

Interview of the First Lady by Larry King Live

Mrs. Bush's East Wing Office

10:35 A.M. EST

Q Tonight, here in Washington, at the Ritz Carlton Hotel, the Larry King Cardiac Foundation will celebrate another one of its dinners with gala entertainment in which the funds go to help people who can't afford it to get various types of heart treatment. And in that connection, we have invited, and she has accepted, the First Lady of the United States, Laura Bush, to kick off the show tonight, which later will deal in depth with heart disease with a panel to talk about. What got you interested in it?

MRS. BUSH: Well, the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, which is part of the NIH, the National Institutes of Health, called to see if I'd be interested in being a part of the Red Dress project. And I didn't know when they called that heart disease was the number one cause of death among American women. I just had assumed, like everyone else, that cancer was.



Q Breast cancer.

MRS. BUSH: And I was really surprised, because I read everything. I read the health sections of newspapers. And so I knew that if I didn't know that, that probably most American women didn't know that.

We all thought of heart disease as a man's disease. And we would rush our husband or boyfriend to the hospital, but when women start to suffer the symptoms of a heart attack, they think it's anxiety or indigestion or whatever, and so they're slower to go to the hospital, which means they usually suffer more damage.

Q And often the doctor is quicker to dismiss them.

MRS. BUSH: Didn't even know, that's right. That goes to show how few people really realize that heart disease was also a woman's disease. Even doctors would send them home when they came with specific symptoms -- not always the symptoms that men have.

Q Yes, they are different.

MRS. BUSH: Women might have an ache in the jaw, or a shoulder pain, and not always the crushing chest pain that men think of. One of the main symptoms is extreme fatigue. And, of course, I think women, a lot of us, think we're tired a lot of the time, so we probably dismiss a symptom like that.

Q In fact, the term "heart attack" is a male term. If I tell you someone's had a heart attack, you expect it to be a man.

MRS. BUSH: You immediately picture a man, you do. Absolutely.

Q So what have you been doing?

MRS. BUSH: Well, so I've gone around the country with the Heart Truth campaign. I've visited with heart attack patients around the country in a lot of different hospitals. I've talked on television about the symptoms, just to get the word out to women to go to their doctors or go to the emergency room as soon as they would send their husband if they have any sort of symptom.

And I really have -- I've heard from other people, I've heard from people who heard me on television and that night have realized that what they are having is a heart attack and have gone to the hospital.

Q And the red dress has become the symbol, right?

MRS. BUSH: The red dress is the symbol of the Heart Truth campaign. The other really good news, though, is that heart disease can be prevented. And if people will change their lifestyles, they can really protect their heart health. And it's especially important, I think, for women, as mothers and role models, to change their lifestyles for their children. Obesity is a symptom of -- a risk of heart disease. Smoking, obviously, is one of the main risks for heart disease -- high blood pressure, diabetes, all of those things.

So you should go to your doctor, get your blood pressure taken, make sure you have a diabetes check, find out what your cholesterol is. And then try to have a heart-healthy diet. And everyone knows now what that is. It's written in all the food sections of the newspapers. The government, the new dietary guidelines, have a great new book out that you can order or download from your computer to get what the real dietary guidelines are. And we all know what it is.

Q We also know now that it's possibly reversible.

MRS. BUSH: That's right, it really can be --

Q You can change your lifestyle.

MRS. BUSH: -- if you change your lifestyle, if you treat high blood pressure, if you lose weight, if you exercise. And that's a very important part. And all of those things sound hard. They sound overwhelming, especially to women who are busy probably taking care of their own mothers and their children and all of those things.

But I think if you just start with the exercise part, once you just make yourself go for a walk a few days a week, you find out that you feel better. And then it's a little bit easier to have a little bit less food or to pick lower calorie foods and better foods that are better for you. But I really think the exercise piece is the way to get a good start.

Q Has heart disease affected you personally?

MRS. BUSH: No, it hasn't.

Q No one in the family, no?

MRS. BUSH: No one in my family has, even though my father was a heavy smoker. But he died in his '80s of Alzheimer's.

Q You're lucky not to --

MRS. BUSH: I know, I am.

Q It affects almost every family. How about friends?

MRS. BUSH: Sure, I have a lot of friends who have had heart attacks, a lot. One of our best friends had a heart attack at George's first inauguration --

Q At the inauguration?

MRS. BUSH: -- and found out about it when we got to the big Sunday service after the -- at the end of the weekend of the inauguration, at church; another friend told us there. He's doing great, but it was really scary.

And in the end, he was glad he was here because he would have been in Midland, Texas, which is where he's from. And here he was able to go straight to George Washington Hospital and be treated really very well.

Q That's where I went. It's where President Reagan was taken.

MRS. BUSH: That's right.

Q By the way, we think this is your first interview in this office, right?

MRS. BUSH: That's right. I've done a lot of print interviews here, but I haven't done a television interview. This is my office in the East Wing. You can see all the things I'm involved in.

Q I thought it would be bigger.

MRS. BUSH: A lot of children's books over here, because of my interest in literacy and in children's reading.

Q It's not a huge office, though.

MRS. BUSH: No, it's not a huge office. None of the offices are, really. In the West Wing the Oval Office is not a huge office. And I think -- I like that. I think it's very American, actually, to have lovely offices, but not particularly grand.

Q So you have privacy here, as well?

MRS. BUSH: That's right. And I have a great staff that's here, who are working on a lot of issues, including the Heart Truth campaign, and a lot of other issues.

Q How do you choose your issues?

MRS. BUSH: Well, I chose first, of course, reading and literacy and early childhood development because that's what I'd spent my life on. I was a teacher and then a librarian. In Texas when George was governor, I'd done a lot of work on ways that school districts can make sure they're really teaching reading, that children are really learning to read, and other ways that different people in every community can make sure little children -- before they start school -- have been exposed to reading and books, so they're ready to learn to read when they get there.

And then a lot of things came from other things that happened -- for instance, the Heart Truth campaign, when the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute called me about it. Or last fall, I had a seminar on boys, and really -- called Helping America's Youth, about what we can do for young people, particularly boys.

Q How boys have a different problem.

MRS. BUSH: Boys are having a hard time. We know it intuitively. We know that more young men go to jail, of course, than young women, that boys are much more likely to join a gang, they're more likely to drop out of school. But there are other statistics that say now about 56 percent of the people in college now are women, and even in graduate school. So many more women are going on to higher education than men. And what is it? What can we do to address these problems so that our boys and young men can be successful?

Q What was it like to raise twins?

MRS. BUSH: It was great -- really very, very fun. I am an only child, so I really hoped I'd have two children so they'd have a sister or a brother. When we found out -- I was 35 when I had them, so when I found out we were having twins, I felt double happiness as my mother-in-law, Barbara Bush, said.

Q Biggest problem in raising them?

MRS. BUSH: I think the same problems you have in raising any children.

Q Oh, really?

MRS. BUSH: The same things. When they were little, it was physically difficult to take both of them into the grocery store, for instance, if you had to carry two babies, and you didn't want to leave one in the car while you went in and got a cart, and brought out -- put the other one in it. That part of it was hard. But they have gotten a lot of emotional support for each other, and they're lucky to have a twin, especially under the circumstances with their grandfather when they were born, and now their father in politics. I think it has been -- they're lucky to have each other.

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Q We're back with Laura Bush discussing heart disease, and in a little while some other things. I know you have to deal with stress. Your job is stress.

MRS. BUSH: I do. That's right.

Q And your husband's job is major stress. And stress and heart attacks go hand-in-hand.

MRS. BUSH: That's right.

Q Do you ever worry about it?

MRS. BUSH: Well, not really. I think we both are very good at dealing with stress. I don't think you could run for this office, or be elected for this office, or serve in it if you didn't handle stress well. And both of us do that. And a lot of it is by exercise. That's certainly what he does. He has the chance to work out a lot, and I think that's a great stress reliever.

And then also, we have a strong faith. We have lots of friends. The support from our friends and family is very, very important. It's really important.

Q Speaking of stress, how are you handling the stress of diminishing poll results?

MRS. BUSH: No, I don't like that, of course. But I also think I have a view of it that other people don't have. I know what it's like to live here, I know how high the stakes are right now in our history with what happens in Iraq and what happens in Afghanistan and how really, really important it is that we be able to have a good peace there where we support governments that can really start to function on their own as good, democratic governments.

I know how every problem in the world eventually comes to the foot of the President of the United States to the American people, because we are so much more prosperous, so much more affluent in many ways, not just financially affluent as a country, but also many of the ideas we have, the ideas of our constitution, the ideas of our democracy, the ideas of freedom of religion, the ideas of human rights and the dignity of people and the equality of men and women in every race, are really values that I think are universal.

And I think because of that, countries around the world look at us. They may say they're anti-American, they may say they hate things we stand for, but in most cases, I think they would like their countries to have similar values and similar qualities, and certainly a similar sort of life.

Q But why isn't the American public buying it?

MRS. BUSH: Well, I think they are. I really do think they are. I think the American public knows that. I think it's difficult, it's very difficult to watch on television and see the loss of our soldiers in Iraq and to get the idea that the Iraqis don't care, that they don't want us there, that it's a sacrifice they don't respect or regard.

I do think they do. I think the people in Afghanistan -- I know the people of Afghanistan, from when I've been there, say, don't leave. Don't leave us yet. Let us build our democracy. Let us get all of the institutions of democracy into place before you go.

There are many, many countries that want the help of the United States, and that get the help of the United States, and I hope the American people can feel proud of that. We are a very, very generous nation. I've visited in Africa. I've seen the results of the money that comes from the taxpayers of the United States for AIDS relief or for malaria or tuberculosis relief. I've seen how important that is.

Just this week, we had President Sirleaf from Liberia, the first woman elected on the African continent as President. The United States stuck with Liberia for a long civil war that they had, a long time of war. And all the other embassies left. But our ambassador didn't leave. And we stayed there, and we worked with them until finally they had a good and fair and free election, and a woman was elected who can start to rebuild Liberia. And we want to help. Americans want to help.

Q There was an article in The Washington Post today saying that when President Reagan ran into problems in his second term, Nancy sort of took some clout and power and suggested and put through some changes, administrative changes. Do you think that's necessary?

MRS. BUSH: Well, you know I did -- I saw the article, and I know what advice you're telling me, the person gave me in the -- the writer gave me.

Q Sally Quinn.

MRS. BUSH: I think it's interesting that -- and this is so typical of Washington that on the front page of the Style section would be the advice to the First Lady. But I take advice to heart. I really do. I mean, a lot of people give the President advice. A lot of people give me advice. A lot of people write --

Q Well, what did you think of the advice?

MRS. BUSH: Well, I mean, I think there's some of it that's right and some of it that isn't, of course. And I know that the view from outside is a lot different from the view that George and I have inside, with each other, by ourselves. And there's certainly some advice I would feel free to give him, and do. There's other advice that I really don't think I should give him.

Q Like personnel?

MRS. BUSH: Well, no, I mean, I would certainly -- that's one of the things we do talk about the most, are personalities. And I know everyone as well as he does, who works here. I've worked with them also. So certainly I would give him that kind of advice.

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Q We're back with Laura Bush. You've lived the life of a First Lady of a state and a federal government. Would you want it for one of your daughters?

MRS. BUSH: Sure, if they wanted it. I mean, the fact is I'm the First Lady because I happened to marry someone who ran for President and won. I didn't run for the office; I'm here because he ran and he wanted to run. As he said, don't feel sorry for him, he's a volunteer -- he volunteered for this job and he ran for the office. I think that I have an unbelievable opportunity to see our country at its very, very best. And do I get to see it at its worst? Sure. But overwhelmingly, every opportunity that I have strengthens and encourages me because of the way the American people are.

Q So you wouldn't mind it if one of them had the same fate?

MRS. BUSH: Sure, no. I mean, why did you not suggest that one of them might run themselves? (Laughter.)

Q How about running, would that bother you?

MRS. BUSH: No, not at all. If they were interested in that, I think that would be terrific.

Q Are you going to get involved in the 2006 elections?

MRS. BUSH: Sure.

Q Are you going to campaign for -

MRS. BUSH: Sure, absolutely, I'll be campaigning for our candidates. I've already done some and have some more scheduled.

Q When I first met you there in Austin, you were not a fan of running for office. That was not your ball game.

MRS. BUSH: Well, I know how hard it is. I do know how hard it is. And George and I had an advantage that most people -- except John Quincy Adams -- haven't had, and that is we had seen someone we loved in this job and we knew what it was like, we knew what we were getting into. Certainly, we didn't know how extremely difficult and challenging these years would be for our country, because of September 11th. But on the other hand, we knew to expect the unexpected, that that's what happens. That's what has happened to every President and their family that's lived here.

Q So you like getting out now?

MRS. BUSH: So I do like it. I like it a lot. It's fun.

Q Do you have a favorite?

MRS. BUSH: A favorite state or a favorite --

Q A favorite presidential --

MRS. BUSH: Favorite president?

Q For the office in 2008.

MRS. BUSH: Oh, in 2008. I thought you were talking about the 2006 elections.

Q No, those governors and senators and congressmen, no.

MRS. BUSH: I'll be campaigning for them and then we'll see what happens in 2008. I have a lot of favorites. I think we have a very good slate of people who will be in the primaries.

Q Have you spoken to Hillary since her criticism of this government, and yours of her?

MRS. BUSH: Sure. She went to the funeral, Coretta Scott King funeral, she and President Clinton did, rode with us on Air Force One to Atlanta.

Q Did you talk about that -

MRS. BUSH: No, we don't talk about that. You know, it's sort of like in politics you have a way you are when you're together with people, and I guess a way you can sound when you're separate -- what you might say when you're on the campaign trail. And we all know that.

Q Would Secretary Rice make a good President?

MRS. BUSH: She'd make an excellent President, but I don't think we can talk her into running.

Q No?

MRS. BUSH: I don't think so. I think she sincerely does not want to run, but I wish she would.

Q Want to go back to college?

MRS. BUSH: I think she probably wants to move back to California and have a wonderful life, post-Secretary of State. But she is a wonderful Secretary of State for our country and she'd be a great President.

Q There's the story she wants to be commissioner of the National Football League.

MRS. BUSH: Well, I heard that she said he didn't want to now, that she was still going to continue to be Secretary of State.

Q And what do you want to do?

MRS. BUSH: Well, I want to continue to do what I've always done, and that is work on all these issues that I think are important. I'm interested in other ways that I can help. I have a lot of international interests that I didn't have before -- the women of Afghanistan, all of those issues, the people of Liberia, the people of Africa, the treatment of AIDS worldwide and in our own country, as well, what we can do to help people who are afflicted with it.

Q Thank you, Laura, as always.

MRS. BUSH: Thanks very much, Larry. Appreciate it.

Q Thanks for your work on heart disease.

END 10:55 A.M. EST