

Jason Altmire ([00:04](#)):

We have an excellent guest today for Career Education Report. A former colleague of mine from the US House of Representatives, Ric Keller, who served four terms in the US House from 2001 to 2009. And he will be memorable to our listeners primarily because he was the Chairman of the Higher Education Subcommittee at that time, and dealt with a lot of issues that are very important to our schools.

Jason Altmire ([00:33](#)):

And he's out with a new book called Chase the Bears, Little Things to Achieve Big Dreams. And we're going to talk about the book momentarily, but first let me just say, Congressman Keller, welcome to the show and we're grateful that you're here.

Congressman Ric Keller ([00:48](#)):

Well, thank you. Honored to be with you, Jason.

Jason Altmire ([00:51](#)):

When you served in the capacity of the Chair for the Higher Ed Subcommittee, that was during the term of President Bush, George W. Bush. So when President Obama came in, of course he took a pretty negative turn to the for-profit college sector. But I was wondering in your experience, in your capacity as Chair, what was important to you? Why did you want to be Chair? Why was higher education important to you?

Congressman Ric Keller ([01:17](#)):

So it was really based on an emotional experience that I had as a kid. I didn't have enough money to go to college. I worked as a busboy and short order cook. I got Pell Grants and student loans, but there was a gap. And so my mom was a secretary to a man named RT Overstreet, an 81 year old CEO of Overstreet Investment Company.

Congressman Ric Keller ([01:38](#)):

And she said, "He often has me type up checks for the corporations to charities. It's a very generous company. Why don't you ask Mr. Overstreet if he would consider his company making a charitable contribution to you?" So I went and met with him in his big office and I was 17, he was 81. And I said, "Mr. Overstreet, I want this so badly. I promise I'll get all A's. You won't be throwing money down the drain."

Congressman Ric Keller ([02:01](#)):

And he says, "Son, I'm just a CEO. I have a board of directors to answer to. They meet on Tuesday, so if you come back Tuesday, I'll let you know." I couldn't sleep the night before. I went and met with them and he said, "Here's the answer. It's no. The company said that it's nothing personal at all. Think you're a good kid. But if they did that for you, they would have to put the kids of all the employees through school."

Congressman Ric Keller ([02:25](#)):

And so my intuition just said say thank you because he did try. And I started to say thank you. And in the middle of that it hit me at that moment, I really wasn't going to be going to college. And I started crying and I just said, "Thank you for trying," and tears are coming down my face. And he said, "Son, you can wipe the tears away. I said The company couldn't put you through college. I didn't say that I couldn't."

Congressman Ric Keller ([02:47](#)):

And he stroked a check and sent me off to college and then helped me the first couple years, and I got a public speaking scholarship to pay the rest. And he lived just long enough to see me graduate from Vanderbilt Law School. And so when I was elected to Congress, I used my election night victory speech to thank Mr. Overstreet. He had passed away, but I was imagining him looking down from heaven.

Congressman Ric Keller ([03:09](#)):

And I knew then my mission was to help other poor kids to go to college to pay it forward. And so I wanted to be Chairman of the Higher Education Committee, ended up doing it. During my time, we increased Pell Grants 62%, which helped another five and a half million poor kids go to college. And I just think it's so remarkable that the one kind act of a man behind the scenes, no publicity, no ulterior motive, impacted five and a half million lives.

Congressman Ric Keller ([03:35](#)):

And I thought the least I can do is pay it forward. And so I made that my mission and I wanted to be Chairman of the Higher Education Committee from Jump Street. And luckily it happened. I got a break. I was the only one in Florida who backed John Boehner for leadership and it was a big election and he was then the chairman of the education committee. And I went on a limb. My intuition said he should get it, that he'd be good at it, and he got it. And one of the perks of him getting it was he elevated me to the position of Chairman of Higher Education Committee.

Jason Altmire ([04:08](#)):

One of the issues that we've had when you talk about Pell Grants and access to higher education, is there are some policy makers mainly on the Democratic side, but in Congress who want to exclude students who would like to look at a for-profit school as an educational option from accessing, whether it be the Pell Grant or any new programmatic funding. Did you have any issues like that come up when you were the Chair?

Congressman Ric Keller ([04:36](#)):

Yeah. And often for some reason, unfortunately it pitted the for-profit sector against community colleges often. And there was a dispute about whether or not students at the for-profit schools should be eligible to receive Federal Aid, Pell Grant, student loans, et cetera, based on the loan repayment rate.

Congressman Ric Keller ([04:56](#)):

And a lot of the folks who were against the for-profits thought that that would be a way to hit them financially. And what my view was is that for-profits, there's a place for everybody. There's a place for community colleges with a low cost, but there's a place for for-profits too, because a lot of these for-profits do things that nobody else does.

Congressman Ric Keller ([05:16](#)):

For example, I'm in Orlando right now where I live, it's home of Full Sail College. There's no place like that in the world. If you want to be a recording engineer or something, they don't offer that in the state school or community college. If you want to be a nurse and you don't have time to go to a school in the daytime because you have a job, you can go to Kaiser and learn to be a nurse at night.

Congressman Ric Keller ([05:36](#)):

And so there was a place for everybody. And so I kind of champion the inclusion of everybody. And let's not attack this sector that's providing a service that nobody else can.

Jason Altmire ([05:46](#)):

And what I like about the way you bring your personal experience into, at the time your public policy, chairmanship and leadership, but throughout your life you've talked about the difficult upbringing that you had, the challenges you faced. And that's what the book is about. And the book just came out at the end of September.

Jason Altmire ([06:05](#)):

So it's new on the shelves for anyone who wants to check it out. And I've looked at it and I was inspired by your story. And one thing you left out, you made a promise to that individual who was going to fund your education. Do you want to talk about what the promise you made and how that turned out?

Congressman Ric Keller ([06:23](#)):

I told him if he took a chance on me, I'd graduate number one in my class and I'd have a 4.0. And that was a big thing for me because I was a very mediocre student in high school. In fact, I got fired from Wendy's. You could hardly say that I was a star. They said I didn't have what it takes to make it in fast food, but I made him that promise. And something happened.

Congressman Ric Keller ([06:43](#)):

I met my dad, I didn't know him that well at the time, not well enough to ask him for money. I was 14. And he gave me this book called Think and Grow Rich by Napoleon Hill. And it had some goal setting secret formulas, and I wasn't ready to call him dad until about three years later. And about three years into it is when I had my conversation with Mr. Overstreet and I set that goal and it happened.

Congressman Ric Keller ([07:06](#)):

And I graduated number one in my class with a 4.0 GPA and then got a partial scholarship to Vanderbilt. And so I was happy to do it. It helped me, it helped him. And really, Jason, I would've never ran for Congress if that didn't happen, because it was that experience of going from being a lousy student to a top student that gave me the self confidence that says you know you can do it, you can do it.

Congressman Ric Keller ([07:30](#)):

And so the reason I wrote this book many years later, is I wanted to have a book, and I'm 58 now, that would have the same impact on young people's lives, particularly those in college that that book had on

mine. And so it has the secret formula of how you succeed, how do you set goals, and how to use auto-suggestion and visualization.

Congressman Ric Keller ([07:50](#)):

But it's more than just about making money. How do you get elected to Congress? Or win a medal? Or start a business? Or lose weight? And it has lots of stories of modern day celebrities that you would know. Jim Carrey and Dolly Parton and Steve Harvey. So a lot of people, I have teenage daughters, they don't know who Andrew Carnegie is. And so Think and Grow Rich is a wonderful book. I think it's the best self-help book of all time. But this is sort of a modern day version that's relatable to people, and I feel like it's really going to change some lives.

Jason Altmire ([08:19](#)):

And you call the book Chase the Bears, The Little Things to Achieve Big Dreams. What's the reason behind the title?

Congressman Ric Keller ([08:27](#)):

So I was writing that book and one morning, it was Sunday morning, I'm having coffee, reading the paper with my wife. And we look outside the window and there's a family of bears that are crossing our front yard and we're a mile or two from the woods. And we were shocked.

Congressman Ric Keller ([08:42](#)):

And without saying a word or thinking really, we jumped up and raced outside to chase these bears because we wanted to continue this magical experience, mainly three cute little cubs. They looked like they were four or five weeks old, and we never were able to catch them.

Congressman Ric Keller ([08:57](#)):

And after all the smoke cleared, I said, "Lori, that may be the dumbest thing we've ever done." Florida black bears usually mind their own business, but if they feel threatened, or you chase their cubs, they run 35 miles an hour, and Olympic sprinters only 28. So that mama bear could have got us.

Congressman Ric Keller ([09:15](#)):

And I said, "That's nuts." But in a way it's a metaphor in life because most people are content to stay inside, play it safe, look out the window of life as life passes them by. And eventually the clock runs out. And some people go for it. They chase the dreams, they chase the bears. And when I was saying that to Lori, she said, "Ric, that's the name of your book, Chase the Bears." And so that's how we came up with the title.

Jason Altmire ([09:41](#)):

You talk about people who have, not just folks who have failed the first time or the second time and they keep going. But what I found interesting, you talk about people who became enormously successful, but they had doubters in the beginning. And I think everyone has faced that in their life.

Jason Altmire ([10:01](#)):

But can you give some examples and talk a little bit about that aspect of things? Folks who had a good idea, who had some talent. You talked about you yourself were fired from Wendy's of all places, and obviously became extraordinarily successful and made a huge difference for the country. What are some other examples of people who've gone through that experience?

Congressman Ric Keller ([10:22](#)):

So let me tell you about a couple failures. One of the biggest ones, when I ran for Congress in 2000, there were three really high profile races that got a lot of attention in the House of Representatives. And there's my race in Florida, Vice President Mike Pence in Indiana, and some guy in Illinois. And I won, Pence won, and the guy in Illinois got blown out by 31 points. A huge, huge humiliating loss.

Congressman Ric Keller ([10:48](#)):

And years went by and I always wondered whatever happened to that guy? And then one day I saw him in the grocery store in the checkout line, smiling ear to ear on the cover of People Magazine, and that guy's name is Barack Obama. And he didn't quit and he had a humiliating setback, but now I think he's doing okay. He's got one Nobel Prize and two terms in the White House and three number one, best selling New York Times books.

Congressman Ric Keller ([11:14](#)):

And so it shows that if you use your gifts and you're really trying to serve the greater good, you may stumble, but you're not going to fail on a permanent basis. Now, as I've given you this interview, I'm here in Orlando home of Walt Disney World. He was fired at age 22 for not being creative enough. Martin Luther King Jr. Best speaker of all time, got a C in public speaking from his teacher. Michael Jordan cut from his high school team. Oprah demoted because they said that she wasn't fit for television news. And The Beatles were told they didn't have the right stuff to make it in the music business.

Congressman Ric Keller ([11:48](#)):

And my favorite is J.K. Rowling, age 29, single mom on welfare. Had a good idea, a good little writer, and she took her concept to the 12 biggest publishers and they all said, "We don't think this is very good. It's not going to work." And the 13th one said, "Yes." And her book, Harry Potter and the Harry Potter series has sold over 500 million copies, the biggest selling book of all time.

Congressman Ric Keller ([12:11](#)):

And the common denominator with all of those super successful people, is all of them were using their gifts. They weren't trying to be something that they weren't. And so my view and my own experience is that if you use your gifts for the greater goods, you're going to make it.

Congressman Ric Keller ([12:29](#)):

And if you go outside your lane, for example, Albert Einstein won a Nobel Prize in physics. But if he had decided to be a bull rider on the rodeo circuit, he would've been E equals MC squared on his butt in eight seconds. You've got to stay in your lane. But if you do, I think you're going to be rewarded.

Jason Altmire ([12:48](#)):

I am like you in that you discuss in the book risk taking. And I think I agree with you to the extent that risk taking is extremely important, especially if you want to achieve success in life. But don't take crazy wild risk. Make it calculated, make it an informed decision. And yes, it's okay to take a chance, but don't go crazy with that. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Congressman Ric Keller ([13:15](#)):

Yeah. I don't think you need to be like a Evil Knievel and strap yourself into a rocket motorcycle and try to jump the Snake River Canyon. I think educated risks are risks that are aligned with your purpose.

Congressman Ric Keller ([13:28](#)):

So let's say that your goal was to be a doctor, you would need to take certain risk. And that would be, for example, you know you're going to have to have good grades to get in med school. Let's take a baby step. That first semester, let's take things like public speaking and sociology and volleyball and badminton. Let's get you off to a good start where you can have a 4.0 and learn to study.

Congressman Ric Keller ([13:50](#)):

And then maybe the next semester we'll take biology and ramp it up a little bit. And after two or three years, now you're taking organic chemistry and physics. You just one little baby step at a time that you can achieve. And I think that's really the secret. And it has to be aligned with your purpose.

Congressman Ric Keller ([14:05](#)):

And I think a lot of people don't do it because of fear. What if I fail? What if I get rejected? What if people think I'm crazy? And you just have to overcome that, man, because everybody who's successful in life has jumped and taken some risk.

Jason Altmire ([14:21](#)):

And you have spoken a lot about using humor in your everyday discourse with people, kind of disarming unpleasant situations. And I think you did a TEDx talk on that subject that was one of the most widely viewed in the world, and have had a lot of exciting response to the ideas that you put forward on that.

Jason Altmire ([14:42](#)):

And I know you have an example of a president that you met within the Oval Office who used humor as a way to kind of disarm a situation when you talked about President Bush and Senator Kennedy. Can you tell that story? And then talk a little bit more about just the idea of using humor in your daily life?

Congressman Ric Keller ([15:00](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. So I had a Higher Education Bill that I had authored in the House, and Senator Kennedy had been the author in the Senate and we were in the Oval Office for a signing ceremony. And I was just enamored. It was miraculous. Here I am, a poor kid, grew up in a single home and I'm with the leaders of the two most political, powerful dynasties in American history.

Congressman Ric Keller ([15:24](#)):

And President Bush went out of his way to make me comfortable. And so for example, I arrived there and Ted Kennedy's there and he says, "Ric, let me tell you a little bit about this desk. This is the same desk that Ted's brother used when he was President, the Resolute Desk. And see this spot, Ric, this is the same spot that Little John Junior crawled under in that iconic world's most famous photograph." And he said, "So, Ric, we are now going to reenact that scene by having Ted Kennedy crawl under this desk and photograph it."

Congressman Ric Keller ([15:52](#)):

And they just erupted laughing. And it made me at ease. And what it showed me is that behind the scenes, even though they're from different sides of parties and really the kind of a very conservative Republican, very liberal Democrat, they're very courteous to each other. And it made sense, aside from being the right thing to do, is that your opponent today may be your best ally tomorrow.

Congressman Ric Keller ([16:15](#)):

And so here we were, an issue that President Bush and Ted Kennedy agree on. They also agree on things like immigration and education reform. And so don't let your opponent be your enemy, it maybe your best ally. And when I was in Congress, let's say a Democrat would vote against a tax bill that was really important to me. I would never say a single negative thing to him, or complain, or keep a grudge, because next week that guy is going to be my biggest champion in getting my Pell Grant Bill passed.

Congressman Ric Keller ([16:42](#)):

And so I think humor is the biggest underutilized tool. I think it, self-deprecating humor in particular relaxes people. It deflects criticism, it helps build you rapport. And it's been life changing for me. I'll give you just one example. When I filed my papers to run, I was such an underdog. I was losing 27 points in the poll, out fund-raised four to one. The leader of my own party told me to drop out. I didn't have the right stuff.

Congressman Ric Keller ([17:11](#)):

And then I was invited to Washington, to DC for something that was like an American Idol for politicians. It was a group of CEOs who got together, decided to put some big money to a handful of races, and they invited 16 finalists. I was the last one picked, the last one to speak. You only had five minutes. And everybody in front of me, famous names. Mike Pence, Jeff Flake, they all did great.

Congressman Ric Keller ([17:32](#)):

I'm like, you know, what the heck? That's not me. I don't know about Laffer Curves or details about tax policies. I'm not going to be like them. I'm just going to be Ric Keller. And so the opening line that I said, which was true was, "I've been waiting here a few hours guys, and I feel like Elizabeth Taylor's seventh husband on his honeymoon night. Technically I know what I'm supposed to do, but at this point I don't know how to make it interesting."

Congressman Ric Keller ([17:55](#)):

And that place, for the first time, erupted in laughing, and it made me comfortable. And I spoke without notes for five minutes. And afterwards I pulled off my name tag and set it in the trash and my pack fundraiser pulled it out. And he said, "Ric, keep that. That speech just changed your life, buddy." And sure enough, they ranked me number one in the country. They spent \$400,000 to support me. And a few months later, I was elected to the US Congress. So literally humor has changed my life.

Jason Altmire ([18:24](#)):

I wanted to close by talking about an issue that's very important to both of us. We crossed over a little bit in Congress and I served on the Higher Education Subcommittee with you when you were the Chair. But it's what we've done after Congress that we've gotten to know each other a little better. And we share an interest in just the lack of civility in our politics across the country.

Jason Altmire ([18:47](#)):

And you and I have talked about this many times and been on panels. And we both believe that it is hugely detrimental, not just to public policy, but to the view that the rest of the country has of America to the ability to get things done. And it's just even in the short time that has elapsed since you and I served, it's gotten so much worse. So can you talk a little bit about your views on how impactful it is for the country that we've moved towards such incivility in our politics?

Congressman Ric Keller ([19:19](#)):

I think the erosion of civility is literally the number one root cause of the biggest problem in the United States right now, with the divisive politicians and the screaming talking heads and the Twitter trolls. And it used to be that someone agreed with you on eight out of 10 things, that they're still your buddy. And now they're the enemy and they're worthless and they're treated horribly.

Congressman Ric Keller ([19:40](#)):

And so I think that we need to do three things. That if I were king and I could have a magic wand, I would have people do. And number one is truly listen to what the other person has to say with an open mind. I went to Harvard for the orientation and some Republicans protest it and they won't go because they say, "Harvard's left leaning." And some Democrats wouldn't go because they said, "There's too many CEOs and not enough labor leaders."

Congressman Ric Keller ([20:06](#)):

And I'm like, you know what? Would it kill a Democrat to hear what a right leaning CEO has to say about creating jobs? Would it kill a Republican to listen to what a really smart Harvard professor has to say who may be left leaning about helping poor kids go to college? Wouldn't that be helpful just to keep an open mind?

Congressman Ric Keller ([20:24](#)):

And then second, I think you got to be respectful. You don't have to agree on everything or anything. It's just be respectful, man, in your tone. And don't cut people off and insult their self-esteem. Just have respect. And then finally, I think we need to put relationships above differences. If you have some things that you agree on, and we talked about Ted Kennedy and George W. Bush, don't make the other guy the

enemy. Your relationships are important and they're more important than your differences. So I think if we keep those three principles in mind, we'll be on a good track.

Jason Altmire ([20:59](#)):

Our guest today has been former Congressman Ric Keller. He is the author of the newly released book, Chase The Bears, Little Things to Achieve Big Dreams, which our listeners can find on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, any of the online book sellers that you would prefer. Congressman, if somebody wanted to get in touch with you or learn more about you or the book, where would they go?

Congressman Ric Keller ([21:22](#)):

You would go to RicKeller.net. And I spell it R-I-C, but however you spell it, you'll get to me, and you can email me and communicate with me that way. And I'm happy to hear from your listeners.

Jason Altmire ([21:32](#)):

Well, thank you for being with us. It's been a treat to have the conversation today.

Congressman Ric Keller ([21:35](#)):

Thank you, Jason.

Jason Altmire ([21:39](#)):

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