



### **All the Best Podcast**

## **Episode 65: “Service Til the End: Evan Sisley and Sully H. W. Bush”**

*Featuring Personal Aide and Senior Medic to George H. W. Bush, Evan Sisley, and service dog Sully H. W. Bush*

Evan: September 10th, 1996. Dear Griffin, my, but you have an unusual name for a dog, at least it seems unusual to me. But today, there are a lot of different, even strange names around. Anyway, Griffin is a nice name. The Griffins that I know about have head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion. Is that the way you look? What about your long tail? I hear that you are a great puppy. I had a puppy once named Ranger. He made me laugh a lot. He was a very fast dog. And he could run like the wind through the woods of Camp David. Everyone at the White House loved Ranger. He was so fast he could catch squirrels when they were running their fastest. He never did catch a rabbit, but he tried hard to do that. When we went back to Texas, Ranger died. I cried for two days. I cried because I loved him and I knew I'd miss him, for he had made me the happiest dog owner in the whole world. I know that when you are an old guy, you aren't supposed to cry, but I did. I hope you make Sam as happy as Ranger made me. Goodbye, and wolf for now devotedly. Gampy.

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."

Evan Sisley served as the personal aide and senior medic to my grandfather, George H.W. Bush, from 2015 until his death in 2018, where he supervised the medical team who cared for both of my grandparents. Evan first started working with my grandfather in 2013, after being recruited to the job from the Marine Corps Reserve company in Houston, where he served as a Navy Corpsman. Evan has been a paramedic for 10 years and has worked on ambulances in Kentucky, Maine, and Texas. Prior to serving in the military, Evan was a photo journalist who covered national politics, including the presidency of my uncle, George W. Bush, from 2005 to 2008. Evan also was joined by Sully H.W. Bush, a service dog who was assigned to disabled veterans. Sully was trained by the organization America's VetDogs, and serviced my grandfather during the last six months of his life. Today, Sully is part of the dog program at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, where he ranks as hospital corpsman first class. Evan and Sully, great to see you. Welcome to "All the Best."

Evan: Thanks so much for having us.

Sam: Well, Evan, as you know, this podcast is dedicated to service. What does service mean to you?

Evan: I think service is a commitment to something that is bigger than yourself, whether it's time or even possibly putting your life on the line, just giving of yourself to better your community. I think the majority of my service, a lot of it's a little bit dark. You don't call a paramedic on your best day. But what really does stand out to me is probably the personal connections you make. That's actually what makes the dark things worth it, those sorts of connections. Also, you end up missing a lot of time from your family, especially the holidays stand out. But I think the things that you get to do during those holidays, whether it's having a potluck in a break room somewhere with a bunch of people who also are being away from their family, those connections, those are what make it really worth it.

Sam: Well, you mentioned your time as a paramedic, but before that, you were a photo journalist. Can you tell us about that experience?

Evan: Yeah. So, originally, I went into photography because I wanted to help people. I thought it would be able to inspire social change. And then in 2007, when the Virginia Tech shooting happened, a lot of people I went to high school with were at Virginia Tech at the time. And I was working with a news agency while I was currently going to school at Western Kentucky University to study photography. And I was given an opportunity to cover the Virginia Tech shooting for "Time Magazine," which is about the equivalent of getting drafted the Major Leagues for photography. So I went out there. And after three days, I felt like a voyeur. I didn't feel like maybe the images I was taking were how I wanted to spend a career. It's really valuable and important, but it just wasn't where my heart was. So I ended up instead, choosing medicine, became an EMT, and then joined the Navy. Specifically, I wanted to serve with Marine Corps infantry in Afghanistan. So I joined the Navy as a medic, specifically to serve Marine Corps.

Sam: So Evan, what is it about the intensity of going into combat with your fellow recruits, that gives those relationships a depth that few outsiders can understand?

Evan: People are brought together through trauma a lot of times. And the combat environment is kind of unique in that situation. Truth is, you're putting it all on the line. And in reality, you're putting a ton of faith in the guy to your left and the guy to your right. And the connection you have with people who've also been there, that's a connection that is pretty intense and different than a lot of other traumatic environments that kind of bring people so emotionally close together.

Sam: Were there any points in your role as medic where you said, "What did I get myself into?"

Evan: Kind of the nature of those jobs is that they're not always the easiest places to be, whether, you know, rounds are going downrange, or you're here domestically working on an ambulance and you're at a car accident. I've always found that it helps me to hyper focus on the situation. I don't necessarily think as much maybe about everything else that's going on or your own mortality. Maybe it's better that way. There's been plenty of times afterwards, I was like, "Oh, man, what was I doing?" But luckily, I don't think it's human nature necessarily to think about that as much while it's going on.

Sam: Well, on a more personal note, for me and my family, can you tell our listeners how you came to work for my grandparents?

Evan: So, really, that has a lot to do with Jean Becker. I think she was watching the news. And she came across a piece that was talking about how veterans were coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq. And they were having trouble finding jobs. So she kind of realized your grandparents needed some extra help around the house for a while, but they were very reluctant. So she went to them, said, "Oh, my God, there's a great problem. We need to fix it. There's all these veterans and they can't get jobs." They said, "Wow, that's amazing. We should hire some of them at the office." And she goes, "No, no, no, we've got that covered. How about we hire one or two of them to come over and work at the residence? And they can kind of help you out if we need anything." So that ended up evolving. And a bunch of Navy Corpsman joined to mostly help out around the house, but that evolved towards providing medical care. And I was one of the first group of guys that were hired for that.

Sam: Well, Evan, I know that in working for my grandparents, you're one of the few people that I've known to go toe to toe with my grandmother and live to tell the tale. Was it hard for my grandmother to let go and let you take on my Gampy's medical care?

Evan: I'll just say nobody goes toe to toe with Barbara Bush. She was a force to be reckoned with. So I'll say that I think I came into their life during a particularly difficult time. They'd been together 75 years, and she had been the fierce protector during that entire time. A lot of people would come in and out of their life, but she was always the one constant. And I think her role as his protector was a pretty big one. So I can only imagine what it would be like to watch somebody who you've been with for 75 years, aging, and how difficult that must be. I know it was difficult for the rest of the family as well. But her and I had differences of opinions sometimes. And it's important to always know that they had a tremendous medical team, both here in Houston and in Maine. And a lot of times I was just forward facing for the recommendations of the doctor. So I may have gotten caught in the crossfire a couple times. But I think with time she was able to trust that we all had his best interests in mind. And then I think the greatest way that she showed that is near the end of both their lives, I was kind of handling components of both of their health care.

Sam: Well, Evan, from there, how did the job evolve? Can you talk about that transition?

Evan: When I was first hired, there was more scheduling, football games, during the fall, there were more baseball games, boat outings, things of that

nature. And then as time went on, they just slowed down a little bit more. More time spent on the back deck in Walker's Point, reading out loud. But I do have to say, there's nothing more frightening in the world than reading out loud to the First Lady of literacy. But a lot of time spent just quiet evenings with her needle pointing and him watching reruns of "Law and Order: SVU."

Sam: Very quiet volume, right?

Evan: Yeah.

Sam: Loud volume. Yeah.

Evan: Pretty loud. Yeah.

Sam: You could hear the dong, dong from "Law and Order" two counties over when he would start a new episode. Well, he's been quietly sitting by your side and I mentioned him earlier, but we have to talk about Sully H.W. Bush. How did he become a part of the Bush family?

Evan: When your grandmother passed away, one of the things that we were kind of focusing on was to ensure that he still had a mission. And one idea was to bring in a service animal, mostly to be able to show other veterans, it's okay to ask for help. It's okay to have a service animal to help you. That even if a former president of the United States can do it, then so can anyone else. So we initially looked by reaching out to Coleman Lapoint, who was my predecessor as his personal aide. And Coleman was able to hook us up with America's VetDogs, which is a offshoot of the Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind. And Valerie Cramer, who works for American's VetDogs, she said that she had the perfect dog, mostly because of his temperament. And Sully is just such a sweet dog, loyal, great with children. Had the right temperament, especially for an older veteran, not necessarily the kind of dog that you'd want for somebody who's into paragliding or rock climbing. But he was really the perfect dog for the mission.

Sam: Well, Evan, I'd like to stay on the topic of service dogs. What role can service dogs play with our veterans?

Evan: There's a couple different classifications of service dogs. You have caring dogs, guide dogs, service dogs for those who have disabilities. A lot of what they do is kind of related to pushing, tugging, or pulling, or fetch. So that actually can go into a lot of different things. You can have a dog that assists somebody with balance. They can get help if they need it. One thing that Sully did in particular was that if President Bush needed something, he would be able

to run and hit a button that would set off an audible alarm to let people know that President Bush needed something. They have dogs that help with those who have seizures, that can bring medication to them, or hit a button that dials 911. PTSD is another big one. One thing in particular with PTSD, what a lot of the dogs do is they can do nightmare interruption, where if you're having a nightmare, the dog will actually wake you up and bring you out of that. It's not just that they're good dogs. They're all wonderful companions and great dogs, but they're dogs that are actually trained to do very specific tasks.

Sam: Well, Evan, I'd like to end on a lighter note. You have such great experiences with my grandparents, I'd love to hear some stories. Do you have a memory of my grandparents, either together or individually, that still makes you smile or laugh?

Evan: One of my favorite things about your grandmother, she teased me a lot for different things. One of my favorite interactions with her was actually after the Super Bowl. I was the guy who looked incredibly scared, pushing President Bush in his wheelchair, to do the coin toss.

Sam: Yeah, and you're in your full uniform, right?

Evan: Yeah, that's right. So the next day, Catherine Branch, who was her aide, kept on joking about how handsome she thought I looked in my Navy uniform. And Mrs. Bush, I'd called her to ask something about like a reservation for dinner. And she said, "By the way, I thought you looked very handsome in your Navy uniform. And I want you to wear it again every day to work." As she was hanging up the phone. She was really, really funny. She had a great sense of humor. And then with your grandfather, I think my favorite story with him would be when I told Jean that I decided I wanted to go to medical school. So she told President Bush, you know, "Evan's finally decided what he wants to do after this job. He wants to go off to become a doctor. He wants to go to medical school." And he goes, "Well, I think it will be a good resume builder. And I think it'll be good training."

And I was very concerned and surprised. Like, I don't think I've ever heard anybody say becoming a doctor is a good resume builder. But it turned out that I didn't fully understand what he was saying. That, to him, Director of Central Intelligence was a resume builder, Ambassador of the United Nations, Vice President of the United States, congressman from Houston, these were all resume builders to a point where he became president of the United States later on in his life. But the idea that when you're 40 years old, you would be putting a capstone on your career by becoming a physician was just outside of his way of thinking. So I feel bad for you.

Sam: Low bar, very low bar.

Evan: Yeah, even becoming a doctor is like, yeah, yeah that's great. What are you going to do after that?

Sam: Well, Evan, thank you so much for sharing these stories. And thank you for all that you've done to help them. Thanks for being on "All the Best."

Evan: Thanks so much for having me and Sully.

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.