



All the Best Podcast

Episode 49: "Dear Ganny and Gampy...It's Me, Jenna" *Featuring Granddaughter of George and Barbara Bush, Daughter of George W. Bush, and TODAY Show Host, Jenna Bush Hager*

Jenna: November 30th, 2011. Dearest Jenna and Barbara. After I heard that Henry, a thoughtful, great loving man gave Gampy's letter to you early, I felt I could relax and get my letter to you nearer to the actual birthday. So many things to debate. Do I write separate letters or do I write one letter to you both? You certainly are two distinctive, wonderful people and yet you're closer than any two people I know. Random thoughts. God was good to you in that you were so different in a physical appearance, both lovely looking. You're both smart and bright. Your interests are different and your friends are the same and different also. And friends. You girls have more fabulous friends and have shared some of them with us. Thank you for that. Friends are friends forever as Michael W. Smith's song says. How true. I don't know if I was supposed to write about your growing pains as normal young people growing up in an abnormal political world. You had them. So what? Among other things, thanks to an amazing mother and father with the patience of saints, who set a good example and especially your own discipline, you have grown into absolutely wonderful, caring, giving, loving people. Gampy and I are so proud of you and love you more than you will ever know. Love and more love, Ganny.

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."

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."

My cousin, Jenna Bush Hager, is the cohost of "Today with Hoda and Jenna." She joined "Today" as a correspondent and contributor in August, 2009. As part of her work on the show, in 2012 Jenna received the daytime Emmy award for outstanding morning show. Jenna is also the author of the number one New York Times, bestseller, "Sisters First" written with her sister, Barbara, and the New York Times bestseller "Ann's Story: A Journey of Hope," which she wrote after interning with UNICEF in Latin America. She also coauthored the children's books, "Our Great, Big Backyard", and "Read All About It" with her mother, former first lady, Laura Bush. Most recently, Jenna published "Everything Beautiful In Its Time, Seasons of Love and Loss," which chronicles the stories and wisdom passed down to her from our grandparents. Jenna, thank you for joining us today on "All The Best."

Jenna: Thanks Sam. I'm so happy to be here. What took so long?

Sam: A lot of negotiating behind the scenes but we finally came up with a figure. So, our show is based on service and I want to start with this. We were both so lucky to grow up with Gampy and Ganny as incredible role models and grandparents. And service to others was one of the greatest examples they set for us. What did you learn from them about the importance of giving back, and how do you carry on that tradition in your own life?

Jenna: I think, and I think you'll agree with me, the most important thing they did for our family was to really emphasize the importance of family and about unconditional love. And I think one of the things in service that they did was the humility behind it. You know, nobody was like sending a tweet or saying "Here, I'm going to do something good.". I mean, in fact, some of the things that our Gampy did, you and I never even knew about until after he passed away. And I think that humility and that sense of giving as just part of our life, without it needing to be announced, without needing to win an award or be

congratulated for just doing what is right, is so much part of who I hope to be. I mean, I think you would agree that so much of what they gave us was a figure to watch.

They modeled what service looks like. They modeled what compassion looks like, what love looks like. One of the things Sam, that I've been thinking about a lot as I try to build my family with three little kids, is that I don't remember every detail of what life was like with them at the helm. I do remember some, but I don't remember everything, but I do remember what it felt like to be under their roof, whether it was in Washington or in Maine. And that was just a house filled with love. There was tons of laughter where we could be free in some ways and be ourselves and that even when we made mistakes, we would be loved. The reason why it felt like that was because of them. Because they loved each other. They loved their kids, they loved to laugh. And so, in the same vein as watching them serve quietly, humbly, but with great fortitude, they created this house filled with love. And it's not always so easy, but it's something I hope I can emulate.

Sam: Well, there's one thing I know you picked up from Ganny and your mom, who was a librarian, it's your love of books. So, I want to talk about your transformation into the next Oprah here. Can you talk about your book club, "Read with Jenna," how the idea started, the amazing influence you now have in the book world, and your process for choosing books to highlight each month.

Jenna: First of all, you're going to only call me Oprah from now on, if that's okay with you. I'd like to just be addressed as Oprah, no. It's so cool. And I think you will remember this too, that when we were little and spent summers in Maine with our grandmother, she would say, "Go do your summer reading." And the reason why she would say that is that she loved to read more than anybody I've ever met. She loved books. And so I went from having Ganny read to me to sharing books with her later in life. And I have letters where she sent me books and I've sent her some, she would write about the book afterwards almost as if a mini book report. And I loved sharing books with her. I miss that about her. And my mom was a librarian as well. My sister loves to read.

So, it is so much fun, this new part of my job. We just thought like "Americans love to read. It's not always reported. Let's start a book club." and so we have, and we try to choose books that are by debut diverse authors, because we know that we want to make a difference and we want different voices to be heard, and I think that's the other thing that Ganny and Gampy loved was to be in conversation with people that were different than them, people that weren't

exactly like them. They liked the debate. They liked to be surrounded by views that weren't exactly the same as theirs. And so I feel like it's really cool to be part of this. I read constantly. This is like the gift that our family gave us that we didn't even know about. Like there's of course the genetics, and then there's the love of things. And you might say you have the love of dogs or being outdoors or whatever it is, like Ganny gave me the gift of books.

Sam: Well, speaking of books, Jenna, we have to talk about your new book "Everything is Beautiful in its Time, Seasons of Love and Loss." In it, you share moving and funny stories about Gampy and Ganny and the many pieces of wisdom they passed along to help shape your life. What inspired you to write the book and could you share one of your favorite stories?

Jenna: The night that Ganny died, Henry was in Texas, Barbara was in Texas. So I was alone with the girls and I'd put them to bed, and I turned on the TV and there were all of these in memoriams. These public people talking about our public grandmother. And at first, when you're so raw and grief, it kind of hurt. Like public grieving is a very strange, unique thing. And at first it really hurt because I was like, "Oh my gosh, there's no Sam talking about what she was like as a grandmother." And of course there wouldn't be, it was the night she died, but, it felt like there was only one side of her represented. There was Barbara Bush, the politician's wife, the First Lady. Some of the things they said rang true. Some felt a little hurtful. And so what I did after just compulsively watching, like I couldn't stop, I turned off the TV and I wrote her a letter.

It was a letter she would never read. And I wrote it for myself, really. Just to have another voice in all those voices that I heard on the TV. And of course it was Ganny that taught us how to publicly grieve. She taught us how to do it. She taught us what it will feel like. And later, I realized what a beautiful gift it is, right? Because people will stop and say, "I loved your grandma." And you'll hear stories about Ganny and Gampy forever, which is a beautiful gift. But I wrote this book really, I started writing it, not as a book, it was journal entries. It was letters to them in a process of the healing from losing two people, three people, my grandma, Jenna too. So I wrote about it for myself, really and then eventually I thought, why not put this out there?

Sam: Well, Jenna, you mentioned writing the letter to Ganny two years after Gampy and Ganny passed away. You penned a beautiful letter, thanking them for all the lessons they taught you and Barbara over the years. Could you share some of those lessons with us?

Jenna: Well, I feel like you will probably agree with me that some of the most precious things that we have, aren't things that they passed on. The letters that

Gampy wrote Ganny during World War II, he was the most beautiful poetic writer and what he wrote to her is at the center of our family. Their love was something that we so wanted to be part of, that we wanted to be in the glow of their love as much as we possibly could. So those letters, but Ganny also wrote tons. I mean, I feel like our memories of being little kids or even adults, waking up early in Maine, is to see her in that little sun porch, writing letters, reading the newspaper, like that's what I picture. They weren't afraid to write how they felt, whether it was pure love or I even received kind of a scolding letter from Ganny.

Sam: You're not the only one.

Jenna: I wish I still had my, she told me in the postscript to tear it up and never showed it to anybody. So I did cause it was startling, but I think that's what was so lovely about them. There was transparency and they wrote it so that we always will have it. And so, yeah, so I wrote to them and I still sometimes do. It's letters they'll never read and it's a way to let them know I miss them.

Sam: Well, Jenna, you and your sister, Barbara have the amazing distinction of having your grandfather and father both win the presidency. Besides being younger, as we both were for Gampy's presidency, what was the difference for you growing up as the granddaughter of the president and the daughter of the president?

Jenna: One thing that Gampy did, and then my dad followed suit, is Christmases were always in Washington, D.C. They didn't want the Secret Service to have to travel on Christmas. But the other reason is that we could all be there. Once the White House is gone, nobody owns a house it's big enough to fit our huge family. You know, those Christmases was a place for us all to be and then we would go on to camp David. And so those were 12 years of our lives together and it was amazing. And I think we probably could have been anywhere just with this group, but the fact that we were in this historical, magical place that felt so foreign from our day to day lives and the fact that there were 10 grandchildren to play with, to run around with, like we just had such wonderful times.

And I think when you're little, the harshness of politics, isn't quite as profound. I do remember one of my first memories in, I think, Washington was being at a grocery store and seeing the Newsweek magazine with the words, "Wimp Factor" and wimp was like really one of those like eighties and nineties words that we used. Like it was a word that kids knew and the connotation was clear and so to see this man who, to us, was our hero, we didn't even know probably then how heroic he really was. So to see that word felt jarring and I have that

memory and I remember asking my mom, like, what does this even mean? And I think, like now more than ever, the fact that he was humble and wouldn't brag about himself and that's why they're calling him a wimp, like how much we long for that. A type of man whose love was gentle.

Like, that to me is what a true leader looks like. Somebody that led with love instead of fear. And so, you know, gosh, I miss that. And the same with my dad, he is somebody that isn't always understood. You know, when we were in high school and college watching some of the things that people said about him, like they just didn't feel right to the person we love. But what we realized is there's no possibility of getting that right. Like nobody knows them like we do. There was always going to be a disconnect between the president as a politician and the president as a dad. And sometimes that hurts and then you get used to it and you realize that's just the way it was.

Sam: Well, Jenna, I want to talk about the Today Show. It has been amazing to see your meteoric rise there from correspondent all the way to now cohost of the "Hoda and Jenna Show." Jenna, tell us about working with Hoda. She seems awesome and what it's like to be a part of the Today Show family.

Jenna: I'm loving it. I mean, I can't believe it really, but I'm loving it and Hoda is such a bright light. She's so much fun to sit next to. And I think it's so funny because it's like, you know me, people are like, are y'all really the "Today Show family," are you really that close? Like, I don't know how you could do this job if you weren't. To be surrounded by people that I really, really like that. That I want to spend time with. Hoda and I've been going to Soul Cycle now that New York is coming back and feels alive and Samana lives two doors down from me. So our girls are friends and I am so excited to be at a place where everybody really likes each other, respects each other. To be able to come back to a place after three maternity leaves, I wanted to make sure that was right. But yes, I've had three of my babies while working at the Today Show and wanted to come back. Like, I was excited to come back to work. It's a really wonderful feeling and I feel like if you don't have a support system at work, create one, because it makes work so joyous to be surrounded with people you're really crazy about.

Sam: Jenna, you mentioned New York opening back up, which is very exciting news, but the last couple of months have been crazy with the Coronavirus changing our everyday lives in so many different ways. Homeschooling, Zoom call learning, social distancing from friends and family, and much, much more. What has been the most difficult part of this year for you as a mother? And what do the kiddos think about this sudden interruption to their normal lives?

Jenna: They were a little bit like "what's going" on because we left for spring break and then just never went back to school. And you know, I would never have thought that a show that is run under NBC news would be done by home with like a ring light and my iPhone on FaceTime. But it was, and the truth is even though of course the studio was a dream and hopefully one day we'll get back to it, the show was still fun to do. The show was still good to do. And I think it shows that it's the people that you work with that make the difference. You know, I wanted to be next to Hoda, even if it was FaceTime. I wanted to be talking with her about what was going on in our country. And so it's really about the people you are with in life that make a difference.

I will tell you homeschooling, I was a teacher so I was sure that I was going to be good at helping facilitate the Zoom school, but I could not do it. I lost my patience in not a good way. And Henry, I was like, "Honey, I don't get it." He was like, "You just... they're your children, don't do it." They snuck into the show several times and got into fights on TV over Barbies, stuff like that. That's just karma. But Barbara and I, you know what we were like, there was just a little bit of that coming for me. But honestly it was also really beautiful because we were by ourselves as a family, Henry stepped up and just like, I can't even believe, in tremendous ways because I was working in the morning, you know? And he told his work like at 11 o'clock, I'll be there, but in the morning, I'm helping with the kids do homeschooling so Jenna can do her show.

There was something really beautiful and simplified about our lives because it was just the five of us and we relied on each other. We didn't see other people, you know, we were in quarantine and there was something about it that was really beautiful because we took advantage of life as it was. We let our kids stay up late and layed and stared at the moon. Things that we would never do in the hustle and bustle of our ordinary lives. And so a lot of that I'm hoping to take with us, even though the world is hopefully coming back.

Sam: We talked about looking at the stars with your kids at night. What better place to watch the stars than in Kennebunkport, Maine, or as Gampy referred to it as our anchor to Winward? I know you feel the same way about our special piece of heaven, tucked on the rocky coastline of Southern Maine. Can you talk about why it is such a special place and share a favorite memory from your summers there?

Jenna: I think especially since our family, my immediate family moved around so much, you know, and we have like all these different chapters of our lives, the only consistent part of it was this place in Maine, this place that meant family, that meant Gampy and Ganny, that meant cousins and uncles and aunts that we may not see throughout the rest of the year. The fact that it's just the

most magnificent looking place. Like my mom always says coming from West Texas, that the first time she visited with my dad, she almost couldn't believe it was real. But I also think because Gampy loved it so much, because it was their history, where they got engaged on the rocks, was why we wanted to be there. Watch him be free like he was probably as a 19 year old boy on the ocean. His favorite place where he could look out and the horizon seemed endless and possibilities seemed endless. To be with him on his boat and to bask in that in his happy place, means that it will be our happiest places for the rest of our life.

Sam: Well, Jenna, I want to end with this and first, thank you so much. I know you're super busy with all the kids and shows and everything, but in everything you do, you radiate a positive and joyful energy that is contagious for anyone who watches or comes in contact with you. What is your secret to finding joy in your everyday life and sharing that with everyone? Do you have any advice for someone who is trying to find that joy?

Jenna: Gampy wrote this letter. He wrote about the pursuit of happiness and he was a happy man. I mean, he was not a man that brought work home. He was the type of grandfather that even if he'd had a terrible day at work, we had no idea because he would play with us and be genuinely happy to see us, but he talked about pursuing happiness. And so when I think about raising children, I mean, that's what I want to do. I want to work on having a happy family, having a happy life for the rest of my life. But I think joy is a choice. I think we can wake up and like, look outside and think like, "Oh, look at this trash on the ground, look at this noise." Or you can wake up and be grateful for what you have and write it down.

One thing that Henry and I did before the pandemic, before we were next to each other without any space was early in the morning while I was having my first cup of coffee, I would text Henry three specific things that I was grateful for. And they're really specific like Poppy in her pajamas "saying beans and spaghetti blow my mind," which she did. I think by writing three specific things, and sometimes they have to do with the other person, sometimes they don't, it unifies a marriage and it starts the day with three little things that you're grateful for instead of just rushing through your day, you have that moment. So that's one way that I think is a tangible, easy way to spread joy, to be grateful, to choose to be grateful. And if you start your day like that, there were very few days that got off track.

Sam: Well, Jenna, thank you for sharing your stories and joy with us today on "All the Best."

Jenna: Thank you. I love this podcast.

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.

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.