



All the Best Podcast
**Episode 66: “The Family Literacy Mission in Houston:
COVID-19 Update”**

Featuring Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation, Julie Baker Finck

Julie: "January 20th, 1993. My last walk around the grounds. It's clear, blue, crisp, cold. And I think of the many walks I've had around here and what joy it's been. Worse, we'll be saying goodbye to the staff today. But if I lose it, too bad, they've been a part of our lives and they know we care.

Barbara is wonderful. She's strong and what a first lady she's been, popular and wonderful. Time will tell and history will show that she was beloved because she was real, and she cared, and she gave of herself. She has been fantastic in every way. And my, how the people around here love her. And my, how that staff rejoices in the fact that she came their way.

But we'll make it in Houston. I know we will. We kid about our cooking. We kid about no staff, no valets, no shine shoes, and no pressed suit. We did that before. And we can do it again. It's my last day as President of the United States of America, George HW 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."

Julie Baker Finck has served as president of the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation since the organization was created in 2013. She has nearly 25 years of experience in the fields of K-12 education and nonprofit management. Prior to joining the foundation, Dr. Fink served on the executive leadership team of the Houston Independent School District as the chief academic officer and chief major projects officer. She has served in leadership positions at both a regional and state level in Ohio leading large scale education reform initiatives.

Julie, thank you so much for joining us on "All the best."

Julie: Thanks for having me on today.

Sam: Well, I want to start out with this because for those that aren't aware, there are actually two distinct Barbara Bush Literacy foundations. The first being the national Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, which my grandmother started in 1990 when she was first lady. And there's also a slightly different version called the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation, which my Uncle Neil and my Aunt Maria launched in 2013. Can you explain the difference between these two organizations?

Julie: First and foremost, I'll say what, we're similar and that is carrying forth the legacy of the amazing Barbara Bush and we are so fortunate and blessed each and every day. British Robinson, the CEO of the national Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, we both feel blessed and honored to carry forth Mrs. Bush's legacy.

We are two distinct organizations with a driving mission. The national foundation focuses at a national level. They promote advocacy and champion Mrs. Bush's cause of literacy at the national level. They have a much more broad reach. Their focus has particularly been most recently on adult literacy and giving adults a second chance at life by learning how to read, write, and comprehend.

We here at the local Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation have a much more narrow focus and reach. We serve the Houston community. We were formed, as you mentioned, just seven years ago, and we really focus on bringing cross-sector leaders together and creating a comprehensive plan to lift literacy rates of people of all ages.

And while we are two separate organizations, one of the things that I want to really emphasize is that we do have a symbiotic relationship. Again, we are all about creating a vision of literacy for all, but we also are working together in creating an action plan. British is working on a national action plan to increase adult literacy rates. While we're working on a localized plan, a local blueprint for Houston to lift adult literacy rates.

And President Bush always believed that community-based problems weren't always going to be solved by government alone, that we needed to activate the community. And that's why, again, his whole message around points of light. So we're trying to activate points of lights here in Houston to step up and to serve and to solve this literacy problem that we have here in Houston. And British is trying to take that message at a much broader level and advocate for policy for new programs and funding at a national framework to make that happen.

Sam: Julie, I know we were talking about this before we started recording, so please jump in at any point to correct me. But I believe the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation has a three-pronged strategic plan. Those being to make sure each child in Houston has access to books, that they have a parent or trusted adult to read to them, and that families are empowered to be their child's first and most important teacher. Is that right?

Julie: Absolutely. You got them right, Sam.

Sam: Well, I'd love for you to give us a progress report here as your mission enters year eight.

Julie: I will start by saying that in 2013, when we first were formed, the very first thing that we did was we enlisted the expertise from Deloitte and rally the community. We had over 100 business leaders and community leaders, philanthropic leaders, community-based organizations, school districts, library, librarians come together to develop a plan of action that we call our Blueprint for Community Action. And so, over the last several years, we've been really focused on implementing those key strategies.

I'll start with the family literacy and making sure that parents are empowered to be their first and most important teacher because that was one of the things that your granny held dear. And she believed that solving the literacy crisis or, to say it in another way, breaking the intergenerational cycle of literacy really required a two-gen approach. And by focused on family literacy is where parents and children learn together.

We can see, again, more results because we're teaching parents how to read at the same time we're teaching their children how to read. And she believed that parents were their child's first and most important teacher. And when you look at brain research, a child's brain is 90% developed by age 5, that's when our education system starts.

And so when you look at those critical early years, from birth to 4, birth to 5, it's really the role of the parent who is helping to build those early literacy skills, oral language development, recognizing sight words, understanding what a concept is or constructs are for language. And we're finding that so many children are entering kindergarten lacking those foundational literacy skills for success. In fact, here in Houston, about 60% of children enter kindergarten each year lacking those foundational literacy skills and so they're starting off already behind, some kids one to two years behind where they need to be.

So we've had a significant focus on the early years through third grade. And we know third grade is a critical milestone here. And so, we've been focused on scaffolding our programs intentionally in underserved communities. It's one of the initiatives that we're particularly proud to be a part of is called the Third Ward Schools Initiative, an initiative with the Houston Independent School District and the seven elementary schools that comprise the Third Ward, and also the University of Houston's College of Education. They have an ACES Institute.

And as we've been working on implementing programs there, putting books in the hands of kids through our My Home Library program, working with the University of Houston, creating a Cougar Literacy Corps, they actually have students that are paid through funding that we hope to provide. And they are providing one on one or small group reading mentorships to children in first and second grade.

And over the years, since we've been implementing it, we're coming up on ending our five-year implementation of the Third Ward schools' initiative. And while we've had some disruption, of course, this past year, due to COVID, the results that we've seen thus far are that kids who have had a reading mentor and

had books in their home, about 75% of them have either grown three, four or five alpha levels in reading since that program began.

We had two schools. One was called Blackshear Elementary. And it, at one point in time, was the longest poorest performing elementary school here in Houston. And it went from an F rating to a B rating. We also recently had another one of the schools called Foster Elementary come off of the improvement required list and score an A. And so we're really seeing some great results.

We're going to continue to persist and implementing those programs and seeing more outcomes. We know that children just need to spend more time reading outside of the school day. And for so many families, books are just a luxury that their families simply can't afford. And so to expect that they are going to be reading at home, 15 or 20 or even 30 minutes a day, which is what is recommended. We have been putting books in the home.

And since we launched our My Home Library program, we are so proud to say that we've empowered more than 85,000 kids with home libraries of books that they've chosen through our program. And so we're so grateful for the Houston community and all of the amazing donors who've stepped up and helped to fund the books for the kids that we've been able to give out.

Sam: Well, that's exciting. And Julie, you briefly mentioned COVID-19, and it's hard not to talk about it these days. Everyone's being affected in so many ways. And I know the nonprofit community is no different. What has the impact of COVID-19 been on your organization?

Julie: Much like every other nonprofit, we had to cut our budget. In fact, last year, we cut our budget by 20%. So we have lofty goals. You know, your granny set the pace for getting up every day and do something to make a difference. And so it did set us back a little bit just from being able to achieve the kinds of things that we wanted to do last year. But it didn't stop us from keeping a relentless focus on our work.

I mentioned our My Home Library program. Despite the pandemic, we still know, in fact, it's even a more critical need since students, especially when COVID first hits, students weren't going to school, they didn't have access to their school libraries, they didn't have access to their public libraries, and they didn't have books to read at home. And so, we still partnered with our local school districts, and we're able to give out over 150,000 brand new books to children through curbside as part of our efforts. So we had to shift a little bit

from the standpoint of how we deliver our programs. We haven't changed our focus.

We also host a summer reading camp in partnership with the Houston Children's Museum. And we had expected to serve 600 children last summer in a face-to-face environment. And because of the great leadership and, again, the focus of the school district as well as the museum, we were able to transform the camp adventure into a virtual learning program.

And so all of the resources, the hands-on reading kits, books, the science materials, all were packaged up into take-home kits that parents stopped and picked up curbside. And then the Children's Museum educators provided all of the video lessons through their Facebook Live page. So we were able to work with them to transform that program virtually.

And so the tutors that we've trained are still continuing to provide small group reading intervention programs through Microsoft Teams. So we haven't stopped. We've had to shift and transform. And I'll say, also, Sam, that when we think about what return to normalcy might look like, I think we've been able to use this time to transform and rethink the way that we do our work.

And so we're just going to have a different way of how we define normal. We've learned a lot over the last year that we've been affected by the pandemic. And I expect that it'll just be a means of learning and growing and doing things differently, hopefully, impacting more children along the way.

Sam: Julie, one thing you haven't mentioned is the difficulties in fundraising during this time. If someone's listening right now, how can they help the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation? Is there a website they can go to for more information?

Julie: Our website is bushhoustonliteracy.org and there are many ways that you can contribute. You can just make a general donation. We have a couple of fabulous programs. One is, I mentioned, our My Home Library program, it only costs \$30 to sponsor a child's home library of 6 new books. And again, the children get to choose the books that they want to read and love. So we encourage you, if \$30 is what you can give, and you want to make a difference directly on a child, please do that. If you can give more, do so.

And we do have our Celebration of Reading, our signature event, as I mentioned previously, coming up on April 29th. Because of the pandemic environment, it'll be a hybrid event. So we'll have just a very small intimate audience, but we're also going to be livestreaming the event. So if you live

outside of Houston, you actually can participate in the event via livestream. So you'll see on our website a way to purchase a livestream ticket access, as well as if you're here in the Greater Houston area and tuning in, we have a great partnership with KPRC Channel 2, and they're actually going to be filming the event this year and editing it and airing it live on Channel 2 in early May.

Sam: Well, Lee and I will definitely be tuning in from Washington, DC, looking forward to that. Now, Julie, where do you see the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation 10 years from now?

Julie: I would love to say that in 10 years, there is no need for the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation because we will have broken the intergenerational cycle of low literacy right here in our community. But I think that that might be a little too ambitious. But we're gonna still work hard to try to make that happen.

I think one of the things that I see 10 years from now is we've just partnered with and announced with the Mayor's Office for adult literacy, the development of an adult literacy blueprint. So I see 10 years from now, having demonstrable results in the number of adults who can read at an 8th grade or higher competency, one of our other key outcomes is having a demonstrable number of kids reading at or above grade level by the end of the third grade.

So I would love to be able to tell you that we have received moonshot results in both of those outcomes, the number of adults who can read, the number of children who are reading at or above grade level and, and those are things that I hope in 10 years from now I can come back and say, "Houston is a model city for driving outcomes and results for literacy, creating a more thriving vibrant community, both socially and economically. And that we are a model city for others who have taken our blueprint, our roadmap, to do the same within their other cities, and activate it for change."

Sam: Well, Julie, listening to you, it sounds like we still have a lot to do to improve reading levels among our kids. If you had the ultimate authority to do one thing to improve that, what would you do and why?

Julie: I would create a system of high quality, early childcare education and parent education programs, where children and families learn together from birth to age 4, capitalizing on human brain development, those critical early years where a child's brain is growing rapidly, trillions of neurons are activating and to make sure that parents are empowered to be their child's first and most important teacher. Part of that system would include an expanded system of high-quality Pre-K. So making sure that there's equity of opportunity for any

family to send their child to a high-quality 4-year-old Pre-K program, and to expand reach of early Head Start Programs for even 3-year-olds.

And again, allowing parents to make those determinations, whether or not their child is developmentally ready for a program like that. But we need to create a system where parents and children are learning together, kids are entering kindergarten with those requisite reading skills, the return on investment is going to be astronomical. We already have economic data that shows that for every dollar invested in early childcare, there's seven dollars return on investment. That's not even looking at what we do with two-gen approaches for parents.

If we can turn the needle both on parents and children, we can redirect a lot of the resources that's being spent on special education, interventions, programs for kids who are behind. We'll close the achievement gap. There's so many tremendous outcomes that we will achieve if we can approach two-way family literacy programs and early child care programs.

Sam: Well, Julie, you were fortunate enough to work directly with my grandmother for several years on this Houston mission before her passing in 2018. Whether you liked it or not, I'm sure you got plenty of advice from her. What did you learn from her in that experience?

Julie: One of the things that I learned, I think, most fervently from your grandmother is that we need to act with a sense of urgency and purpose and do something every day to make a difference. And so she kind of instilled that. And she set an example of that throughout her 30 years championing literacy.

And so I take that seriously when the alarm goes off, and I get up every morning and figure out what am I going to do today. And I try to instill that within my team and those who work with us in the community.

But I also learned that you never should stop giving and caring. And I had the fortune of being with your grandmother, several weeks out from her passing. In fact, on February 15th, we were over her house setting up a video. So each year at a Celebration of Reading, your grandparents love to do something funny to make the audience laugh. They love a good laugh, they love to good joke, anything that they could do.

And so being over there, she had agreed to put on a mascot costume. And so here she was on February 15th, 2018, donning a mascot costume with what you would see on a football field or on a basketball court. You know, the big giant

head mascots for our Curiosity Cruiser and she was doing the skit with your Uncle Neil and he was wearing the owl costume called Albatron.

And you know, it just struck me here, you know, a 92-year-old, I think at that point, woman who was willing to don a costume, a mascot costume, to shine a lot on her cause and to make people laugh, but also to create attention, create awareness and attention for driving change. And it really, it struck me then, but it really struck me eight weeks later when she passed away and she passed away on the Tuesday before Celebration of Reading event. And we've played that video and everyone laughed. It was a wonderful tribute to her.

But again, it just demonstrated that here was a woman who could have retired and gone on and lived her life in silence and in quiet fortitude with her hero and the love of her life. And she could have felt like she did enough. But she never stopped caring. She never stopped doing.

Sam: Thank you for sharing that, Julie. And, gosh, thanks for sharing all these great stories and memories of my grandmother. And tell us about all the great things that are going on at the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation.

Let's end on a lighter note. I know the Houston's Celebration of Reading events have tons of distinguished authors that come through. Is there one that stands out to you as your favorite?

Julie: You know, that really is an unfair question, particularly because you have so many family members who have graced the stage.

Sam: Take them out of it.

Julie: Okay, we're taking them all out.

Sam: Take them all out of it.

Julie: I would say Gary Sinise was here discussing his book, his memoir, "Grateful American: A Journey from Self to Service." And I was aware of the Gary Sinise Foundation and all that he had been doing. But I read his book, and I listened to his powerful story. And it just again reminded me of the power that each of us have in ourselves. If we would just activate and do something, what we could do.

And here is a gentleman who struggled to become an actor, who now is a director, and felt a calling to create a nonprofit organization. And it's tremendous to see what the Gary Sinise Foundation has done. And so, I was

completely enamored with Gary and I loved him as an actor, but he earned utmost respect for me as a human being, a servant leader in our nation.

Sam: Well, Julie, we're lucky that you took the calling to lead up the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation, we couldn't be in a better spot with you at the helm. So thank you so much. And thanks for being on "All the Best."

Julie: Thank you and all the best to you, 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.