



All the Best Podcast

Episode 53 ‘In Honor of our Service Members’

Featuring the CEO of the United Service Organizations, Dr. J.D. Crouch

JD: February 1st, 1991. I traveled to three bases to support our military and their families. The first stop was Cherry Point. Some of the Marine's based there were KIA. I think I saw tears in Al Grey's eyes. Al, the commandant of the Marine Corps, looked to me a little down right after the State of the Union. So I stopped and said, Al, I know you had a tough night. I'm thinking of you and I know you lost some Marines. Yesterday, he had the same emotional look and I can see why, because when I got up to speak, there were a lot of teary faces of wives in the audience. None of the wives who lost their husbands were there, but there were a lot of nervous, worried, Marines and families. They had some 70,000 deployed to the Gulf. I decided when I was speaking that I had to get through my text without crying. It's hard to do when they play the Marine Hymn or the Star Spangled Banner, or when they salute you and hold up signs of total support. Or when you see the kid mouthing the words, bring my dad home safe. I decided to look past the first row where there were a lot of crying faces and look at the press are way back in the back of the room. And that helped. And I got stronger. 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."

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."

Dr. JD Crouch, II was elected the 23rd President and Chief Executive Officer of the United Service Organizations, or the USO, in July of 2014. The USO holds a special place in our family as my great-grandfather Prescott Bush, chaired the USO National Campaign during World War II, helping raise \$34 million in 1942, his first year at the helm. Under my uncle, George W. Bush, Dr. Crouch served as assistant to the President, U.S. Ambassador to Romania, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy and Deputy National Security Advisor. Dr. Crouch also served pro bono for 10 years as a reserve deputy sheriff in Southwest, Missouri, where he was named Missouri deputy sheriff of the year in 2000. We're so lucky to have Dr. Crouch from the USO with us today. Welcome to the show, Doctor.

JD: Thank you very much. It's great to be here.

Sam: Dr. Crouch. I'd like to start with this question for our younger listeners. What does the USO do and who do you serve?

JD: Well, the USO is a organization that was founded in February of 1941, just before the United States entered World War II. So that means our 80th birthday is coming up next February and what we have been through that entire 80 years is really the vital link between the American people and their servicemen. We provide that sense of gratitude to them. That sense that Americans back home are thinking about them when we send them forward into battle or deploy them overseas and the like. And we do that in a number of different ways. You know, we really start from the day they first get into basic all the way through their military journey until the time that they take that uniform off. Some of those times are wonderful. Some of them are not so wonderful, but the USO is there for them. And we do that by deploying with them. I have people today in war zones, in Kandahar and Iraq and Bodrum, where they're supporting the over 200,000 that are deployed overseas, as well as the almost 2 million more that are here back in the United States in various forms.

Sam: Well, doctor, a lot of our discussions here on All the Best touch on my grandparents, who epitomized service for my entire family, but the history of the USO and how it got started back in 1941, as you stated, actually involves the person who most inspired my grandfather. That would be his father, Prescott S. Bush. What can you tell us about that history?

JD: It's a great story that your great-grandfather Prescott S. Bush, who had been a Senator as well. He was tapped in early 1942, which was about a year after we were founded, to develop the USO National Campaign to raise funds for it. I think Roosevelt and your great grandfather knew that the way to connect Americans was to have them put skin in the game to support the military through this organization. So they created it and over the course of the war, and I think four campaigns, your great grandfather raised \$210 million. And that sounds like a lot of money. But actually back then, it was really a lot of money. In today's dollars, that would probably be about \$3 billion. He set the tone for the rest of this organization. And it's not surprising that if you go to, really our premier center here in Washington, that center is named in honor of Prescott S. Bush.

Sam: So since 1941, almost eight decades have gone by, has the role of the USO changed over those years?

JD: You know, if you think about the central challenge of military life, you can ask military folks and we've done this. It's not, Oh, "I'm afraid of battle." They know they're getting into a dangerous job. They know that, they're willing to take those risks. The central challenge is really separation. Sometimes they're physically separated by deployments. They're all separated by the fact that they wear different clothes than we do. They're governed by different laws. They're often on military bases, separated away from their families. And that sense of difference is the thing that weighs the hardest on them. So I would say our role really hasn't changed. Our role is to strengthen them by keeping them connected to family, home and country. We're the connection that is the antidote to that separation. Now, the way we do that, of course, has changed over the years. In 1941, we would have a lady helping a young soldier who maybe couldn't even write to write his sweetheart back home. Today, the most popular thing in the 270 USO centers around the world is Wi-Fi. But it's the same thing. It's that connection. It's that ability to reach back to home, or if we can't connect them to home, we'll bring a little bit of home to them.

Sam: Well, Dr. Crouch, we are living in a challenging time in American history, but one thing that still unites most Americans is support for our service

men and women. That includes leading entertainers as well. Who are the top names you can call on today when you have a need?

JD: There's great support from the entertainment community for service members and their families. And just recently, we had Clint Black do a 4th of July special live-streamed to, you know, tens of thousands of service members. We had Scarlet Johansen and Chris Evans come on and do an interactive talk about their new Avenger movie. I remember meeting Chris Evans and you know, the first time we took him to Afghanistan and he stood up there and he said, I'm not Captain America. You're captain America. More recently also, you know, Martha Stewart came on and baked cookies in the middle of this COVID thing with 23,000 service members and their families on a virtual platform. We've got people like Craig Morgan, Kellie Pickler, Wilmer Valderrama, Tiara Wilson. They have gone out year after year after year. I remember both Craig and Kelly telling me separately, "There's no place I'd rather be at Christmas than with the troops."

Sam: That's amazing. Well, one of the things you've become very familiar with lately has been delivering shows on a virtual platform. Do you think virtual performances will continue after the COVID-19 pandemic?

JD: For the near term, there'll be a lot more focused on virtual, but we think that even after hopefully that chapter in our nation's history moves on that we'll do both. And we had already been moving in that direction to be honest, but this really helped to catalyze it. So I don't think it'll ever stop. And if your listeners want to go onto the USO website, go to uso.org/MVP. And that stands for Military Virtual Programming. And some of those things they can be involved in too, but you can get an idea of some of the things that we're doing.

Sam: Doctor, aside from COVID-19, what's the greatest challenge the USO faces today and if you could wave a wand to fix it, what would you do?

JD: You know, think about when we started, it was right before the war, we were scaling up World War II at the height of that war, there were 16 million men and women under arms. There were millions of others in auxiliaries. Every family was affected by the war and what's different now is we have an all volunteer force. Fewer than 1% of the population serves in that force. So there's something that people call the civil/military divide. And it's not that Americans don't like their armed forces, in fact, they hold them in very high esteem, but they don't understand them. They may have the capacity for sympathy, but it's hard to have empathy because they don't really understand what they're going through. So if I could wave a magic wand, I would want every American to be

able to go out and have a connection of some kind with a service member to talk to them, not just thank you for your service, but to really talk to them, learn something about the military. And then finally go do something, you know, take some action. And obviously I would love that action to be with the USO, but there are lots of other great organizations out there as well. So I think that's the central challenge, but it's a good problem to have.

Sam: Sure. And like everybody we're trying to engage younger people. So what advice would you give to someone younger who wants to get involved with the USO?

JD: I mentioned we have about 270 locations all over the world. We've got programs people, obviously we have to raise funds. All that's done with fewer than 800 people. And so how do we do that? Well, we do it because we have over 30,000 Americans who volunteer for the USO. So volunteer, you will learn something about the military. A young man that I know in Guam, he volunteered at our air base there and last time I talked to him, he said, well, I'm leaving the USO, but I'm going into the Air Force. He wanted to be part of that again. Whether you do that or you don't, you will learn a lot and you will learn great respect for your military and you'll be helping your country.

Sam: Yeah. That's a very interesting path to serve, from the USO to the Armed Forces. I'd never thought about that. So that's a very interesting perspective. Doctor, you've been President and CEO of the USO for over six years now, why did you initially take the job and what has been the most surprising thing you've learned since taking on the role?

JD: You know, I will say I actually almost turned down the opportunity. I'd been running a for-profit business. I was in the middle of selling that business for the owner. And I got a call from somebody who said, would you be interested in this? And I said, Oh, what a great organization. I'm not sure it's in my wheelhouse, but let me think about that and maybe I'll come back with another name for you. And I went home and I thought about my experience, really working for Bush 43. And I was deeply involved in the decision-making that he made on the surge in Iraq and some of these other big issues. And I got to thinking, you know, what a marvelous way to give back to the men and women who participated in that. And so I talked to my wife about it and we prayed about it.

And it was one of those things where the more I thought about it, it was the right thing to do. It was the best decision I could've ever made. It's a wonderful organization. We have great people working here. It's a great place to work, but

it's also a great place to volunteer and it's just been really, a wonderful experience, both for myself and my family. You also asked me, you know, what's the thing that was most surprising about all this. And it really was on, I learned that the USO almost went out of business three times in its history. And you might imagine when it was after World War II, after Vietnam and right after the end of the Gulf War, actually, you know, in sort of the early 90s, because you know, Americans kind of thought, well, job is over, right? Don't necessarily need an organization like that.

And so one of the things I really said to myself is I'm going to create the circumstances under which that can't happen again, because as long as we have a military, we need to support them. Whether they're deployed here in the United States or overseas, where there's a war going on, or there isn't, that is a very different life. And it's one that we want to keep our civilian population connected to them. But that was a big surprise. I had no idea. I grew up thinking the USO was, you know, about as iconic as you can possibly believe. And it is, but it takes careful tending.

Sam: I can only imagine. Well, doctor, I'd like to end with this question and thank you so much for joining us. Where do you see the USO going over its next 80 years?

JD: You know, I worked for somebody once, he said, "If you don't like change, you're going to like irrelevance even less." So I think what I tell my folks is to think about every day, getting up and asking ourselves what are the needs of service members and their families. So we're going to be trying to get in front of those needs wherever they happen to be. And the force is changing. You know, I mean, you look at the number of women in the force, for example, compared to just what it was like during Vietnam. I mean, it's a huge difference. The number of families that are now in the military compared to where they were, I think the greater need, since we don't have a draft and very short term military service now is the need to help people transitioning out. One of the things we did in the last three years is we developed a program that really helps folks as they're transitioning out of the military.

That was something the USO had not done before. So my plan is to keep spreading out, making sure that I've got access all over the world and all over the country, to the service members, the 2.1 million active duty, guard and reserve, and there are about two and a half million family members, but also to look at programmatic activities that are meeting their needs as those needs change and they'll continue to change and so we have to change with them.

Sam: Well doctor, thank you for all that you are doing and thank you for sharing your stories with us today.

JD: Oh, it's my pleasure. Thank you for highlighting it. And for all the great work you're doing in the name of your grandfather.

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.

