

Lead Left Interview – Chris Ullman

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This week we chat with Chris Ullman, Managing Director and Director of Global Communications at The Carlyle Group. Prior to Carlyle, Chris was Director of Communications at the US Office of Management and Budget, and before that, Director of Public Affairs for the SEC. He is author of the soon-to-be-published memoir and inspirational book, [“Find Your Whistle: Simple Gifts Touch Hearts and Change Lives.”](#)

The Lead Left: Chris, it’s a real pleasure speaking with you again. First of all, congratulations on your book, “Find Your Whistle.” For those who don’t know that you are a champion whistler, how did that start?

Chris Ullman: My whistling career started when I was five years old. My father liked to whistle. In fact, he’s 83 and still at it! So I got regular exposure early on. My whistling really developed when I was on my paper route in Long Island as a kid. Riding my Schwinn Stingray I whistled classical music, of all things. I played “120 Masterpieces”, snippets of great classical music all the time on the record player, so I’d whistle songs from that on my route. In those days, it was more volume than quality. My customers would say, “I heard you coming from down the block!”

TLL: I’m sure some of our readers are thinking, “Hey, anybody can whistle. What’s the big deal?” But just take a look at this clip [\[link\]](#). This is a whole different ballgame.

CU: It’s like any traditional instrument. It’s a matter of picking certain notes and shaping a story. It’s a lot like the written word. Great composers are able to tell compelling stories without words. So I worked a lot on the quality of my whistling when I was young. Then in college I would do whistle improvisations with a jazz band. I was also a big Dead Head, so I whistled a lot of Jerry Garcia back then.

Then in 1987 when I was working in Washington, D.C., I started doing some open mic nights. That led to my first international competition in 1993. I entered nine times over the years, and either won, placed, or showed seven times. My last event was in 2004, when I tied for third. That’s when I decided to retire from active competition.

TLL: I guess it’s a younger man’s game.

CU: It’s also tough when you’re working full-time at Carlyle and have three kids! Anyway, I transitioned to performing. That became more of an application effort. I whistle 400 times a year for birthdays alone! It’s literally a ministry for me.

TLL: Could you describe why that is?

CU: It’s really what the book is all about. Before I called you for this interview, I had just left a whistling birthday message for Brendan Kelly. Brendan had Down’s syndrome and also suffered from leukemia. He had been introduced to us by a casual acquaintance. Our family prayed for him every night for five years. And I would always leave him a whistle message on his birthday, which is today, May 12th.

Last year out of the blue we received a note from the family that Brendan had died three years ago. I was shocked and embarrassed. I felt awful having left those messages for the family, not knowing he was gone. But they told me that before he died, Brendan had taught himself how to whistle. They asked me, “Chris, will you continue to whistle for him every May 12th?” That’s what I was just doing before calling you.

TLL: Oh, wow. That’s an incredible story. I’m seriously tearing up.

CU: Me too. But that’s what’s behind this book. I’m not inventing the concept. But you never know what simple things can affect people’s lives. We have such a hero-centric culture. But it’s the little things that matter. Teachers who help kids who struggle. “Find Your Whistle” features ten people whose simple gifts touched my heart. The cowboy, for instance, whose hiring philosophy is based on character not skill. That approach has a huge impact on families visiting his dude ranch in Colorado. Or the Catholic priest who started SOME, which stands for “So Others Might Eat.” His “whistle” is love, and his organization helps the homeless in D.C.

TLL: What’s the trigger, Chris? What motivates people to “pay it forward”?

CU: People underestimate the true power of simplicity. My interest is with the people we encounter in our everyday lives – waitresses, teachers, and our own family. Get away from the heroism angle and focus on the simplistic angle. Your doorman doesn’t have to cure cancer, but a kind word or gesture can touch the lives of so many in a day. A former deputy of mine makes me this wonderful carrot cake every year. It’s not a big deal to him, but it is to me.

TLL: What if someone reading the book is thinking, “I don’t have a ‘whistle.’”

CU: Everyone has a whistle. You just have to find it. When Dorothy says at the end of “The Wizard of Oz,” there’s no place like home, she’s saying you don’t have to go far to have an impact.

To be continued the week of June 5

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