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Profile: Caucus Up-Close; Psychologist Daniel Gottlieb discusses his book "Letters to Sam: A Grandfather's Lessons on Love, Loss, and the Gifts of Life"

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STEVE ADUBATO, host:

The gentleman you're about to see on camera's a very special person. He is Daniel Gottlieb, and he is the author of a fabulous book called "Letters to Sam: A Grandfather's Lessons on Love, Loss, and the Gifts of Life." Dan wrote the book for his beautiful, beautiful little grandson, and Dan wrote the book to Sam so that Sam could just be a little bit happier and have some perspective on life, particularly when you are challenged with whatever it is you're challenged with, be it autism. And Dan's story's even more interesting than that. As we go one on one with Dan Gottlieb, stay with us. We'll be right back.

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ADUBATO: There he is, Dan Gottlieb, who is the author of a great book called "Letters to Sam: A Grandfather's Lessons on Love, Loss, and the Gifts of Life."

How you doing, Dan?

Mr. DANIEL GOTTLIEB, PhD (Author, "Letters to Sam"): Great.

ADUBATO: You've been with us before on our sister program, our PBS program, CAUCUS: NEW JERSEY. I want to thank you for joining us here. I have to tell you, this little kid, Sam, beautiful little boy. Tell us about him.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Sam, my grandson, my daughter's first and only child, changed the course of her life and mine. My daughter had multiple traumas throughout the course of her life. Her mother had MS, her father was gone for a year, quadriplegia. There was a divorce, her mother died. A lot of trauma in both my children's lives.

When Sam was born, I've never seen my daughter, Debbie, look so happy and so peaceful, and I fell in love with Sam that moment for that reason because of what he did for my child. And I could say that same thing right now. So that's what Sam meant to me.

ADUBATO: Mm.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: In the beginning it wasn't for Sam. But my relationship with Sam really happened when Sam was a toddler. Early on he was uncomfortable with me.

ADUBATO: We should be clear--because I don't want to assume everyone knows about Dan's background. Other than the fact that he has a great radio program on WHY, the NPR affiliate radio down--radio station down in Philadelphia, also he writes for The Philadelphia Inquirer, and he's--you know, he's a therapist, family therapist. He's a first-class guy.

But many years ago you were involved in a terrible auto accident, and it left you...

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Quadriplegic.

ADUBATO: OK. So when you say Sam was whatever...

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Well, for the first year of his life he was uncomfortable with me. And shortly after his first birthday my dad died, and we had a graveside service...

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ADUBATO: His Pop-pop?

Mr. GOTTLIEB: His Pop-pop. We had a graveside service. And I adored this man. So I'm sitting at the cemetery crying. Sam's in his mother's arms and insists on coming over to me. He's really fussy, and he just wants to sit on my lap. First time, sat on my lap quietly as I cried and let me hold him and nurture him. That's when I loved this child so deeply. In a way, he helped me cry. He knew.

ADUBATO: He knew.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: He knew. He knew. And they know, children know--children--we all, Steve, are born with all the ingredients we need to be compassionate, to be loving, to be caring. We're born with those ingredients. Unfortunately, they get socialized out of us, but we see it with Sam.

ADUBATO: And in Sam, this beautiful little boy--and as many times as you can

show the picture of this kid it isn't going to be enough because he's just--not just a great-looking kid but--there he is, you and your grandson. There's a great picture there. He was diagnosed with autism when?

Mr. GOTTLIEB: He was 14 months old. He stopped babbling. And I knew.

ADUBATO: You knew?

Mr. GOTTLIEB: I knew. I knew what it meant, and I struggled--as I wrote about in the book, I struggled with when to tell Debbie, and what to tell her, and was I just being a worried grandfather. But he stopped babbling, and then he seemingly stopped paying attention, and then I knew and I told her, and we went out and got the diagnosis. That's when I decided to write this book.

ADUBATO: Why?

Mr. GOTTLIEB: For a lot of reasons. First of all, I had always wanted to write a series of letters to Sam about his Pop because I didn't know how long I would live. I...

ADUBATO: About you.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Yeah.

ADUBATO: You wanted him to know you.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Listen, in Judaism there's something called an ethical will, where we have a moral responsibility to share with our progeny what we've learned in life and how we've learned it. So I wanted him to know about his Pop. I wanted him to know the lessons I've learned, the gifts that came with suffering, how I've gotten to where I've gotten, what it means to me to have a life, what it means to me to lose one. I wanted him to know that about his Pop, and then when he was diagnosed, became more urgent. Then he and I had something in common.

ADUBATO: Which is?

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Well, the label of disability. But what it means functionally is we're different, that people will look at us differently or, worse, not look at us at all, not see our humanity, but see maybe Sam's strange behavior or my wheelchair. That's, sadly, the future he might endure. So the book became urgent. But more important than that, this book is my prayer for the world that Sam grows up in. I want Sam's world to be softer than this one.

ADUBATO: Dan--and by the way, as we do this program, logon to our Web site and we'll connect you to the work that Dan is doing, because it's exceptional.

(Graphic on screen)

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ADUBATO: And I'm going to take the liberty of reading a little bit. These chapters, so many of them--one of them--one of them is called "You're Perfection." And each letter begins to Sam. It's "Dear Sam," and it's signed--each one of them is "Love, Pop." And on perfection, you talk about--I'm going to take it out of context: (Reading) "That's why--that's why

I struggled when I first noticed some unusual things that were happening in your development. You were 14 months old when I noticed that you weren't yet talking. You didn't seem to be paying attention to us when we talked to you. I thought there was a problem, but I didn't know how to tell your mother," and you go on here.

Now, the reason I read that is I ask myself: What is it that you want Sam to take away from your description of his situation, and why is the chapter called "You're Perfection" when you're talking about what some people may perceive to be their potentially--their potentially--their greatest nightmare for their child? How is it Sam's perfection?

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Debbie, whenever I called her and asked how Sam was, she said he was perfect. And I worried about that--this is before he was diagnosed--because, you know, Debbie's my baby, I didn't want her to be disappointed, and nobody's perfect.

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Mr. GOTTLIEB: And then he was diagnosed. Debbie still says Sam's perfect because, in the most fundamental ways, he is. In the most fundamental ways. When--it is said that when the Dalai Lama first came to this country, the thing that surprised him most, he said, was that people over here don't seem to like themselves very much. He said, 'How can people not like themselves when we all have a Buddha nature inside, a piece of the divine inside of all of us?' He's right.

ADUBATO: But this is a little boy. How does he take--I mean, what you're saying now about the Dalai Lama is very big-picture, philosophical, somewhat cerebral stuff. But you're talking to this little boy, this issue of perfect, perfection. And it--I'm going to press you further on it because there's something about happiness that you write, and it--and it's--it had a great impact on me, and it's--for those of you--go out and buy the book, by the way. Significant portion of all the royalties go to...

Mr. GOTTLIEB: All the royalties are going to Cure Autism Now and other children's charities.

ADUBATO: OK, on page 128 is a chapter called "What Does Happiness Mean?" I'm just going to take a section that kind of affected me. You talk about a speech that you were making, I believe at Lincoln University. You were--you were--Dan was delivering a commencement speech. And you're looking at all these kids, many of whom have worked very hard to, you know, succeed, go to high school. You do well on your SATs, you go, you go to a great school, etc., etc. And you're talking to these kids about being happy, and you say, 'Let's talk about what does it mean to be happy.' And one kid said to you, 'If I have a \$1 million in the bank, I'll be happy.' Another announced that, 'If I have--if I'm number one in my profession, I'm happy--I'll be happy. But I won't settle for number two,' the kid said. And you sort of pressed them, and you said all the answers had to do with money, success, achievement, and that would make them happy. None of the 18-year-olds, 17- and 18-year-olds, you talked to, Dan, talked about love, children, relationships, marriage, community or friends. You said, quote, "When your resume is perfect, how does

your soul feel?" And you talk about what real happiness means. What does real happiness mean, and what is the message to Sam and the rest of us?

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Happiness is an emotion that ultimately we all strive for. And most of us miss the mark with accomplishing it.

ADUBATO: How?

Mr. GOTTLIEB: We think that wealth or power or the perfect marriage...

ADUBATO: Prestige, recognition.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: We think that will buy us happiness, and it will for a few minutes or an hour or a day. But I think what I have that sustains me is gratitude.

ADUBATO: For? To?

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Name it. Name it.

ADUBATO: But, respectfully, you are--you're sitting here in a wheelchair from an accident that you had on your wife's--it was your 10th anniversary, as I understand it, and you're in a car accident.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Yes.

ADUBATO: This devastating thing happens to you. Later on, you and your wife divorce.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Yeah.

ADUBATO: There's more tragedy in your life. You've had more than your share. Gratitude for?

Mr. GOTTLIEB: I just had an experience where a doctor told me that my urinary tract infection that I've been battling forever is going to be permanent. He said, 'We're not going to cure this.' So I've got to stay on high doses of antibiotics for the rest of my life. I just heard this news. And I was pretty shaken. Coincidentally, 24 hours before that, a friend of mine was over at my house, and she was struggling with her life, and she said, 'Dan, do you believe in heaven?' And without thinking I said, 'Yeah, you're in it right now. This is it. What were your chances of that sperm fertilizing that egg and your having a life? What are your chances of living to the age you're at with relative health? What are your chances of having food whenever you want it? You have people who love you, who you love. I have all those things in abundance. What's not to be grateful for? I have this life and, like you, it's slipping away.'

ADUBATO: So, for Sam, a little boy with autism, grateful?

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Not at this...

ADUBATO: So he reads this, what, 10 years from now? Help us put that into perspective. Because for me, it was--it is so powerful, but I'm thinking, 'This little kid, when does it resonate?'

Mr. GOTTLIEB: I want him to read that book and learn about me. I don't want

him to read that book and learn about him. He needs his life to teach him about him. I'd like him to know how his Pop saw the world.

ADUBATO: Yeah, but, you know--I hear what you're saying, and I am so blown away by the book because there's a chapter in here called "Your Father and My Father," and I--and I'm tempted not to read it because I'm not convinced I can get through it. Even though you're talking about your family, I believe that no matter who reads this book, you'll think about your own dad, your own mom, your own parents.

But you talk about your relationship with your father, and you talked about the fact--you said your father--"my father," meaning Sam's Pop-pop--"loved me as much as your father loves you." And by the way, you say great things about Sam's father, your son-in-law. He's an extraordinary guy, it sounds like. What's his name?

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Pat.

ADUBATO: "By the way, my father expressed himself in a much different way. His image of fathering came from his father, a man who had endured extreme adversity in Russia and was never comfortable in this country. To my father, a dad was someone who was strict, rigid and demanding. My grandfather would frequently say to my father, quote, 'You should never compliment a child or he'll get a swelled head.' So my parents never paid me a compliment when I was growing up," etc., etc.

"From what your dad has told me," you're talking about Sam's dad, Patrick, "I know that his own father treated him very badly when he was a boy, so your dad has created his own version of what it means to be a father. That's lucky for you, Sam." And you go on to talk about Sam's father, who said if he really could have his druthers, he would not go to work, and he would take Sam and he would get him in a sailboat, and they would go and they would sail around, and he would teach him everything he'd need to know about life.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: That was exactly what Pat's reaction was when Sam was diagnosed with autism.

ADUBATO: He said he'd take two years off of work to be with you.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Like you, his eyes welled up with tears, and he said, 'I'll do whatever I need to do to help Sam. I'll take two years off of work, we'll sail around the world, and I will teach my son everything he needs to know about life.'

ADUBATO: Well, you see, you said you were going to teach Sam about you, but in many ways doesn't that teach Sam about his father and what love really is, and then ultimately why Sam should be grateful for having a father like that?

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Yes. Yes.

ADUBATO: That's what I took away.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Yes. I wanted him to know what a precious father he had.

ADUBATO: And grandfather.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Thank you. I wanted him to know how lucky I thought he was.

ADUBATO: What kind of reaction have you gotten from--by the way, you also talk to Sam about the divorce from your wife, which I can't do justice to in the time we have. What kind of reaction have you gotten from Sam's parents?

Mr. GOTTLIEB: They're thrilled with the book. They're deeply touched. Debbie, my daughter, is championing the cause. She's thrilled about the book. So is Sam. Sam...

ADUBATO: Talk to me about Sam's reaction.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Sam, well, he...

ADUBATO: Show more pictures of Sam as we do this.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Sam doesn't fully get it, but he came down to the radio station one evening when we first launched the book, and he went around, people came up to him and he said, 'I'm famous, you know.' 'Really, Sam? Why are you famous?' 'Because I wrote a book.' He loves to sign the book, too.

ADUBATO: He loves to sign the book.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Sign the book, yeah.

ADUBATO: What does he think of his Pop?

Mr. GOTTLIEB: I'm a playmate to him. He loves his Pop. I'm just a playmate. We tickle and we laugh and...

ADUBATO: What do you talk about?

Mr. GOTTLIEB: ...we run around the house. We talk about school, we talk about things he loves.

ADUBATO: He loves golf, doesn't he?

Mr. GOTTLIEB: He loves golf. He's a great little golfer. That...

ADUBATO: Give me a golf story real quick, because it's in the book.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: It's one of my favorite, in the golf story. I used to love golf. It's the only way I got close to my father. It was the most painful thing I had to give up after my accident, was my golf clubs. So here we are, Sam's a little golfer, and he asks me to go on the golf course with him. I hadn't been on the golf course in 20 years; it was just too painful. I get on the course with him, and I forget how beautiful it is, I forget the smells.

ADUBATO: It is.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: So I get out there with Sam and Pat, and Sam puts the ball down and hits it. He's a good little golfer, hits it, lofts it, and he claps.

ADUBATO: He gets it up in the air.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: And I am just overwhelmed, moved to tears with joy and gratitude. And we go down the fairway, and I start thinking--which is not always a good thing--I start thinking about how it used to feel under my feet,

how the turf felt, how the club felt in my hand. And I'm overwhelmed with grief and sadness, and I'm back 20 years ago and I'm longing and I'm aching, and all of a sudden I hear Sam say, 'Great shot, Dad,' and Pat just hit the ball, like, 270, straight down the fairway.

ADUBATO: His dad, Sam's dad.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Yeah. And I'm back here, I'm back on the golf course, and I'm again consumed with smells and joy and gratitude, and I'm back there. And 20 minutes later I'm thinking, 'Well, maybe we could rig up a golf club with Velcro that I could use, and I could swing,' and that felt awful because it's not what I really want. What I really want is what I had yesterday. And again, self-pity and I'm sorry for myself, and again, I'm back. Sam said something, and I was back in the moment. The lesson I learned is to be where we are. Yesterday's yesterday, tomorrow's tomorrow. But to be in that moment is sheer joy. It was sheer pleasure. And what I want of my life, whatever time I have left, I want to be where I am. Whether it's good, whether it's bad, I want to be where I am. I don't want to be lost inside my head, and that's--Sam taught me that day.

ADUBATO: The book is called "Letters to Sam: A Grandfather's Lessons on Love, Loss, and the Gifts of Life," by Dan Gottlieb. A couple minutes left. By the way, it's Sterling Publishing Company in New York City.

For the rest of us who play golf and get angry and occasionally throw a club--which I've done--and take it way too seriously, take making money too seriously, take this too seriously, take my minor celebrity seriously. Not happiness, is it?

Mr. GOTTLIEB: No. I had an experience years ago when I had a skin breakdown on my buttocks, which happens. At that same time, my beloved sister was diagnosed with terminal cancer, my kids left for college, and my wife had left. I wound up...

ADUBATO: Your wife left you.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Left the marriage.

ADUBATO: Right.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: I wound up in bed for the better part of 18 months with just a nurse in my house. I had lost everything, my tiny minor celebrity status, my kids, my sister. Everything I lost. And I laid there for 18 months, and what I found was my own humanity. I lost all the labels. "Dan Gottlieb the psychologist," I'd lost them all.

ADUBATO: All the titles.

Mr. GOTTLIEB: And I found my humanity. When somebody walked into my room, I could feel my heart open up. I could feel gratitude that somebody would just come and sit with me. My eyes welled up with tears when people told their stories to me. I felt great love when any human walked into my room. I began to feel great love when I saw the sun shine. There was no Dan Gottlieb, just a being. Now, since that happened, the labels have come back, the neurosis has returned and...(unintelligible).

ADUBATO: The author, the therapist...

Mr. GOTTLIEB: Yeah.

ADUBATO: ...Sam's famous grandfather.

Listen, we got a few minutes left--excuse me, few seconds left. I have to say to you, I know the book is written to Sam, and he's a special little boy with a special family and an exceptional grandfather, but I know I speak for many people, particularly my wife Jennifer's grandmother, Nancy, who is raving about the book, you have made a difference in the lives of so many, and I just can't thank you enough for coming in here and reminding us what's really important. Thanks so much, Dan.

Announcer: If you would like more information on this program or if you'd like to express an opinion, e-mail us at info@caucusnj.org and visit us online at caucusnj.org.

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