

Lucas: Welcome to Bridge The Gap Podcast, the senior living podcast with Josh and Lucas. We have an exciting show today. We want to welcome the executive assistant to President Ronald Reagan and the author of "The President Will See You Now," Peggy Grande. Welcome to the show.

Peggy: Thank you so much for having me on this morning.

Lucas: Well, for our listeners that may not be familiar with you, we're really excited to have you on because your story is super fascinating and your experiences, starting off very, very young in your profession is something that I think everybody's going to want to lean in and listen to. And so I think that I'm correct that you were only 22 years old when you went to work for President Reagan, how did you get a job like that?

Peggy: Well, I have to be one of the luckiest women in the world, but I also believe that God has a plan for everybody. And so this was part of His plan for my life and hopefully for the President's life as well. I was one of those kids that just always had a fascination with presidents, with government, with the white house in Washington, DC. But I grew up in Southern California, which might as well have been a million miles from there. My family was a family of educators, no interest in politics, particularly, but it was just something I was fascinated by as a kid. Fast forward to college, I was a communications major with a minor in business. Didn't go into politics because I thought how practical is that, whoever gets a job in politics? But was just kind of a little hobby on the side.

Something that I always kept my eye on. And while I was in college, in the white house, actually in junior high, through college, high school and college, Ronald Reagan was in the white house. And so for me, he was the perfect convergence of everything I loved from politics, to a man of faith, to a man of optimism. And every time he spoke through the TV in my living room, I thought he was talking just to me. And I'm sure a lot of people had that same feeling. But in 1989, January Ronald Reagan left the white house. He returned to Los Angeles. He opened an office, just a few miles from where I was in college. And my dad raised me to believe that somebody has got to have the job you want and it might as well be you. So I took a chance, wrote a letter to the office of Ronald Reagan in my final semester of college, and asked for an opportunity to volunteer there.

Was brought in for an interview. I tell the story in my book, which is very embarrassing about meeting Ronald Reagan for the first time. I was in his office for an interview, never had prepared myself mentally for what I would do or say if I saw him, I don't know why I didn't think Ronald Reagan worked in the office of Ronald Reagan, but he walked toward me as I was leaving the office. And I panicked, I didn't know what to do. I didn't grow up in a family where we met important people and so embarrassing myself, I'm sure, I stood up straight and put my hand over my heart as if the flag was passing by and just to be respectful. But I was hired that day to work for what I thought would be a short-term internship as I was graduating from college. I graduated from college and was given the opportunity to come on full-time staff.

I worked as the executive assistant to the chief of staff for a couple of years. And then Ronald Reagan's long-time executive assistant, he had had since before he was governor retired, and they asked me to take that job. And so stepping into the shoes of somebody who had served this man for so many decades was, was daunting, but obviously, the opportunity of a lifetime to have a front-row seat to history. And

how do you say no to an opportunity like that? I was six months pregnant though with my first baby. Not quite sure how all that would work out, but over the course of the next 10 years I got married, I had three of my four children, and had an opportunity to serve this man from the time he left the white house until the time he left the public eye in 1999 and stayed connected with him until his passing in 2004. And with Mrs. Reagan until her passing in 2016. So 27 years of my life. Yes. To your point, starting when I was very young, just turning 22, but what an incredible start to an amazing life and to be able to witness these people up close and personal and the Reagans were really incredible people.

Josh: Oh my gosh. So there's so many things my mind just runs in, there's a thousand questions I have. So I'm going to have to, I know because of our time today, I have to limit it, but you know, it's really interesting. You said a few things and it takes me back to my early years, and Ronald Reagan was really, I don't know about you Lucas, but was really the first president I remember growing up and it's always just kinda been special to me. Kinda like you said, Peggy, I felt like when he was talking, he was kind of, he was so relatable. Like I felt like he was just personable. And so I can't wait to talk to you a little bit and ask you the question a day in the life of Peggy during those years. I mean, what in the world did that look like? Was that, was there an average day or was there never anything average about it?

Peggy: Both. It's interesting because as much as there's that, ah, and that overwhelming feeling, there was this interesting balance that you've got to working for him so closely and for such a long period of time, there was always this formality. He was the former president of the United States. So you never lost that feeling and that distinction of he was the president, even though he was a former president. But there was this warmth and a familiarity with him that he allowed you to have. And so, yeah, every day was a little bit different. Everything from world leaders coming in to travel to speeches, to I guess the ordinary days in the office would be when local visitors would maybe stop by. He would do a lot of writing, reading, planning. And so there were some, I guess, ordinary days in the office, although there was certainly nothing ordinary about this extraordinary man.

And I remember so many pinch-me moments, from traveling in private aircrafts with him when I was in my twenties, completely spoiled me, to riding in the back of secret service-driven motorcades, heading to events, and just having those moments where I would turn and look at the man sitting next to me and think, how does a girl like me wind up in a place like this? And as much as there were still always those moments of awe, I knew that he relied on me. He depended on me to do my job and to not just keep pace with him, but to be three steps ahead of him. And so my mind was always spinning about what was next, where we were headed, what needed to be coordinated. And there was coordination with everything. There was no simple movement, whether it was from the office to the car, whether he was walking into a restaurant or a store or a public place. There was nothing simple about moving Ronald Reagan anywhere. And so I had to be very much forward-thinking but did want to capture those snapshots of time in my mind. And I certainly have many of those and write about a lot of those in the book as well.

Lucas: Yeah. I mean, you know, when people think of Ronald Reagan even today, he's so respected as a world leader and a former president here in the United States. Why do you think, what was it about him that you think resonated with people so deeply even still today?

Peggy: I think he loved America. He made us love America. He made us proud of who we were as Americans and proud of who we were on the world stage. I think he also represented, and for me, especially coming into work for a man like this at such a young age, there were a couple of things I had in my mind that leadership looks like, and he really changed my opinion about that and wonderful ways. I

thought, I guess, as a young person, I thought you had to choose one of two paths in life. You either were strong and successful or you were a kind of nice person, but I didn't know you could actually be both. And so here I meet Ronald Reagan who no one argued that he was strong. He went toe to toe with the Soviet Union, and by the way, the wall came down, but it was couched in this beautiful humanity.

He was warm, he was charming. He was charismatic. He was thoughtful. He cared about other people. He was very attentive to people. And so it really changed my mind of what leadership at the highest level looked like. And you could be strong and successful and you could be kind and warm and a good person. He also showed me that diplomacy is something we're all engaged in. It's not something for a president under the state department, but diplomacy looks a lot like relationships, not like rhetoric. It's very personal, it's not political. And we saw these deep relationships that he had formed during his presidency. Some of them even before then, that continued long after he could do anything for these people politically. You know, people like Gorbachev and Margaret Thatcher and even mother Teresa and world leaders and former presidents all came to see President Reagan and his post-presidency office because they wanted to, not because there was a diplomatic reason for that.

So I appreciated that about it too, that really at the end of the day, whether you're president of the United States or president of a company, it really all comes down to relationships. And he modeled that. He also showed me the power of optimism and we certainly know he was a man of faith. He was known as the great communicator, but I think we also knew him as the great optimist. And if you asked him what he was most proud of his eight years as the president, it wasn't anything that he did or laws he pushed for or advocated for. It was the fact that he made the American people believe in themselves again. And that was what he was most proud of. And he did that through setting a vision of optimism. The seventies were very rough times in America and he painted a vision for how we could be better and do it differently. It's morning in America, there's a shining city on the Hill. We all get to be part of it. America's best days are ahead. And so he painted this vision that we all wanted to be a part of. And he did that through optimism and then obviously took action on those things during those years. But yeah, I think we loved him because we loved ourselves and how we felt about ourselves when he was president.

Lucas: What an incredible story, you know, Josh, having great mentors in people's lives it just makes a huge impact. And we can see that in your story, Peggy. You know, Josh, we have a lot of young listeners to the program and to me it's unmistakable that, I really think that there's a deep connection, especially today. You know, we're coming out of, really into a different world here in 2021. And there's a lot of people that are back in the job market. And especially for young people that are seeking employment and seeking different things. What would be your encouragement to some of our younger listeners that are, you know, just trying to find their way, trying to find mentors, trying to find a meaningful career, what would be your advice to them?

Peggy: Yeah, I'd probably tell them exactly what my dad told me, you know, to dream big. Somebody's got to have the job you want. It might as well be you! And to really dream big. What's the job you would love to have? Reach out to that person. Talk to that person. See their pathway there, it may be very surprising. Connect with people. I mean, it really does all come down to relationships. And be unafraid to step into a place where maybe you are very young and green and you feel like this world is far too big for you. I certainly had those feelings every day, especially at the beginning, but to realize that eventually you will find your footing and eventually you'll feel like you belong there and you'll be able to contribute. And so to not be afraid, to dream big, to be bold, and to step into a place, even if you feel a little lacking in confidence that eventually you'll find your footing and be a valued contributor.

Josh: I think that's such valuable information and so glad that our listeners can hear that. Obviously you, had the blessing of having parents, that while you came from an educator's family, I believe you said, and never thought about politics or lavished in things like that, they instilled in you what you were just saying. And I think that's really important for all of our listeners to understand and hear. So thank you for sharing that. I know that is really an important, critical step that people just often feel like they're not empowered to be able to take those kind of steps out of their comfort zone. So that's really, really cool. Well, I want to transition a little bit of the conversation because you spent a lot of time with the president and you got to see him from, you know, every kind of angle, every type of communication.

Josh: I'm sure there was some closeness there with his greater family. What was it like seeing him, I think, and you correct me if I'm wrong, but from the outside, looking in, when you start thinking about Alzheimer's and dementia and those kinds of things. When I look back through just my limited history in my lifetime, I have to believe in talking with my parents and my grandparents. He was probably one of the first that actually put a face and an identity with what we now all talk about, which is Alzheimer's and different forms of dementias. How did that translate back then? Was that something that was very shocking? Or was this something that kind of happened gradually? What was that like from your lens?

Peggy: Yeah. Well, like you said, watching the great communicator walk through those years, obviously it was very challenging. It's very sad personally, to watch, and very demanding professionally to try to navigate something that's very personal in a professional space. But, you know, one of the reasons I wrote my book was to tell the full story. And so once he left office, a lot of people have in their mind, Ronald Reagan left office, he got Alzheimer's, he died and they don't realize there was 15 years in there. And actually five years into his post-presidency is when he announces to the world that he has Alzheimer's. And so in a lot of ways, the world starts then saying goodbye to him, but I'm still saying good morning to him every day for the next five years. And so for him, the diagnosis wasn't a death sentence, and it wasn't a reason to step back and diminish himself before that was necessary.

And so what a great example he was. To your question in particular, I remember hearing the diagnosis. I remember learning about it and you know, I'm going to date myself. It was pre-Google. You couldn't go and Google it. I went to the library, went to check out a book. There was one book, I think it's called the 24 hour day or something like that. But that was the only thing that had any information about any sort of diminished capacity and will for people and mental acuity slipping and all of these things. And so it really was this very unknown. Now in a lot of ways that maybe made it easier, because I didn't know exactly what we were going to be walking through together. But I certainly knew that it would be challenging and demanding and sad and heartbreaking.

And, you know, Mrs. Reagan said it beautifully when she said it was just a long goodbye, and it was this very extended goodbye. But maybe it was better that I didn't know that at the beginning. But I had always wanted a fast-paced career. I wanted to be challenged. I wanted things to move quickly. And while I had loved those first several years in the office, I knew that that would pivot and it would demand the entirely different of me in the years that were ahead. And I didn't know then whether it would be months, or years or nobody had any idea, but I made the commitment to myself until the president at that point that however it played out, however long it went, that I would be with him and walk through him through that with him. And I'm so glad I did.

Josh: So let's talk, let's fast forward now to kind of the modern-day, the day that we're living in today. We, I think from the outside looking in, learned a lot, those of us that got to see the president from afar and listened to him and how he communicated to me. The world, since his passing, seems like it's changed so much. But I think, you know, we're all still humans. We're all still facing the same similar challenges and communication and conflict and world happenings, but yet it seems like, more than ever, we've kind of polarized ourselves. And I heard you on another interview talking about how his communication style and kind of his humanity and love for people seemed to break down barriers so that there was able, even from maybe opposition to be able to get progress together and move forward together. And it seems like now more than ever, we need voices like that. And in our world, could you kind of share with us some of the things that like values and things that you learned that you think have such relevance to the world we're living in right now?

Peggy: Yeah. He was somebody that believed you could disagree without being disagreeable. And, I would watch people sometimes come to his office that I knew were politically opposed to him. And I could almost count in the number of seconds how long it would take. I used to call it, he would disarm with charm. He just, he was somebody who was so likable. You could disagree with him politically, but you couldn't help, but like him personally. And I think that was because he really liked and respected people of all opinions. And he truly believed that if there was a thousand things you disagreed upon, there had to be two or three or five or 10 things that you agreed upon. And so rather than focusing on all the areas of disagreement, let's focus on the areas of agreement and use that as the building block to start a foundation of a relationship or at least a conversation.

And to always do it in such a civil way. I mean, he and Mrs. Reagan both just embodied public service at its greatest and best. He was always focused on his audience, on his listener, not what he wanted to say to them, but what he thought they really needed to hear and did it from a place of love. It was sometimes tough love. You know, he was unafraid to have difficult conversations with we the American people, and tell us the truth and knew that we could handle it. And so I think people respected the fact that he could be the adult in the room and take us through difficult times, because he didn't sugar coat them. He was very straightforward. And even in this final chapter of his life, he and Mrs. Reagan did the exact same thing. It would have been very easy for them to go up to the president's ranch and hide and let the tabloids speculate about what was happening to president Reagan.

But instead they did what they always did, which was go straight to the American people to tell their story, to be transparent and to hope and trust that it would help other people. And you asked about this earlier, most people didn't know anybody who had Alzheimer's or dementia, or if they did, there was so much shame and stigma around it. These were people that families kind of kept hidden or didn't talk about or didn't even acknowledge. And so for the Reagans to come out publicly with something like this, that really it saw those people, it validated those families and those caretakers who were really struggling to give care to people that were incredibly difficult and were doing so without much support or information. And so when the Reagans went public with this, it really did unleash a whole lot of research and interest and conversations and de-stigmatized it in so many ways. And that was truly because they believed in public service to their very core and not only talked about it but lived it out and what great examples they were of that to the very end of their lives.

Lucas: Your personal story around this with president Reagan's battle with dementia. You know, there's such a close tie to the senior living industry that we serve and love and speak for. Bridge The Gap, our mission is to educate, inform, and influence, and to be a voice for the industry. And there's, you know, so many great men and women in this country, maybe didn't make it to the levels that Ronald Reagan did, but people that have served their families and our country and their businesses that are battling with dementia right now. And given the coronavirus and everything that has taken place, has just added to the complexity and the challenges that this industry faces. I loved your comment even before the podcast started that you were just really giving your love and affection and support to our industry. As we kind of round out the program, what would be something that you could say, given your personal experience and living with someone that you loved and respected and admired with dementia, what could you say to the caregivers that are listening and are caring for all the great American men and women that are battling this really scary and oftentimes misunderstood disease?

Peggy: Yeah. You know, Ronald Reagan never believed he was better than anybody else. He was just living out the life that he had been called to live. And so whether you were president of the United States or serving in whatever role you were, if you were committed to living that to the fullest, invest, then you were equal. And so whether the president is dealing with this, and of course, he probably had the luxury of better care or more care than a lot of people are, but they're really, it's the great equalizer. And it's something that we equally face and have to endure. And his experience with the illness was every much as real as other people who are struggling with it. And for the person who's caring for them or for the family who's supporting them, I know for me, there's always this doubt of, am I doing enough?

Am I doing too much? Am I not allowing them enough independence and freedom? Am I putting words into their mouth? Am I challenging them, but not frustrating them? And there's this constant battle of doubting ourselves. And I think the best thing we can do is just to show up. And to show up for the people who need us. To show up for the people who are in those support and care capacities. On a very different end of the spectrum, my own father died in his fifties and I was in my twenties. And I write about this in the book. And whether you lose somebody slowly or quickly, early or late in life, there's a pain and a loss. And I remember from the experience of losing my dad, there are people, I was really close to that I never heard from because they didn't know what to say, and they didn't know what to do.

And they thought they would say, or do the wrong thing. And I would just challenge anybody who's out there who knows somebody who's struggling with a long or a short term illness, whether they're old or young, or, you know, just going through those golden years of life, happy. But show up and support them, ask the questions, be willing to have those conversations, and be willing to allow them to be frustrated and to doubt themselves and be supportive. And so don't avoid those conversations and don't avoid people who are in those situations because that's when we need the support more than ever. And, you know, like the Reagan's showed us, when we talk about things, and when we join a community of people who I said, it's almost like being part of a club that nobody wants to be part of, but you relate to each other in ways that you couldn't possibly understand.

And I've had so many people reach out to me after reading my book. And in my book, I tried to be revealing, but also respectful. You know, there are certain lines I just would never cross in talking about the president's illness, but I did feel like it was okay to talk about that, because he had chosen to talk about that. But so many people said, "Oh, I just, I read through the lines and I felt where you were at, because I, I feel that every day." And so be willing to have those tough conversations. Be willing to be in

friendship and in partnership and in support of people who are going through that, because at some point in life, we're all going to be going through this, whether it's with a parent, a friend, a family member or ourselves. And so I am so grateful for the two of you for building this community of support.

We certainly didn't have it back in the day. And I would like to think that the Reagans maybe played a small part, even in allowing you to have this platform that you do, because they de-stigmatized it and were unafraid to have those tough conversations with We the American people and now with the world. But I was going to leave you with one little thing. Ronald Reagan, his favorite quote, and I'm going to read it so I don't get it wrong. But my favorite quote of his that I think applies to so much, whether it's politics or something personal, it's some of the final words that he left us with in one of his last public speeches. And he said, "Whatever else history may say about me when I'm gone. I hope it will say that I appealed to your best hopes, not to your worst fears. To your confidence, rather than your doubts." And so much of life, whether it's politics, whether it's health issues, whether it's growing older, there's so much appeal to fear and doubt, but can we be people that infuse the world and society and our communities and the people around us with confidence and remind them of their best hopes. And I think we all have the capacity to do that. And I appreciate the work that you're doing in supporting a community. Taking away some of the fear and the doubt and filling them with hope and with confidence. So thank you for that.

Lucas: Peggy Grande, a speaker and a writer, a media contributor, and the author of, "The President Will See You Now," which is a fantastic title by the way. Thank you so much for all that you've done, telling us your story, and spending time with us on the program today.

Peggy: It's my pleasure. Thank you so much for having me, my best to you and to your community of listeners.

Lucas: Josh, great conversation. I know that our listeners are going to want to dive a little bit deeper into this and get Peggy's book. We're going to definitely connect to you in all of our show notes. Everything can be found on BTGvoice.com and you know what a great conversation Josh.

Josh: I love it. Peggy, thank you so much for joining us. Thank you for your time. Thank you for your service to the country and thank you for the next chapter that's coming. We can't wait to see what's next for you. I know it's an exciting time. Lucas, I can't wait for our listeners to learn more.

Lucas: BTGvoice.com, and thanks for everybody listening to another great episode.