Welcome back to another episode of Bush School Uncorked. I'm your host, Justin Bullock and today I am sadly missing my cohost, Greg Gause, who I am missing today, so you're just going to have to rely on me to direct the ship today. We're doing something a little different today, which I'm really excited about. Our episodes up until this point, have been discussing current issues with Bush School faculty, but we're going to expand today and we're going to be talking with a couple of former Bush School students that have graduated from our master's from program and are now actually out in the world being public servants. Each of the folks you're going to meet today have very interesting stories and are out doing some really cool work.

What I'd like to do is I'm going to give the guests, the former students, and opportunity to introduce themselves, and then I'm going to start with each of them and spend maybe five or ten minutes talking a little bit about them, how they got to where they are, experiences at the Bush School, why they were interested in public service, a few kind of questions like that, and then we're going to talk broadly about public service, how they get to feel like they're serving the public in their current job, some challenges to that, some concerns in their current environments as they try to serve the public, and hopefully have a interesting panel conversation about that, rather than just one on one direct Q and A that will start with. How does that sound to y'all?

Sounds great.

Sounds great.

All right, excellent. I'd like to take a moment first and we'll go from left to right across from me, and let the students introduce themselves, or former students. You are now graduated. I guess you're life students now; you made it. [inaudible 00:01:50], please start and tell us your name and maybe what organization you're currently with.

Okay, I'm MaryLou [Heir 00:01:56]. I am with the American Heart Association currently.

What year did you finish your degree with the Bush School actually?

I finished my master's in 2017.

'17, got it. Thank you. Kirby?

My name's Kirby [Farrel 00:02:10]. I finished up with the Bush School in 2018, and I'm not working with the Texas A&M transportation institute.

Excellent. Thank you.

Howdy. My name's David Fujimoto. I graduated the Bush School in 2017, and I currently work at The Association of Former Students.

I apologize in advance. I cannot call David anything but Fuji, so when you hear me say Fuji, that is who I am referring to. Actually, from the very first day of class, I have a really distinct memory of this. I have in the 601 course that the students take with me, I have name plates. I have this really distinct memory of Fuji having his name scratched out and just Fuji written in quotes at the top. I don't know if you remember that or not.

I do. My parents call me Dave but my teachers and my friends call me Fuji, so [inaudible 00:02:57].

All right. Well, that's what I'm going to roll with. We're going to go in the same order that you met each of these individuals. We'll start with you, MaryLou. I thought it'd be interesting for the listeners to know a little bit about your background, why you were interested in public service, so maybe where you're from and a little bit of background about where you are, where you're from and what led up to joining the master's program, and then why you were interested in a public service degree particularly.

Okay, so I am from Dallas and I currently live in Fort Worth, which if you're from the metroplex you know what a big deal that is that I changed locations. I actually did my undergraduate at Texas Women's up in Denton after I quit going to school in Oklahoma, because I thought I was going to be a musician. That did not work.

Ooh, what kind of music?

I played flute and piccolo, and-

Oh, that's really cool.

Went to school on a music scholarship and realized I only liked it because I liked hanging out with people, and not because ... Musician's are really competitive and I am not, and so it was not a good fit. I quit school and started working retail, and then decided, worked for Ralph Lauren for a few years and decided I was going to do marketing for luxury retail, went to Texas Women's, got a marketing degree, and as I was finishing that degree at Texas Women's, was miserable in retail.

Both of my brothers were current students at A&M. Both of them were in the core cadets, and I was just telling them, I was like, "I can't figure out what I'm going to do," and one of them was like, "so, you know there's this Bush School on campus and they do some certificate things with non-profit stuff, and it sounds like something maybe you'd want to do," and I was like, "Okay." I applied for the nonprofit certificate, just because I was like, "I need something else to do. I can't just work retail. This is life-sucking." For me, every time I sold something, I was like, "You should not be spending your money on another jacket. We need to find something else to do." It's great stuff, but-

That's a nice tie, Fuji. [inaudible 00:05:07]

[inaudible 00:05:07] put in a plug for [inaudible 00:05:08].

Oh.

I like retail.

I am a shopaholic.

Ditto.

I will be the first one to tell you, but I couldn't do it professionally, so started taking classes and started realizing that how I function in life and how I wanted to exist really matched more of what we were talking about in Dr. Brown's classes and what we were learning in that program. At that point I finally started working for the American Heart Association, and was waiting patiently for the Bush School to create an online program. The moment they launched the executive master's program, I jumped on it and-

Very nice.

So yeah, and it's been great.

What is it that you're doing now, and how has that changed from where you were when you were starting, and starting the program? Now that you've finished up, what is your, how has your position changed and what are you currently doing with the American Health Association? American Heart Association, I'm sorry.

Heart Association. When I started at the American Heart Association, I was a project coordinator in the office of science operations, which essentially meant I just helped our program managers with anything and everything related to do with awards, and paying bills, and basic administrative stuff to make sure that the office of science was moving forward. I'm on my third position at the American Heart Association, and I'm an associate program manager for scientific sessions, which his the largest cardiovascular, cerebrovascular scientific medical meeting that we host every year. I work with scientists and researchers to plan all the educational content that goes on at those events.

Our events are accredited, so we do continuing medical education, and MOC stuff. My job essentially is coordinating all of that to make that happen. I like to say that I do that professionally, and then I, in my free time, I'm hugely passionate about working directly with people to empower them to understand their just generic intrinsic value as a human in this world. I spend a ton of time working with the youth and the college kids at our church and I've created a lot of educational content around justice based consensual sex education, and body image, and self worth. I recently just went to Brownsville and [inaudible 00:07:34] in Texas and Mexico, with the ACLU and Texas Impact to look at what's actually happening on the border. I think there's a huge need that we talk about that all people are valued and important. Actually, I should have started with that. That's what got me interested in this whole public service thing, is that piece of it, that everybody matters.

I saw on your Facebook actually, some of your posts about your trip down to Brownsville and starting to explain sort of what that was like. We can talk more about it, but what is it like on the ground? What was it like actually being there and seeing it firsthand?

I expected it to be chaotic and feel like intense and violent everywhere we went, and it was not. It was a lot of people. What we did is we sat in the court system to talk and listen to a case of people who had entered the country illegally, as they were getting processed, and then we actually walked across the bridge and talked to people as they were waiting to seek asylum in the country. It's just like anybody else who's looking for a better chance at anything. It was heartbreaking to hear stories of people who had traveled for three months, and every single one of them wanted something better for their children, wanted something better for themselves, and no one wanted to leave home. Every single one of them told us about how, "I just love my home country, but I couldn't stay."

Yeah, for the sake of their lives or their children's lives, they had to make a different type of decision.

Yep.

Well, I want to come back to some of that when we talk about some of the motivations for being in public service and some of your experiences. This is one issue that I followed along closely, and have chatted about, and posted about, and argued about, is some of the humanitarian challenges at the border. I want to circle back to that, but in continuing to get to know each of the guests, Kirby, that makes you next.

Well, this is going to be a little anticlimactic after that. Sorry. Like I said, my name is Kirby [Ferrel 00:09:48]. I'm now working with the Texas A&M Transportation Institute, but if you would have asked me five or six or seven years ago, what I would be doing, I would 100% be living in a Spanish speaking country, working in some kind of international relations. I don't really know how I got here. I've always been very interested in transportation. I have this weird thing about airplanes, and trains, and all that fun stuff. [inaudible 00:10:20] my friends think that I am the biggest fan of roundabouts, of anyone that they have ever met in their life.

It's because they're bitter. It's nothing.

If you drive in them correctly.

If you drive in them correctly. [crosstalk 00:10:34] Unfortunately, Texas doesn't have as many roundabouts, so you get to one here and it's like, "Oh no, what do I do? Who goes first?" so people panic, but I want to go ahead and assure my friends right now that I actually now work with 400 people that like roundabouts more than I do.

You're not the only one.

Yeah, I needed to say that. Like MaryLou, I actually did my undergrad at a music school. I did not study music.

I did not.

Me either. I have no musical competence. [crosstalk 00:11:04] but you did know something about planes.

And music.

And music? All right, all right. I'm excited. We'll get there.

I'm originally from Houston, Texas, actually southeast of Houston, Pasadena, Texas. I did my undergrad at Belmont University in Nashville Tennessee, and I ended up there because I played softball in undergrad. I like to say that Belmont found me, ended up there, the most beautiful school. I love A&M too; it's very, very beautiful.

Woo!

But Belmont is just gorgeous and Nashville is one of the most incredible cities. I had a blast, but Nashville also has this very, very awful traffic problem, I would say rivals a place like Houston, and it's more frustrating because of certain design elements. I think that in Nashville, that's where I really became interested in the ongoing transportation effort, and I think that transportation is really cool because it is changing, arguably more rapidly than any other policy field. The technology in transportation is unreal, and the congestion problems and the different challenges that we're facing, funding, these are all such a big deal, but is transportation, so no one's really interested. It's not one of those hot policy areas like health and human services and stuff like that.

It's not as inherently sexy as some of those are, yeah.

Yeah, so I don't know. I actually studied international politics and Spanish in undergrad. Still thought for sure that I was going to live abroad somewhere and ladidadida, foreign service, the whole nine yards, and my senior year I was actually able to enter in for the house majority leader, who is now the house speaker in Tennessee. He rocks. He's never going to hear this, but if you do, I love you guys very much. I was able to intern for them, and I worked in, I kind of did some media stuff and some policy stuff, and absolutely fell in love with it.

Very nice.

After that I realized that I wanted to work in the US, doing something more of state and local. As soon as I graduated I worked for a digital media firm on political campaigns, and I'm not really sure why I thought that was a good idea, because I'm not very technologically inclined. I don't really enjoy it very much, so ended up there, worked there briefly, realized that was not where I wanted to be, and I transitioned back to the Tennessee legislature and worked there for a while. I was bill tracking and doing all that fun stuff, and at some point government, and I'm probably touching on a point that you're going to get to later. Government is wonderful, but it's also one of those places that you have to do your time and work your way up, so you start out as the little man on the totem pole, and I was bored every day. Fortunately, I had a boss that was fantastic and he really incorporated me into a lot of the stuff that he was working on with water and wastewater, which I never thought would be interesting, but actually is.

Yeah, there is some really interesting issues with water and wastewater [crosstalk 00:14:33].

I worked there for a little bit, and decided to come back. I grew up an A&M fan and I would have come to A&M for undergrad had it not been for softball, but when someone says, "Hey, we want to pay your tuition," you don't say, "No thanks."

You're good, right?

I've really been dying to go to A&M, so I knew I would make it back here eventually. I came back to do my master's and Bush School was the obvious choice for me.

You're at TTI now?

I am.

I don't know that you know this. Well, I don't know if TTI is partnering with this, but I'm about to find out, so hopefully you know the answer. I recently got a grant from the IBM business of government, to partner up with the city of Bryan and some of the engineers, to study the autonomous trolleys that are in downtown Bryan. It's a small grant but I'm meeting with the project lead, in a thing a week, to get a little tour on the autonomous trolleys here in downtown Bryan.

I, like you, was not particularly interested in transportation, at least from the beginning, and I've gotten really interested in artificial intelligence, and emerging technologies. To your point, there's some really, really fascinating stuff going on in technology, at a crazy pace. This is the next frontier for automation and for changing how we move around in society. I want to get some of your thoughts on that as we move forward, just like I want to get back to some of the border issues, but is TTI involved? Do you know?

I would assume yes. We are involved trolley downtown, so I would assume yes.

But not something you're working on?

Not something ... Well, I'm doing government affairs, so I am not necessarily a researcher. My business title is associate transportation researcher, so sometimes I say I'm a researcher, but no. I'm doing government affairs, so my role with TTI is I should know the answer to that, but often times whenever we're in the contract phase, I'm not as aware until that proliferates, and then someone's like, "Hey, by the way, you should know this. My role there is to know what everyone's doing. If we get inquiries from outside sources, I can figure out who of this institute of hundreds of people, has this information, and pull from different areas if I need to.

Oh, that's cool.

Get together [inaudible 00:17:05] response.

How did you end up there, after being at the Bush School? Did you have an internship there? How did you end up at TTI?

This is a really funny story. Actually, I work on the same hall now, as a former Bush School student who is now working on her PhD.

That would be, I believe, Jackie [Gusiad 00:17:23], right?

Yes it is.

We need to have her out as well. She's wonderful, yeah.

She's awesome. I had a class with Jackie last spring. It was an urban planning class on campus, and our professor for that course had us make a Twitter account to tweet about our readings every week. Just during this process we all linked up and were like all the nerds that are on Twitter right now, tweeting hashtag, transpo637. Yeah, super [inaudible 00:17:55].

I imagine that did not catch off. Not a lot of people were tweeting that.

No, it didn't, but it was funny because she, our professor has so many transportation friends that they would start responding and they're like, "Good idea."

Oh yeah, a little bit of trending there.

It was funny because my first week, I got multiple text messages from friends almost immediately saying, "Please tell me this isn't a thing."

"You're not really going to do this, are you?"

"Is this going to be a thing all semester? Do I unfollow you now and follow you again later?" I was like, "Yeah, go ahead. It's fine."

[crosstalk 00:18:25] That's great.

I followed Jackie in the process of this whole shenanigan. When she caught wind that TTI was writing up a job description for this position, she said she immediately thought of me, and sent me a message, and asked for my resume via Twitter.

That's awesome.

She then sent me her email. I sent her my resume and the rest is history. Here I am.

That is a millennial way of finding a job if there ever was one, being Tweeted at.

Very funny.

That's great. All right, thank you. In the interest of time, I'm going to move onto Fuji, here. Give us a little background on you and how you ended up at the Bush School, and what you're doing now.

Thank you, Dr. Bullock, and I appreciate the invitation and the opportunity to speak on this panel with these illustrious former students, and you as well. I go by Fuji, and I think I'm a diverse member of this panel, because my story is nothing like what they just shared. I did my undergraduate at the United States Air Force Academy and served in the air force for over 22 years as a pilot. As I came towards the end of that service in uniform, I knew that I wanted to continue to serve my country, and my community, and my state in another form and fashion.

I had always admired President Bush because when I took my oath of office, my oath to enter the Air Force and be a cadet, he was our president, and he was our president during Desert Storm. I had always admired him and his values and his public service. I knew that I had to find the right way to continue service outside of uniform. I was actually interested in Texas A&M. My wife is an Aggie, and so she always thought highly of the school, and I served with a lot of Aggies when I was in uniform, and I was always impressed.

Two, a man and a woman, the folks that had been in the corp and taken a commission, and chosen to serve their country in that way, I had always been impressed by Aggies. I started doing a little research into this school called the Bush School, and was very impressed with the degree programs, the type of courses that were offered. Once I found out a little bit more about it and I had the opportunity to apply, it was a very easy decision to come to the Bush School, and probably one of the best decisions I made in my life. The reason I say that is it opened up my eyes to the many, many, many ways people serve in and out of uniform. They serve their communities, their cities, a cause, their country, their state. I really feel like I found a home, and I found a set of like-minded individuals, and like-minded professors that were interested in the same things I was. I'm thankful for that experience.

Since you came to the Bush school, you were stuck with me in one or two classes.

A few classes, yeah, and public policy [inaudible 00:21:52], so that was-

Which was a lot of fun.

It sure was.

Which sadly, they're not doing anymore. You came to the Bush School, you made a career change. Where are you now?

I made a huge career change, because I don't work in national security. I actually work in higher ed. I work at the association of former students. I'm the director of strategic engagement. That's a lot of big words for running an advocacy network. Our advocacy network concentrates on higher ed policy and funding for higher ed. I have the privilege of translating some of that policy towards our very large and diverse former student base that we have at Texas A&M. My responsibility is to take the things that go on in congress, legislation wise, politics wise, as well as in Austin, and figure out how does that effect Texas A&M, how does that effect state schools, and how can former students specific to Texas A&M take a role in understanding that policy and being a vocal advocate in trying to get their voices heard by their elected officials regarding that higher ed policy. It's not something I studied at the Bush School. It's not something two years ago I would have ever thought I would be-

Seeing a common trend around here.

Be involved in, but I have to say I'm passionate about it because I'm a first generation college student, myself, and I'm the grandson of immigrants to this country. If I was not given the higher ed opportunities that I was, I would not be the person and citizen that I am today. It's something that I can do with a straight face, with a lot of passion, because there's so many indicators that tell you why higher ed is important to the United States and how it changes peoples' quality of life.

Very nice. I want to pose a question to each of you. Now you've heard from everyone. In case you forgot, we have three guests and now you've heard from all of three of them. I want to abstract a little bit and I want to pose one question to you about school, and then I want to talk about public service. What was, and instead of, "Rah-rah grad school's great, Bush School is great," we all know that. That's why you're here. What was one of the most challenging things for you personally, about choosing to devote the two or two plus years to grad school? It was important to you. It's got you in some interesting new places, but grad school isn't easy. Your time here had its own type of personal sacrifices and challenges. I'd like to hear on a more real note, for lack of better words, what was something that was really challenging for you during your time at the Bush school? Anybody can jump in at any time you like. I didn't prepare them for this question, so I'm putting them on the spot.

Okay.

Go ahead, Kirby. Jump in.

I actually had multiple people come up to me at some point during the past two years, and say, "How's grad school? I heard it's even easier than undergrad."

They didn't go to Texas A&M.

I was like, "Well, you don't know much about the Bush School then." It's not necessarily that everything you're doing is that hard. It was almost like at time I felt like my limits were just being tested like, "How badly do you want this?" It [inaudible 00:25:37]. On top of that, I was also working two different jobs, which was a lot. When I was starting, I didn't think much about it. I was like, "Yeah, you know I played softball in undergrad and that was more than a full-time job, and then I was doing school, so no big deal, work. You know, I'm not pulling out any loans for this; we're doing it." Guys, whoa.

You can't see her, but she has the most accurate facial expression of what grad school feels like.

Yes.

I agree. Actually, I can remember in decision making [crosstalk 00:26:11], I think decision-making-

Oh, man.

Which was your final semester, which I think was-

No, that was-

Was it year one when you had decision-making?

Yeah, I think year one, mm-hmm (affirmative).

I think that was the first time I had had you. There were certainly days where I could tell that you had been quite busy.

Yes, it was stressful, and there was one, especially with my capstone project. There was one week. This was a span of like five days that I worked on this capstone project, I kid you not because we had to count, we had to keep time sheets; I worked on this thing for like 52 hours.

Oh my gosh.

Did not sleep for three of those nights. I was toast by the end of the week, but I didn't pull out any loans for this. I was bound and determined to do that, but it all comes down to how much you want to get out of it, and how badly you want to get where you want to go. You can take the easy way out and put just enough effort into everything to do well, or you can actually push yourself and try to learn what you want to learn, and do a little bit extra, because you care about that certain policy area. I wouldn't say that grad school in itself is ... It's not easy.

For the people who think that it's easier than undergrad, you are seriously mistaken in that thinking. I don't know. It's a choice, and it's something that if you don't care about, you're not doing to enjoy. I think that's really what I got from grad school, and the friends. Oh my gosh. Being in a room of, you know, it's a privilege to be surrounded by the kind of people that attend the Bush School, so I have to give a shout out to my friends. They're incredible and unparalleled in most rooms. Love y'all.

That's awesome. That's awesome. Thank you. Anyone else want to jump in?

Yeah. I know you framed this question as what were the challenges, so I'm really thinking about that. I think my situation was unique because I already had a full time and demanding job. I've always been the guy that likes school, right, and I'd already been to grad school prior to coming to the Bush School. For me, it reset my priorities and it reset my quality of life and balance a little bit differently, because I could just concentrate on school. I didn't have to worry about flying planes and going overseas and things like that.

I think for me, and I'm fortunate that the Bush School really does an excellent job of this, was that I felt like I came with a lot of practitioner experience, at least in the national security realm, and that there was so much for me to learn about state and local, about nonprofit, about some of the theory that I had participated in as a practitioner, but I had never been exposed to the theory side outside of the military. For me, that was challenging to keep in perspective my practitioner experience, but knowing that I did not have the experience necessarily on the degree side. For me, I think another challenge too was the military has a wonderful diverse set of folks, but it's a very codified structured organization, and a lot of it's based on your experience and your rank.

In grad school, that's all mixed up. My peers were even more diverse and came from a greater diversity of opinions, academic backgrounds, colleges, political beliefs, social beliefs than were in the military. The military's not homogenous, but it's more homogenous than the Bush School. For me, I just had to realize that just because I had learned something a certain way, or my experiences were a certain way, that might not have been the experience of my peers. Again, I feel like I'm one of the geeky guys that I didn't try to get a pass.

I was involved in class and took it seriously. Just because I thought the material was interesting and relevant, and again, the Bush School is preparing you to be a practitioner of public service, and I just enjoyed not only my peers, but the way the professors approached the classes that way, that, "Hey, you need to know some of this theory, but how are you going to use the theory, not in class, but more appropriate, how are you going to use it in a year or two?" I just thought that that, for me, personally and professionally, that struck the right balance.

I like that you highlight some of the structure changes to your day and to your, who you were accountable to and what you had going on. Fuji and I, with a few other students, worked on a public policy challenge that was sponsored by the Fels Institute at U Penn. One of the things that we looked at was exactly that, the transition of former service men and women into universities, and some of the challenges that presented going from a super structured environment to, particularly somewhere like Texas A&M, which is large. It's easy to get lost, and then all of a sudden you're in a civilian environment, where you're not expected to report at a certain time every day to certain places, and some of the risk factors that's associated with that.

I think that you did, I think, an excellent job of navigating that space, but it was interesting as we had conversations, and then thinking about other former service men and women that we knew that were part of that team, that thinking about, something that never occurred to me. I never had to be super disciplined. Seeing what it was like to go from having a troupe or having a group of people that relied on you and that you were accountable to, to the big broad world where there isn't, is an interesting challenge for public servants going from military service to wanting to participate in civilian service.

I will add that there are opportunities for folks to work on their leadership at the Bush School, whether it's being a leader of your capstone, to leader of a student group, SGA, intermurals, ambassadors, and so another thing that I think is good, or was important for me, is to step back and make sure other folks have the opportunity to practice their leadership, their public speaking skills, of which there are plenty of opportunities within the Bush School. Again, it's designed that way.

Excellent. MaryLou, I'm going to put you on the spot here momentarily, so be prepared to answer the question as well.

Okay. All right.

So the two of you can be thinking, the follow-up question is going to be, because it's a pretty broad one and I want you to take a few moments to think about why MaryLou and I are chatting about this, but one of the things that unique about the Bush School, I think is the focus on public service. I'm curious, what is public service to you, and how you live it out? Be prepared for that, but first challenges from grad school, and your context is a little different.

Yeah.

You were doing the MPSA, the online environment. That's how we connected. Maybe tell me a little bit about that experience, because I imagine it might be similar in some ways but also different from Fuji and Kirby's experience.

Well, I will start by saying I am not a school person, so Fuji can have that title all he wants.

He's like me.

Might do some more in the future; who knows.

That's why I never left.

[inaudible 00:33:52]

I will say, having done the Bush School, I enjoy it a lot more, but going into it, school's not my thing. For me, first of all, there was a challenge, like Kirby said. Coursework is hard when you're in a master's program. It's just hard. You are learning at a different level. You're learning faster, you're learning more, and you're learning it on a practical application, not just a theoretical application. Whereas undergrad, I think it's like, "Oh, here's some great things that you can do in your potential future job." Bush School you're like, "Here, today we're talking about not only what you could do, but how you're actually going to do this in all four of these situations that are going to go wrong." The coursework is one thing on its own. Here's my formal apology for the 900 times I texted you on Friday nights being like, "What does this problem say? I don't understand."

"What is that sigma thing you keep talking about?"

"Where? I don't know how to start."

Disclaimer, here. I taught MaryLou statistics online, which one, teaching statistics online, not an easy scenario, but learning statistics online I think is its own crazy challenge.

It's hard, but actually that leads me very well into what I thought the hardest challenge was. I was working full-time. It's an executive program, so part of the qualifications is you had to be a full-time employee somewhere. I was working full-time at the American heart Association, I was engaged, I'm super involved. I live real close to my family, super involved with that. My brother was commission in the air force. He's actually a pilot. He and his wife are both in the Air Force.

Smart guy.

Yes. Super involved at my church. As much as I wanted to learn all this stuff, there was this whole piece of my life that I constantly had to say, "I need all of you people to wait until I can figure out what this one thing is I'm supposed to be learning right now. No I'm not coming to any of these events, because I have this ridiculous paper I have to write, and I have to reread whatever." It was totally worth it. I think to Kirby's point, when you love it and when you're passionate about it, and when you put so much into it, you get so much out of it, and I don't ... There's not a moment I regret or would change, but learning how to balance my personal life, and then my professional life, and my school life, all which I felt like needed all of my attention all the time, was really hard. I think you pointed out the capstone. The capstone was hard, and because it was an online, I did it online, we were working with a group. Nobody in my group lived in the same area.

Oh my gosh.

I think the week before we turned it in, I was in college station in Houston every single day that week for different, trying to finalize this paper. Just at that point, my husband and I had just gotten married and I was like, "Okay babe, love you. I'm leaving for a week. I'm going to go figure out how to finish school." Just balancing those relationships that you care about, and that you want to nurture, and that you want to grow. Also, there was a huge learning curve of who are the people who are going to be in my life, that I really need in my life because they were so supportive of this process and letting me really just dive into this, and not be offended when I cancel birthday party plans and all that last minute.

Yeah, it's amazing. This is my fifth year as a Bush School professor, and the thing that I didn't notice at first, but that I've noticed over time because of how I went through grad school and a few other things, but is the significance of the trade offs you have to make to do it well, right? You might can skirt by in some classes, by giving less effort, but it can really be all encompassing, and in some ways that's beautiful and fun and rich, and in some ways that really does call for personal trade offs to do this thing towards public service that you care about. Let's talk a little bit about public service. As I mentioned a moment ago, one of the things that I appreciate about being at the Bush School as opposed to any other program that I could be at, as someone who studies public administration, is the focus on public service.

In some ways, I think people, some people that I know, "Oh, that's corny. Why do y'all do that there? Why do you have your own little separate degree?" I think it is relatively unique and it's focused on serving others, which was part of former President Bush's dream for this school, and I think it really does permeate the culture. After spending time at the Bush School, how is it that you think about public service and trying to serve others as a profession, whether it's personally, or whether it's part of what you do for your day to day life? What is it about public service that is important to you, or that motivates you? How do you conceptualize this thing of public service?

I'll start. For me, it's pretty easy. It's what our namesake said. It's a noble calling. I think for me, the call to serve, which was manifested in the military. Serving in the military first was something that I felt a long, long time ago, even as a young teenager. I define it pretty simply, and that's serving a cause that's greater than your individual, yourself, your individual needs, your wants, your desires. I think that we do have a legacy of Americans doing that, going back to the things the founding fathers gave up to gain our independence from England. I do think there's a little bit baked into that, into the American experience, if you will.

I think for me, and I'm not trying to be hokey, but it's a little bit of a guiding light, is that when you're frustrated in things that happen in day to day basis at your work, or with politics, or things that frustrate you about friends or family, that if you have this thing that you're constantly looking towards, and that you know that your work is helping, is magnified, it is helping a greater group than your immediate circle, to me that's very gratifying. It's something that it gives me some inner peace. I feel an immense sort of pride that I can associate my work with something that helps a much larger group of people than myself.

I like that. Ladies?

He just stole my answer.

That's okay. Let's hear it in your words, Kirby.

I'm really just here so that I can get to southeast Houston faster. Just kidding. I would say, and I think this probably stems from working in transportation because it's not the sexy policy issue, you know.

Higher ed isn't very sexy either.

That's true. That's true.

Fair.

[inaudible 00:41:30]

Like [inaudible 00:41:31] and stuff like that, that's just this immediate need kind of thing. I'm not saying that transportation isn't, but people don't see it as an immediate need. I think that to me, public service is being this background group of people that is looking at the whole picture and analyzing everything to try to create the best future situation for people.

I like that, yeah.

It's not necessarily this, because government's designed to work slowly. We all know that.

Defining characteristics.

The government has to solve some wicked problems.

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Yeah, and it's not this system of immediate gratification, and we're all very aware of that. It's not like I'm going to snap my fingers and all of a sudden I-35 isn't congested anymore, congratulations. We don't have that power.

Come on, Kirby!

Sorry to disappoint, but it's just, it's seeing the future and looking at these longterm problems that we have to start addressing now, because other people aren't seeing it. When you're fully emersed in something, you begin to see it differently in your view, and perspective changes. I work in this area. I work in transportation and I love transportation, but that doesn't mean that I'm not seeing the need for broadband across the state of Texas, and the different, having access to healthcare. It's not that I'm not seeing that. I'm just seeing how transportation's involved in that. I'm seeing if we do this, this, and this, we could create a better situation in this area, and other problems could start to solve itself. I think that's something that's so interesting about transportation to me, is that it's involved in everything. It's involved in healthcare, education.

Energy policy, I mean all of it.

Yes, everything. My take on it is just, let's start to think about these issues now to create something better.

I like that. Thank you, Kirby.

I think if service wasn't such a big deal at the Bush School, I wouldn't have been inclined to go to school there. To me, that's the point. The policy's important and all of it's important, and I think all three of us can sit here and talk about all of those things for days. Obviously, we love this topic.

Mm-hmm (affirmative). You're here.

Right. I think the service piece of it for me, or why public service matters is because the people matter, and if we're going to be a nation or a world that cares about people in any aspect, then we have to care about serving them in any aspect. In looks different, and it looks different amongst the three of us sitting here, or however you want to expand that. I think we could all go on, and on, and on about how we want good things for people or whatever, but I think when you look at people who are choosing to be public servants, who are choosing this as, this is not just what I'm going to do, it's going to be what I study and invest time, and energy, and money in, you're looking at people who at the root of it, care so deeply about the people and how the people matter, and how do we do better for our people. For me, that's the coolest part of all of it.

I like that as well. Very nice answers. I like to think about what we do as a profession, and a profession of public service, which is why I really like the focus of the Bush School explicitly saying, "We're training public servants." I like how the three of you have adopted that as well. As a field of public service or as a profession that you're all participating in, you may or may not be aware that the broader world is having some geopolitical concerns. You may or may not be aware that domestically, we have lots of challenges independent of your own political leanings.

I worry for public servants in 2019. The pushback against experts as having a legitimate role in policy discussion, this wave of dehumanization that seems to be unfolding not just in the US, but in a few places, and I think these are, and also things like right now as we're recording this, the US government is in a partial shutdown, which really affects public servants, and their paychecks, and their ability to provide for their families, and their ability to serve when they had those economic needs. I was wondering if you all have any thoughts about what are some of the challenges, given that you're in the trenches, as we say, in what you do? What do you see as some of the challenges for our profession? For me, thinking about academia and thinking about public service, I'm always worried about our weird incentives that come along with getting money, right?

In the modern university, you've got to be chasing money, and money is good and generates a lot of wealth, and is useful. We couldn't be sitting here. I wouldn't have my job without the money that comes to universities, but I do worry, for me, about the influence of money directing who and how we serve. That's one of mine, for example, as I think about public servants, that people that would like to be helping say, immigrants, there's not a lot of resources there sometimes, and even within higher ed or thinking about higher ed institutes. What do you see as some of the challenges as we're, in 2019 there's a lot going on in the world? Talking heads in the media are really in outrage mode. What do you think are the challenges for our profession?

In general, it's the politicization of public service. I think that again, we, within the civil service realm and their equivalents at the state level, and then even at he nonprofit level, that to a certain extent you've been insulated from politics. You know that it happens and it's a part of our government, it's a part of our country's history, but that the missions that you were charged with executing were not as greatly affected by politics as maybe they are in today's environment. I think that that system was set up for a reason, because as some of the other panelists alluded to, people choose this as a lifelong profession, and that their political leadership will change, and the winds of politics will change, and positions will change, but their choosing this career field because they're passionate about an issue, they're passionate about helping a community, and that they want that to survive, their work to survive, and their cause to survive, regardless of the political appointee or the person for the party in power.

I think that's the system that most Americans want. They don't want every single issue wrapped up in the partisanship of politics. They want their government to function, to function effectively, to function efficiently. They want some insulation for the folks that have chosen to provide some of those services in the public service sphere. My fear is that some of these things, higher ed for instance, which used to be bipartisan or nonpartisan, at then national and state level, the majority of parties agreed that higher ed was good. Funding higher ed is good. Recent polling shows some frustration among the parties with higher ed, for different reasons, but even that issue where both parties traditionally agreed, can't escape the partisanship at the national, and to a certain extent, the state level. I think that is immensely frustrating for those of us that work in those areas.

Yeah, politicization, I think, is pretty clearly one that's having a serious impact on the lives of public servants. Again, take the shutdown as just a classic example at this point. Yeah, I think that's a good one.

I think burnout is a pretty high one. The reason, and maybe we need to clarify that feeling of burnout, because to your point about money, there's a sense of not having any money to do what you want to do, constantly seeking money to do what you want to do. There's that piece of it, but I also think when you choose this lifelong career of being a public servant, you are choosing to constantly put something above you or constantly be seeking something better. I know for me personally, that can be exhausting to feel like you're not doing enough. You're not seeing enough change, you're not getting enough done. Sometimes it's because there's literally not enough resources, and sometimes it's because we're in a slow machine and it just takes a long time to make things happen.

I think that feeling of, "I'm not doing enough, so I have to constantly do more. I have to constantly be devoting my time." The other thing I have had a lot of conversations recently with people about, is the emotional burnout from being a public servant, this feeling of, "I've now invested all of my being into this one issue, and I really just need two days to step away from it, and I don't know how because I'm going to feel guilty that I have the privilege to walk away." I think there's a balance there. I think there's a balance of learning that as public servants, you also have to take care of yourself and sometimes that means you have to walk away, and finding out how you don't get burned out. How do you not get burned out but still do what you feel called to do, and meet those needs that you see?

I think that's a good one as well. Yeah. Kirby, any thoughts?

My mind is going all different directions right now.

Well, share one direction with us.

One direction. I think that three of the things that came to mind would be conflicting interests, lack of resources, and emotions. Public servants are all extremely passionate about what they do, which is what makes them such a unique group of people. They are truly, whole-heartedly, go forth each day to serve this particular interest that they're passionate about. It's easy to say everyone wants to feed hungry children, for example.

If you ask me, "Do you want to feed a hungry child or design a new bus route?" I'm going to feed the child. Everyone wants to feed the child, but there are limited resources. That brings me into the second one, is that there are limited resources where yes, you want to feed the hungry child ten times out of ten. Every day I want to feed the hungry child, but if you start to provide a city-wide transit where this child's parents can now get to a grocery store or something like that, and that's a very, very base level example of it, but it's trying to find this happy medium of where we put resources.

That's one of the issues in transportation, is it's really hard to say we need more money. You know everyone thinks of transportation and they're like, "Well, it's congestion, yeah it's a problem," but people aren't often seeing the big picture of what transportation can solve. There are limited resources and we're very aware of that, which fortunately we have private companies, the private sector and nonprofit, that come in to fill some of these voids and some of these needs, which is essential, but it's so challenging to figure out where the balance is, because you want to give everyone all the money they need, but you can't. It's not possible. That's where conflicting interests come into play, and you start to see a lot of political gains and stuff like that, which you understand, but you don't like it.

Yeah, so frustrating.

It's like, "Oh, I get it, but do you have to do that?" It's just [crosstalk 00:54:05]-

"We get the incentives, but really?"

Yeah. Once things happen in government, which was another thought of mine ... Once someone takes this action and this is put into law, or is taken out of code, or something like that, once it's done, if it's a mistake, it takes even longer to fix it. It's a low-moving process, and once you commit to something, sometimes it takes even more votes to undo it. Government is designed with an incredible amount of intentionality, if that's a word.

Yeah, it is a word.

Okay, it sounded a little weird to me. I don't know. [inaudible 00:54:47] really quiet right now, but it's designed in such an incredible way that history nerds are like, "Oh my god, this is so cool," but it's also frustrating at times because of how slow it is. I could talk [inaudible 00:55:04].

Justin, I'd just like to add something real quick.

Go ahead.

I don't think public servants are looking for a pat on the back, but a lot of folks that work in government, and maybe even to a certain extent, nonprofits, you know when you hear about them in the media, or you hear about their work, is when something goes wrong. [crosstalk 00:55:22] Right? When a constituent has an issue, a pot hole, [crosstalk 00:55:26] or some service wasn't delivered how it was promised. You never hear about the successes. At the federal level, at the state level, at the local level, there are so many layers of government providing services on a daily basis, with people efficiently and effectively using tax dollars, and donations, and resources. I don't think public servants are looking for a pat on the back but-

It'd be nice not to be a scapegoat.

Right. It's inspiring how President Bush recognized that. He lived a life of service in that he wanted his legacy to be ab out public service. Even Bush 43 had a proposal about national service and public service. That family is definitely an ethos there, and it's an ethos in other families, but there are a lot of good Americans, that this is their passion, and they're not looking for a high paycheck, they're not necessarily looking for a pat on their back. They usually get feedback when something goes wrong, but it is really ... If you took away all the public service aspects of our society, there wouldn't be private industry or other groups that necessarily could fill those needs for our citizens. There just couldn't, and I'm talking about from food security all the way to national security.

We're getting close on time, but I didn't want to end on the negativity. Once of my own goal for '19 is to be more, less negative, I suppose, so let's end on a sales pitch, and not a used car sales pitch. I want you to share in conclusion with the audience, despite some of the threats to public service now, why they should to it anyways, why someone who's contemplating public service should go after it anyways. Why does it remain rewarding or useful to you, even in the midst of things like burnout, and politicization, and emotional responses, and conflicts of interest that you have to watch people play out? These are some real challenges, but I think the reason we all do it, is because of the benefits and the way you get to contribute to helping others. Why should someone, despite hearing our concerns about public service, choose to go into public service and serving others anyways? Go ahead, Kirby.

I'll go first on this one.

Go first this time.

I've been passing the ball [inaudible 00:58:00]. Especially on your way to getting where you're going, you feel like you're in a tunnel and you're like, "Where's this end goal? Where am I going? What do I want?" Then you get there and it is such a good feeling to figure out this place, this role where you can serve your community, the country, your state, whatever it is. When I joined TTI, I can't tell you what a great feeling it was to go into work every day and work alongside these brilliant people, these people that could be working in the private sector, making absurd amounts of money. My boss is one of the most intelligent people. I mean, I have two bosses, primarily. They're both just brilliant.

One is this incredible ideas person, and this other one has a memory like a steel trap, that will recall a relationship from like 25 years ago and say, "Oh, so-and-so doesn't care for so-and-so because this thing happened 25 years ago. You wouldn't know that; you weren't here." I was barely alive. It's so funny, because I get to be in this place with hundreds of people that have chosen to pursue this career, to try to improve the lives of the people around them. They have chosen to work in the public sector, because they're working for this means that's beyond any of us. As a whole, we can slowly but surely start to address it. Seeing these people and seeing the amount of income that they've probably forfeited over the years, because they care so much about the people around them, it's inspiring and it's unlike any other work environment, any other feeling.

Very good. I'll take that.

For me, it's a little bit of pay it forward. I think as a citizen of this country, myself and my family have been the benefit of public servants that have preceded me. I view it as a little bit of an obligation to my fellow citizens and the folks that served before me in different capacities. I also think that it is immensely satisfying to identify yourself with something that's bigger than you as an individual, and to find that passion in other folks that have made sacrifices to serve in the way that they're doing, and to be part of a group, or an issue, or a cause that's making your country, or your state, or your community better. That's just intrinsically satisfying.

The motivation to do that and the rewards are so pure, because they're not financially based, they're not fame based. It's just the right thing to do. I am an optimist that even though our country has faults, a lot of folks have stepped up and done the right thing across a plethora of issues. I just think that that's part of being an American. Improve your city, improve your community, improve your country. Be willing to sacrifice a little if your time, of your paycheck, of your prestige, your personal safety. I think that's something unique about Americans. I think it's a worthwhile thing to do. It's definitely [inaudible 01:01:32].

There's a huge part of me that just says, "Oh my gosh, it's just worth it. Just do it." It just is so great. If you ask me at the end of a workday that's been particularly trying, that's probably not the words that come out of my mouth, but I'm also up the next morning ready to go. I agree wholeheartedly with both of y'all and your answers. I think there's something really powerful and empowering about being able to serve others, and then see those people continue that service. I am going to use a quote that was said by a woman named [Melba Zapata 01:02:13], who's on the border.

She's a minister down there, and she said, "We were all given skills by God, and all we have to do is be the seed, and everything else comes." I love that, because it's this idea of, "I have the set of skills that I can use to help the people around me, and to help my community, and my nation, and my world. I don't have to do everything. I don't have to try to be everything. I just have to do what I'm here to do, and do it to the best of my ability to serve the other people." I think there's such a powerful feeling seeing other people join in, in that. I don't know. It's real good. [crosstalk 01:02:51]

"It's real good," I like that.

Those aren't real answers, but it's real good.

They're honest answers.

They're honest answers.

Very honest answer.

Which I will take in this space every time. Well, I wanted to get back to a number of things we didn't get back. I wanted to talk about some of the work you were all doing, but alas, it's been an hour, believe it or not. In respect of your time and the listeners' time, I want to go ahead and close this out. Thank you so much to each of you for taking the time to be the first former students to be a part of this podcast, and have conversations with me about what it's like to be a public servant. This is going to be a regular feature of the Bush School Uncorked, and I think it's an important one.

I think it's important for people to see or hear about, not just what us academics in our ivory tower in the Allen building are doing, but actually what you all are out doing, getting your hands dirty, being on the ground, making some big applied differences as well. Many thanks. Also, Greg always reminds me because I'm about to forget, but many thanks to our hosts as well. We're at downtown uncorked, yet again, and we're very happy and appreciative to have this space, and look forward to having many more conversations here.

We have a few things coming down the pike.We're going to do another one of these conversations in early February. We're going to do another conversation with faculty in the second week of February, I believe. There'll be a little bit of a time gap, I think. We may sneak something back else in, in January, but otherwise we'll have a couple episodes for you in January, and many, many thanks to all of you following along. Also, of course, thanks to our panelists, and for being here. It means a lot to me that you take the time, and it is one of the things that I really enjoy about my job, is watching my former students go out into the world, and do cool things, and help others out. I am proud of each one of you and the work you're doing, so thank you for it.

Thanks for letting us talk.

Thank you.

[crosstalk 01:04:56] yeah.

Yeah.

Excellent.

Yep. You're welcome. Have a nice evening, and thank you to our listeners once again.