



All the Best Podcast
Episode 68: “Flowers...and Bushes”
Featuring Family Friend and Walker’s Point Gardener, Annie Kennedy

Annie: Summer 2014. Dear Annie, I have sent your invoices off to the Walker's Point Trust. From now on, they will pay all that has to do with the point. It may take a little longer, but that is the way that all bills will be paid. The children now on Walker's Point. Don't worry. I am still the boss. This card is painted to raise money for the expansion of the library in Cornish, Maine. All is well here and we will all be together over the holidays on the 26th for 4 and a half days. I'll accept little Jeb who is expecting a second baby on the January 2nd. God is great and we Bushes are blessed with faith, family, and friends like you. With affection, Barbara 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."

Annie Kennedy is a gardener by trade. After leaving corporate America in 2002, Annie took a master gardening class and taught herself everything she could about plants, native plants, soil science, and design. In a few years, she'd built up 13 accounts in Kennebunkport, one of which was Nancy Bush Ellis, my grandfather George H. W. Bush's beloved sister.

Through Nan, Annie was connected to my mother, Doro Bush Koch, who immediately asked Annie to tend to her garden as well. A year and a half later, my grandmother, Barbara Bush asked Annie to work for her, too. Her rose gardening for various members of the family migrated into Annie's role now, taking care of the entire property of Walker's Point.

Annie, how are you? It's so great to see you.

Annie: I'm great. Thank you. Good to see you, too, Sam.

Sam: Annie, I'd like to start with this because not everyone listening knows that you've been tending to my grandmother's gardens in Kennebunkport, Maine for some time now. How did you come to work at Walker's Point and meet my grandparents?

Annie: Well, I was a gardener in Kennebunkport, and I had a small gardening business. And one of the clients was 41's sister, Nancy Bush Ellis. I had gardened for Nancy for a couple of years, and she decided she wanted to take me out to the Point to meet her brother. And in addition to that, one day, Doro Bush came over unexpectedly, and Nancy wanted me to meet Doro when she had her little dog and she seemed like a very nice person.

And then the next day, I got an email and Doro asked me to come over to the point to see her garden. You know, after talking to her for about 10 minutes, she asked me if I would actually come and work there and take care of her garden with her. And so we did that, and we worked together to make her garden even more beautiful than it was.

During that time, Mrs. Bush, every time I came, according to Doro, "Mom would come over and want to take a look to see what you did." And it was like garden envy. One of the big things that I did for Doro was to restore her grandmother's rock garden, and Mrs. Bush, I was pretty much the only one on the Point at that point. She would come over and look at what I was doing.

And one day, she asked me... It was the test, my big test. She asked me if I would come up to the big house, and we walked up to the big house. And she

said, "Now, Dearie, do you think you could make me a garden over here? A rock garden." And I said, "Wow," and there were two little mountains of rocks sticking out about 2 feet wide and I thought, "Oh, my God, the dream job." And I said, "Well, how about if I think about it and come back with an idea tomorrow?" And she said, "Okay, you think about it," with her tone.

So the next day, I came back and I said, "I have the idea." I said, "Mrs. Bush, I would love to make three huge crashing waves in a rock garden. It would just be three waves." And she said, "Okay, do it." Well, I got pickaxes. I got the summer lads out there with me, the kids that worked at the Point in the summer. And I decided to just tear it apart and find the ledge and find the bones to this.

And she came out one day when I was alone, still working at it with a pickaxe, and she said, "Dearie, just how big is this going to be?" I said, "Mrs. Bush, look at your house. It's a huge house. You can't have a little garden. You have to have something that's going to actually balance it. Don't worry. It'll be fine.

And so, when it was installed, she was not only pleased but I had the great privilege of watching her stare at it. She'd go almost every day and just stare at it. And to someone that creates something, that's really a wonderful, wonderful reward.

Sam: And shortly thereafter you were a fixture on the Point, is that true? Did it happen that fast where she said, "I don't want you to leave anymore," or how did that work?

Annie: The next summer, she came to me and said, "Dearie, I would like you to leave all your clients and come and work for us. How would you like that?" And I said, "Mrs. Bush, you're very direct and I'm really indirect. How's that going to work?" And I also told her that I couldn't leave my clients yet. And she said, "Well, just when can you leave?" And I said, "Well, I have to finish the season, but I could be here in late September." And she said, "Fine." And that's when I began. So I had worked for Doro two summers before that started.

Sam: So, Annie, for those that don't know, what does your job entail?

Annie: It encompasses everything that's green, and the landscape itself, which would include its look and feel, its health, its maintenance, and it interfaces also with the people that do the mowing. I don't move. And the people that come in actually work on the irrigation. I'm in control of everything that is planted, the buying of plants, the permitting that is involved in installing gardens because we're in the shoreline zone and you have to have a permit to actually even

remove a blade of grass. I'm also in charge of the health of the pond and all the other gardens. Anything that grows and flowers, it's got my name on it.

Sam: Annie, you've worked side by side in gardens with my grandmother for some time now. Can you talk about her special relationship with gardening?

Annie: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, it was very, very soon after I started to work for her that I realized she had a gardener's soul, and that's a person who doesn't treat the vegetation as a trophy. I've worked for a lot of people where... There's nothing wrong with it, but they want something pretty but they don't go out in it. And she would go out, observe. It was alive to her, she was alive in it. She was conscious of its health and not hurting it. She herself would be found deadheading and occasionally weeding and sometimes pruning the roses. My relationship to her was one that was a bond of two people trying to create beauty in a very historical place.

Sam: Do you remember her having a favorite flower?

Annie: Oh, absolutely. I think it's well-known that the peony would be her favorite flower, but she also had flowers she didn't like. And I have one funny anecdotal story where she asked me to remove this large plant. I realized that I have forgotten to do it. And it was July. And I came one day and I saw that the first buds had bloomed, and I panicked thinking, "Oh, glory be to God, I didn't take that plant out." So, I didn't know she was near me, and I started to snap off all the buds and she said, "Annie, what are you doing?" And I said, "Oh, Mrs. Bush, I'm really sorry. I know you told me to get rid of this plant and transplant it somewhere else but I forgot and I didn't think you'd notice if I took off all its buds."

But she noticed the littlest things I ever introduced to the garden. And she had a very strange way, euphemistically, of telling me she didn't like something. And this is what she would say, "Annie, do we like these?" And I never had heard that expression before, which is wonderful. "Do we like these?"

Sam: It sounds like she's leading the witness there. Annie, there's hundreds of people who have called Barbara Bush their direct boss. Not all of them have had the same job description as you, probably none. What was it like having Barbara Bush as your boss?

Annie: Having Barbara Bush as my boss was very, very different than the other things that I had heard about her, and even though she was direct, I would bond the plants and what needed to be done. She was so clear, but she also gave me...she knew I needed free reign to create. Although we collaborated, it wasn't

a committee doing things. And she knew that she'd get something better if she didn't put any constraints on me.

As far as working with her, my bond with her became one where I wasn't afraid of her even when I made a few slips of the tongue, I wasn't worried except one time. We were together and some of the times we would be together a lot in May when no one was around before the family arrived in September and October.

And this one foggy, foggy day, she was with the dogs, and she was still riding a tricycle. I was trying to help her put these bags on, and she said, "No, I can do it myself. I can do it myself," and I said, "You are one tough old goat." And she said, "Tough old goat?" And I didn't know what to do. Oh, my good God, I called her that. So I clenched my teeth, and I could hear her pedal away saying, "Tough old goat," and she just went off into the fog.

So I got in touch with Katherine Branch who was her assistant and I emailed her and told her what happened. And I said, "I'm not going to sleep. Am I going to get fired?" And she said, "Calm down. I'm sure she loved it."

Sam: I'm sure she did, I'm sure she did.

Annie: Many of the stories that I have that were on the perimeter when nobody was around where one day she had a lot of broken glass. At that point, she was in her walker and she had the glass in a little cup. And she saw me and she said, "Annie, can you throw this in the ocean? I can't do that." And so I said, "How far do you want me to throw it?" and she said, "As far as you can." And it was the place where the grandchildren come and collect sea glass and the thing about that was she was a 92-year-old making something that she would never, ever appreciate. That was a beautiful moment of how conscious she was of time and her place in it and still that continuum.

And it was the same period of time when we were planting milkweed seed together to bring back the monarchs which had been in great decline. Not being afraid of her was one of my highlights because she wasn't famous to me. Of course, she was famous and she was the First Lady, but when I saw her, she was just this wonderful character of a human being. And because I didn't fear her, I had been tying up all the peonies to stake them in June, and I had lost my brand new glasses. And they were very expensive. They were titanium and everything. And so I went to every peony—and they were wireless—trying to find them. And they were going to mow, and I thought, "Oh, my God, if they mow, I'm going to lose my glasses."

Two days later, I saw her walking and she wanted to speak with me. So she called me down, and I saw that she was wearing my glasses. And I said, "Mrs. Bush, are those your glasses?" and she said, "Of course, they're my glasses. Why do you ask?" And I said, "Well, they really look like my glasses, and I just lost them." She says, "I've never seen you wear them. She said, "I've had these for years. I just took them out of the drawer today," and I said, "Mrs. Bush, are you sure they're your glasses?" And she said, "Annie, were yours prescription?" I said, "Yes, but there's a smudge in the same place that I had a smudge," and she said, "Annie, these are my glasses." And she said, "Do you want to try them?" and I said, "Yeah, I do." And so she took them off, and I was so happy because I thought, "Oh, my God, I didn't have \$600." I put them on, they were not my glasses. I handed them back to her, and then true to form how she had that tilt of the head that she was right and off she went.

Fast-forward another week went by, Doro had told me that she was telling all the ladies around that, "The gardener thinks I stole her glasses." So, I lost my glasses again, and I was in bed and my husband was reading and I said, "Oh, my God, I lost my glasses again," and he said, "Why don't you ask, Mrs. Bush?" I told Doro that, Doro told your grandmother, and your grandmother added that to her story.

So, at the end of the summer, she met my husband for the first time, and she brought him closer. She shook his hand and then she got close to him and said, "Excuse me. Are those your glasses?" That was a great one.

Another story, there was a catastrophe that happened before your grandparents arrived in the garden. An application had been applied to plants by a contractor, and it burnt plants. It burnt hundreds of plants; some of which wouldn't have returned that year or others that would've not been as nice.

And so I went around and collected information about the species, what we needed to do, and how to actually restore this. And I was very excited about what we could do in order to fix this. And I had the whole thing documented and what it would cost. And she said, "Annie, I know you've done your job, but don't be greedy. It was someone's mistake," and I thought, "Wow, that's wonderful. It was just wonderful."

Sam: Well, Annie, you talked about how you worked side by side with my grandmother in May or September when nobody was around. that's a pretty unique opportunity with one-on-one Barbara Bush time. Is there anything you learned from her that you still follow to this day?

Annie: There are a lot of things that would be morrow and the way that someone would comport themselves that I learned and appreciated and observed. There was an actual thing that she taught me about poppies. I went to plant poppies and actually how to fen them, and she taught me some things on how to condition flowers to put in vases.

But the serious things that she taught me were through observation, and the observation of how... Because I had a front-row seat to someone that might arrive in a driven car or a beat up truck, and she never ever, ever changed from how she dealt with either type of person. That was something that I hope I learn.

Sam: Annie, you already mentioned the summer lads or the yard lads who help support you and all your gardening on the Point.

Annie: As you know, your family has had summer lads for decades. I mean, I've been here going on my 11th year. They are the people that provide a lot of the gardening help for me. They're strong, young teenagers. One of them actually is a lobsterman, sixth generation lobster kid from Cape Porpoise who comes every day. He works at 5 a.m. on his boat, and then he comes in and actually works at the Point. And 43 affectionately calls him Lobsterboy when he needs him, and the kid is shy, and you can see his dimple when he says, "Lobsterboy, come and help me."

These kids are strong and wonderful, and it provides a huge opportunity for them to learn not only skills, work for a very beautiful, important family, and engage in a piece of history. But in all of this, there's all the color that comes with having 16-year-olds. And when they first came, Mrs. Bush said, "Now, Annie, you're going to be working with 16-year-old boys." She loved boys, and she said, "You're going to need to teach them things because, if you ask them to put a bucket of water on a plant, they'll do it but they're just going to throw it. So you're going to have to teach them to do it slowly."

But she was their boss, and they had uniforms where they'd have a collared shirt and wear boat shoes because they did work on a boat once in a while. They would meet with her every morning, and she would go out and tell them what to do. But by the afternoon, if you get a bunch of 16-year-olds, they're getting kind of tired and so they would try to hide from her and they just go onto the fishing shed. One of them I found hiding from her; he fell sound asleep on a 5-gallon bucket behind the garage once trying not to have to do any more work, but she was omnipresent, omnipresent to the point where that shock of white hair, they couldn't believe that she'd come up like a stealth bomber, and they'd say, "Here she comes. Oh, my God. Here she comes."

Well, one of them, he was a little smart. He would start to look at her schedule to know when she was coming and when she was going. One day he thought, "Okay, I'm just going to tell her I have to work for my mother," because there was nothing on the schedule and he knew she'd be inside that afternoon. What he didn't know was she had an unannounced doctor's appointment. So he went golfing to the rental golf course, which has some of his tee boxes right on the road, and she drove by and saw him teeing off. And, oh, my goodness, the next day, I said, "Austin, she saw you." He said, "That's not possible." I said, "She saw you, she saw you." And he never lived that one down with her.

Other things where we're cleaning out the garage and there were items that belonged to Mrs. Bush that were worn out and some of them were hideous. And the boys tried to throw them out. One of them was wearing a Red Sox hat, and I said, "Don't you dare throw those out." She's like an old Yankee mentality. And one of them says, "She's a Yankees fan."

Of course, the kids that came and went, they were as young as your sister Gigi at one point, and Gigi being so beautiful, they didn't want to do certain things for me but they would always volunteer if she were out sunbathing to go up to the pool and do anything. Anything.

Sam: Annie, you've already told some great stories about my grandmother, but I'd like to set the record straight because I heard a story about you singing to my grandfather while you're gardening. Is that true? And if so, what songs?

Annie: That was very true. And you mind if I tell you how that came to be? Because I sing all the time and my first day working out at Walker's Point for your grandmother, I didn't know anything about the layout of the big house and I didn't know their bedroom was right there where I was going to be doing the work. And so the window was cracked a little bit, and I was working in that garden and singing Irish drinking songs and gospel songs at the top of my lungs thinking no one was around and not knowing that President and Mrs. Bush's bedroom was right there and he was napping.

That following day, he came out and he said, "Hey, we enjoyed your singing yesterday." But from that day forward, every time he heard me singing, he would either chime in because he knew the song I was singing or say, "I can hear you singing, Annie." And I'd pop up and we'd sing something together.

One 4th of July, I'll never forget this, he heard me singing and he started singing, too. And I held his hand and we sang "Grand Old Flag" and "I Want a Girl Just Like the Girl That Married Dear Old Dad." And he knew all the oldies

and so, when he'd hear me sing, and his wheelchair was around and he came toward me, we would continue what I was singing or I'd sing a couple of the old tones.

Sam: Oh, that's great. Well, Annie, can you talk about climate change and how that's affecting our gardening philosophy on the Point?

Annie: Yes. You have a lot of lawns at the moment, and the ocean's getting a little closer and the storms are getting greater. So the ocean's actually coming on the property more often than it ever did. And to prevent erosion, we're trying to plant as many native ground covers and what they call woody, perennials throughout the Point and to make sure that there's some kind of a tenacity and root zone so that, when the ocean comes, we're hoping that that's going to hold.

And so the native plant push started back when I installed the big installation at Jeb's because it was required by law to put in native plants, but Lady Laura Bush is very much interested in native plants. So I've become a student of them. You know, we're planting them by the hundreds.

Sam: Is that something that could be done as soon as next summer or are we looking at years ahead?

Annie: Years. First of all, we had some experimental things, you know, planting, you know, a couple of hundred grasses in more problem areas, seagrasses, which we had a couple of storms. We'll see what happened when the spring comes, but we're also going to put more native trees on the property and it's mostly ledge. And so plants can grow into ledge and that's the hope.

Sam: Annie, I'll tell you, Lee, myself, and Howdy were chopping at the bit to get to Walker's Point, and we want to see all the new projects that are coming up. Is there anything new that you're working on for 2021?

Annie: You're going to see more grasses. Actually, we're going to install 10 to 15 more trees this year, and I would assume that they're just going to try to do that from year to year now.

Sam: Annie, I like to say, first, thank you for coming on "All the Best" and sharing your stories. I know everyone is going to appreciate all these behind-the-scenes stories. It's amazing to hear. Before I let you go, I have to ask, is there anything else we need to know about George and Barbara Bush?

Annie: This goes back to the summer lads. They were in topsiders for the longest time. And when I came, I started to use pickaxes and crowbars and

moved rocks and dig. And it was a whole new horizon for them. 41 was in his wheelchair and coming by, and he saw me up on the hill with the kids. And he said, "Annie, Annie, you're a slave driver!" And as soon as that happened, the kids all scattered for lunch, you know?

Your grandfather really surprised me. One fall where he was going up to the main house, he said, "What are you doing, Annie?" And I said, "Well, I've got a surprise for you for next spring." He didn't know this, but he just assumed because I was saying next spring I was planting hundreds of bulbs. He said, "You must be planting spring bulbs," and I said, "Yes, I am." I thought that was kind of interesting that a president would even know something like that.

And then I take care of the vegetable garden as well. Up at the vegetable garden, he'd always say, "What are you having here? And what are you planting now?" And I said, "Well, I'm planting potatoes." He said, "Really?" And he was in a wheelchair. And I said, "Would you like to plant them?" And he said, "So how do you plant them?" And I said, "Look, you take the spud, and I had dug the trench that you needed." And I said, "Now, you just have to space them," and so he took the spud and his lips curled like it was playing a game of darts and he threw them into the trench almost exactly the way that I was supposed to be placed. And he said, "So, when are they going to become potatoes?" And I said, you know, "September."

So when they were finally ready and they became potatoes, I dug them up and I gave him a basket. He said, "Oh, Barb's going to be really interested to see these." I just thought that was interesting, a man who had done so much that would indulge me with that kind of a joy.

Your grandmother was very aware of people and what they did. And there was one day I didn't notice a storm was coming, and I hadn't heard that there was this big storm coming. And it came on pretty quick, and I was up on Jeb's Hill planting. And I heard her yelling, "Annie," and I looked down. And near the tennis court, she looked like Phyllis Diller with her hair swinging in the air. She was on her scooter.

I had been looking down for so long, it was green, dark green, the sky. Big pelts were coming just before the storm hit. Here I am with a metal, little shovel. I didn't want to be a lightning rod. She's like, "Annie, take cover. Take cover." And I said, "Oh!" I ran down the boardwalk and I said, "Mrs. Bush, thank you." I said, "Mrs. Bush, hurry up. Hurry back to the house," and she said, "What in the holy hell do you think I'm doing?" and she's riding up on her scooter.

Sam: That's great, Annie. Well, thank you so much for sharing these stories. I speak for the whole family. I know we cannot wait to get back to Maine. We're counting down the days, the minutes, the seconds. I can't wait to get up into the gardens. I know they're going to be as beautiful as ever. Annie, thank you for being a part of "All the Best."

Annie: Thank you, and I appreciate it, and I look forward to seeing you as I always do in the spring, summer, and have a good rest of the winter.

Sam: We will.

Annie: All right. Thanks. Love you, bye.

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.