

# Ben McAdams

## United States of America



**Interviewer:** My first question would be about your life. Where were you born and what was your childhood like?

**Ben:** I was born here in Salt Lake City at Primary Health, now LDS Hospital in the Avenues. My family lived in Davis County. So just north of Salt Lake City, kind of the suburbs. My parents had moved to that house a year before I was born. And that's the house that I lived in until I moved away to go to law school. Or I guess I got married and then moved away to law school. I grew up in Davis County, Utah, and went to school in Davis County, elementary school, junior high, and high school. Growing up, my family didn't have a lot of money. We were, I think, lucky in many regards. I'm sure that many refugees have it harder than I have. But we, my parents, were always struggling to pay our bills and I remember times when I was a kid, that our electricity was shut off, or that we almost lost our house. So we struggled as a family. But then, I decided to go to college, I was one of really only a few people from my neighborhood who did go to college, and I started with a scholarship at Weaber State University then I transferred to the University of Utah, so that's where I graduated from. I always had to work during college. So I worked different jobs and sometimes multiple jobs at a time to pay tuition and to pay for gas and a car and everything and go to school. I ended up going to law school.

**Interviewer:** What has been the biggest challenge in your life?

**Ben:** We had some struggles as a family and growing up. Life always brings challenges for everybody. But I feel like I've been kind of lucky to have lived in a place where my hard work meant success. Nothing was handed to me in life. But nothing was denied to me and I think that makes me really lucky, because I've traveled the world a lot and I see that that's not the way things are everywhere. It's not even the way it is here in the United States. But I feel that I've been lucky because I've had life circumstances where I've been able to lift myself up. That, I think, places a burden on me that I feel a responsibility to create opportunities for other people because I feel like in some ways, I got things I didn't deserve. I mean, I worked hard for them. I didn't get anything handed to me but I also know that people who work as hard as I do, don't always get admitted into college and get to go to law school and get good jobs. So I kind of feel lucky, and that's given me a burden on my shoulders to say I have a duty to pay it forward to other people. It's a lot of what motivated me to go into public service. Before I was sitting here, I was the mayor of Salt Lake County and was in the State Senate, and I also served in Congress. And I think that's a career that requires a lot of sacrifices. And I feel like those sacrifices were part of what I needed to do, because of the things that life has given me.

**Interviewer:** How do you feel about the Utah or Salt Lake County people and the culture?

**Ben:** I think we live in an amazing place. I love it here. I think it's a community where people are very friendly. They're nice. They want to help out. Now sometimes they're nice to your face, and they're mean behind your back, but that's kind of humans though. Human beings can be good to your face and bad behind your back. But, I think that we live in a place where people are nice and people want to help other people. I think we live in a place that since we have a lot of

visitors, either tourists who come here for skiing, or the Olympics, or other things. But we also have a lot of immigrants and refugees. We also have a population I think that, more than other places in the United States, has left the United States. We have people who were born here who speak foreign languages- Not as much as in Europe or Asia, where everybody speaks two languages. The U.S. has a bad reputation that Americans don't learn other languages. And I would say that's probably true in Utah, like it is anywhere. But, we're better than most places, because we do have people who have had that experience outside of the United States. They've seen what the world is like outside of the United States, and have a bigger vision. And I think that makes us more accepting of people, more kind, more willing to see the outside of our bubble and help people who come from different circumstances.

**Interviewer:** Do you have any kids and if you do, how many? What are they like?

**Ben:** I have four kids. I have twins, who are 17 years old. So they're starting their senior year of high school at Highland High. I have one who is a sophomore at Highland High, he's 15. And I have one who just turned 12. He just started seventh grade at Hillside Middle School.

**Interviewer:** And your daughter is about to study abroad. So she's going to get the chance to see outside the US, right?

**Ben:** Yeah, she's going to do a study abroad in Spain.

**Interviewer:** When you were growing up, and then maybe some of your adult life, did you interact with a lot of immigrants or refugees during that time?

**Ben:** I don't think I did. Utah was different at the time. I was born in 1974, so my childhood was in the 70s and 80s. America was different then. And certainly, the suburbs of Salt Lake City were way different then, I went to a high school that was most likely white people born in Utah. I think we had one African American kid in my high school, and probably 20 Hispanic kids, I would say that's about it. But I think people were kind and I think there's a certain level of understanding that comes when you're exposed to people who are different that we didn't have growing up. But, I don't think that people were mean intentionally. I was an LDS missionary in Brazil. So that was probably my first exposure. That was my second time on an airplane and my first time out of the US. When I went to Brazil and was in the 'Favelas' of Brazil I saw poverty and hardship, and that's when I really got an appreciation for how lucky I was. Up to that point, I probably thought that I was disadvantaged- I saw so many other people who had things that were so much better than me and more opportunities than I had- Then I got there and realized, wow, even in my worst days, I'm so much better off than somebody who's in this favela. I can go to college, even though my parents aren't paying for my college, and I was kind of resentful about that. My parents not only couldn't pay for my college, but they weren't going to pay for my car, my gas, or my food, or anything like that. You realize it's called 'First world problems.' Here were people who were never going to go to college, no matter what they did. So that was an experience.

**Interviewer:** What objects tell the story of your life?

**Ben:** It's been four or three years since I was in office, but my campaign colors were bright orange. I had an orange bus and orange shirts and the signs and everything was bright orange. People asked me, 'Why orange?' Because most people who are politicians, their colors are red, white, and blue, or something like that and mine was orange, which people didn't have. And there's a few reasons why I chose orange. One of the main reasons is it's a color that gets noticed, and when you're running for office, you want people to see it. I thought, I love the United States, I love our flag, but red, white, and blue, people are just like, 'Oh, there's another political sign,' and they ignore it- They don't even read it. But, when you see an orange sign, what do you think? 'Was the road going to be closed? Is there construction? I'm going to read that because it's going to be important to me to read that sign.' So I had a theory that subconsciously people see orange and they pay attention. The other reason for orange was my first job. I told you my family didn't have a lot of money, so at 11 years old, I worked on a farm in our neighborhood and we were picking pumpkins. So we would start in the summer, they would plant all the pumpkins and we had to go and weed the pumpkin patch all summer long. And then in September and October, we would pick pumpkins and take them to the grocery store for Halloween. I loved that job. I had so much fun with the other kids that were working there. And so for me, orange also means 'fall,' and elections are in the fall. So orange means hard work and means success that I've been able to achieve by working hard for myself. And so that's why my campaign colors were orange. So pumpkins are my object and the color orange.

**Interviewer:** How were you feeling on the first day of college?

**Ben:** I remember better my first day of law school. So I got admitted to Columbia Law School. That's really a very prestigious law school. And when I went to college, I didn't know that I was gonna go, and most of my friends didn't go to college. I applied to the school because I knew I could only afford to live at home with my parents. And that was okay, but I was going to be driving to school, I couldn't afford an apartment. We lived in Bountiful, so we only applied to Weber State in Ogden. And so it felt like a continuation in high school, I felt like I was driving a little bit longer drive to go to college. But, in that process, I started realizing that if I studied hard I could get good grades. That was something I didn't know about myself. I didn't study hard in high school, don't tell my kids. But, if I studied hard I got good grades and I could do well, and I started realizing that I can do almost anything I wanted to do if I worked hard. So I applied to Columbia Law School. It's a very prestigious law school. It's expensive, so I had to take out student loans to go. And that's okay. I hope all of you are thinking about college, and if you have to take out student loans, I think it's worth the investment in yourself. But I remember my first day at Columbia Law School, thinking that I probably made a mistake and I'm not at Columbia Law School, but there's probably another one out there. Like, could it really be that I'm here? I felt like an imposter and that I didn't belong there and that I probably made a mistake and I was at the wrong law school and that's how I got in because it wasn't the same. And I had to like Google while sitting in class and make sure I didn't make a really expensive mistake.

**Interviewer:** What is your career now?

**Ben:** I spent about 15 years in public service, but I started as a lawyer. I went to law school, I practice law. Then I went into government, and I worked for Salt Lake City. And then I was elected to the Utah State Senate. So I was a senator in the Capitol. And then I was elected mayor of Salt Lake County, so this was my office right here for six years. And then I was elected to the United States Congress, so back in Washington, D.C. And then I lost my election in 2020. And so since then, I've been working for myself. I have a consulting business, where people hire me to help them figure out how to solve problems. So it's either like I work for governments who are trying to figure out how to do something, it kind of depends on different things, or I work for businesses that are trying to figure out how to work better with government. Since I know what that world really well, we help them figure out whatever they're trying to work on.

**Interviewer:** Do you have any family traditions?

**Ben:** We have a fun vacation that we just started doing. Where we have been traveling to South America or Central America. And since most of my work is virtual, my clients are all over the country, so I just work from my computer and Zoom and stuff. So I could work from anywhere. And so I realized, why not work from somewhere cool? So we started last year when I found an Airbnb in Costa Rica on the beach. And I was like, 'Let's go work from Costa Rica for a month.' So we did that last summer, and my kids took Spanish classes. And we lived in a beach town in Costa Rica for a month. My wife also is an attorney, and she also can work remotely. So she did that. And so we did again this year- We went to Colombia and worked on the beach there. And compared to the United States, it's much more affordable. So it doesn't cost that much money. So that's a fun tradition that we started.

**Interviewer:** Did your family have traditions growing up?

**Ben:** We have a lot of traditions around Christmas. When we would have a gift thing that we would do for somebody. We would pick somebody in our neighborhood and do anonymous gifts on their doorstep every night for 12 days before Christmas, that would always be fun. We would actually never tell them who did it, so they just kept getting gifts and they didn't know who. It was fun as a kid to like, we dress up in clothes and go and sneak up and do it. All of us always wanted somebody to do it to us because we had so much fun doing it. So when I was 18, I did it to my family, and they didn't know. I snuck out gave it to them. I had 12 gifts that I gave to my family. And that was so fun that somebody chose us to do it, but it was actually me.

**Interviewer:** How have you seen Utah change?

**Ben:** I think Utah has changed in a lot of ways. We've grown so much. And that's maybe a good thing and a bad thing. Because you see, our air pollution has gotten worse, traffic is getting worse. So some of those are the bad things of growth. I think some of the good things of growth, we have really good restaurants here. I don't think we had that when I was a kid. Like things that were weird that I thought were so exotic when I was a kid. I remember when I went to Brazil,

and had my first mango and I thought it was so amazing. And so I came home, I was 22. And I bought a mango from my family, they never had a mango before. Like things like that. And I think that's probably true for most of the United States. Transportation has gotten so much better that you can get these exotic fruits and good foods here from across the world. So I think changes in those ways. Utah is much more of a diverse state. I think 5% of our population are refugees. I think that makes you a stronger place through welcoming people from all over the world who bring experiences, and points of view, and culture. And I just think it makes us a much more interesting place to live. To have friends who have been all over the world I think makes it interesting. I think we've changed in good ways and bad ways and I think most of our changes, because the growth and being a Delta Airlines brings business and brings that growth here too. We have had the Olympics since I was a kid, that I think changed Utah in some ways. I kind of think we've kind of grown up. We went from being a little kid to I think we're a teenager now. We're not a mature adult yet, but we're exactly where we want to be, I think. It's become a fun place. I love living here. And one of the things we've done well is, we've been able to preserve some of those things. Even though we're a big city, people are still nice to each other as neighbors. You can still go to your neighbor's house and borrow food. Maybe we don't do that anymore, I don't think society borrows a cup of sugar anymore. But people are friendly to each other. We have such great outdoor places that we've been good at taking care of like our national parks and our hiking in the Wasatch Mountains and things that I think we're lucky to have been good stewards to take care of.

**Interviewer:** What are your hopes for your community?

**Ben:** I hope we can continue to keep creating open doors for people. One of the things that I think we're starting to see is intergenerational poverty. That's something that's sad to me, because I was somebody who didn't grow up with a lot of money but was able to get ahead. And what's sad is when you see people get trapped in the cycle of poverty. And that hasn't been a characteristic of Utah, but I think we're kind of starting to see that. And I think I want to see us doing a better job of making sure that people have opened doors, if they'll work hard to go through them. I think we need to do a better job of that. You're starting to see barriers between healthcare access and schools. I think you can get a good education in any school you went to in Utah when I was a kid. Now, I think some schools have more funding and more parental involvement, and more opportunities for kids to succeed than other schools. That worries me, I think we need to make sure that there's an open door for anybody who wants to walk through it. That's something that has defined Utah, and I don't want us to lose that.

**Interviewer:** What does the American Dream mean to you?

**Ben:** I think it means that anybody who wants to prosper, can own a home and find financial stability, and have a good quality of life, have a family and raise them to have the same quality of life as we have. And that's not guaranteed but that should not be denied to anybody. That's the American dream for me.