother, Doro Bush Koch, is the honorary chair of the foundation.

Sam: Julie, in your view, what qualities about my Ganny accounted for her widespread and enduring popularity with the American people?

Julie: I think number one, it was her authenticity. She was seen as being down to earth. People saw that she didn't take herself too seriously. For example, early on, she decided not to color her gray hair, and although she cared very much about how she looked, she just wasn't focused on designer clothes. And as you know, your grandmother could make fun of herself. A good example is a story she told years before the White House. She was posing for a photo with your grandfather and a lot of other dignitaries. The photographer looked at the group and said, "Would the lady in the red dress please step aside?" Your grandmother said, "I looked down and realized he was talking to me." He thought she didn't belong in the photo.

One of your Ganny's friends once said, "She walks into a room and suddenly everyone feels a little bit better." People would meet her and feel like they had a new best friend." And, of course, there were her pearls, they became a kind of signature. She said they helped draw attention away from her wrinkles. Your grandmother's memorial service, I think almost all the women who attended were wearing pearls in her honor.

Sam: As someone who contributed to Jean Becker's terrific book, "Pearls of Wisdom," what pearl did you choose and why?

Julie: I think I had two. There were so many to choose from but I chose a memory from vice presidential days. Your grandmother would come down to the old executive office building every other week for staff meetings and her small staff would sit with her and she often told a story or two. I've never forgotten the story she told about looking on the bright side of things. She told us, "George came home one day full of excitement. 'We're moving to Odessa, Texas,' he announced. Well, my heart just fell," she said. We were settled and happy. We had friends and life was good. The thought of picking up and moving hit me hard, but I paused a moment, pulled myself up, took a breath and said, 'I always wanted to live in Odessa.'" I think your grandmother practiced looking on the side all her life. There are times in my own life when I've had to face a disappointment and I've thought to myself, I've always wanted to live in Odessa.

Sam: Julie, what lessons did you learn from my grandmother?

Sam: I'll tell you two. The first one is be positive, find something good to say. Your grandmother told a story about how she and your grandfather as a young married couple were asked by the senior Bushes, her in-laws, to babysit for your grandfather's younger brother, Bucky, for the weekend. All was well and the senior Bushes came home. Afterward, your Ganny's mother-in-law, Mrs. Prescott Bush, Dorothy Bush told everyone, "You know, Barbara is the best cook." Your grandmother said, "You would've thought I served gourmet meals. All I had done was make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches." But she said, "That dear woman found something good to say about me."

And also, I learned from your grandmother the value of discipline. She did not procrastinate. If there was a task, she didn't rest until it was done. Your grandparents were both famous for their handwritten notes. If you sent her a note or a gift, she sat down and answered it immediately. A personal example is my father. He was a decoy carver and he created a carved brown trout for your grandfather. Well, my dad got thank-you notes from both your grandparents practically two days later.

I'll share another example of her self-discipline. As you know, your grandmother kept scrapbooks all her married life. Unlike many of us who, despite our best intentions, never seemed to keep up with our scrapbooks, your grandmother's scrapbooks were always up to date. She always had one open to an empty page with the glue sitting ready nearby. And when a photo came in or an invitation or a dinner card, she'd slap it in the very same day. As you probably know, there are 105 scrapbooks at the Bush Library and Archives in College Station, Texas. I'm sorry to say that's one lesson from your Ganny that didn't take hold with me. But finding the positive in life and discipline were two great lessons I learned from your wonderful grandmother.

Sam: I mean, there's only so much time in a day, but somehow she found time. I mean, I've been down to the library and gone through those scrapbooks, she saved everything, everything.

Julie: It really is an archive of their life together, isn't it?

Sam: Pretty amazing. So you stayed in touch with my grandparents after their White House days. How did you find them in their not so relaxing retirement?

Julie: Well, I was just gonna say, my view is they just never stopped. They helped launch the National Dialogue on Cancer. President Bush raised funds for victims of the tsunami in East Asian and the Katrina disaster with President Clinton. Your Ganny kept on visiting schools and literacy programs. The tremendously successful Celebration of Reading was held annually in four

states to raise funds for literacy. Your grandfather was devoted to the George Bush School of Public Service at Texas A&M University, meeting with students and becoming a part of the College Station community.

But they also had fun. They entertained hundreds and hundreds of guests in Maine. They traveled, they went to sporting events. Your Gampy jumped out of airplanes and had an aircraft carrier named after him. They were the personification of saying, make the most of every day. And I think that's one of the reasons why they were so greatly admired for their authenticity and so greatly mourned after they died.

Sam: We spent a lot of time talking about my Ganny, but I'm sure you have plenty of 41 stories, don't you?

Julie: After your grandfather lost the election to Bill Clinton in November '92, the White House staff was pretty darn glum. One morning in December, the staff were called to hurry over to the East Room for a quickly scheduled event. Well, once we got there, we kind of meld around and wondered what was going on. Suddenly we heard ruffles and flourishes, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, which of course means the president is arriving, but instead of President Bush, it was Dana Carvey who stepped up to the podium. He proceeded to do his impression of your grandfather who was in the audience. If you've seen the video, it's hysterical. Dana mimicked the president with his hand gestures and his voice. It was a moment that reminded us to laugh and just pointed out your grandfather's grace as a human being.

Sam: That's pretty telling of my grandfather, especially in the time when to your point, everyone was down in the dumps and I'm sure he was too because he was responsible for all those great people that helped him thus far through his presidency and to kind of lift their spirits in that way really showed that he had his eye on the people that really got them there. Julie, when it's all said and done, what will they say is Barbara Pierce Bush's greatest legacy?

Julie: In my mind, without a doubt, it's the cause of literacy. I know she's remembered for being down to earth and for her authenticity but she brought that pervasive nationwide problem out of the shadows and into wide public awareness. Uncounted lives have been changed and made better because of her advocacy, I really think that's it. Yes, people love to say that she was the wife of one president and the mother of another, but beyond that, there were so many causes and so much that she achieved and really literacy more than anything else.

Sam: Well, Julie, I'm so glad you could join us, especially during this current climate. It was a pleasure to have you.

Julie: It's wonderful to remember your grandmother and grandfather and of course,, a great honor to have known and worked with them.

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."

Lyrics

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.

