

# When it Mattered

## Episode 1: Michael Hurley

Chitra: Hello, and welcome to When it Mattered. I'm your host, Chitra Ragavan. I'm also the founder and CEO of Goodstory Consulting, an advisory firm helping technology startups find their narrative. On this weekly podcast we invite leaders from around the world to share one personal story that changed the course of their life and work, and how they lead, and deal with adversity. Through these stories, we take you behind the scenes to get an inside perspective of some of the most eventful moments of our time.

Chitra: On this episode we will be talking with Michael Hurley. He's president of Team 3i, an international consulting company. Mike served 25 years in the US Government as a CIA operations officer.

Chitra: Mike, welcome to the show.

Michael: Thank you, Chitra.

Chitra: Tell us a little bit more about yourself.

Michael: Well, so I come from Minneapolis, and I started my career as an attorney in Minneapolis, but then I decided to go to work for the United States Government, and I applied to the State Department, and the FBI, and the CIA, and they all offered me jobs.

Michael: Then I spent a number of years in different parts of the world for CIA, but beginning in the mid '90s I started getting sent to countries where the United States had interventions going on, to troubled parts of the world. So, I went to Haiti, then I went to Bosnia during the Balkans Wars, and then to Kosovo. Later on I went to Afghanistan in the months, in the weeks immediately after the 9/11 attacks.

Michael: But I also did a couple of stints on the National Security Council staff at the White House as director for Balkans policy, and later on, after my time in Afghanistan, I served on the 9/11 Commission. I was a senior counsel, and also a team leader, and headed the counterterrorism policy investigation of the 9/11 commission, was co-author of its final report. Then I did a stint at the

State Department in its office of counterterrorism as an advisor to the secretary of state.

Michael: And so, that's kind of my government service.

Chitra: You've had such a distinguished career, and a very eventful life, as you said, traveling all over the world, and being posted to all these places. Is there a story or event that happened in your life that kind of helped define and shape it?

Michael: Yes. So, I grew up in Edina, Minnesota, which is a suburb of Minneapolis, and in a really large family. I was one of 10. I had seven brothers and two sisters, and I was the second oldest, so one of the ones my parents sort of always looked to to exercise some responsibility over my younger siblings.

Michael: But, when I was in fifth grade, so, 11 years old, I got some really bad news, and all of did in my family, which was my mother was diagnosed with a very serious disease. She had lupus erythematosus, it's known as lupus. But, it's a very serious disease, and back then it wasn't all that well known, actually, and she had a very good specialist in internal medicine, but it was a disease that really debilitated her for a lot of years with, it's a disease that sort of ravages your autoimmune system, and so it makes you vulnerable to other diseases. And so, it was just going through that process of seeing your parent having to deal with a really difficult health issue, and my father, you know, how he dealt with it as well.

Chitra: And being the second oldest in the group, how was it? You must have had a lot of the responsibility given to you to help manage the situation, and how did it all work out?

Michael: Well, it was difficult. The hardest thing was seeing your mom go into the hospital kind of regularly, it seemed like, once a year, once every two years, and she always came out after her various treatments. But, you just had to sort of step up, and help out around the home, and make sure your siblings weren't messing up too much, and just sort of being aware of what was going on.

Chitra: When your mother passed away you were an adult, right? You were what, 25?

Michael: Yeah. So, her life was prolonged because she had such great medical care, and I was 25 years old, and I remember, at her funeral, there were a couple of interesting things that happened. One of them was that my aunt, her older sister, my mom's older sister, came up to me after the funeral mass, and she said to me something I'd never known. She said, "Mike, you'll never know

how many times I was prepared to tell you, and your brothers and sisters, when you came home from school, when you were in grade school, that your mother had died."

Michael: So, it was a blessing that she actually lived as long as she did, but it was a pretty shocking thing to me, and sort of drove home the fact that how much she actually had to deal with. And the remarkable thing for me, and one of, I think, the main lessons of it, was just to see how she handled it, was she never complained, and she never, she tried to let it interfere as least as possible with being a mom and all the other things that she did socially. She really was the center of our family in so many ways, and a terrific example.

Michael: I said that this disease, lupus, wasn't so well known back in those years, but my mom became kind of a ... I don't know, like a reference point for so many, especially women, around the country who learned about her, and when they were diagnosed with the disease, sort of the word first spread in Minneapolis and St. Paul, and to other places, and they would call her up to ask her about handling the disease, and going through it. And she, you know, with tremendous concern and empathy for complete strangers, would assist them in their ordeal. So, it was an incredible exercise.

Michael: And I learned from all my parents just this dealing with adversity, I think, and I learned it at a young age, and I think some of those lessons stuck with me as time went by.

Chitra: You said that what you went through with your mother's illness really helped shape your life in a big way. What were some examples of challenges and situations you had to deal with when you were a child, having to make big decisions?

Michael: Well, I remember one thing specifically, and it was a real specific set of circumstances that just came up, and I had to make a pretty quick decision. So, I was 15 years old, and I was just beginning to go through my driver's training to get a learner's permit, you know, then eventually, when you turned 16 you could get your driver's license.

Michael: But, I was very early in that process, and I came home from school kind of late. I was participating in sports, and one of my younger brothers was playing little league football, and he got dropped off at home, this, I think, was in the fall, by his coach, because he was in really, really serious pain, really serious pain, and it wasn't an injury from football. He was clutching his abdomen, the side of his abdomen, and he was literally screaming.

Michael: And my mom, I think, may have been in the hospital then. My dad was unreachable, didn't have cell phones in those days, and our immediate

neighbors weren't around either. So, I knew I had to take him to the hospital. And so, we had a car outside.

Michael: So, I grabbed my brother, lifted him up, dumped in the backseat of our station wagon, and got in this car, and just sped like 90 miles an hour to the hospital going down the interstate. It was maybe a 10, 15 minute drive from our house.

Michael: And I remember arriving at the hospital and jumping the curb, kind of going right up to the emergency room door, carrying him out of the car, and screaming for the emergency personnel to come and take care of him, which they did. It turned out he had an emergency appendix problem, appendicitis, and it was minutes away from bursting.

Michael: And so, we got him there. I was sort of worried for a time that, you know, look, I mean, if the police had stopped me or something like that, I didn't have a license, but I just sort of realized that there are certain things that sort of supersede rules occasionally, and you have to take action. And I thought at the time, well, if they weren't going to give me my license for 25 years because of that, that would be okay.

Chitra: It's a really important lesson to learn, that there are rules, but how you, when you circumvent those rules is also important, and that's very hard for young people to learn.

Michael: You have to, and it just, my brother was, he came close to dying, really. He would have had serious, serious problems if his appendix had burst. I didn't really know that was the issue, but I did know I'd never seen anybody in that kind of pain before in my life, and he had to be in the hands of doctors right away, and you just do what you need to do.

Chitra: What did your parents say when you told them what you had done?

Michael: They kind of applauded, I think. They said I made the right decision. But, it's something that I'll never forget.

Chitra: You went on to serve 25 years in the CIA as an operations officer. You traveled all over the world, and you served 18 months in Afghanistan, as you said, in 2001, and after that after the September 11th attacks. You were the first CIA operations officer to volunteer to go to Afghanistan, is that right?

Michael: Well, I wasn't the first, but I was one of the early ones, and what happened was everybody remembers where they were on September 11th, 2001. I was working at CIA headquarters. I had a fairly senior job. I was the number two in charge of a fairly large component.

Michael: And when the attacks occurred, orders came down from our top level management that we should evacuate our building, because there was concern that it would be the next target of an attack. But what they kept was, they kept what were called essential employees. So, they kept all of the counterterror center people. I was not working in that area then, but I was deemed essential employee because of the responsibilities I had.

Michael: So, I stayed, but that afternoon I decided to walk down to the counterterror center, because something inside of me, kind of like a light bulb went on, and I just realized that the world had changed, and I decided that I would go to Afghanistan. I didn't quite know how that would happen or how long it would take, but I went to the counterterror center and volunteered to go to Afghanistan. It took a couple more months before they actually got me out there, and there were a few teams that were in Afghanistan before I was, but I got there pretty early after the 9/11 attacks.

Michael: I paid a little bit of a price for my impulsiveness, in a way, because you usually don't do things like that, you go through a process, and you have to tell your division chief, or ask them. But, I sort of thought that even in the management of my organization, they didn't always get how substantially and significantly the world had changed on September 11th, and I got it, I thought, that we all were going to have to do something different. And I felt that because I was single, and because I had a certain level of experience, that going to Afghanistan was the right thing for me to do.

Michael: So, it was really that day itself that began the steps that ultimately led me to being in Afghanistan in late fall of 2001, and leading a team of CIA officers, Green Berets, Delta Force, SEAL Team Six, to hunt for Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Chitra: And you led one of the biggest operations, Operation Anaconda, in the hunt for Bin Laden. What was that like?

Michael: Well, Bin Laden, the hunt for Bin Laden was separate. The Operation Anaconda was to find and, it turned out to be, find and destroy the last sort of refuge of the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, and that took place in late February, early March of 2002. It took place, the battle took place, about 30 miles from where our base camp was at the time in southeastern Afghanistan, and our base camp was located at an altitude of about 9,000 feet, ringed by higher peaks. Occasionally, Al Qaeda would lob mortars at us just for target practice.

Michael: But, we did locate Al Qaeda and the Taliban in these very high mountains, and we got the United States military, they sent surveillance out, we confirmed that they were there, and then they organized two or three weeks

of nonstop bombing. It was the biggest campaign of that first year in Afghanistan by far, and leveled the enemy there. So, it was an extraordinary event, and it made international news, which, of course, we didn't see while we were out there, but during the entire time it was happening.

Chitra: Looking back, you know, as a child in Edina, would you ever have predicted that you would end up in the mountains of Afghanistan, talking to the Taliban, and hunting around in the caves for the Taliban and Al Qaeda?

Michael: It never would have occurred to me. When I went through university, I had a professor who always encouraged me to think about a career in the United States foreign service as a diplomat, or as a CIA officer. But, when I actually did enter it, and enter that service, the Cold War was still going on, and there were sort of rules in terms of the Soviets would do certain things to us, we would do certain things back. But, against an implacable enemy like Al Qaeda, it was a different scenario entirely.

Michael: And no, I never would have conceived of it. I didn't have a military background, but I had worked in a number of these other areas with the military in the 10 years preceding the 9/11 attacks. It was interesting, because I didn't have the local languages. I didn't speak Pashto or Dari. We had people who did, but we went through them pretty fast.

Michael: But, what they tended to do then was just put experienced people out there who would get interpreters. In CIA, what was important was to have people that could go into an entirely new situation and just start moving forward, basically, and not be paralyzed by fear, or concern, or that they might make a mistake, or that they didn't have the language, or whatever it happened to be, but just kind of had the sense of what to do. And what was really sort of fulfilling, in a sense, was that the government imposed that sense of responsibility and trust in us for doing that.

Chitra: Looking at the way you responded to your brother when he was in pain, and the decisive action you took to save his life, there seems to be some similarities between the way you acted then and this almost impulsive way you decided to go to Afghanistan after 9/11.

Michael: I think definitely it was sort of the same thing, that there's an emergency, in this case, the second case, a national emergency, in a way, and what was I going to do? And I just decided to do it, and sort of the damn the torpedoes at that point.

Michael: If you start second guessing yourself you'll be paralyzed with doubt. What tends to happen with me is I make these decisions, and as I said, it took a couple months before I actually got out there, it was on the plane flying over

when I'm sitting there asking myself, what in the hell are you doing? Basically. And you're, there is kind of a moment of anxiety and apprehension.

Michael: But, what always then happened was when you actually arrive on the scene, in this case in Afghanistan, you just begin working, and performing, and that really takes over, and you rely on your training, and all that gets you through.

Chitra: I remember one of the photos you showed me, talking to one of the tribal chiefs, and it's kind of interesting to see how far you come in your life, and where you begin.

Michael: Yeah. Sitting in meeting with these Afghan tribal chiefs, and having to do things that you weren't trained for that specific task, but kind of just relying on your overall general experience dealing with people, having respect for different cultures, and knowing the power that you had behind you as a representative of the United States.

Michael: I met, Chitra, some really interesting people. We had some amazing young people that worked with us. Can I tell you the story of one of them that came out to Afghanistan?

Michael: Well, his name was Helga Bose, and he was 27 or 28, as I recall. His parents were German, they lived in Germany, but he was an American US national. He had gone to Harvard Law School, became a lawyer, was working for a white shoe law firm in Washington, D.C.

Michael: And I think it was around the time of the ... remember the attacks on our two embassies in east Africa in 1998, that killed Americans and so many Africans? That was an Al Qaeda attack.

Michael: Helga was sitting in his law office, and he decided that he wanted to get involved, to do something to protect the country, to step off the sidelines and kind of get into something more concrete to help the country. So, he applied for CIA. It takes a long time to go through that process, can be up to a year. You have the medical exams, you have all the testing that they do, you have the background checks, all of those sorts of things.

Michael: They offered him a job right around the time, a year later, when the USS Cole, the navy ship, was attacked by Al Qaeda off the coast of Yemen in October 2000. And remember, that killed 41 US sailors, another Al Qaeda attack.

Michael: So, Helga was offered a job at CIA right around that time, late 2000. So, then he goes through training to become a case officer, which is nine or 10 months, at least, which meant that he got through all that training and was

part of the first training class post 9/11 to complete its training. And what did he do? He volunteered to go to Afghanistan.

Michael: They got him out there in 2002, and he was sent to where I was, in a really forlorn and dangerous part of Afghanistan along the Pakistan border. And he came out there, and right away he was new, he was young, he was inexperienced in certain ways, but he was incredibly bright and talented. What, in his background, he wasn't military, had trained him to be a quartermaster and paymaster for a 1,500 person Afghanistan friendly militia, for example? And all the other things he did, meeting with people of different, diverse backgrounds and languages, and getting intelligence from them on were these high value targets we were seeking.

Michael: He did a fantastic job. He was with me about three months, and then he went back to headquarters. Later on, he went back to Afghanistan for a second tour of duty and he died there. He was killed.

Michael: And that was a remarkable three month span for me, because I had lost my father first, while I was in Afghanistan, he died back in Minneapolis, and the word came out to me. I was really out in the sticks, and it took me almost four days to get back to Minneapolis, making all the connections in the special planes they had to spin up for it.

Michael: So, I go back to Minneapolis, and then with my family, and we're grieving, and I was the eulogist at my dad's funeral. And I spent another week or two weeks there, and then I go back to Washington to prepare to go back to Afghanistan again. Within 30 days of my dad's death I get, I think, the worst phone call of my life, it's a brother advising me that our older brother had died suddenly of a heart attack. Went back to Minneapolis for his funeral, also eulogized him, and spent a week or two there.

Michael: Back to Washington, was then preparing to go back to Afghanistan when word came in that my friend, Helga Bose, had been killed in Afghanistan. They held a memorial service for him at CIA headquarters, and I was asked to eulogize him there.

Michael: So, that was three funerals of two immediate family members and a very close friend within a three month period, and I thought back to the adversity that my mom had dealt with, and all those experiences. And we all go through hardships in life, but you have to sort of draw on those lessons, and that strength that I saw in her, and in my dad.

Michael: Yesterday, as you know, was Father's Day here, and what was pretty remarkable is all day long I was texting with my siblings, who are scattered all over the United States now, and we were sharing memories of our dad, and

also our mom, and just realizing how lucky we were to have had the parents that we did have.

Chitra: Well, looking back on all these events, do you have any closing thoughts and advice for our listeners on what they should take away from your experience as they go forward, and many of them will, are leaders, others will go on to become leaders?

Michael: Well, I think that adversity happens, as I said, in everybody's life, and you have to learn from it, and grow from it, and just move forward. And you realize, as life goes on, that those lessons that you learn really do prepare you for all the other different things that are thrown at you throughout life that you don't expect, and you can think back to, you know, how would my dad have handled this? How would my older brother have handled this? How would my mother have handled this? And I think it just helps you to get through really, really difficult times.

Michael: I'd say the other thing is that my mom was a highly, highly, she had empathy to a high degree, and I think that helped me in managing people. I also would say that just being one of 10 in a family of 10 siblings, 10 kids, one of the things you learn, especially if you're an older one, and I think it's really important, is that you're not the only person in the world. You learn that really quickly. Some people don't learn that lesson. Some people never learn the lesson that their needs and wants don't get priority over other persons'. In fact, in kind of my family, if you were an older one, you kind of got served last, and you had to take care of the younger ones first.

Michael: So, I think those lessons are fundamental, and it certainly, I think, carried over to me when I was managing people later on. I tried to be a better listener, and have greater empathy for what people were going through.

Chitra: Great. Mike, thank you so much for joining us today.

Michael: My pleasure.

Chitra: Where can people learn more about you?

Michael: They can go to LinkedIn and type in C. Michael Hurley, and there's also a link to a website that I have that is MikeHurley.us.

Chitra: Awesome.

Michael: I hope they do.

Chitra: Thank you so much.

Michael: My pleasure.

Chitra: Thank you for listening to when it mattered. Don't forget to subscribe on Apple Podcasts, or your preferred podcast platform. And if you like the show, please leave a review and rate it five stars.

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Chitra: When it Mattered is produced by Jeremy Corr, CEO and founder of Executive Podcasting Solutions. Come back next week for another episode of When it Mattered. I'll see you then.

Chitra: (music)