

RICHARD: Talking to someone you don't know who feels differently about the world might seem intimidating or unnerving. Yet it can also be rewarding. In this show, we look at two successful attempts to get Americans of different backgrounds and beliefs to engage in face-to-face conversations. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Today, we meet two people who planned and took part in America Talks and the National Week of Conversation. Each event was designed to get Americans to go outside their comfort zones and engage with people they might not ever talk to otherwise.

RICHARD: Our guests on this show are Kristin Hansen and Mizell Stewart. Kristin is Executive Director at Civic Health Project, a nonprofit that aims to reduce partisan polarization. Mizell is a vice president at the media company, Gannett, and the USA Today Network.

ASHLEY: In this conversation, we discuss lessons learned, insights gained, and the vital difference between talking and listening.

RICHARD: Let's start with America Talks. The event received a lot of publicity. Kristin, you were involved in organizing it. What was America Talks, and will it happen again next year?

KRISTIN: Well, we'll find out, Richard. America Talks was the first time ever that we've brought the award-winning program called My Country Talks from Europe over to the United States. The basic premise of any My Country Talks event, including ours, is that you bring thousands of people together to meet face-to-face on video for conversations of about an hour across political divides. And we held America Talks the weekend of June 12th and 13th, providing exactly that opportunity to Americans who signed up for the event.

ASHLEY: Kristin, just how big was America Talks? How many people were involved?

KRISTIN: We held the event over a weekend. We had one set of conversations take place on Saturday and another on Sunday. At our peak on Saturday, we had over 1,000 people at one time on our purpose-built conversation platform having those face-to-face conversations. What was especially gratifying, the technology worked great, and we were able to see that many, many people stayed on and lingered in their conversations long past the allotted time, which was just very heartwarming.

RICHARD: I took part. I dived in and spoke with somebody who was not like me in his political views. Mizell, you did the same. What was the experience like?

MIZELL: I found it to be wonderful. The person I was matched with was a young woman in the Western United States. We were of different races, of different

generations. I'm a journalist. So everybody has the idea of the supposed political leanings of journalists, and that was a fascinating aspect of our conversation, as well. This was a young woman who was actually raised in an Evangelical Christian environment in Texas and is actually in the process of moving to Washington State with her partner. She found herself gravitating a little bit more to Liberal positions as she has traveled and moved around.

I was not personally raised in the church but have become very much involved in formalized religion as an adult. These are the kinds of things we talked about during that conversation, and how our upbringing and life experience in adulthood has shaped our political views. We were one of those teams who lingered long past the allotted time. Kristin is texting me with updates, and I'm like, "I can't talk now. I'm on my conversation."

ASHLEY: I'm curious. That conversation that you just talked about, when you came away from it, what did you feel that you'd learned that you didn't know before?

MIZELL: Well, I learned a couple of things. One is, in having that conversation across generations, what I learned was that there are a number of aspects about America that we both believed in common. We had a fairly lengthy discussion on the role of government and, in particular, the role of government investment in our future and exploring different perspectives on things like infrastructure investment, as an example. What I really appreciated about it... And USA Today has been involved in this work through a partnership with Public Agenda called Hidden Common Ground. What that project is intended to do is to explore those areas of authentic public agreement on major issues facing the country.

When we get out of our own echo chambers and actually have a conversation about these things, when pollsters ask questions in the right way, you would be amazed at the level of agreement there actually is. But for whatever reason, whether it is political power, financial gain, or other factors, there are actors in our civic life who are working to make sure that we are divided.

RICHARD: Yeah, some people call these actors, as you mentioned, conflict entrepreneurs, people who make money, gain fame, have increased notoriety because they're stirring up the rest of us.

MIZELL: Well, no question about that, and it is the attention economy and how we, as citizens, push back against that is really, I think, the challenge of this moment in our civic life.

RICHARD: Kristin, I wanted to ask you, what's the point of America Talks? Why do we need it?

KRISTIN: From my perspective, the point of an event like America Talks, and not just this one event but really the hundreds and thousands of bridging events, connections, and conversations that are happening in our country all around the year, is to bring people together in their most constructive, connecting, and cohesive way. What we find is that, when people come together not for social media, not from connecting across their echo chamber, but realtime, face-to-face in conversation, and this can be in person or it can be virtual, people bring their best selves, and especially if you provide a little bit of guidance to ensure and nurture that conversation to go in the right direction.

That's exactly what we did by providing a built-in conversation guide so that two people, face-to-face, could self-facilitate through a very constructive conversation. When we see each other face-to-face, when we are reminded of some basic conversation norms—and ours for this event were listen with curiosity, speak from your own experience, and connect with respect—this is exactly what people do.

RICHARD: We've been talking mostly about America Talks, the weekend event, but there's also the National Week of Conversation. Could you tell us more about that?

KRISTIN: Yes. The Listen First Coalition encompasses more than 300 bridging organizations that are operating here in the U.S. today. Once a year, this whole field comes together to create a whole menu of opportunities for Americans to engage in conversation not just through the America Talks weekend but through an entire week of inspired programming hosted by more than 100 hosting organizations providing opportunities to listen, learn, and, most importantly, engage in conversations across differences.

ASHLEY: Mizell, I think you've said in the past that we need to engage in courageous conversations across our differences. What do you think is brave about speaking honestly with somebody from a different background or viewpoint?

MIZELL: Well, it's very easy when we live in, in many cases, echo chambers of our own creation that actually reaching across difference gets you out of your comfort zone. One of my favorite quotes is from a social science researcher and real cultural icon, Brené Brown. She says, "You can have courage or you can have comfort, but you can't have both." In many cases, we lead our comfortable lives ensconced personally and in my suburban, relatively affluent neighborhood, and going across to a different part of town or to engage with people who are different from me, there sometimes is a level of discomfort there. I think acknowledging that discomfort, leaning into that discomfort, and then pushing past it is really what I talk about when I talk about courageous conversations.

KRISTIN: There are deep social, psychological, even neurological bases for why it feels scary to engage in conversation across differences. We can feel concerned that we're going to be backed into a corner, forced to defend our positions, attacked from the

other side, and, frankly, some of those fears and concerns are warranted because we all have the inclination to engage in that kind of behavior with one another. This is why many of us in the bridging field view conversation across differences as a practice much as yoga is a practice or meditation is a practice. This is something we have to keep doing to get better at it. These are muscles we need to develop societally.

What we were delighted to see is that, based on the 750 surveys we got back, the 150 video testimonials, people did find this very therapeutic. This seems to be something that Americans want, need, and crave right now. Americans are actually asking and looking for opportunities to be a part of healing divides in our country even if it does feel a little uncomfortable and scary.

MIZELL: I'll give you, actually, a very practical example. Because of my background, my upbringing, the work that I do, and the circles that I travel in, more often than not, I am the only person of color in a room or in a gathering. It is highly unusual in the converse for most white Americans to be the only white person in a situation where they are surrounded by people of color. That, in and of itself, in my opinion, in order to reach into those spaces where everyone is different from you, takes courage. I would argue that if more Americans would consciously insert themselves into situations and into spaces where everyone is different than they are, then a lot of the things that divide us would come out of the way.

ASHLEY: You're listening to Let's Find Common Ground from Common Ground Committee. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard. Next, some reactions to our show from our listeners. Some of you have left reviews on Apple Podcasts, and we want to thank you and share them with everyone else.

ASHLEY: A recent one says, "A civil conversation about today's hot topics."

RICHARD: And how about this from a listener named J.V. Mill, "If you're tired of endless finger-pointing that accompanies so much political discourse, give this podcast a listen."

ASHLEY: Another one reads, "A very entertaining 30-minute look at topics that make you consider how to better understand an alternate perspective."

RICHARD: That's good to hear because it's why we started this podcast in the first place, to get people to consider some other points of view.

ASHLEY: Right, and it's great to get this feedback. Please keep it coming. We do this show for you, and we always want to know what you think. Reviews and ratings boost our searchability, as well. It makes it more likely that new listeners will find us.

RICHARD: Now back to our interview on Let's Find Common Ground with Kristen Hansen and Mizell Stewart. How do America Talks and the National Week of Conversation factor in to this growing conversation we're having about the need for equity and inclusion in America?

MIZELL: Well, I would say that equity and inclusion is, first and foremost, about understanding. What I've heard people talk about, the situation that we are in in 2021 in the wake of the racial reckoning of 2020, as actually the third Reconstruction. If you're a student of history, the first Reconstruction was the backlash that occurred in America after the freeing of the slaves in the post-Civil War period. What happened in the first Reconstruction was, as Black Americans got more political power, got the franchise, then we saw the resurgence of segregation put into law, i.e. Jim Crow. So that was the first Reconstruction.

The second Reconstruction is often ascribed as the era of mass incarceration which followed the voting rights, civil rights, and housing reforms of the '60s. Now we have the racial reckoning in 2021, and we see a backlash on things like the teaching of American history as it relates to America's treatment of Black Americans. Critical race theory is the shorthand for that, and all anyone is encouraging is that people truly begin to understand the unique perspectives, the unique history of our fellow Americans, so America Talks as a construct. Let's get people talking to each other. Let's get people learning from each other, helping people understand that, when you engage in that one-on-one conversation, you're not as different as you think you are. That, to me, is really the value and the tie-in to issues of equity and inclusion.

ASHLEY: This is sort of a follow-up for you, Mizell, and feel to jump in, Kristin, afterwards as well, but because you're a senior news executive at a big media company, and journalists are sometimes criticized for writing stories, broadcasting stories that tend to highlight controversies and clashes that make the viewership and the readership angry and divide everybody further apart, would you agree? And do you think there's anything that can be done about that?

MIZELL: Well, we believe that initiatives like Hidden Common Ground, like the partnership that brought America Talks to fruition, is part of that solution. So it's really a conscious decision on our part, and both of those projects align so well with USA Today's approach. I'm really proud because you've probably seen that four-square chart of media bias that shows Left, Right, true, untrue, where various national media sources are. And USA Today is about as close to the center as any other news organization, and it's because of a series of very conscious choices. Initiatives like this are part of that conscious choice to look beyond those things that divide Americans and look for those areas where people agree.

RICHARD: A little earlier, Kristin, you mentioned the construction of the conversations that were held during the America Talks weekend. When I took part in America Talks, I was surprised by the structure of it. Tell us a little bit more about why the

conversations that so many people had were not just merely, "Hey, let's pair a Liberal with a Conservative. Let's pair somebody of different class or ethnic origin together."

KRISTIN: Right. An important aspect of scaling conversation across differences is the assumption that you can't always have a third-person, skilled facilitator in the room. Conversation across differences is only going to scale if we can equip young people, adults, people of all ages to engage in these kinds of constructive interactions together without that third-party facilitator. Given that, anyone who is orchestrating conversations across differences, whether it's America Talks or any of the whole host of organizations that are delivering events and conversations during this National Week of Conversation that we're in the midst of now, has to think about how to construct a conversation guide that will be positive, constructive, and drive the outcomes with the right kinds of guardrails that you're seeking on that conversation. I want to tell you that our team couldn't have been more intentional about how we designed the guide.

ASHLEY: Richard, what was your response to the guide? I'm curious. What was your gut response?

RICHARD: I was surprised by the personal nature of the questions. I don't think I had very good answers. So that was a moment of slight discomfort, but I thought it was great the way that the conversation just didn't go the way I had imagined. Mizell, did you have any moments of discomfort or surprise during yours?

MIZELL: I can't say so but, remember, I've spent 20 years getting into uncomfortable conversations with people I don't know, in many cases, in my reporting days, at some of the most uncomfortable parts of their lives. So I'm kind of a ringer when it comes to finding a place of common ground, so to speak. But I do think that your observation around getting personal is accurate, and I am confident that it was intentional because, when you begin from a place of personal connection, you begin to talk about some experience you may have had in common with your conversation partner, that creates that place of connection. Then you're able to expand from there, and once you find that place of connection, you can explore differences in ways that are not confrontational.

But, if you start from a place of having a conversation about difference, the connection is never going to get made. So I was particularly appreciative of the discussion guide because it not only encouraged you to open up and share a bit of personal information but also to talk about your hopes and dreams. How do you want to have an impact on your community? How do you want to get engaged? It's just a rich vein to mine, and certainly my conversation reflected that.

RICHARD: A question for both of you: do you believe that this movement to promote conversations across difference is growing?

KRISTIN: There's no question that it's growing. Just in the run-up to this National Week of Conversation that's underway now, the number of hosting partners, organizations that are hosting conversations has been growing by leaps and bounds on a daily basis. We've been throwing logos up on to the website as fast as we can to reflect and appreciate the broad number of organizations across the United States that are bringing conversation opportunities to Americans day in and day out. But I also want to say that this is now starting to move up and out and beyond what we might describe as the bridging field. What I'm really struck by, what many of us are struck by is the fact that so many broad-based institutions—faith communities, civic organizations like Rotary, companies like our sponsor, Walmart, higher education institutions like Stanford, where I teach—are all grappling with this question of: how do we get better at bridging across differences?

MIZELL: I think Kristin raised a very critical point in that learning how to talk across differences is increasingly an opportunity for business. A number of years ago, I was a local newspaper editor in Evansville, Indiana, and we had a Toyota manufacturing plant there. And I was giving a talk on a concept called fault lines in the community. Fault lines is a concept that was invented by an organization called the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education. It really helps journalists better frame stories across difference.

In giving that conversation, there was an executive from Toyota in the audience, and she asked me to come and speak about that concept and what it means to have conversations across difference to her managers. This was the lead-up into the 2008 presidential election, and there were literally arguments on the assembly line over the presidential election. So these differences that were manifesting actually had the potential to derail the production of Toyota pickup trucks. So there's real, practical reasons that more and more businesses are getting engaged and really amplifying these concepts because it has a real effect on workplace culture as well as the ability to actually get things done in the workplace.

KRISTIN: That's right. I think a key there for businesses and for faith communities, civic organizations, institutions of higher learning is to aim for a more proactive versus reactive response when situations in our country flare up that really become flash points for all these different forms of diversity, obviously racial but, again, also geographic, also political. I think that many corporate leaders and civic institution leaders are waking up to that, the importance of having a proactive plan that may encompass training and skill development, again, opportunities to practice these skills, to put them into practice and to have this be some of the skill development that takes place within the organization.

ASHLEY: I love that idea. I think it would have such an effect if organizations could get involved in this movement.

KRISTIN: Well, that's what we're seeing. It's really the mobilization of the bridging movement or, in other words, bridging is going mainstream. It's happening now.

ASHLEY: Yeah, because where you used to spend most of your day would be in a workplace and with those people.

MIZELL: Absolutely. We had a significant uproar at a tech company because employees were having conversations on political and related topics across politics, across race, across gender. And they were having all of these conversations in internal channels. The CEO stood up one day and basically said, "We're not going to have any of these conversations at work anymore," and that caused even more of a firestorm. It's an object lesson in the fact that employers really do have to engage their constituencies and all of their stakeholders to equip them to have constructive conversations across difference.

KRISTIN: Meanwhile, one of the things that saddens me the most is hearing about faith communities, congregations that are encountering schisms based on different political perspectives and belief systems. This is causing the fracturing, at times, of specific congregations, sometimes whole faith communities. It's putting a lot of pressure on faith leaders who may or may not be well-equipped to address these schisms as they emerge within their congregations.

This goes to the heart of the social fabric in our country. All of these institutions we're talking about—workplaces, faith communities, civic organizations—we need to keep these whole because they are the fabric of our country. COVID and the whole past year has put a lot of pressure on these institutions. So our job now is to stitch them back together, stitch the people back together and enable us all to retain what are described as crosscutting identities. Resist the sorting into our partisan political frames, and this is what I'm encouraging us to consider resisting. In fact, lean into just the opposite. Seek out social groups, organizations, and institutions that get you out of that comfort zone and ensure that you are coming into contact with people of different backgrounds and beliefs.

RICHARD: I love that, a great way to end. Kristin Hansen, Mizell Stewart, thank you very much for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground.

KRISTIN: Thanks, Richard. Thanks, Ashley.

ASHLEY: Yeah, thank you so much. Kristin Hansen and Mizell Stewart on Let's Find Common Ground. You can check out that initiative Mizell mentioned. It's called Hidden Common Ground at usatoday.com/hiddencommonground.

RICHARD: Before we go, a quick word about another podcast we think you'd like to give a listen to.

ASHLEY: You've got opinions about everything— who to vote for, which god to worship, the best way to make brownies— but do you know where your opinions come from? Are they really yours, or did you inherit them?

RICHARD: The On Opinion podcast seeks to answer some of these questions by speaking with philosophers, psychologists, and social scientists about where our beliefs come from, why we argue, and what that means for society and our politics.

ASHLEY: Brought to you by Parlia.com, the encyclopedia of opinion, you can find On Opinion wherever you listen to your podcasts.

RICHARD: And you'll be able to hear another one of our podcasts in two weeks. Until then, I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Thanks for listening.