



All the Best Podcast

52. Over A Thousand Points of Light

Featuring former Senior White House Staffer, Gregg Petersmeyer

Gregg: January 15th, 1993. Dear Gregg, thank you for your loyal service as assistant to the President director of the office of National Service. Parting with friends and colleagues is never easy, but I'm proud of each member of my team and deeply appreciate your contribution to our accomplishments. Four years ago, I said that I sought the presidency in order to build a better America. We've achieved that goal together. And we have also met the challenges of a changing, sometimes turbulent world through a host of achievements. Among them America 2000, the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Clean Air Act of 1990 and the Americans for Disabilities Act. We've made genuine breakthroughs and honored our commitments to advance the wellbeing of the American people. I'm also very pleased by the work that was accomplished through the points of light initiative. With your terrific efforts and the help of your staff, we've established what I believe will be a lasting positive legacy of service to others. And I'm grateful for the dedication and energy with which you approached this important work.

I also vowed four years ago to keep America strong. The success of our efforts is evident in the resounding victories for Liberty and the rule of law in the Panama and the Persian Gulf. Of course, few achievements have been more far reaching than the death of Imperial communism in the former Soviet Union, a triumph that has rekindled hope for millions of people. I believe that history

will credit our steady handling of these complex perilous events as the guarantee of America's success. You have my lasting respect and gratitude for your service at the White House and you can take pride in knowing that you have made a difference for our country. Barbara joins me in sending heartfelt thanks and best wishes to you and Julie for the future. Sincerely, 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."

Gregg Petersmeyer has served in the White House staff for two Presidents. first with Richard Nixon as the youngest staff assistant and then again for my grandfather, President George H.W. Bush on the senior White House staff as an assistant to the President. During his time and my grandfather's administration, Gregg was the founding director of the White House Office of National Service, he helped establish the Points of Light Foundation and was instrumental in the passage of the National and Community Service Act of 1990. Gregg also created the Daily Point of Light Award, the first daily Presidential recognition program in American history, which continues through the Points of Light Foundation today. Currently Gregg sits on the board of Points of Light and is the founder and CEO of Personal Pathways, LLC. Gregg, thank you so much for joining us on "All the Best."

Gregg: Thank you, Sam. I'm glad to be with you.

Sam: Well, Gregg, I want to start with something fun. I've seen a terrific photo of you with my grandfather in China during the 1970s, which means you must have met my grandparents long before the Presidential campaigns. How did you first meet?

Gregg: It was actually the summer of 1969. I was finishing my freshman year in college and I was a summer intern in the Nixon White House. It was the first summer Nixon had been in the White House and Julia and David Eisenhower, President Nixon's daughter and son-in-law invited me to go to a baseball game, the Washington Senators back then. He had up team and it was an evening game in July. And I was sitting with them and Congressman George Bush came over to say hello. And he knew them. I had not met him. They introduced me and he had met my father, I think some years before and he asked me what I was doing and I told him I was there for the summer. He said, gee, you know, you ought to come over on Sundays. We do hamburgers in the back and a bar and I would love to have you. And then a couple of days later, I get a call from his office, inviting me that next Sunday to come to their house in Washington. You know, I became one of his 5 million best friends and it was really remarkable. I came back each summer in college to work at the White House and then full-time after I graduated. And so I continued to see him for a number of years during the Nixon presidency. And then periodically after that.

Sam: Our podcast is all about service and everyone we've spoken with has served and/or helped others in some meaningful way. I want to know your path of service, Gregg.

Gregg: Well, I don't think my story is very special actually. I grew up in a household where my parents did volunteer work. I was very active as a boy scout. I did all kinds of service projects on weekends and did the same in school and through the church I was a member of. I later got involved as a volunteer in political campaigns. And now, you know, as I've gotten older, I've remained involved in all kinds of organizations. Typically, you know, now at the board level.

Sam: So Gregg, what drew you to politics in the first place? Was it the people and meeting people like my grandfather, or was it something that you just innately knew that you wanted to be a part of?

Gregg: It's a good question. I actually, in 1968, did a project in high school on the Republican alternatives to Lyndon Johnson, who was people thought was going to run for another term. At the time the candidates were Nelson Rockefeller, Ronald Reagan, George Romney, Senior, Mitt Romney's father

and Richard Nixon. And I sent away for all kinds of material and got material back and got about an inch or an inch and a half of stuff from all the candidates except Richard Nixon, whose office sent back about six inches worth of material. Much of it very interesting. I mean, he wrote an article in foreign affairs the year before about opening relations with China, said we needed to reform the welfare system. We needed to start an environmental agency. So I ended up saying, I really wanted to work for him that summer. And it's pretty counter to what my friends were doing, which were pretty much lining up after Jean McCarthy, during that period or Bobby Kennedy actually, before he was killed.

Sam: Let's fast forward to 1989. My grandfather is President and right away he creates the White House Office of National Service with you as the first director. And in that position, you helped him launch a movement known today as the Points of Light. How did this movement come to life and what did the Office of National Service do?

Gregg: It was an unusual office in that it was really not about the President's role as leader of the government or as head of his political party. It was really about him as leader of the nation. And in that sense, it was more of a cultural office, which again is a little bit out of sync. I used to tell colleagues on the White House staff who were upset that he was spending so much time on Points of Light, that this really was a different type of leadership he was trying to initiate. And it was really around trying to have people discover or be reaffirmed that they needed to help with our nation's problems, that there were children that didn't know how to read, which is something that obviously Barbara Bush was very committed to. There were all kinds of problems, which bureaucracies weren't going to solve, and that actually relationships needed to be engaged.

And he had foreshadowed all of this in both his Republican National Convention speech and in his inaugural. When in both, he talked about his view of what America is and a big part of that was at the bright center is the individual who really is responsible for his or her family, for their community, for organizations they're part of, but that the country really is made up of tens of thousands of communities and tens of thousands of organizations all spread like stars across a broad and peaceful sky, like a thousand points of light. So I think that was really how it started was this belief that he brought to the White House, that he wanted to be part of a kinder and gentler nation. One where people cared more about one another, that maybe was a bit less materialistic and he wanted to use his office to try to advance those ideas.

Sam: Gregg, what became the White House Office of National Service? Did that continue on through future administrations after my grandfather's,?

Gregg: It survived a bit after his presidency. I think what was particularly important about the office was that it was an attempt to lead, as you said, a movement. And that involved really defining what a Point of Light is, talking about the values that animate a person who makes a difference and also showing what he meant by the kinds of people he recognized. And so what was really fascinating from, and actually challenging, was to take the phrase "Point of Light," which he'd really used it more as an idea, defining organizations, voluntary organizations, and really begin to treat it as what an individual is capable of being, because we actually found, Sam, that there were limitations to the words that were out there to describe what we were trying to do. Volunteer is a word that actually has very little meaning in certain parts of the country.

Community service has its own limitations because it's the kind of thing that prosecutors met out to someone X number of hours of community service you need to do. Service is obviously probably the most important word, but I was very intrigued and believe that the whole notion of light, which is quite transcendent and it says as much about one's potential as it does about what they're doing at a given time, it's a phrase or an image that is not just about what you do, but who you are or what you're capable of being. So I was very intent on taking this phrase and having it be the brand essentially that we focused on. And it was ridiculed. I mean, I have behind me many cartoons actually, because a lot of people who were in Washington didn't really think it was a serious phrase. But what we found of course, was that it had great resonance in the country.

The President began to talk about what he meant by being a Point of Light and the most important idea or value connected to this was the notion where he said that any definition of a successful life must include serving others. And that became the basic core idea of Points of Light. That any definition of a successful life must include serving others. It doesn't say you have to be mother Theresa, it doesn't mean your whole life has to be service. It just means that if you want to consider your life successful, not your career, but your life, that service just needs to be part of that. And he hammered away at that sentence. He and I talked about that sentence for the first time on January 30th, 1989, 10 days after his inauguration. But there were many other things that he said in speeches to define what he meant by Points of Light.

He would say, for example, that if you have a hammer, find a nail, meaning if you want to help, if you know how to read, teach somebody who doesn't know how to read. He said to young people, he said, when it comes right down to it,

what we're all looking for in our life is meaning and adventure. And he said, if you walk with me down this path, I will promise you a life of meaning and adventure. He said a Point of Light is the way you measure your success. So these were all cultural values. And then pretty early on in November of his first year, we began the first daily recognition program in American history from the White House. President Bush began every day, five days a week, releasing from the press office, a story of an individual, doing something in the country for someone else to change somebody else's life.

And at the end of each of these stories, these press releases, of which there were 1,020, the last day he was in office. He named the 1020th daily Point of Light. And at the end of each, he said, thank you for helping us all know that any definition of a successful life must include serving others. So he pounded away at that idea. The thing about these stories was that your grandfather was not somebody who was comfortable telling people what to do, but he was very good at pointing out in his own way what he really thought was good and thanking people was really a perfect way for President Bush to hold attention on activities. And when somebody would get a letter from the White House, naming them a Point of Light, the presidency is so remarkable that that individual felt like the whole nation was honoring them.

That strategy of naming someone every day did several things. It helped point to behavior and actions, not words that matter. It showed how incredibly broad and deep this idea really is in the country. It also helped the idea from getting crowded out by the bureaucracy and the White House is a very, very tough place to hold to a given idea because there are just so much coming down the conveyor belt. So this was something by doing it every day, he could sign the letters once a week, five at a time and approve of them, and then they were ready to go. And it didn't really matter what else was happening in the world, religiously that would go out. And I think what is also been very remarkable is that he continued to name Points of Light after he left office through the Points of Light Foundation. He would sign the letters himself and he signed letters right up until a week before he passed away.

So week before November 30th, 2018, he signed, what was it, 6,300 and something letter. Although a lot of people don't know it, in 2014, the United Kingdom's prime minister began to name Points of Light. And it was first done by David Cameron and then Theresa May picked it up. And now Boris Johnson is naming a daily Point of Light five days a week from 10 Downing street. And then finally believe it or not in early 2018, her majesty Queen Elizabeth began to recognize what she calls Commonwealth Points of Light from the 53 Commonwealth nations. And every week she names a different Point of Light. So she's named, I think more than 150 Points of Light from all over the world.

This idea of light and the power of both believing that you have the capacity to make a difference in someone else's life, and that actually everyone has that capacity is very important, particularly at a time with greater and greater diversity. It's one of the things about being a human being that I think is extremely important in this particular time.

Sam: Let's transition to the post-presidency. Four years after my grandfather left the White House in 1997, he helped spearhead the President's Summit for America's Future in Philadelphia, which brought together President Clinton, President Ford, President Carter, and even Nancy Reagan to highlight the importance of volunteerism to our country. And once again, Gregg, you played a critical role in the success of that bipartisan or nonpartisan event. Why was this unique gathering so important to my Gampy and the other Presidents who attended?

Gregg: I think in part, it was the first time that Presidents, and it's the only time I'm aware of, that Presidents have gathered other than for a funeral or for some sort of a tragedy, actually. George Romney, Sr., Mitt Romney's father, who was a remarkable man. He was very worried about the country in 1994, 1995. And he believed that the country needed to become more committed to helping solve its problems and its citizens needed to do that, very much the Points of Light way of thinking and that we particularly owed a special commitment to children and young people, many of whom don't have the American dream available to them right now. So George Romney proposed to the head of what's called the Corporation for National Community Service, as well as the head of the Points of Light Foundation at the time, that there'd be a national gathering.

Sadly, George Romney passed away very soon after he first suggested this idea. And I was actually at his funeral because I'd gotten to know him. He was a tremendous supporter of President Bush's and of Points of Light and I'd gotten to know him well. And his wife Lenore said to the head of the foundation and to the corporation for National Service, she said, George came back Washington two weeks ago because he just died around that time. And he said that he had told you about this idea and that you all had agreed to do it. Are you going to do it? You are going to do it, aren't you? And of course they said they would. That was the beginning of just the idea. And then there was a lunch in Houston that your grandfather attended where Harris Wofford, who was the head of the corporation and Ray Chambers, who was the former chairman of the Points of Light were having lunch with him and I was there as well.

And they raised this issue to him and he said he would come. So he was the first President who said, I'll come. It was so again, emblematic of President Bush, that he was a creative entrepreneur at heart. He thought good ideas deserved to

be pursued and that was a good idea. And it took a while actually to get others to come. There was one sort of humorous piece about it, which is that President Carter thought that the name was the President's Summit. Apostrophe S meaning it was President Clinton's Summit. Ray Chambers had a meeting with him and said, Mr. President, it's "Presidents", S apostrophe, it's all the Presidents' Summit. It's not apostrophe S, it's S apostrophe. And Ray loved to say that it's the power of the apostrophe of where it is, but it made a huge difference that the Presidents realized this was all Presidents. It was their joint summit. And now that organization, Colin Powell was the chairman of the gathering and went on to create right after that or at that event, which had delegations from all over the country and thousands of people came to talk about what they could do in their communities to make a difference for children and young people. And from that was born America's Promise Alliance. Colin Powell was the first chairman of that organization.

Sam: The Points of Light has been a movement for over 30 years now. And 6,000 plus daily Points of Light later, they're still going strong. If someone were to ask you what the Points of Light Organization does, how would you describe it?

Gregg: I think Points of Light, as a movement, is very much alive and well, whether or not it's by that name or not. Which is to say there's been a tremendous growth in the number of people who want to be and are involved in making a difference in their own communities. Actually gen Z, those born in the late 1990s, they're breaking all records for civic engagement of being involved in voting, being involved in volunteering, being involved in recognizing what companies that make products that they buy, what their environmental practices are. They're a very aware generation. They were born after President Bush had left office. So the idea is an idea that transcends Presidents and is really important to the country. But I think it's useful to note that President Bush stands as having advanced more than any other national leader for the last 30 or 50 years this idea. It's impossible to know what would have happened had he not been President, but I do think that being so relentless on the idea, that made a big difference. And when he passed away and of course had that amazing funeral at the National Cathedral, it was remarkable at how much attention was paid to this dimension of his life. And I think part of it was that he lived long enough for people to realize that this was a way of being and of living. He was President for four years, but he lived a long life that was filled with this kind of engagement.

Sam: Gregg, we are speaking in October of 2020 in the waning weeks and days of the Presidential campaign where our country has certainly been polarized. And yet my uncle Neil, who chairs, the Points of Light has a wonderful

expression, "Service unites." I could be fairly accused of leading the witness here, but it would seem to me that we need more Americans volunteering and getting involved in their communities. How can more people get involved?

Gregg: It's an important question and these are very unique times in terms of the inability to get together with people and it's going on longer than any of us want, but it won't be forever. I do think that getting involved, there are lots of ways to do it. One is just to be with friends who have an idea of something they might like to try. Another is looking at organizations you're a part of, or alumni groups you're a part of or faith communities you're a part of and seeing what they're doing, what they're sponsoring, because a lot of that happens just below the radar. But if you peel back and ask the question, there always things that are going on. Another way is to think about what you really enjoy doing. What I say is either a gift or a special interest. It might be chess. It might be playing the clarinet. Look to organizations that engage people in those kinds of activities, chess clubs, or whatever, and ask, what are they doing that is allowing chess, for example, or playing music in senior homes.

It's just remarkable how many different ways people who have gifts and talents find to connect with people who would benefit from that music or that listening to a story or whatever. There's almost a limitless way for people to engage in a voluntary act. And I think the secret is to be open to different channels of information or opportunities that are based on people you enjoy being with already, activities you enjoy doing. I don't think it requires being a brave hero going off into a completely uncharted area by yourself. But instead to see it as something that is done really with other people often around things you already care about and believe really make a difference.

Sam: That's a really good point. And I think you can be even more impactful with your service when it's something that you love. That's great advice. Gregg, I'd like to end with this and I'm going to ask you to paint us a picture . A picture of the service movement 50 years from now, what worries you about it, but more importantly, what excites you?

Gregg: There are lots of problems that the world is facing and that we're facing, and those problems are not going to go away, but there are a couple of things that make me very optimistic. One is that younger people now I really believe are increasingly going to show us the way, not only in voluntary service, but in race relations and systemic injustices in just basic fairness. I think there's an amazing openness and way that young people think about these issues that their parents really don't think in the same way or didn't. So I'm very hopeful generationally about who's emerging as leaders. And there's a lot of data now, as I was saying, that shows that this is happening. Secondly, I think diversity is

increasingly going to become an ally of making a difference, but I also think that being involved with other people in service is going to be a central strategy.

And I guess I just close by saying that I want to come back to this notion of light. There are lots of differences among us, gender, age, race, economic well-being, sexual orientation. The list is long, and there's an awful lot of attention these days placed on groups of people and differences. I think the thing I'm probably most hopeful about is this whole notion of light that within every human being there is light. It's light to be revealed, it's light to seek in others and I think as long as we don't lose sight of the fact that all of us irrespective of our differences are human beings who are capable of being helpful and sources of light and hope for others. We're going to be just fine.

Sam: Well, Gregg, thank you for helping us see the light here on "All the Best" and thank you for joining us and sharing your stories today.

Gregg: Thank you, Sam. It's really a pleasure to be with you.

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.