



All the Best Podcast

Episode 85. The Best Job in Politics

85. Featuring Gian-Carlo Peressutti, Director of Public Affairs at IFM Investors and Former Aide and Press Secretary to George H.W. Bush

Gian-Carlo: December 4th, 2005. Dear Roma, I'm a very happy old guy because I now have a new friend, a beautiful little girl to love. You are a very lucky girl. You have two wonderful parents who will take care of you and will always love you, and will hug you a lot. Your dad and I worked together some years ago. I love him as one of my own sons, and as for your mom, she is the best. Have a great, happy, peaceful life, and may it always be filled with love and wonder. God bless you, Roma. We Bushrd love you already. A lot. An awful lot. George Bush, 41st President, USA.

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".

On behalf of our family and the George and Barbara Bush Foundation. This is "All the Best".

Sam: Gian-Carlo Peressutti is director of public affairs at IFM Investors, a global asset management firm specializing in infrastructure investing. He is responsible

for communications, media, and public and government affairs strategies throughout the Americas. Prior to joining IFM, Gian-Carlo held various senior positions in communications, sustainability, and government affairs at multinational corporations such as PepsiCo, RR Donnelley, and CGI. While in government, Gian-Carlo was associate director in the White House Office of Public Liaison for President George W. Bush and served as personal aide and press secretary to former President George H.W. Bush during his post-presidency. A graduate of Georgetown University and Choate Rosemary Hall, Gian-Carlo was appointed to the board of directors of the Connecticut Development Authority, the Direct Marketing Association, and the Illinois Chamber of Commerce. He is currently on the Board of Advisors for the George Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University and serves on the Connecticut Statewide Grievance Committee. He has been a political commentator for several national cable television outlets and lives in Ridgefield, Connecticut, with his wife and two daughters. We're thrilled to have Gian-Carlo with us today, Gian-Carlo. Welcome to All the Best.

Gian-Carlo: Sam, it's great to see you. Thanks for inviting me on.

Sam: I'd like to start by hearing how you came to work for my grandfather in 1996 during his post-presidential years. I hear an internship with former All the Best guest and former political director for 41 Ron Kaufman helped put you in position to land the gig. Is that true?

Gian-Carlo: That is absolutely right. I was Ron's intern spring of my senior year in college. Right around graduation, one of Ron's colleagues, a guy by the name of Craig Patty, called to see if I was interested in a job very similar to one that I held for your grandfather. And I was working for a man named David Kearns, who had been the former chairman and CEO of Xerox and was in need of someone to perform similar duties to the job that your grandfather had for many cycles. And so that was my first job after college with David. I think the similarities between those two roles, and maybe Ron put in a good word or two, or maybe he didn't were what made me, at least on paper, a candidate that I guess Jean and Michael, Dan and I were deemed worthy to at least fly out to Houston and see if it was going to be a fit.

Sam: So who did you interview with, Jean and Michael? Or did you interview with my grandfather as well? How did that process work? All of the above?

Gian-Carlo: All of the above. Michael picked me up at the airport. It was my first time ever to Houston. I could put two and two together and learn that the drive into 10000 Memorial Drive there in Houston was probably my de facto interview with Michael. But I visited with Jean for a while, and then I went in and interviewed with President Bush. You know, it's funny. I had been offered the week before a job to go to work for my congressman in Connecticut, for whom I had worked in his '96 reelection campaign. That was former Congressman Christopher Shays, the Fourth District, Fairfield County in Connecticut, where I live now. So he had offered me the job to be the kind of, office manager, the low man on the totem pole in D.C., and I was all excited because I'd just come off the campaign and he was reelected and it was great. And I remember thinking to myself, flying to Houston, "You know, what do I have to lose here?" I mean, if I vomit on my shoes, I still get to say I had an interview with the former president of the United States, and so I really wasn't nervous. And as you know, no one can put people at ease the way your grandfather could. I was in a great frame of mind when I walked into his office. I remember it like it was yesterday, and, you know, we had our conversation. That's how it went down.

Sam: Gian-Carlo, what was it about working for a former president that was so attractive to you during that time in your life?

Gian-Carlo: Someone once said to me during my four-year term in the job that my job was the best job in Republican politics, and I think that was probably true because, as you can remember, during that time, your grandfather was, what, two and a half years, three years out of office. He only had to go to places where he wanted to go and do things that he wanted to do, and rightly so, was revered and lauded everywhere he went. He gave speeches, was on the speaking circuit, so to speak for a while, raised a ton of money along with Mrs. Bush for charity, and did a bunch of political work and the political work he would have done, you know, I'm sure had he not had two sons either eyeing office or eyeing a promotion in office, as this was '96-'97 when I started. And so it was that combination of stuff that diversity of activity and engagement, which obviously was a hallmark of your grandfather's life. And as you know, better than anyone, he liked nothing more than to live an interesting and diverse life, and he got to do that as a former president and I got to tag along for the ride.

Sam: As you just mentioned, Gian-Carlo, like many former presidents, my grandfather's post-presidency was busy, filled with international travel, speeches,

and a lot of fun. What was it like traveling with George Bush during this time, and was there a trip or two that stuck out to you?

Gian-Carlo: You know, there were the trips that were just fun because they were fun, because something happened that was comical, or, you know, whatever, but I think really the unique trips were the ones where I was fortunate to be in a position to get to meet historic figures. I'd gotten engaged, I think, three days prior to taking a European tour with your grandfather, and one of our first stops was to London and I went to pick up President and Mrs. Bush at number 10. And I'm standing there in the little foyer and Tony and Mrs. Blair come out and President Bush introduces me and says to the prime minister, "This is my aide Gian-Carlo he just got engaged," and before I knew it I was getting a congratulatory handshake from the Prime Minister of Great Britain and his wife. And you know, one of those moments where you kind of hit pause on reality and say, is this actually happening to me? You know, another one would have been a trip to Russia that we took when Boris Yeltsin was in office. And because protocol demanded that since the president of Russia had his chief of staff, that President Bush had to have one of his staff members with him, well, that staff member happened to be me because I was all that was available. It was either me or a Secret Service agent, so I went in and sat in on that two-plus hour lunch with the president of Russia in the presidential dining room there. And I can just remember thinking again, "My God, why is this happening?" Like, this is unbelievable. So things like that, the people that I met always will be what stood out for me in terms of what made a trip special.

Sam: You briefly mentioned the engagement to your wife, Amanda. I heard that my grandfather may have unwittingly played the role of matchmaker, putting you at the right place at the right time. Is that true?

Gian-Carlo: He sure did. One of the fundraisers, Sam, that your grandfather never missed was an event for the Gary Pike Foundation, and Gary Pike was a Kennebunk High School student who died of cancer, sadly, and one of his wishes upon passing was to create essentially a Ronald McDonald House in Portland, Maine, near Maine Medical Center for the families of children like him. And every year there was a big fundraiser for that, which included a golf tournament at the Cape Arundel Golf Club in Kennebunkport. And your grandfather mustered up all of the friends and the golf connections that he had so that that thing turned out to be basically the PGA Tour, right? Every year. I mean, it was a who's who. I'm not a golfer, but I love sports. And so Jim Nantz would be a guest every year and every

famous golfer basically on the planet got to go to that thing. And as a quick aside, to specifically answer your question, my wife happened to be a classmate of Gary Pike's in high school, and she was a reporter at WGME, which is the CBS affiliate in Portland, Maine. And so Gary's parents invited Amanda to kind of get the exclusive to cover the event. So she was there, and as I often joke with her, she met George Bush, Jim Nantz, and me all at the same moment, all on the same morning, and for some reason, I was the one that she decided to connect with. So, there you go.

Sam: Giancarlo, I'm not sure if it was Ron Kaufman or Jean Becker who said that working for George Bush was like the Hotel California. You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave. You did leave to go to PepsiCo and IFM investors, but you stayed close to the family and even purchased a house in Kennebunkport, Maine. What is it about George Bush that brought people together and kept them together through all these years?

Gian-Carlo: You know, I think about all the ways that my time with your grandparents, with both of them, changed my life. And I mean, just about every facet of my life was affected by those four-plus years that I spent. I met my wife there, who was a local girl. Kennebunkport had an even more special place in my heart as a person for that reason. You know, I spent four summers, four years in my life there working for both President and Mrs. Bush. But it's my wife's hometown, it's where we met. So we spent every summer or some part of every summer up there, and it was always her dream for us to one day be able to have our own place, and a couple of years ago, we were able to make that happen. And now I'm proud to say that my daughters have spent one part of all their summers since they were alive in that town, and so it will forever occupy an incredibly special position in our family. That's something for which I'll be eternally grateful.

Sam: Gian-Carlo, there's not many people who got to observe and work with my grandfather as closely as you did for so long. During your time working with George Bush, you must have received some advice from the former president. Is there anything you learned from George Bush or even Barbara Bush that you still carry with you today?

Gian-Carlo: Yeah, I think two things that will always jump out at me, and one was your grandfather's humility. It was staggering at times the degree to which this man who had achieved one of the highest positions that a human being can aspire to on this planet, being President of the United States. And yet he had almost a reflexive

desire to always think about other people and always put other people's thoughts and considerations ahead of his own. You know, when you learn at the knee of someone like that and you see how they engage and interact with people—especially at that age, I was in my early 20s—it leaves an indelible mark on you as a person, you know, and how you think about your approach to life, your approach to other people, et cetera. I'll tell you this story: There was a line in your grandfather's speech that he used to give over and over again when he would give talks, and he talked about how his political opponents used to refer to him as a man of privilege. And he would always be quick to add to say, and they didn't mean that in the nice way. They meant that I was the son of a rich guy and he would say, you know, "They were right. We did come from money that my parents worked for to give me things," he said. "But the privilege that I really was the beneficiary of, and not the one that my adversaries meant, was that I had two parents that loved me and cared about me and instilled values in me." And I often think about that because when people say to me, you know, "Wow, you were so privileged, you got to work for a former President of the United States." Yeah, they're right. But I always think kind of a variation on the story your grandfather tells that the privilege was just being around probably the best human being I've ever had the pleasure of meeting and getting to know. And I mean that sincerely. That was the real privilege, right? The fact that he was president of the United States was kind of a nice cherry on top of the sundae, but, you know, it really was just getting to spend that much time with such a quality human being and a wonderful person. That was a highlight for me.

Sam: Anyone who worked with George Bush also built a relationship, whether they liked it or not, with Barbara Bush. Gian-Carlo, what do you remember about my grandmother?

Gian-Carlo: I don't know if you know this, Sam, but she wasn't one to hold back a comment or two, and I'll never forget someone said to me she's going to be in a holding room with Mrs. Bush, and she had never met her before. And they, you know, they were going to be there for like half an hour together. And she turned to me and said, Oh my gosh, I'm so worried. Like, What are we going to talk about? I said, Oh, not to worry. There will be plenty of things for you and Mrs. Bush to converse about over the time that you'll be spending together. One of your grandmother's most endearing I thought, qualities truly was that she would talk to a complete stranger the same way she would talk to her best friend in life. And it was that sort of authenticity that, you know, certainly it came across when she was First Lady, but I think it really disarmed people when they met her in the

post-presidency. You know better than anyone, if she had something to tell you, she was going to tell it to you. Good, bad, or indifferent. And I was the beneficiary of compliments, and Lord knows I was the beneficiary of some—shall we call it—constructive criticism, too, but that came with the territory. I admired her again for so many of the same reasons that I admired your grandfather, for her humility and for her not ever taking anything too seriously, least of all herself. What a remarkable woman.

Sam: I think if Barbara Bush told you what to do or gave you constructive criticism, I see that as a badge of honor. And I'd be covered in them because I got plenty of it over the years.

Gian-Carlo: No, I know I actually witnessed the couple of times when you were the recipient of some life lessons from your grandmother.

Sam: We'll do it on the next podcast. I'm the one asking the questions here. Well, I want to transition to 2018, Gian-Carlo, because that was a tough year, but a celebratory year for people who love George Bush. His funeral week was an amazing celebration of life. Gian-Carlo, you were among many former staffers who volunteered their time to make sure that chaotic week of traveling and events went off without a hitch. And it did. What do you remember from that week, and what do you think the country learned from the life of service of George Bush?

Gian-Carlo: It just so happened that right around the time that your grandfather passed away, I had been doing a good bit of political commentary on cable television, and so I got a ton of calls to come on and talk about one of my favorite subjects in life, which is your family. I called Jean Becker and said, "Hey, Jean, I have these opportunities, are you alright with my doing them?" And she said, "Absolutely." So from kind of a selfish perspective, it was great because I got a neat platform to be able to go on national television and tell the stories, you know, many of which I've told or will tell during my time with you now and tell them to some pretty high profile journalists. I really appreciated that because I wanted the world to know—again, selfishly—I wanted the world to know the George Bush that I knew. I wanted them to know what a remarkable person he was and remind them of all the courageous things that he did when he was President of the United States, of which there were many, politically courageous. So I was very grateful to get to have the opportunity to do that. And then, of course, there was his service in Washington. And man, what an emotional day for the country. It obviously was great to see everyone in Bush World in one place at one time. As you know, there

are a couple of moments, both during and post-presidency where everyone gets to get back together. That was the varsity of get-togethers in George Bush World and being able to catch up with everyone and share stories, and I think most of all, I mean, I guess I'll leave it here and just say it struck me that it's exactly what he would have wanted. It wasn't some somber, morose event. It really was a celebration, and it was a celebration of a man that the nation knew, but that those of us who are fortunate to know him personally, you know, knew on an intimate level and it just felt perfect. It felt like the perfect send-off to a deserving human being.

Sam: Yeah, they had the heads of state, but just showing George Bush, who was in the front row, the ushers from the White House, you know, the Secret Service agents. So it was the varsity, but it was George Bush's varsity, and that was just amazing. People all together at once.

Gian-Carlo: Typical, you know, it would be like the overnight list at Walker's Point on any given evening in the summer, it would be the most random assortment of people. You know, that's who he was.

Sam: Well, Gian-Carlo, I want to say thanks so much for being on All the Best. Hearing your stories is great. You worked so closely with them for so long. Thank you for sharing with us today. I want to end with this. It's been three years since George and Barbara Bush have gone on to their greater reward. What do you miss most about having them in your life?

Gian-Carlo: That's easy. I miss their humor. I don't think I ever laughed or was around someone who loved to laugh as much as your grandfather, and your grandmother too. This is a true story: I got her to snort a glass of water once because I made a joke, and I think it was one of the proudest moments of my life. But no, seriously, just their humor and two things people would say consistently when they met your grandfather in his post-presidency: one was "You're taller than I thought you were," and the second was, "Gosh, you're so much funnier than I thought you were." And, you know, the first is kind of a throwaway, but the second really didn't come across when he was president. Nor frankly, should it. No one looks to their president to be the comedian-in-chief. But your grandfather had the best sense of humor, probably of anyone I ever met. And you know the jokes he liked to tell and the way he liked to laugh and he made me laugh heartily every day. And yeah, I miss that.

Sam: Hmm. Well, Gian-Carlo, thanks for being a part of all the best. You're the best man. Thanks for doing this.

Gian-Carlo: Great to see you, Sam. Thanks for having me.

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".