



All the Best Podcast
Episode 2: "The Meaning of Service"
Featuring Son of George H. W. Bush, Neil Bush

Neil: Dear George, Jeb, Neil, Marvin, Doro, I'm writing this letter on the last day of 1991. First I can't begin to tell you how great it was to have you here at Camp David. I loved the games. The marines are still smarting over their one in two record. I love Christmas Day marred only by the absence of Sam and Ellie. I loved the movies, some of them. I love the laughs. Most of all, I loved seeing you together. We are a family blessed and this Christmas simply reinforced all that.

I hope I didn't seem moody. I tried not to. When I came into this job I vowed that I would never wring my hands and talk about "the loneliest job in the world" or wring my hands about "the pressures or the trials". Having said that, I have been concerned about what lies ahead. There is no loneliness, though, because I am backed by a first-rate team of knowledgeable and committed people. No president has been more blessed in this regard. I have thought long and hard about what might have to be done. As I write this letter at year's end, there is still some hope that Iraq's dictator will pull out of Kuwait. I vary on this. Sometimes I think he might, and others I think he simply is too unrealistic, too ignorant of what he might face.

I have the peace of mind that comes from knowing that we have tried hard for peace, we have gone to the UN, we have formed a historic coalition. There have been diplomatic initiatives from country after country. And so here we are, a scant 16 days from a very important date, the date set by the UN for his total compliance with all UN resolutions including getting out of Kuwait totally.

I guess what I want you to know as a father is this. Every human life is precious. When the question is asked, "How many lives are you willing to sacrifice?" It tears at my heart. The answer of course is none. None at all. We have waited to give sanctions a chance. We have moved a tremendous force so as to reduce the risk to every American soldier if force has to be used, but the question of loss of life still lingers and plagues the heart. My mind goes back to

history. How many lives might've been saved if appeasement had given way to force earlier in the late '30s or earliest '40s? How many Jews might've been spared the gas chambers or how many Polish patriots might be alive today? I look at today's crisis as good versus evil. Yes, it is that clear.

I know my stance must cause you a little grief from time to time and this hurts me, but here at year's end I just want you to know that I feel every human life is precious. The little Iraqi kids too. Principal must be adhered to. Saddam cannot profit in any way at all from his aggression and from his brutalizing the people of Kuwait. And sometimes in life you have to act as you think best. You can't compromise, you can't give in, even if your critics are loud and numerous. So dear kids, batten down the hatches.

Senator Inouye of Hawaii told me, "Mister President, do what you have to do. If it is quick and successful, everyone can take credit. If it is drawn out, then be prepared for some in Congress to file impeachment papers against you." That's what he said and he's 100% correct.

And so I shall say a few more prayers mainly for our kids in the Gulf and I shall do what must be done and I shall be strengthened every day by our family love which lifts me up every single day of my life. I'm the luckiest dad in the whole wide world. I love you. Happy New Year and may God bless every one of you and all those in your family. Devotedly, Dad.

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 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 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".

Uncle Neil, so happy to have you join the show. Thank you for being part of something truly special. Welcome.

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

Sam: Neil, you're a brother, father, husband, international businessman, chairman of the Points of Light and the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation. Can you give our listeners more insight into your professional roles, and where exactly do you find the time to do it all?

Neil: You know, Sam I found that the busier you are, the more fun you have and the more you get done. And so I've chosen and I feel very blessed to pursue both a business career, and my business takes me frequently to Asia, but also I'm blessed to be kinda the head of and part of Bush family legacy movements including the Voluntary Service Movement as the chairman of Points of Light, the Barbara Bush Literacy Movement as chairman of the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation. Your grandfather was a huge believer in the importance of the bilateral relationship between China and the U.S. I'm the chairman of the George H. W. Bush Foundation for China, U.S. relations which is kind of a controversial situation right now given the hostility that Americans have towards China, but it's one that Dad believes strongly that China should be an ally in dealing with our world's biggest global challenges. And I'm on the board of the Bush School of Government and Public Service.

It really doesn't take that much time to be chairing these organizations, Sam, truth be told, because if you have a great leader and all of the leaders of these organizations are amazing, fabulous, well-organized, they have wonderful teams and they're promoting the legacies of Mom and Dad so beautifully that, you know, if I show up at a board meeting and participate in committee meetings and that kinda thing that I've done my duty. So it's not as much of a time consuming thing as it is a labor of love and a commitment of a passion towards extending legacies that, especially in these times, need to be extended. You know, the basic concept of civility and service with humility and service as a noble calling. You know, I love the name of your podcast, "All the Best". Dad didn't wake up one day where he didn't wish all the best in others. Where you and he and the Bush family have inculcated in us a sense that we have a duty to lift others in various ways.

And so these organizations that they founded will be long-lasting, sustainable legacies for lives incredibly well lived and lives that should be emulated.

Sam: Well, one of the main themes of our podcast is service. What does the idea of service mean to you?

Neil: I'm inspired by Dad's calling, truthfully, and he basically said that any definition of a successful life must include service to others. He often would say that he was blessed to have so many opportunities in this great country and in his life and that he felt an obligation to give back to others. And he set a great example for that not just for his kids and grandkids and other family members but he set a great example for our nation. And so service to me means giving of yourself in one way or another, in little ways or big ways, and every day we could do something to be of service to someone else. You can help walk an old lady across the street or...you know, you don't have to volunteer in a formal program or start your own initiative. You know, Mom and Dad often said you don't have to be president, first lady or governor to make a difference in the lives of others. Everyone can find a way to do it. So service to me means giving of yourself in order to help another human realize their fullest potential or help a community be stronger and better and help a nation be more vital.

So that's what it means to me.

Sam: Gampy and Ganny both kind of instilled that in our entire family and I think everyone's caught the bug somehow. Neil, as we'd mentioned before, you're involved in so much stuff but I wanna talk a little bit more about the Points of Light. How and why did the Points of Light begin and how do you continue to honor Gampy's vision and legacy through that organization?

Neil: So when Dad was elected president, before he was elected, as he was running for president he basically understood that government can't solve all of our problems and that there are problems that are playing out in communities all over America and that in these communities there are solutions being applied that nonprofit organizations are using their paid staff but also voluntary staff to increase capacity, to help solve those problems. And these problems are numerous, too many to numerate on this podcast.

And so he basically called on every American to become a point of light in the lives of others and he used a great metaphor saying that all of these organizations, the community organizations, the nonprofit organizations, companies, faith organizations that are sending volunteers into the community or sending their employees or their parishioners in the community to help others...he referred to them as a constellation of stars like a 1,000 points of light in a broad and peaceful sky. What a great image and a great calling. It's an inspiring message.

And so Points of Light was formed from that. The first kind of most recognized program of Points of Light which has survived to this day is the Daily Point of Light Award. There have been over 6,000 awards given to individuals who are giving of themselves to others. These are regular people who are doing extraordinary things to find ways to lift others in their community. And so our foundation, the Points of Light Organization was created to and continues to be a driver in a movement that is calling on more and more Americans to find ways to help others.

And Sam, I'll give you a little bit of good news, and I don't think Points of Light can take credit for all this, but when Dad first used the words points of light, there were 34 million Americans volunteering. Today there are over 64 million Americans. So the voluntary service movement has more than doubled. You know, more corporations, more faith organizations, more educational institutions are sending people into the community and it's helping, it's making a difference in the lives of others.

Sam: That's amazing to see the growth of the organization since Gampy spoke those words about 1,000 points of light. This past September we celebrated the first George H. W. Bush Points of Light Awards. So you talked about the 6,000 daily Points of Light. Where did the idea for this awards banquet come from? And now that the first ceremony's in the books, what is your vision for these awards?

Neil: When Dad passed away, it was amazing to be with you and your mom and your family and all of our family was together for those four or five days of celebration from Houston to Washington and back to Houston and College Station, and I was so moved and I think everyone in our family was moved not just by the testimonials about Dad's biography or the history he made as president, but about his character. The statements about what a good man he was and how he reached out and touched others in special ways. Like the pen pal in the Philippines, you know, that he wrote the letters to and we had no idea that he had that relationship or that he shaved his head, you know, for the leukemia kid. And he did small things and large things all the time, and the recognition during the funeral of his character to me was really special.

And so we thought of Points of Light...and the references, by the way, to points of light, the words points of light were frequent in testimonials. So we thought that after the passing that it would be a great idea to lift up our recognition program to go from the Daily Point of Light recognition. We've had other recognition programs that we've implemented but to raise it up to the highest level of recognition so that Dad's presidential legacy could tag along.

And so this year we decided...and it was an amazing event...incredible success. Garth Brooks was the major recipient of the recognition, the biggest name I should say, and he's done incredible things in mobilizing volunteers to do good through his brand. And we had other recognition that's more typical of the kinds of things we'll look for in the future. Chloe Thomson, for example, encountered a homeless woman on the street and she told her mother. So her mother and she had a conversation about it. Then so she ended up developing bags to be given to that woman and then to other women. And so it's ballooned into this wonderful charitable cause. And the point is if you see a problem in your community or if you see a problem in front of you that you feel like you can address then just do it. So by recognizing stories where people have just done it, it encourages others to take things into their own hands.

So I'm really excited about this launch of this presidential recognition program and looking forward to years of continued success with it.

Sam: We're really excited to see it grow and, you know, you set a high bar. I talked to your daughter, Lauren who's also involved and I said, "The bar's set pretty high."

Neil: We had some outstanding help obviously, including Lauren who herself is a great, shining, bright point of light, but she's so beautiful and elegant and did such a great job in helping organize this event with Ray Chambers who's an amazing philanthropist who's done so much for the world. He's been a global philanthropist. So it was just a fabulous event. I'm very, very proud of our team and especially Lauren.

Sam: I wanna shift to the other organization that you help with with Ganny. You helped launch her Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation which differs slightly from the National Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy. What's the difference between the two organizations?

Neil: Well, Mom, when she started the Barbara Bush National Literacy Foundation, focused on family literacy. And so she would raise money and then primarily give grants to adult learning centers around the country and she gave money to all 50 states. And we had a big fundraiser in Houston which raised most of the money during the years. And so when Mom said, "Neil, I want you and Maria to take over the Houston event but I'm gonna start taking a smaller role in these things." I said, "You know, mom, it only makes sense if the money that we raise in Houston stays in Houston so that we can use your legacy right here in your home town." And she agreed with that. We had a negotiation with the National Foundation. So we formed the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy

Foundation to keep most of the proceeds from our Houston event. And the difference is in Houston we're using the Barbara Bush name and her commitment to literacy to examine the landscape of literacy across the whole spectrum of ages, not just adult literacy but from childbirth all the way through high school and into adulthood.

And we did a study in Houston which was an amazing study that described the crisis of literacy in Houston. And if you look at every age group...and it relates heavily to poverty. If you're born into poverty, you hear fewer words, you have fewer books in the house, you're exposed to reading support-type mechanisms much less, and so these students...they're these kids that are, by the way, born with a God given potential but whose potential is stymied from the beginning. These kids get into kindergarten ill-prepared to learn, they graduate from third grade without reading at a third grade level and they inevitably end up either dropping out of high school or limping through high school. Then they're not career ready. So they're not realizing their fullest potential. So our leader in Houston, Dr. Julie Baker Finck brought together like 80 or 90 stakeholders who have subsequently written up a game plan, a blueprint for community action at every age group. We've divided the community into various age groups. We continue to bring together folks and we serve as a catalyst to try to raise awareness, raise capacity through volunteerism, raise funds so that these programs could be better funded. And we're making a difference in this community.

My next hope for the foundation is that we focus on neighborhoods, because there are so many wonderful solutions that are playing out city wide, but it makes a 5% difference in test scores for third grade reading or whatever. If we focus all of these resources that work on a single neighborhood then I think we can have a huge impact, you know, of...instead of 5%, a 50% increase in success rates in the third grade reading tests as an example. So Julie Baker Finck is doing a great job. We've got a huge Ladies for Literacy Guild, we've got a great young professionals group, we've got a lot of talent moving in. our celebration of reading, by the way, is getting bigger and bigger every year. So things are going really well with it and I'm proud to shamelessly use Mom and her name and while she was alive she would limp into, like, events with J.J. Watt and, you know, big Dwight Howard would tower over her, and she attended all of the big celebrations of reading. She was an amazing advocate herself, but we continue to use her shamelessly in her absence.

Sam: Yeah, and I think that's what she wanted.

Neil: I think she was pretty happy with all that.

Sam: I'd say so. Well, as you know, family is everything. Can you share how Ganny and Gampy always continued to make our family a priority throughout the years, especially during his time as president?

Neil: That's really true and I think this is true of George W. too when he was president but, you know, when you're in the White House...I've never been a president but I feel like, you know, you have your professional lives as first lady and president and that's an overwhelming responsibility. But the safety net is provided by knowing and having family around. And so in Mom and Dad's case, they had family like your mother and big Marv was there frequently, and I loved going to the White House during those days with my little babies and visiting, and they loved welcoming us, and it was kinda like a reprieve from their formal duties to have family around. There's no question that what gave me confidence...and I struggled as a reader. I was a dyslectic kid. I had troubles in my professional life. I was given credit, Sam, you may not believe this, for bringing down the savings and loan industry 30 years ago. I was one of many directors of boards and stuff and Dad was president at the time.

But there was never a doubt in my mind that their unconditional love was kind of a cocoon for me. I never lost confidence in myself, I never lost faith in family, I never felt abandoned or alone. And it's a great lesson I think for all of the family members. You know, I try to shower my kids and family with unconditional love every chance I get and encourage them and do all I can to be supportive and helpful of them because I think it's just one of the most important, most powerful, most enabling qualities that a human can have is that knowledge of unconditional love. And Mom and Dad blessed us with that.

Sam: Neil, since you just brought up the savings and loan investigations, I'd love to talk more about that. We talked earlier about service, and certainly Gampy and Ganny believed that public service was and is a noble calling. And not only for the candidates and office holders of both parties but for their families as well. You can personally attest to that and I wonder if you would share your experiences during the savings and loan investigations that took place during Gampy's administration.

Neil: It was a crazy time. I'll be honest with you. Just as a quick background, every savings and loan institution in Denver, Colorado failed in the '80s because the oil prices had gone down and Congress had allowed for higher risk loans to real-estate portfolios, etc. etc. So realtors leveraged up and when the market went down, savings and loans went belly up. And these are federally insured institutions so there were some regulatory reviews. So I was on the board of one institution. We had regulatory review. All of the loans we made were reviewed by the regulators and approved by the regulators. So then when

the institution went belly up, they went back and did a retrospective, and because I was on the board I became highlighted. Dad's reelection campaign was gearing up. I was pretty low-hanging fruit in terms of a target. I was never accused of anything illegal and yet I would be confronted by people in Denver, Colorado, "You should be thrown in jail." I remember going to Washington and there were, "Jail Neil Bush" signs pasted on the telephone poles. It was treated as though there was some high crime committed.

It was tough and it hurt me I think business wise for a long time. And so there was a drag in terms of my potential for making a living or earning a living. I moved from Colorado to Houston, Texas to kinda nicer confines at the time, and things have gone very well for me since then. But I count my blessings every single day. Well, maybe it's easier now that the Silverado thing's way behind me but, you know, for all the amazing opportunities I have in my life and the family and the love of friends and, you know, the business opportunities I have and just the joyful things I get to do every single day of my life. So I guess the trick is not to let the cards you're dealt, if they're not the most favorable cards, get you down. You gotta play the hand you have and just do the best you can.

Sam: Neil, before we wrap up, I'd love to hear one of your favorite memories of growing up with Gampy and Ganny.

Neil: One of my favorite memories of Gampy was he loved boats, I loved boats. He had a boat on the Potomac River and one night he came home late. He was working in the Congress so this would've been in the 1960s, probably '65 or '66. And he said to the family sitting at the table, "I wanna take the boat around to Chesapeake Bay." And he said, "Are there any volunteers?" so of course, you know, nobody else would...and I raise my hand. And so we packed up. It was night. We had had dinner. So we were taking off basically in the dark of night in his boat, the Rebel I think it was called at the time. And so we took off heading up the river, and it started getting really foggy but he plowed on. And we didn't have like GPS system at the time, so I don't know how the hell we stayed in the river, and it got foggy. And then all of a sudden a barge came into our view in front of us and Dad somehow missed the barge. So we decided wisely to tuck away in a cove somewhere. And it started raining that night and I was sleeping out, he was sleeping under the deck, so he came out and pulled me back into the deck. But that experience was great.

Sam: That is a great experience. I haven't heard that story before.

Neil: That was before the Fidelity days. That had five Fidelities but the Rebel was the predecessor to all that. It was a pretty fast boat but nothing like the Fidelity.

Sam: Yeah, and fast forward to now, you're kind of the keeper of the boats now, right?

Neil: I'm the boat man. We need to share the boat.

Sam: Certify some people.

Neil: Yeah. You're certifiable.

Sam: We gotta get some certifications out there. Well, let's end with this one because, you know, the theme obviously is Gampy and Ganny, but it's their service to others. Is there anything that you learned from Gampy and Ganny in terms of service and its importance over the years?

Neil: I just hark back on the notion that Dad has stated verbally and that is that service is a noble calling, that there's good that comes from serving others. And in today's world, a lot of those that have put their oar in the water or have gotten their uniform dirty, as Dad would say, in the arena of service are being hammered for being establishment folks or whatever. I mean, whether you're a newcomer to service and you wanna upset the apple cart and turn everything around and make a difference in that way, kind of in a revolutionary type way, or if you'd been serving for 40 years, your service should be applauded. You should be commended for wanting to make a difference in the life of others in terms of public service.

So Pierce is thinking about running. So I have a son that's interested in politics and may run. If he does it, God bless him. I hope he's successful and I hope he would make a great difference in the lives of others. But whether he does or not, everybody can find a way to serve others. Getting back to the concept of light, there's a light in each of us that shines and calls us to help others in different ways. Start an organization that can make a giant difference over time or just say a kind word to people. Be kinder and gentler and more thoughtful and lift others in every way. Write notes to friends that are suffering in some way. Service to me means one, it's a noble calling. Two, you can do it in the public arena and everyone who gets their uniform dirty deserves credit for that whether you agree with their politics or not. And three, everyone can find a way to serve others.

Sam: Well, that's a great way to end it. Neil, thank you for coming on "All the Best". We'll talk to you soon.

Neil: I'm proud of you, Sam, for doing what you're doing. This is great.

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

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