



All the Best Podcast
Episode 56: “Supporting Our Service Members”
Featuring Author, Communications Consultant, and Philanthropist, Dava Guerin

Dava: November 6th, 2013. Dear Dava, you are the most thoughtful friend. The Carl Sculpture is beautiful, and your kind words really touched my heart. It's a funny thing but at age 89, kind words mean more to me than ever. Good luck with the Mighty Mon's of Walter Reed, a truly wonderful tribute to the unsung heroes of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, our nation's mothers. Warmest best wishes, George H. W. Bush. P.S. You're right about Jean. I couldn't live without her.

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."

Dava Guerin is an author, consultant and former communications director for the U.S. Association of Former Members of Congress. She served as the President of Guerin Literary Services, Inc., a DC-based communications firm which worked with numerous Presidents, world leaders, politicians and entertainers. She has also managed communications and logistics for many national and international events as well as provided media credentialing and communications for the 2000 Republican National Convention. Dava also continues to support my Grandmother's Foundation, The Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy and was a great friend of my grandparent's. Deva, welcome to "All the Best."

Dava: Oh, thank you so much, Sam, I appreciate it.

Sam: Well, Dava as you know, this podcast is all about service and you have devoted so much time and effort to supporting our men and women in uniform. What was your own path to service and why have you focused so much on our veterans?

Dava: My dad was a WWII Veteran of the greatest generation, my uncles, the same way. So I grew up just being involved in all of the stories and I think that was sort of the beginning. I did a lot of work in high school, being very supportive of veterans, I did workshops and lectures, I was Vice President of our class, so I was very involved in all of that. And I have to say, your grandfather has been a big inspiration to me as well because when I first met him and your grandmother, I was probably 29 years old and learning about everything that he went through in the Navy. It was just so inspiring and we did an event with him when they were in the White House and it was actually the Medal of Honor Societies' week long event, I was involved in planning it. And I had to take him around and everyone else around and Billy Ray Cyrus and Bob hope and you know, you just watch how he interacted with a lot of the veterans and it was the most beautiful, touching thing and of course, years later, I've seen that many, many times with him and with your grandmother and I think that was the beginning, plus going to Walter Reed for the first time, which absolutely got me hooked.

Sam: Well, you not only devote so much energy to helping our human service members recover from the battle experiences, but you've also included animals and pets in the equation. How did that get going?

Dava: Actually, when I did the first book, "Unbreakable Bonds" and that was about caregivers of Wounded Warriors, your grandfather wrote the foreword to that book, which was just unbelievable. And it was sort of the beginning of this love of these people and of course everybody has a service dog. So we thought,

"Wouldn't it be fun," Kevin Ferris and I, my coauthor at the time, "If we did another book about service dogs." And our editor said, "Well if you can include other animals, you have a book deal." So we researched it and of course we found potbelly pigs and horses and birds of prey and that was the book "Vets and Pets" that your grandmother wrote the foreword to that one. so that's the beginning of learning about how these amazing animals can really help heal as well as service dogs.

Sam: Well, Dava, given all of the time you've spent around our wounded veterans, what's the one or two things they need above all else to recover from the battlefield experience?

Dava: Everyone is so different and everyone's experience is different. What I have seen in getting to know some of the Wounded Warriors, I think a lot of them, despite what a lot of people think, and yes, the suicide rate is extraordinarily high and even one person is too many, but the fact is that they really conquer their problems with a lot of zest and passion the way they do when they're in the military. So Walter Reed is a good example. They have amazing programs, they've got different programs for PTSD for physical injuries and I think it's just that determination and the will to get better and to live and to accept certain limitations and learn to live with it and thrive and I think that's what, to me, is the most wonderful thing to see. People who you think would have a tough time in life and they end up doing amazingly well.

Sam: So, Deva, how can someone like me, who might not have the connections at a place like Walter Reed, help our veterans?

Dava: Well, one of the reasons I've written these books, along with Kevin Ferris and my late husband, Terry Bivens, is to bring awareness to veterans. Gary Sinise has many great things he does but among the things that really touch me the most and learned about was that less than 1% of Americans have a family member in the military. We really don't get involved. you know, we see them and we sort of walk away, not realizing that once they get out, especially when they're injured, it is a really tough adjustment and it's the little things that people can do that can make a huge difference. And that could be just being nice to someone. You know, when you're injured and you're missing arms and legs and you're in a wheelchair, everybody stares at you and it's very embarrassing and hurtful to them.

And I have done different things that I've learned from them and if I see someone I can obviously see they've been through some problem in a battle situation, I just walk over to them and I'm just like, "Hi, how are you. Are you a veteran?" and start a conversation. I do that all the time. And I know so many

people so I have been fortunate to hear the things that helped them and it's the kindnesses and it's nice to say, "Thank you for your service," but it's even nicer to say, "What do you need?" and really start a conversation. Maybe get involved with a veteran in your community or a veteran's group. Anything that you can do is so appreciated and I'll tell you what. It absolutely is life changing. Twice we went to Kennebunkport. All the veterans who were there, it was literally life changing meeting your grandfather and grandmother...it inspired each and every one of them in very different ways. Those little acts of kindness are just literally life changing for them.

Sam: Yeah, those special delegations you brought, mostly to Walker's Point, to visit my grandparents, I think was a two-way street because obviously the veterans get to meet a former President but I know my grandfather and grandmother and uncle, loved having them on the point and supporting everything that they've done for our country. Do you have any other stories of those interactions?

Dava: The touching ones occurred when literally your grandfather wasn't feeling well but I'm telling you what. He was determined to give every single one of the Wounded Warriors a coin, shake their hands and every single one of them...nobody could even believe it. Then, one of the Wounded Warriors, Tyler, was getting engaged that afternoon at David's restaurant. We had it all planned. And I said to your uncle, something like, "Oh, Tyler is getting engaged later on today." And he said, "Well, where is she?" And Tyler said, "Well, she is in downtown, like waiting." He's like, "Jean, get her up here right now." Anyhow, oh my goodness, we quick got her and I said, "Tyler, are you ready to like propose in front of two Presidents and First Ladies?" He's like I don't know, I don't know. Anyway, she comes up and one of the other Wounded Warriors helped him. He got down on his prosthetic, he had no legs, on his prosthetic leg and before he could even propose, she screamed "Yes!" And everybody was cheering. It was a beautiful, beautiful story. So there you go. What a great inspiration.

Sam: Dava, I want to take this time to transition to a tougher topic. This fall, you wrote a very powerful, brave and selfless article on the issue of suicide and how it recently and directly affected you and your family. Why did you decide to write about your painful experience and what lessons did you want to share with your readers?

Dava: It was very unexpected...I mean completely unexpected. My husband was an extremely brilliant person. He has a Warton MBA, he was a Pulitzer nominee when he was a journalist, he had this amazing career on Wall Street, he was also a veteran. Nobody knew that he had depression. And so I just

thought, you know what? I have a platform, I can help people, and that was my mission. Instead of having it be a stigma and not saying anything, I thought the most important thing I could do is share the story in hopes that his tragic death will hopefully help someone else to realize, you know what? It is not something to be ashamed of if you have a mental health issue. but a lot of men, especially older men and men who have just grown up in the military, nobody will admit that they have a problem. You are losing your toughness, it's not manly. And I think that's what was really bothering me and I really know that speaking out has helped a few people, one of whom came to our service who was a veteran, who was suicidal. And he said after he came and he heard what happened with Terry, he said I couldn't do that to his family. So, I really believe that if you have a platform, but even if you don't, it's so important to share and you might save another life.

Sam: Well, Dava, you're a prolific write and after my grandmother passed away in 2018, you wrote an article about the lessons you learned from her. Perhaps the most important being, "Don't take yourself too seriously." How did you first meet my grandmother and what else did you learn from her?

Dava: I was just out of grad school and I was hired to do the Bicentennial of the Constitution and handle all the media for that. So I got to know congress and worked in Washington. Then when they were elected, I got to know them because I was asked to help with his visits to Philadelphia. So anytime President Bush would come to Philly, I would handle part of that visit. But Mrs. Bush, your grandma, I met in a different way that I was volunteering for a non-profit called "Children's Literacy Initiative" at the time. And they had an idea that maybe we should see if we can get the First Lady to embrace this project, which was reading children's stories aloud on the radio. She loved the idea and that's how I very, very first met her and since then, I loved them. I was so impressed with both of them. They were kind, brilliant, thoughtful, unassuming and I would just do anything for them. So I volunteered anytime I was asked, sometimes she was honored at an event that I was hosting and we sat next to each other. She's amazing and funny and just the coolest person you ever want to know. And she would do things like when I'd have to manage a visit for her and she'd say, "Look, don't worry about Secret Service stuff. It's just you and me. We're going to go in the ladies room. I don't need a green room. It's just us, it's fine."

Another time, we were at this event. We're sitting next to each other, I had to introduce her. So we were finishing lunch and she bends down, puts her head under the table. I'm like, "What's going on here?" So, I put my head down and here we're looking at each other under the table. She's putting her lipstick on so I thought, "All right, I'll do the same thing." I pulled mine out and she looked at

me and she said, "Dava, don't you know you're just paying for the packaging?" Because mine, of course, had to be like Chanel. She said, "Look, this is from the drugstore. It's about four bucks. Don't waste your money." And then we lifted our heads up and it was like back to the program.

It was things like that little, funny moment where she would tell me about the silly little discussions she would have with her husband when they had little fights. When she thought she lost her engagement ring and she was so upset and he said, "I'm going to buy you the sapphire ring and don't worry about it, I'll get you another one." But she didn't want to have another ring because she had to have that. That was her ring. Well, meanwhile, I guess it was months later, she was washing her sweatpants and it came out of the pocket. So, that is moments you will always treasure.

Sam: Well, Dava, it's been amazing catching up with you and hearing all these great stories. I'd like to end with this. "The Eagle on My Arm," your new book, what can we expect when we pick it up?

Dava: This story is about Patrick Bradley, who is a Vietnam veteran. Long story short, his injuries were so bad he was taken to Walter Reed and he was so upset and so, just hostile. He punched one of his doctors in the jaw, was almost sent to Leavenworth Prison, but one of his doctors found a grant where he could count bald eagles in the wild for three years alone. That experience literally healed him to be in nature for so long, all by himself. He ended up leaving the wilderness after three years, a changed man. His night terrors dissipated, he ended up going back to school, to grad school, had a wonderful career, a zoology major, did all kinds of amazing things. Trained wild animals for movies and he had this idea because of his son, his son was also in the Army, was having some symptoms of PTSD and he said, "hey, just come to the park" where he was volunteering and take a walk with a wounded bird of prey on your arm. And his son did and found he was getting better. So Patrick had this idea he was going to talk to the VA Hospital at Bay Pines and asked them if they wanted to bring people there. So 4,000 people have been through is program where he had them take a walk with a wounded bird of prey on their arm and he's had unbelievable results. It's a very beautiful, inspiring story and I think right now at 72 and retired, he is starting a mobile program where he will be bringing bald eagles, wounded birds, to veterans and others all over Florida.

Sam: Well, Dava, thank you so much for sharing your stories, shining a spotlight on the wounded men and women of our military who need all the help they can get. Thank you for all the work you're doing and that you will continue to do and thanks for being on "All the Best."

Dava: Thank you so much, Sam.

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.