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Speaker 1: There are few things that make people successful. Taking a step forward to change their lives is one successful trait, but it takes some time to get there. How do you move forward to greet the success that awaits you? Welcome to *Next Steps Forward* with host Chris Meek. Each week, Chris brings on another guest who has successfully taken the next steps forward. Now here is Chris Meek.

Chris Meek: Hello. I'm Chris Meek, and you've tuned in this week's episode of *Next Steps Forward*. As always, it's an honor and a pleasure to have you with us again. Today's guest is Ashley Davis. Ashley is a lead principal at West Front Strategies, a multi-million dollar lobbying firm she co-founded in 2015. In that role, she oversees advocacy efforts for the interests of her Fortune 500 clients before the federal government's legislative and executive branches.

Ashley's expertise comes from years working in the executive branch. A special assistant to national director and then security of Homeland Security, Tom Ridge, Ashley directed the daily operations and oversaw the staff at the newly created Office of Homeland Security. Ashley holds a master's of international business from Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business. She sits on several nonprofits and corporate boards, including the Kennedy Center National Symphony Orchestra. Ashley Davis, welcome to *Next Steps Forward*.

Ashley Davis: Thank you so much for having me today.

Chris: Thanks for your time. Two things before we start. I've warned you before, my viewers and listeners know my 30-pound Shih Tzu, Zeke, is in here squeaking away, so hopefully he'll take a little power nap for us. Also, one thing I didn't bring up before, we're not going to talk about Georgetown. My listeners know my undergrad and graduate school are Syracuse, so we won't talk about the basketball rivalry, but I always like to raise that for the guests as a forewarning.

Ashley: I'm actually from the Penn State area originally, and so that's more than Georgetown for me.

Chris: Good. Good for you. That's okay then. Ashley, I just shared a bit of your professional background. Tell us about where you grew up, like you just mentioned, how you chose a career in government and then government relations, and the path you took to get where you are today.

Ashley: Sure. I'm actually from a very small town outside of Pittsburgh, as I talked about earlier. I have an uncle and a cousin that were both state senators, but besides that, none of my family was really in politics. They lived in another part of the state than me, so I didn't know them that well until I got into my 20s, and they did really help me when I moved to Harrisburg. I was majoring in public relations in college. I went to Westminster, a small liberal arts school in Western Pennsylvania, had no thoughts about politics, thought I was going to do communications, and I was at a wedding and met someone that worked for then Governor Ridge, who was governor of Pennsylvania.

This was before my junior year in college, and I was like, well, that sounds fun. Maybe I'll move to Harrisburg, which was like a huge town compared to where I went to school and grew up. I did an internship that summer for Governor Ridge and just caught the bug and loved him as a human being, and I ended up then working for him again later. I ended up then graduating. I went back to school for a semester, and after I got that bug of adulthood, so to speak, I actually got a full-time job and I ended up graduating just a semester early from college and so started working again for the governor.

I was making \$17,000 a year, which was so much more than minimum wage that I was making part-time at the local outlet mall. I then got a call after about six months from something called a lobbying firm. I literally had to look it up. I had no idea. They're like, hey, do you want to come work for us? You'll make \$24,000 a year. I was like, absolutely, because that was even more money. I left and I really had great mentors at that firm who taught me the ins and outs of what this profession really was. That was Bill Greenlee, who's now passed away. He really took me under his arm and taught me all the different dynamics of, and at that time it was state lobbying. I'm giving a long story here.

Then I decided to-- a few years after doing that, George W Bush was running for president and every Republican governor was giving staff or political people in their orbit to the Bush campaign. Everyone was coordinated. It was a really fantastic, well-run campaign. I went on the campaign on behalf of the Governor Ridge world. That's what ended up getting me to Washington, which is a whole other story that I'll not bore you with right now. That's how I-- it just was happenstance. There was no real, this is what I'm going to do and how to get there.

Chris: It wasn't just a 30% raise. Was there something else that drew you into being a lobbyist?

Ashley: I do have to say that I really like the private sector side of things. I've been in government now twice, once in the White House and once in state government, as I said, working for Governor Ridge, but I've always gravitated back towards the private sector. I get the question all the time, would I ever run for office? Have I ever thought about running for office? I never have, never have any desire to have that scrutiny, especially in this day and age. I like being behind the scenes, but also, as my MBA shows, I'm very interested in the business side of things. As I get further and further along in my career, I've been able to really do more, some of the business aspects of my clients, as well as the political policy aspects.

Chris: What does a typical day look like for you in the government affairs position, if there is such a thing as a typical day?

Ashley: There's not a typical day. My self-diagnosed ADD, it's perfect for. We do about 50 different clients in many different spaces, healthcare, tech. We do everything from Tesla, the Walgreens to Microsoft. It's a bunch of different issues. Just today, for example, I just got off the phone about healthcare. I had a conversation about a tech company two hours before that. Later today, I have to do something in the vaping space. It's all over the-- I always say that we know a little about a lot of different issues, which keeps me very interested. I do have to say

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when Congress is in town, it's a much different day than when Congress is out of town.

As many or most of you may know, Congress comes in, it's obviously full-time, but there's certain weeks when they're back at home to work in their districts. When they're actually in Washington is when all the hearings take place, when bills are passed. It just is a lot busier. Right now we're in a three week period of them being in town until they go home for the holidays, hopefully.

Chris: You talked about having to know a little bit about a lot. You must spend half a day just reading up on the different issues of the day for those sectors. Is that one of the most challenging aspects of your job?

Ashley: It's probably one of the most interesting for me. You do have to depend a lot on learning about the company from the company. Usually, especially with some of the clients, most of the clients we represent, they have an infrastructure in place that supports us in regards to how a certain policy would affect these companies. You do rely on that, but going back to my comment about being structured, I do get four newspapers that are still paper, so I'm supporting the newspaper industry every day. It's not like I read them cover to cover, but that's how I really look at what's going on in the different worlds. Also, it's our job to know what's going on or what bills are happening in what industry.

Chris: Now, on the flip side of that, what do you find most rewarding about working in government affairs?

Ashley: There's always fun times. There's a couple of things. Having this firm and being able to make the decisions on our clients, and my firm's bipartisan. When we started this, it was very important that it was be bipartisan, and this is something I will stick to as long as I'm here. We will not take on issues that are controversial in regards to things that we wouldn't believe in or that we couldn't get behind. We don't take on social issues. We don't take on the pro-choice, pro-life. We don't take on guns. Just because those are issues that are so divisive that--

My firm's small enough in regards to people that I wouldn't want to put somebody in a bad position because how we work is we all are supposed to work on all the clients. I would say, from that perspective, the reason I say that, when we do have an issue that actually passes or a piece of legislation passes that is beneficial to our clients, it's very rewarding. Some of my side hustles in politics, which I just learned this word, this side hustle is a thing, I didn't know, I guess I'm too old, is I try to get more-- One thing that Republicans are not real good at is electing women, many women in Congress. Democrats are much better at it than us. One of the things I really do in regards to the congressional world in my free time is try to get more women elected to office, which is rewarding because we're doing a lot better job than we used to.

Chris: It's funny going back to what you said about what you will or will not do for the firm, and I think we're very like minded in the fact that we'll have any conversation here on the show, but we don't talk about guns, abortion, or politics. I guess it's boring after that, but I absolutely understand and agree with that mindset.

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Ashley: [inaudible 00:11:05] these days.

Chris: It is. It's a lightning rod that we've got other things to worry about.

Ashley: Exactly.

Chris: It would seem to me that relationship building and the ability to build working relationships is the foundation of your profession. Would you agree with that?

Ashley: Absolutely. I also think it's a reputation I would add to that as well. As I stated earlier, one of our biggest ways of getting information about how certain pieces of legislation would impact a company is from the company itself, and we have to make sure that that information that we're getting from our clients and our companies is accurate for what we're saying on the Hill about how this, for example, tax provision is going to truly impact the bottom line or the people or the employees of X, Y, and Z company.

Because, especially in my business where we represent numerous companies, sometimes we're talking to staff and senators and congressmen and women on multiple different issues, and if we are ever not giving information that's correct to these offices or not giving the full picture or not doing something that would be harmful to the member of Congress or their reputation, you're never going to be able to be effective. That is always my fear, but also how I make sure that whatever I'm saying is 100% right. It's not that you don't trust people, it's just if you lose your reputation in regards to things like that, then you're not going to be good in this profession. It is relationships, but it's also just that I say the reputation is even better than relationships.

Chris: The word lobbying was coined, a lot of people don't know, from the lobby of the Willard Hotel just a block from the White House. Obviously, lobbying is one of the oldest professions here in the country. I forget which president was there, they were trying to meet him to lobby for different ideas and bills. You started your firm in 2015. Knowing how old the industry is, how were you able to be so successful? Maybe part two of that is, it's a fairly male-dominated industry. How did you be so successful as a female executive?

Ashley: I, first of all, surround myself with people that are much better than me. The team that works here are fantastic. When I left the White House, I went to a law firm for 13 years and ran their government affairs. That was my first true management, but it was nice because it was under a bigger umbrella. I've always been able, I would say as a strength, is to spot talent because this industry has a different talent than other industries, right? You have to have go-getters. We don't hold your hand. You have to go be doing things on your own. That is something that I feel like I've done really well. The team here is just unbelievable. I think that's the main way that we've been successful.

Also, I've never had an issue being a woman in this industry. I'm almost 50 now, so I've been in it a long time. I actually think that being a woman was helpful in some ways because, well, one, I always kept my nose clean. I don't stay out late. There's nothing good that happens in Washington late at night, in the political atmosphere. I

never did that stuff. Not that I didn't like go have dinners and stuff with clients or whoever, but I always was the one that went home. I always made sure that I did things that was respectable. I never had that issue. I didn't put myself in situations that could have been harmful. I always felt like it helped me stand out a little bit.

Even now, especially after the Me Too movement, I would say people were gravitating towards women-owned companies and things like that because that whole movement was happening. Some of my best mentors, I haven't had many. I've had lots of people that I've worked for that I really admire, but I've only probably had one or two true mentors, but they were always men. I just worked very hard to set myself apart. That was also by making sure that I'm over-prepared for every meeting.

Chris: You mentioned earlier how the firm is bipartisan. Do you work exclusively with one party while someone else on your firm works on the other side of the aisle or do you do both?

Ashley: How we're set up now is-- As I've said, I'm a Republican and I worked in the Bush world. I support Republican candidates, but over the years, I've definitely had to lobby Democrats as well and it's fine. I am not a believer that if you request a meeting for a client and say for a Democrat office, that they wouldn't have me come because I'm a Republican. That is just not true. There may be one or two offices. I've never experienced it. How we're divided up, yes, I would say that the Democrat concentrates more on Democrat offices and the Republican concentrates more on Republican offices.

However, again, with being a smaller firm, we all pitch in. If there's someone that needs to cover meetings for somebody else, for a client, we do it. It's not like we would never do the opposite side. It's just when you're aligned with the beliefs of that party, you gravitate towards lobbying them. For example, just to clarify, one of my Democrats that work here now, he was hired out of the Hotel Association where he-- they divided it up on issues. He's a Democrat that worked for Senator Klobuchar, but he lobbied both House and Senate Republicans and Democrats. It works both ways. Firms though are probably more divided into political backgrounds than corporations.

Chris: More us versus them?

Ashley: Yes. We don't fight at our firm either over politics. We just kind of, it doesn't matter. We're just **[inaudible 00:17:44]**

Chris: Put behind and focus on the client.

Ashley: Exactly.

Chris: Have you ever had someone who you just expect you get along with and now you can't imagine ever not being close to?

Ashley: It was funny a couple of years after I left the White House and I was at the law firm, Heather Podesta, who was married to Tony Podesta, who was a big Democrat consultant, very close with the Clintons. I'm like, how are we ever? Then Barbara Comstock was also joining the firm at the same time. She's a Republican Congresswoman. I didn't know Barbara that well then. I'm like, of course I'm going to

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gravitate towards Barbara. I actually ended up really getting along with Heather, learned a lot of her in regards to-- because she was in the private sector before. Just learning a lot of her. She's a very good political fundraiser. She's obviously very smart, but client servicer and probably one of the best I would say. I, it was interesting just how much we connected, which I never thought we would have, and we were still friends to this day.

Chris: Many times there's a lot at stake when Congress takes a vote or someone in the executive branch makes a decision. There certainly must be times when someone you count on to support a piece of legislation or oppose it, votes against you. How do you handle differences and disappointments so they don't sour that working relationship?

Ashley: It's one, how you present yourself. One of my favorite stories I tell one of my current clients, I met the person that hired me for this client probably 10 years ago when I was lobbying him on an issue for his boss, who was a member of Congress, and he told me, no, that his boss, she couldn't support the issue. I lobbied him for 18 months about this, it was back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. We ended up becoming friends, even though he kept telling me no. He said that the reason he hired me after he left and went to the private sector was because I didn't act like a big baby, right? It's not personal.

One thing that we have to remember is we represent clients, but the members of Congress that you're lobbying represent their constituents who live in their state, live in their district, and also elect them. Your business proposition that you're trying to lobby on may not align with what is best for their constituents or what they perceive is best for their constituents. You have to take the emotion out of it. I'm very good at that. I always say, you'll appreciate this, the boys in my firm are much more emotional than the girls in my firm, but you just can't take it personally. It is what it is. You win some, you lose some, but you don't act like a big baby. You don't trash them. You don't **[inaudible 00:20:46]**

Chris: It's just business.

Ashley: It's just business.

Chris: All of these different votes, obviously there's a lot at stake from a policy perspective. Would you share a memorable experience where your advocacy efforts had a significant impact on public policy?

Ashley: People will remember this example, good or bad. We represented the company that made the EpiPen, still do, and represented them for about 10 years even before the EpiPen thing happened. Obviously, I remember this in August, this was right after Obamacare passed. It was going into effect in regards to deductibles of healthcare policies. It was when kids were going back to school. We didn't anticipate this happening at all. When the higher deductibles went into place with Obamacare, we did not anticipate kids going back to school, then buying the EpiPens and their deductibles weren't met yet, because before they may not have had the same deductible, right?

Everything was changing. Everything was new. Obviously, most people remember that this was a horrible, horrible situation. We still talk about it in some meetings, but we had probably a good two and a half years where we had to, well, take a lot of arrows because we were the face. The CEO of the company, who's a dear friend of mine, was Senator Manchin's daughter. She obviously received more scrutiny just because of that, right? They had nothing to do with another, but I'm just saying it was like, oh, it was better to see her story.

To her credit, and it's something I learned, she was like, listen, I'm going to be taking the fall for this, but I'm going to make sure that everyone's going to understand how the supply chain of the drug industry is working now because there's five sectors that are involved in the birth of a drug to how it gets to the patient and some of the policies that were developed that impact the prices of drugs all across the board. We spent years and hours and hours and hours educating, and as you can imagine, people weren't necessarily wanting to talk with us about this issue because a lot of people were mad. I would say, even though it's a touchy issue and it's not a fun issue, it was the best learning experience.

I would say it was a learning experience, not just from how to educate Congress about some of these issues, but also how as a CEO was like, I'll take the fall for this, but I'm going to make sure to try to fix the system. By the way, we're still talking about fixing the system right now. It's still happening. There's still bills that are actually moving further along in Congress than they ever have that will potentially fix this supply chain issue that inflates the drug. I think that it's just a long-term life lesson that I'll probably be involved with until I stop lobbying. It was good.

Chris: As someone who has two daughters with allergies, I remember that very clearly, very clearly. We'll move on to the next question.

Ashley: Yes, sorry. Wasn't our fault.

Chris: I know that. I know that. When we look at Washington from the outside today, we see paralyzing dysfunction in large part because of broken relationships. It seems like the Democrats and Republicans hardly talk to each other. Often, as we recently saw with the Speaker debacle, I'll call it, they don't even work with members of their own parties. Has it been like that the whole time you've been working in Washington or was there a turning point?

Ashley: When I moved here in December 2000, so right before 2000, right before we went into the new administration, it definitely was not like this. Even the entire time I was in the administration, I remember when Bush came in, he worked with Senator Kennedy on No Child Left Behind, love or not that bill, it's something that they worked together on it. We were this close in 2007 working on an immigration bill that actually would have been something that both parties-- he again was working with Senator Kennedy. Both parties, the path, all different, I'm not going to go through what the bill was, but it was actually something that both parties could agree on and then the banks collapsed.

Everything went out the window because they were trying to save the banks. I would say the biggest change I think is the 24-hour news cycle, 24-hour news

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commentators and social media. We did not have any of that during my time in the White House. Right, everyone's talking to that two-minute soundbite, that minute soundbite, or that 30 Twitter or X or whatever. That's what everyone's talking to now. I do a lot of TV, so I can say this. When people like me are talking about every issue under the sun, and that's how people are getting their news, that's not really, that's not how it used to be. We didn't have any social media, one, but I don't remember when the 24-hour cable networks became mainstream. Definitely, the evening news was the thing you watched at seven o'clock or six o'clock, whatever time it was. Oh my God, I'm aging myself. I sound like my grandmother.

Chris: I'm right there with you. A couple of years older. To that point, I think maybe CNN may have been the first one to really create that new cycle. Thank you, Mr. Ted Turner. If you had a magic wand or pixie dust, how would you fix this function in Washington or is our government just broken beyond repair?

Ashley: I don't think it's broken. I think that the next thing that broke I didn't get to was, there was such decisiveness over Trump and I'm not talking politics, but just the decisiveness of the country was pretty bad. I think that broke it. Then I think because the Republicans felt like they were treated horribly during Trump, then when Biden came in, I don't think it's as decisive at all in regards to people criticizing President Biden. You're exactly right. I still think that there's flamethrowing going on, like you said about the Republican speaker thing. It's like, who's not conservative enough, and who's this and who's that? I don't think it's productive at all.

Until we get a leader in there, I think on the Republican side, that I'm saying this as a Republican, if we get a Republican leader in there that's not decisive, I think it would be really helpful to set the tone on both sides.

Chris: No, absolutely agree. Some critics suggest that lobbyists have too much influence over public policy and that leads to industries having too much influence over the agencies that regulate them. Would you agree or disagree with that?

Ashley: See, I always say this. Everyone thinks of my profession as that we carry bags of money around all the time and try to influence people. I do not think that we have as much influence as people think we do. It's definitely not because of money.

Chris: Fair enough. We've been talking to Ashley Davis about the practice of government relations in our nation's Capitol. We'll be right back after a short break.

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Speaker 1: You are listening to *Next Steps Forward*. To reach Chris Meek or his guest on the show today, please call in to 1-888-346-9141. That's 1-888-346-9141. Or send an email to Chris at nextstepsforward.com. Now, back to this week's show.

Chris: We are back. I'm Chris Meek, host of *Next Steps Forward*. My guest today is Ashley Davis. Ashley is a lead principal at West Front Strategies, a multimillion-dollar lobbying firm she co-founded in 2015. In that role, she oversees advocacy efforts for the interest of her Fortune 500 clients for the federal government's legislative and executive branches. Her expertise also comes from years working in the executive branch. Ashley, we were talking for the break about the concerns some people have about lobbyists having too much power and influence. How do lobbyists contribute to the democratic process?

Ashley: If you ask most members of Congress, if not all, they feel that it's something that people don't realize that these members have very little staff. In the House, if you're a normal congressman, you have maybe four or five staff. If you're in the Senate, you have more, but you're obviously representing an entire state. There's not enough manpower for staff to know every issue about every bill or potential bill that's coming their way.

Going back to my earlier comment about why it's so important to have a clean reputation in regards to telling the truth, telling the whole truth in regards to your issue that you're lobbying on, if you're a trusted lobbyist, staff reach out or want you to reach out so they get educated on how X, Y, and Z policies affecting this either specific company or this specific industry. Going back to the conversation we were having about drugs or pharmaceuticals, I should say, is that you have a brand versus generic conversation all the time.

You have some of the healthcare staffers or healthcare committees reach out to companies or their lobbyists to say like, hey, if we did this, you're the one living it every day in regards to a rebate question. How would that impact if we change policy this way? It is part of the Democrat process because there's just too much information out there. Again, you have to be trusted and you have to be one that is not just peddling something that isn't true.

Chris: No snake oil or anything like that?

Ashley: No. No bags full of cash, which everyone has stated earlier.

Chris: Yellow envelope. Every now and then, we hear stories in the news about the revolving door. By that, people from the lobbying profession going back into government or people leaving government becoming lobbyists. What are the pros

and cons of the revolving door and what restrictions, if any, do you believe should be in place to make the system less prone to undue influence?

Ashley: I think the number one, there are things in place already. If you leave Congress, depending on the position, you can't lobby either your personal office. I hired someone, say, from Senate leadership that worked for Mitch McConnell. He, for a year, was not allowed to lobby any Republican senators. Same happens Democrat side. It's a lot. If you're just working for a normal member of Congress, you just can't lobby their office for a year. There are things in place. There is a reason that people aren't going to serve in government forever if they're not allowed to leave and go with the private sector.

Then, the other thing is, it's not even private sector. You go and work for think tanks or nonprofits, they're banned as well. It's not just people that work for for-profit companies. They're banned from lobbying their former offices. Then, in the White House, or the administration, if you work at a-- and Chris, you probably maybe had this experience, I don't know, well, you don't lobby. If you're at a certain agency, depending on your position, you can't sometimes lobby the entire agency, or at least you can't lobby certain aspects if you're at a lower position. This is the thing that I always suggest when there's always that bad actor that gets caught.

Then, years ago, it was that Abramoff person that got in trouble. They broke the law. It's not that there weren't laws in place. We have to remember that because it's really good what we do, and especially knee-jerk reactions of them trying to put new things in place, which it's more just catching the people that are doing bad things.

Chris: If someone works for a congresswoman who's on, let's say, House Financial Services or Energy, they can't lobby the congresswoman's office, but can they lobby the firms in those industries that that congresswoman is on the committee of?

Ashley: If you worked for Senator or House Member X, could you represent a company that she--

Chris: Congresswoman X is on the House Financial Services Committee. Can that person who left the congresswoman's office go and lobby a Goldman Sachs or a Bank of America?

Ashley: Yes. That's why a lot of them would be hired because they would have the expertise on those issues. They wouldn't have a ban on that. I would think there may be extreme situations where if someone worked on something specifically that impacted a specific company, they would maybe have a ban for a year, but that doesn't really happen anymore, especially with earmarks for specific companies gone.

Chris: Sure. That makes sense. Obviously, Ashley, you've worked with people at the highest levels of government. Who are your role models, either in or out of your profession, and what is it about them that inspires or motivates you?

Ashley: I learned a lot from Condi Rice. Her office was beside, around the corner from mine when I was in Homeland. Just as an African-American woman who just

was the most well-respected individual in that White House and around the country. All Republicans are always like, why can't Condi run? I really admired her and her work ethic and just truly how smart she was. It's different when you get-- Tom Ridge is an American, amazing human being, but I worked so closely with him. It's like you become like father and daughter, more than anything. It's a different type of relationship.

My biggest mentor was definitely someone I had at the law firm. His name was Mike Dyer. He was managing partner and chairman of our firm through the years. He just took me under his wing. I had never worked in a law firm before. As a mentor, as I referenced earlier, he was probably my big mentor for sure in regards to that part of my career, which has led to this career. He was a huge supporter, gave me opportunities that I never would have had if he wouldn't have given them to me and just a true gentleman. I never left the law firm to start my own. I'm moving this down a little bit because of that glare. Do you want me to shut that or is it okay?

Chris: You're fine.

Ashley: Okay. I never would have left the firm until he retired. I was free to go make an entrepreneurial decision by starting the firm. He was amazing. He's an amazing human being.

Chris: Just going back to your comment on Condi Rice, you can't see, but behind me I have her biography, *No Greater Calling*, and highly recommend it to people who haven't seen it out there. She's just truly, to your point, one of the great minds of our time. Highly recommend that. I don't get any commission from that. It's a great book. Holidays are coming, so it's a good stocking stuffer. Sticking with mentorship here for a moment, how important is mentorship, and especially for women in government and the government relations profession?

Ashley: I have a struggle with this. I don't think women need mentorship any more than men do, one. I think that there is a good and bad story to mentorship. I'm a big believer there shouldn't be just one, and there's going to be many in different aspects of your life. You may have a spiritual mentor, or you may have an athletic mentor, or you may have a work mentor. I don't think a woman needs to have a woman, or a man needs to have a man. I actually, if I would think I was a mentor to some people, it would probably be more on the men's side than it is on the women's side, but I do both.

I also think that as an individual, and I speak a lot about this, you're responsible for making your own pathway and doing the hard work and doing the strategic work to get there. It's great to have those mentors that push you along the way or open the doors, but you can't depend on them to get you where you want to go either. I struggle with this whole notion because I think that some people think, well, my mentor didn't get me X, Y, and Z job or X, Y, and Z board seat or this and that. You can't put all that on that person.

Chris: You have to earn it.

Ashley: You have to earn it. It's hard work.

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Chris: Maybe as a follow-up to that, what advice would you give to someone looking to pursue a career in government relations or public policy?

Ashley: I have a lot of college graduates that will come and want to talk to me and pick my brain, which is fine, and I love to do it, but it's, hey, I want to be a lobbyist. How do I do that? What I always say is I'm a huge believer to go in, if that's really what you want to do at some point, I think it's really important, whether it's on a state level, local level, federal level, to go in and serve in the government so you understand the aspect of that before you go into the business side of things. I also think people that started from, say, right out of college can work here, but it's really hard to move up unless you go in and then come back out. Going back to your revolving door, it would take you a lot longer to climb the ladder of a firm without having that experience.

Chris: Now, you just touched on having some sort of public sector government experience. Other than that, are there any other specific skills that you believe are particularly available in your field?

Ashley: Communication, obviously. Being able to talk about your issue and talk about it succinct or issues. A work ethic. I think Chris, you and I spoke about this. I look back, and I don't want this to sound like I'm walking to school barefoot, all uphill, like our parents used to say, but after 9/11, I worked seven days a week. Every day for three years, I had to be at the office by 5:05 AM, and that 05 was a big difference. That five was very important. I would not get home until ten, eleven o'clock at night. People look at me now and it's like, well, you're successful. Did it all come so easy? I'm like, no. I was an empty, empty person when I left because I worked so long.

I think it's really important to understand that you have to still work hard. I had a really big disconnect sometimes with folks, and I give this advice to people too, and I'm sure this may be controversial, is when people didn't want to go back to school or back to the office after COVID. I'm like, that's fine if you're not looking for the next step in your career, which I'm not judging, one way or the other, that, but if you want to make and continue to grow, showing your face at the office when everyone else is there or your bosses are there is going to be helpful. I think that that cycle is going back to people being in person again because I just think it's really important to see people.

Chris: Yes, it is. [unintelligible 00:43:52] I'm in the financial services industry for 25 years and was hybrid before COVID, obviously remote for several years. Then you're seeing more and more banks go sort of three days, now four days. They're talking maybe next year for five days, maybe one flex day.

Ashley: I'm also seeing that managers are actually saying now, if you don't show up at work, that's fine if you're working, but you may get passed up for the promotion. They're actually voicing that now, which everyone was too afraid to say that before.

Chris: Exactly. Jamie Dimon from JP Morgan was the first one to come out and say, if you want to get paid Wall Street dollars, you got to be on Wall Street. I totally understand that.

Ashley: Yes. I agree with that. The same thing with Congress. Yes, it was nice not having to go to the Hill all the time, but it's just so different when you can go up there and talk to people face-to-face and then bump into someone in the hall. It's just different.

Chris: Absolutely agree. Ashley, there was a news report a few days ago that some higher-ranking Israeli Defense Forces officers ignored warnings about the impending Hamas attack because those warnings came from young women in the Israeli Surveillance Corps. Have you ever encountered stereotypes or challenges during your career, either early on because of your age or throughout your year because of your gender?

Ashley: Yes, I would say, for sure. Definitely age. I remember when I turned 40, I was so happy because I was like, finally I'll be taken seriously. Age and then definitely-- and I think any woman in business would say this, you automatically know that you may not be taken seriously because you're a woman or a younger woman. I'm not that anymore, but when I was. You have to just make sure you show up and work harder to get there. I'm watching this right now. If you're watching it on the Republican side on the presidential, we finally have a woman presidential candidate, right? She's working harder and differently than her male counterparts. Hillary worked differently than her male counterparts, right?

I think you get it all over the place. Yes, I've had it, but I'm not going to wallow in it. You just pivot and make the best out of it. Also then there's been times where I'm definitely remembered more than my male counterparts because I was the only woman in the room.

Chris: I love that.

Ashley: Or members of Congress will be like, oh yes, the girl with short blonde hair. Yes, I remember her, but they wouldn't remember someone else's name because there were 10 other boys that looked the same.

Chris: You talked previously about emptying the tank when you leave work every day. Your job demands long hours and often puts you in high-pressure situations. How do you manage work-life balance and what self-care regimen do you follow?

Ashley: I'm very structured, as I said again, and I have a boy who's 14 [unintelligible 00:46:59] There's a few things. I manage my guilt by making him a part of my life as much as I could have. He doesn't like to do things as much with me as he used to in regards to go on trips or-- he can, he's got his own life too. If I do TV, for example, he'll come with me to the studio when he can and just see. I think I'm teaching him about a strong professional woman that's his mother, and so I think that will make him a better human being.

I'll just say this because I think it's so adorable, but he told me the other day, he's like, Mom, when I get bored in class, I Google you to see what you're up to that you don't talk about at home. I'm like, I think that makes me proud of me, or am I saying something you don't believe in? I wake up every day at five and I do the four newspapers, I work out, and then I read something that's not a novel, but something

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that's inspirational. I try to write something every day just to get my thoughts on paper about whatever's in my mind. Then I wake him up and then take him to school.

As long as I'm not traveling, I drive him 30 minutes in the opposite direction of my office so I can spend that time with him. Everything's not perfect, things drop through the cracks. My husband is a very equal partner for sure, so I'm very fortunate in regards to that. I could actually get up at 4:30 if I wouldn't be exhausted because I still have more I want to do. For anyone who's listening to this, I do go to bed at 9:30, so I'm not like crazy.

Chris: Sleep is very important, you're very disciplined.

Ashley: Yes.

Chris: You and I shared some stories about sports with our kids. I have an 11-year-old son, and we're both sort of transitioning out of that little boy into a teenage boy, and to a point, moving on to their own lives, which is the next chapter, I guess, for us. Ashley, we have just a few minutes left, and I always like to have our guests take us to the close with something that gives them hope, or offer advice to our audience to help them become less stressed, more content, and more empowered. We were talking earlier about the dysfunction in Washington, but what gives you hope, or what can people in our audience do to become more empowered? Take it from here, please.

Ashley: Even with what happened, not to debate last year, two years, three years ago, almost to January 6th, we live in the most amazing country in this world, and we are the most looked up to nation. Some people don't like us obviously, but you can do anything you really want in this country that you can't do in other countries. There are so many success stories of how people were born. As I said, I grew up in such a small town, didn't have the opportunities like my son does now for sure. Nothing is in your way if you want it to be. Obviously, there's different situations for different people.

The backbone of America is what people in some of these other countries don't like because we do have such hope and we're not controlled by one religion or our government's not communist. I think that we lose sight about that and sometimes Americans can be really spoiled because we do have such freedoms. I do believe at the end of the day that the hope is that our country is going to survive. Look what happened in so many different instances, 9/11, obviously January 6th, things that you thought would rock the foundation of this country. We bounce back and we bounce back stronger than ever. I'm a huge, and I appreciate it more and more and more as I get older, I think. That is my hope. I also think that working really, really hard, you can get anywhere you want to.

Chris: I totally agree with you. We're still that bright shining light on a hill. I couldn't agree more with those words. I really appreciate it. If our listeners want to learn more about Ashley Davis or the West Front Strategies Group, where can they find you?

Ashley: West Front is www.westfront.org. I'm sorry, I don't use websites as much anymore. I am on Instagram, [ashleydavis_dc](https://www.instagram.com/ashleydavis_dc), and I'm on LinkedIn, Ashley Davis DC.

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I don't do much like my social media, which I'm just getting into and over the last couple of years, but I focus on my passions, which is political, women issues, fashion. It's different than lobbying stuff.

Chris: It's more interesting.

Ashley: Yes. I don't want you to go out with science.

Chris: No offense. Ashley Davis, thank you so much for being with us today.

Ashley: Thank you. I'm sorry, I have this big light. See, maybe it was--

Chris: No, it's your halo effect.

Ashley: Yes, exactly.

Chris: Thank you to our audience for joining us for another episode of *Next Steps Forward*. I'm Chris Meek. For more details on upcoming shows and guests, please follow me on Facebook at facebook.com/chrismeekpublicfigure, and on X, follow me on Twitter. How long do we have to say that for? At ChrisMeek_USA. We'll be back next Tuesday, same time, same place with a leader from the world of business, politics, public policy, sports, or entertainment. Until then, stay safe and keep taking your next steps forward.

Speaker 1: Thanks for tuning in to *Next Steps Forward*. Be sure to join Chris Meek for another great show next Tuesday at 10:00 AM Pacific Time and 1:00 PM Eastern Time on The VoiceAmerica Empowerment Channel. This week, make things happen in your life.

[00:53:40] [END OF AUDIO]