



All the Best Podcast
Episode 32: “May Your Future Be Worthy of Your Dreams”
Featuring Former Speechwriter, Ed McNally

Ed: April 20th, 1991 from Camp David. Dear Ed, I read your footnote. The bad news for me is you're heading west, way west. The good news is like MacArthur, you shall return. You've been awfully good to the Bushes, Ed, and we wish you Godspeed. Alaska will be the winner and it's right for you to go to the courtroom. Good luck and a million thanks. George H. W. Bush

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 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 though it.

And 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: Edward McNally first started working with my family as a speechwriter during my grandfather's administration. While there, he was widely credited for his writings in connection with the first Gulf War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, including nationally televised Oval Office addresses and the Medal of Freedom award to Lech Walesa. He was also known for my grandmother, Barbara Bush's watershed speech on diversity and choice at Wellesley College, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary on June 1st. NBC anchor Tom Brokaw called it "the best commencement speech I've ever heard." CBS news anchor Dan Rather declared it was "the best speech made by any person connected with any summit." Following his work in my grandfather's administration, Ed then went on to be appointed by my uncle, George W. Bush, as the nation's first General Counsel for Homeland Security and counter-terrorism following the September 11 attacks. Ed, thank you so much for joining us on "All the Best" today.

Ed: Thanks, Sam.

Sam: Whenever we speak with the men and women who worked for my grandparents, I'm always curious to learn your own personal career path to service. In other words, how did you come to find yourself working at the White House?

Ed: George and Barbara Bush completely changed my life, as did their son, George W. I first met Ambassador Bush when I was a Yale undergrad in the '70s. The Nixon Administration, the Ford Administrations had ended and he was still two years away from running for president. I had the great good fortune after I graduated from Yale to be brought on by Andy Card and others as a junior field organizer in Florida for the Florida straw votes. I worked for your grandfather for a time and then I went away to law school. Amazingly, many years later, I was working for the U.S. Attorney in Manhattan as a federal prosecutor, and an African-American DEA agent was assassinated in Staten Island. And I contacted the new Bush speechwriters, some of whom I knew, and let them know about this remarkable man and his remarkable wife who was talking very publicly about the tragedy of drug trafficking. My suggestion was that he should call the widow and offer her comfort. But because he's so remarkable, he said, "Look. New York's half an hour away. Let's go meet with her and the men and women who served with her late husband." And that reconnected me to the President and he asked me to serve as his speechwriter.

Sam: Well, in this episode, Ed, of "All the Best," we are commemorating my grandmother's fairly historic commencement speech at Wellesley College 30 years ago. As a First Lady, how did she sort out all the invitations she received and once she agreed to give remarks, how did the process work from there?

Ed: Your grandmother was a really rockstar popular commencement speaker. People wanted her. People loved Barbara Bush. So each spring, her husband as president, as is true with most presidents, did four or five diverse commencements. And each spring, Mrs. Bush did four or five diverse commencements. Maybe one of the colleges she selected would be a historically black college. Another would be a historically women's college. Another might be something that is related to one of our service academies. Another might be a great state school. So she did this, year in, year out. She did it as the wife of the vice president and she would pick her favorite and then try to give remarks that were pretty consistent in any given graduation year, meaning she wasn't trying to tell four or five different stories. She focused on one core message.

Sam: And so, not long after my grandmother was announced as the Wellesley College commencement speaker, a not so kind and gentle controversy erupted over her selection. Can you give our listeners the context surrounding that drama?

Ed: First of all, many first ladies run into controversy over the course of their term. At least as far back as Martha Washington and Mary Todd Lincoln, there were controversies attached to first ladies. Barbara Bush was unique because there basically weren't any. Never before really, never since, except this one odd moment. What had happened is the Wellesley College seniors get to pick the graduation speaker. They had sought Alice Walker, famous for her novel, "The Color Purple." Their second choice was Barbara Bush, as she famously acknowledged in her remarks.

Barbara: Now, I know your first choice today was Alice Walker, known for "The Color Purple." Instead, you got me, known for the color of my hair.

Ed: But after she was selected, some of the seniors created a protest movement and a petition saying that it was against the spirit of Wellesley... Wellesley, the home of CEOs, and future presidents, and future secretaries of one cabinet or another. It was wrong to be honoring someone for the accomplishments of their spouse, rather than for who, she or he were in of themselves. And in setting that standard, they walked into a kind of magnificent Barbara Bush trap.

Sam: Well, as the date neared, a lot of hard work went into the message my grandmother shared that day and you were a key part of that team that pulled it together. Can you take us behind the scenes?

Ed: Mrs. Bush, for important speeches in any graduation season, got together a number of her key aides, her main speechwriter, her Chief of Staff, others who were on her team, to talk through the ideas. And I remember, very clearly, Mrs. Bush pointing out kind of the obvious, although it's ironic in retrospect. She said, "Look. No one ever remembers anything that's said at a graduation." So she began with that premise, keep it short to the point, don't have such high expectations. And, of course, history proved her very wrong. Those words she spoke that day became among the most famous of her lifetime of a lifetime of any of the prominent Bushes.

Barbara: By the end of the meeting, we had settled on three things I wanted the students to consider. You have to get involved in something larger than yourself. Remember to get joy out of life, and cherish human relationships. When I read my final draft to George, he suggested, "Read to your child." And I added, "Hug your child. Love your child." Imagine my forgetting the most important and obvious things. We cut and pasted and we're ready to start the graduation trail.

Sam: But when the big day came, not only did my grandmother speak, she also brought Raisa Gorbachev, the wife of Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. And in a highly unusual turn of events, especially for a first lady at the time, most, if not all the networks, carried the speech live on television. Can you describe that special day from your perspective?

Ed: The whole thing was amazing because it took on a life of its own. Mrs. Bush had never been protested. The protests became loud and noisy. They went viral. Even though we didn't have 24/7 news, and the internet, and cellphones, it went viral. As far as I know, no first lady's speech, in any context, has ever been carried live, where all three networks interrupted their regular scheduling to carry the speech live. Our friend, Susan Page, the Washington Bureau Chief for USA Today, wrote this magnificent book, "The Matriarch" about your grandmother. And in several parts of that book, she describes how one of the extraordinary edges of Barbara Bush is that she was actually quietly subversive, and she really was. And you can see it in her remarks that day. But more than that, bringing the wife of the Soviet Premier was a brilliant move because it was in the middle of a great international summit and it kind of brought a whole new element and dynamic and allowed these graduates, some of whom had criticized Barbara Bush, to look at her side by side with the wife of the Soviet Premier.

Barbara: Then, it was Friday, June 1st. The day had arrived. From the moment we got to Boston, it was thrilling. Raisa had interesting things to say about everything. Governor Dukakis met us at the airport, which was very kind. At every street corner, there were people cheering. She was just not used to people at home cheering them, so the Boston welcome was especially nice.

Sam: The reaction to the speech was universally positive. And to this day, numerous scholars point to it as one of the great speeches of the time. Why do you think it resonated so well?

Ed: It was a remarkable day. I was at the White House that day. I didn't travel to Wellesley. After the speech ended, I went to check on various people in the East Wing, the West Wing, and I can't tell you the number of office doors I opened up, of friends and colleagues, especially women, who were in tears. And they weren't in tears at any words I had written for Barbara Bush. They were moved, as was the country, as has been history, because of the power and the example of Mrs. Barbara Bush. I'm one of those who recognizes if there is an argument that of all the prominent Bushes, let's say the Bushes who have served as president, or governor, or first lady, she was, in some ways, one of the most, if not the most extraordinary. She cared a lot about language, that's why literacy was at the core of her message of caring, and health, and hope. And she cared a lot about her own words and was very hands-on in drafting her own remarks.

Barbara: "You have to decide now," the pastor instructed the children, "which you are, a giant, a wizard, or a dwarf." At that, a small girl tugging at his pants leg asked, "But where does the mermaid stand?" And the pastor tells her, "There are no mermaids." And she said, "Oh yes, there are. I am a mermaid." Now, this little girl knew what she was, and she was not about to give up on either her identity or the game.

Ed: But I think there were other reasons why this particular speech had such lasting power. Long time ABC News White House correspondent Ann Compton is one of many who actually credit Barbara Bush and her remarks at Wellesley with helping to popularize a fundamental message and truth that today, almost everyone in American society takes as a given. And Compton said in her own book that it's a message from Barbara Bush that stayed with her every day of her life. So in my view, it wasn't so much that Barbara Bush hit a home run, although God knows she did. The networks went crazy. The anchors called it the best graduation speech they had ever heard. It was how it hit home in a very personal and particular way. I think that the core of that is that she had such moral credibility to tell this story, the way no other speaker probably then

or since could. And the words at the penultimate part of her speech, which were in the brochure at the funeral of Barbara Bush, are the words that have hit home with friends, family, and many strangers ever since.

Barbara: At the end of your life, you will never regret not having passed one more test, winning one more verdict, or not closing one more deal. You will regret time not spent with a husband, a child, a friend, or a parent.

Sam: Well, Ed, I want to say thank you so much for sharing your stories with us today and I want to end with this. What's harder, writing a speech or giving a speech?

Ed: So I think it's a fair question and I'm sure the real answer is it depends on the individual. But I am one of those who really believes, and Barbara Bush is a testament to this, that those who we regard as particularly skilled speakers were all writers. They wrote. Barbara Bush, in particular, loved the English language. She gave friends and aides books about speaking, books about writing. She really cared about it. It shows in all of her books. It shows in everything she did. So I think that once you have a speech well-crafted, well-honed, and well-written, which Mrs. Bush did regularly, you've got something authentically strong.

Sam: Well, Ed, it was a pleasure listening to your stories about my grandparents. Thank you for joining us on "All the Best."

Ed: Absolutely, Sam. Be well.

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.

