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George H.W. Bush Appeared on a 1976 Sunday Talk Show. It Changed a Georgia Lawyer's Life

My wife and I were impressed by Bush's resume and were inspired by his direct and concise answers during the show. We both remarked how he would make a great president, if he ever chose to run for office.

By **Joe D. Whitley** | December 19, 2018



Joe Whitley of Baker Donelson
(Photo: John Disney/ALM)

Early in my professional career, a long-distance encounter with George Herbert Walker Bush by U.S. mail made all the difference in the direction of my life. I am certain a story similar to mine was repeated thousands upon thousands of times during his lifetime. Why? Because

the man simply practiced what he preached and believed. Bush 41 was not only a great leader but also someone who positively impacted the lives of those around him with his kinder, gentler style.

I have often been asked what it takes to build a successful career. I don't believe there is a precise formula. But I do believe that working hard, getting a good education and being fortunate enough to have strong, positive, loving people around you is important. And perhaps too, a little serendipity.

It was a Sunday morning in the late fall of 1976. Jimmy Carter was president-elect, and there were three television networks—no cable to speak of. I was serving as an assistant district attorney in Columbus, Georgia, and my wife, Kathy, was working full-time as a public school teacher. We liked to watch “Face The Nation” (or a similar show), and on that particular day the then-CIA Director George Herbert Walker Bush was making an appearance. The host of the show ran down the list of accomplishments of the 53-year-old Bush, who had served as a congressman, ambassador to China, chair of the Republican Party and was a World War II hero and a successful businessman. Kathy and I were impressed with Bush's resume and were inspired by his direct and concise answers during the show. We both remarked how Bush would make a great president, if he ever chose to run for office.

Three years later, in 1979, Bush announced his decision to run for the presidency. Kathy wrote him a letter offering our support and sent it to his home in Texas. True to his prolific letter- and note-writing form, Bush wrote Kathy back to thank us both for our kind offer.

Shortly thereafter, we were contacted by the very small Bush For President operation in Georgia, headed up by the late Sen. Paul Coverdell. The campaign asked Kathy and me, along with another colleague, to run the Bush For President efforts in Columbus in advance of the Republican primary. We readily accepted and worked closely with Senator Coverdell.

I was 29 and had just joined what was then the Hirsch, Beil & Partin law firm. My days were filled with law practice, while late nights and weekends were devoted to the work that Kathy and I could do together for the campaign. At the time, there were virtually no young Republican attorneys in Columbus and no active Federalist Society in Georgia. Many, if not most, of the residents in Columbus were committed to the Democratic party or ambivalent about Republican politics. However, there was a growing amount of excitement about former California Gov. Ronald Reagan.

Despite those daunting headwinds, we found a local store front that we could use as a call center and to employ local volunteers. We also rented a post hole digger and borrowed tools to put up Bush For President signs throughout the city. Kathy and I hosted several fundraisers—inviting to Columbus such dignitaries as Jonathan Bush, the president's brother, and Donald Rumsfeld, who later served as secretary of defense. Despite our enthusiasm and best efforts, Ronald Reagan defeated Bush 41 in the Georgia primary.

Considering my private practice salary at the time was in the \$20,000-plus range, personal contributions were not easy to come by. So most of what we did for the Bush campaign was "sweat equity." Kathy and I were exhausted but truly gratified to have been a part of the Bush For President team. We had no expectations for anything from George H. W. Bush.

However, a short time later, we were asked to come to a Buckhead home to meet George H. W. Bush, who was on a tour of the United States to thank his campaign workers and contributors. We accepted the invitation and traveled

to Atlanta, fully believing there would be a room filled with dozens of people. Much to our surprise, there were only a handful of very connected and accomplished individuals. It was the most incredible one-on-one setting that Kathy and I would ever have with the future president of the United States. We found him to be friendly and engaging, accessible and genuinely appreciative. After the Bush primary campaign, Kathy and I coordinated one more campaign in Columbus for Mack Mattingly, who was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1980 in the Reagan-Bush landslide.

For me, my service to the presidential ambitions of George H. W. Bush launched my career in public service, both at the Department of Justice and later at the Department of Homeland Security. I am confident but for Kathy's and my "serendipitous" moment watching Bush 41 on a television program back in 1976, I would not have been nominated by President Reagan to serve in Macon as the U.S. attorney for the Middle District of Georgia in 1981, and later that fall sworn in on my 31st birthday. All of my other political appointments grew out of my early service to the Bush campaign. After his election as president in 1988, Bush nominated me to serve in Atlanta as the U.S. attorney for the Northern District of Georgia in 1990. And in 2003, his son, President George W. Bush (43) nominated me to serve as the first general counsel of the Department of Homeland Security.

Today, looking back on all that I have been fortunate to accomplish in my life, I credit some of it to serendipity. But, I also realize now and fully appreciate that there is so much more to the story. It all began with the goodness and kindness of one strong and gentle man. A man who would forever change my life. Thank you, George Herbert Walker Bush, for your enormous and lasting legacy. Your positive footprint in this world made a lasting impression on me and will continue to serve as an example of true leadership for future generations of Americans.

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