

ASHLEY: So many young people are growing up with drier landscapes and hotter summers, as well as raging storms and devastating floods. Can they succeed where their elders haven't and overcome their difference to stop things from getting worse? This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. In this episode, we speak with two young climate activists from different political perspectives. They discuss how they see the environmental crisis and what they want to do about it.

ASHLEY: While they do have a lot in common, they feel differently about the big roles government and the private sector can play in addressing some of these issues.

RICHARD: Danielle Butcher is Executive Vice President of the nonprofit American Conservation Coalition. Andrew Brennen is a National Geographic Education Fellow and Cofounder of the Kentucky Student Voice Team. Ashley starts us off.

ASHLEY: You've both spoken in the past about how your generation seems to be better at crossing ideological lines when it comes to the environment. Why is that? Why is your generation going to be the one to find common ground on the environment? What's different about you? Andrew, do you want to go first?

ANDREW: Why do I think young people are willing to cross ideological lines? Well, I think, in part, it's because young people recognize that the challenges we face are so big and have such significant implications for how we're going to be able to inhabit this earth that things like whether you're a Republican or you're a Democrat seem insignificant in comparison.

When we're thinking about issues like climate change and talking about what the future of our planet looks like, young people have the most at stake. We have the most to lose when our leaders are not pursuing policies that have an eye toward the longterm. Half the world's population is under the age of 30, and I think we take that as both a responsibility and then also as an opportunity.

ASHLEY: Danielle?

DANIELLE: Yeah, I think a lot of it also just has to do with the way that we were raised and with our education about the issue. When I was growing up, in school, I was seeing everywhere conversations about climate change or even just recycling bins around campus. These are issues that we've grown up talking about, and we're not denying the science. So it's something that we all have in common and that we can all relate to one another on, and because of that, I think we're very willing to bridge ideological gaps and have conversations because it's something that we are all educated on and all care about.

RICHARD: There was a poll conducted in 2020 which found that 80% or 8 in 10 voters 18-29 said that global warming is a major threat to human life on earth. Danielle, as a Conservative, do you agree with that?

DANIELLE: I do. I do think that climate change is a threat, and there are a lot of implications, whether that be about energy or national security or food scarcity. There are so many challenges posed by climate change, and it's so much bigger than just ice caps melting for the polar bears. This is an issue that has consequences for real people across the world. So, yes, I do agree that it's a challenge that we face, and it's a very serious one at that.

ASHLEY: Andrew, how did you become a climate activist in the first place? Take us back. You were quite young.

ANDREW: Well, I actually came into learning more about climate and working more on climate from the perspective of education. My background is really in education advocacy, and to Danielle's point, the externalities of climate change have really significant implications for our schools and for our students. Just to give one example, we have over 450,000 diesel school buses in this country. And the research is very clear on the impact that diesel fuel emissions has both on our environment but also on student health. So I first came into environmentalism and learning more about climate change through that lens.

RICHARD: Andrew, share with us that story about your involvement with school buses and cleaning them up in Kentucky.

ANDREW: Well, in Kentucky, 95% of our school bus fleet is powered by diesel fuel. What we know about diesel fuel is that it's not only quickly becoming obsolete, but it's bad for the environment, it harms student health, and it inhibits academic achievement. So, as education decision-makers are trying to think about how to move policy forward in a way that strengthens school districts and also addresses the environment, diesel school buses is a place to look.

We have made some progress on this in Kentucky. We've had programs in the past that have tried to begin to transition us to hybrid school bus options, but we are still purchasing new diesel school buses in the state using money that's been allocated for protecting the environment. So, to me, issues like that are what I like to call Duh Coalition issues, issues where they're so obviously problematic that you look at them and you think, "Well, duh, that should not be a thing anymore." And the power of the Duh Coalition transcends party lines. I will say that because, at the end of the day, good public policy protects people and our planet, and I think young people are looking for that from our leaders.

RICHARD: Danielle, you wrote a very interesting article for the National Review on how hunting or hunters can be involved in conserving the land and that that also plays an important role when it comes to protecting the environment.

DANIELLE: Absolutely. I think hunters have a critical role to play in conservation. Sportsmen spend so much of their time in nature and on the land, and they know what the ecosystem looks like, and they know how to care for it. I think involving them in these discussions rather than exiling them is really the best way forward. These people are already contributing to conservation. All of their hunting and licensing fees goes back into conservation programs. And, if these people want to continue their hobby and continue their lifestyle, they have to sustain the land. So there's a vested interest in them doing so.

ASHLEY: Danielle, tell us a little bit about what got you into this work. Obviously, you grew up in the countryside, it sounds like, but what else influenced you?

DANIELLE: Yeah. I grew up in northern Minnesota, which if you know anything about Minnesota, there are lakes everywhere, and it's just truly beautiful country. In addition to that, I grew up with a father who worked in the solar industry. So I was able to see firsthand how clean energy could impact communities, specifically low-income communities where his work was focused. I think it's a really, really good opportunity for us to seize on both to fight climate change but also to lift up communities that need lifting up.

ASHLEY: Do you think that growing up in a smaller place, in a small town, has influenced your ability to find common ground with other people?

DANIELLE: I absolutely think so. I think that, in a small town or in a small community, there is so much more investment in the people, in the land. To give you an example, I grew up hunting with my dad, which is why I was able to write that piece. And there was an agreement between my dad, my family, and our neighbors who we shared land with, which was we wouldn't harvest deer that were young. We wouldn't harvest young bucks or animals that were in ripe breeding stages. So, because of that, we were able to keep the deer population very healthy, very strong, and still enjoy this pastime of ours.

That's something that can only happen on the local level. You can mandate that something like that happen, or you could, but you don't have any buy-in from the people who are participating. So, because we have that local connection and that network of people who all care about this land, we're able to conserve it much more efficiently.

RICHARD: Ashley asked about whether growing up in a small town can make you more openminded or be better at seeking common ground. Andrew, what about you as a Liberal living in the South, in Kentucky?

ANDREW: As a Liberal, as a Black man, as a queer individual, it's been very interesting growing up in the South and in Kentucky. I'll say Kentucky is my home, and I love Kentucky, but we have our challenges when it comes to accepting people that are different from you. What I will say, though, is that growing up in Kentucky, I always had friends that were from the other side of the aisle. There was a program that I participated in that is actually the largest youth-in-government program in the country... is in Kentucky.

What it is is essentially a mock legislature, where young people from around the state are brought together to debate different kinds of issues with one another literally in the state capitol chambers. I think the message that that program and others like that in Kentucky tried to send from a young age is that these are issues that are important to our state but that can be discussed with civility and on a basis of research. So I have lots of friends that are from both sides of the aisle here in the state. Families are quite diverse, as you can imagine.

But, to Danielle's point, I think it's about... When you're from a small place, relationships matter. There's no world where you can say, "Well, I'm not going to work with that barber down the street," when they're the only barber, and they happen to be a Republican.

ASHLEY: Going back to the diesel school bus issue, I know that there's been particular success, hasn't there, in one part of Kentucky? Can you tell that story?

ANDREW: Well, I'll just say that, back in 2011, using some money from the federal government, which was actually an outcrop of some of the stimulus money that was coming out during the time, Kentucky made a big investment in transitioning our diesel fleet from diesel to alternative sources. But what's most interesting about this investment is that the two districts that took the biggest advantage of the program were our largest urban center, our Democratic stronghold in Louisville, Kentucky, and also a very rural community, a Conservative community in far eastern Kentucky, in Pikeville.

So what I think that says to you is... And they each pursued this for different reasons, but the outcome was really the same. I think there's two lessons here. The first is that folks like to make assumptions about Kentucky, but the truth is that we are making progress on these issues in really significant ways. Second, these two communities, they're very different communities. They have very different problems that they face. But a solution was able to be found that would work for both of them that they could work together and elevate it.

RICHARD: This is Let's Find Common Ground. Our interview is with Danielle Butcher and Andrew Brennen. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: Next, we're asking: what does it take to combat hate?

ASHLEY: That's the question being asked in a most unusual way in a Common Ground Committee live online event. Our guests are Daryl Davis and Ryan Lo'Ree. The event is on June 14th at 7:00 p.m. Eastern time.

RICHARD: Daryl is an award-winning Black musician and race reconciliator. He's used the power of human connection to convince hundreds of people to leave white supremacist groups. Actually, we spoke with him about his work on Episode 5 of our podcast last year. Here's just a little bit.

DARYL DAVIS: I've been looking for this answer to my question since the age of 10: how can you hate me when you don't even know me? And no book and no one had been able to provide it to me. Here, a clansman falls right into my lap. Who better to ask?

ASHLEY: Daryl Davis on Let's Find Common Ground. His fellow guest at the Zoom event will be Ryan Lo'Ree, a former White Supremacist and extremist. He's now an interventionist working to deradicalize people who have been lured into extremism and white supremacy.

RICHARD: Register now to join them for the live conversation moderated by New York Times columnist David Brooks. They'll discuss strategies that work to combat hate and how we can all play a part.

ASHLEY: Go to commongroundcommittee.org to get the link and find out more. Turning Racism and Extremism into Hope and Healing is sponsored by Bridge Alliance and Common Ground Committee, and it takes place on June 14th.

RICHARD: Now back to our interview with Danielle Butcher and Andrew Brennen.

ASHLEY: Danielle, you may be from a small town, but now you're living in Texas, in Dallas, I think, and Texas has long been associated with oil and gas production, obviously. But why is Texas so important to conservation and mitigating climate change?

DANIELLE: Well, Texas is a really interesting state because, as you pointed out, it is known for its oil and gas industry. But what a lot of people don't realize is that Texas has opened its energy markets, which has really allowed alternative energy forms to succeed. I know nuclear is a very big source of energy here in Texas, and wind is actually huge here in Texas. In fact, if Texas were its own country, it would be the second largest producer of wind power in the world.

A lot of people don't know that. So I think Texas has a very important role to play in the fight against climate change by showing that you can incorporate an all-of-the-above energy portfolio, reduce emissions, and still have cost-efficient, cheap energy for your citizens.

RICHARD: We try to find common ground with this podcast, but that doesn't necessarily mean we find agreement. Let's talk for a few moments about areas where you disagree. First, Danielle, what's your bottom line as someone who believes that climate change is a crisis but doesn't favor as big a role for government as people on the Left do.

DANIELLE: The challenges that I see with the mainstream environmental movement is that they oftentimes leave behind specific communities whether that's low-income communities that can't afford to transition to electric cars, whether that's Republicans or Conservatives who aren't a part of these conversations or whether that's traditional energy workers who are worried about losing their jobs. I think we have to be realistic, and we have to put people first and recognize that we can't expect people to just overhaul their entire lives in five years.

ASHLEY: Andrew, what about you. When you hear Danielle talking, what do you think? Do you disagree? Do you find points of agreement?

ANDREW: Well, I guess my first reaction is that, when I think about communities left behind, I think about many of the communities in rural Kentucky that have been subjected to fundamentally extractive approaches to resource development that have left many of them at pretty high rates of poverty. We have energy companies that have come into the state and harvested coal from parts of our state and then really left communities ravaged, poisoned, left behind.

So, when I think about communities that have been left behind, I see our green energy economy as an opportunity to bring them forward, to include them. I think there's a lot of opportunity, for example, in eastern Kentucky for things like solar panels, especially where old mines, and there's a lot of that work being done. But, also, I'm not really sure what the mainstream environmental conversation is, as Danielle references. I know what the media elevates a lot when it comes to climate, which is whatever protests happen to be occurring that week.

But when I talk to young people around the world, they are engaged in such a diversity of climate-oriented, climate-protection-type activities, activities that range from protesting, yes, but also incredible research, storytelling that moves people to action, peer-to-peer education, scalable service projects where they're planting hundreds of thousands of trees around the world. And many of them are doing it with an eye toward: how do we engage with the communities more affected and impacted by the climate emergency that went unaddressed for far too long? So I guess I just push back on those specific elements.

In general, I agree completely that every single person needs to be part of this conversation and that it's not either/or when it comes to industry or government. But I guess I'm not sure, really, what the mainstream environmental conversation really is and what Danielle means by that. Then, also, I'm just thinking about all the communities that have been left behind because we've refused to address our climate emergency for so long.

RICHARD: Danielle, what do you mean by that?

DANIELLE: Yeah. I think that when you are involved in a movement and you are looking to make change, you have to take a realistic view of how you are perceived by others and how your movement is perceived by others. From my perspective and the perspective of many others, the mainstream environmental movement would be that of which is Andrew is speaking to, which is the big protests, the Green New Deal, the Sunrise movement, Extinction Rebellion. That is what the majority of people who aren't involved in climate activism think of when they think of climate activism.

That's part of why my organization was founded, because time and time again, we would talk to people who were not politically involved, and they would say, "I care about the environment, but I don't want to participate in something that is so divisive or something that is so extreme." So that's, like I said, part of why we founded the organization that I work for, because the environmental movement at large does tend to have a very polarizing approach, and I think it turns a lot of people off. So, to Andrew's point, we need to be bringing all communities together in this, and I think that starts with taking a realistic view of how the movement is currently perceived.

RICHARD: Danielle, what is the movement you're involved with, American Conservation Coalition? What's that about?

DANIELLE: The American Conservation Coalition is a nonprofit organization that was founded by a group of young leaders in 2017. These were people who cared about the environment and were turned off by polarizing rhetoric or this idea that we only had 10 years, 9 years to act before we reach the point of no return. We want to see an environmental movement that is focused on collaboration, on finding common ground, on realistic solutions, so sort of what Andrew was saying with the Duh Coalition. I would say that we subscribe to that mentality of finding common sense solutions. And most importantly, we want the environmental movement to be focused on hope and optimism and give people something to fight for that they can believe because they believe that it will get better, and they're excited for that future.

ASHLEY: But also, I think you called it market-based environmentalism, right? Can you talk a little bit more about that aspect and how it works?

DANIELLE: Yeah. Market-based solutions are, I think, very important because it's not the idea that governments should not be involved at all because of course government has a role in fighting climate change and in protecting the environment. But market-based environmentalism is the idea that corporations or companies can also be spearheading sustainability efforts, and they had responded to market signals such as consumers demanding more green options.

We've seen this with the electric car industry, where Tesla has really been booming, and there are many other companies following suit. We've seen this with companies like Google who have pledged to reach net zero emissions by 2030. We've seen this in all different sectors where corporations and businesses are leading sustainability practices because it's what their consumers are demanding of them.

ASHLEY: Andrew, is there anything you want to say to that?

ANDREW: I agree with that. I think that markets play a necessary but insufficient role when it comes to the policies and practices that we're going to need to protect our climate moving forward. Look, government has always played a supplementary role to industry when it comes to making innovations that maybe are not very profitable in the near-term for industries but accrue benefit to humanity in the longterm. Look just at this COVID-19 vaccine that received billions of dollars from the government in support of production.

So I think markets play a role, sure, but I think it's an insufficient role, and I think the evidence of that is that 95% of our buses are still diesel. The technologies that are needed to get us to where we need to be in terms of climate, they don't all exist, but progress toward identifying them, much of that progress is funded by the government. So I agree with Danielle, but I just want to emphasize that you can't rely on corporations alone.

DANIELLE: Well, what I would say to that is that all progress has been insufficient but particularly from the government. To your point about 95% of buses being diesel, that's a really great point. I think, in instances like this, government oftentimes gets in its very own way. That happens time and time again. We see with nuclear energy, for instance, nuclear is the largest source of carbon-free energy in the world, and yet the permitting process for a nuclear energy plant can take upwards of 10 years just to get permits much less to build it and begin producing energy. So I think we see, time and time again, government has the right intentions, but they get in their own way.

ANDREW: But I think the reason why there's some regulation that probably does need to be loosened but is being done intentionally is because we have had nuclear accidents here in the United States. And I think that there are some people who are rightfully a little bit anxious about that. So I think it's great to trust markets to do things, but we have to do it eyes wide open, understanding that they're not the silver bullet,

and government plays, I think, an essential role in both helping to spur innovation and keeping us safe.

RICHARD: I'm sure both of you look at this a little bit differently, but before we go, a common ground question to end on, which is: what have each of you learned about the process of working with others, often of different ages, different viewpoints, for a common goal? Do you have advice for others? Danielle?

DANIELLE: I think it's really important to approach things with an open mind and not automatically assume that you're going to disagree with someone because of course you're going to disagree with someone. You could disagree with anyone on something. But approaching conversations with this mindset of productivity: where can we agree, and what can we do about it, what is the next step after agreeing? is what I've found to be the best piece of advice.

RICHARD: Andrew?

ANDREW: I say to start small. Collaboration is a muscle that you have to exercise. So finding opportunities to collaborate that are maybe on a smaller issue or in a smaller way to help build trust and build relationships goes a long way in tackling bigger problems down the road. So that's my advice to people.

ASHLEY: Danielle and Andrew, thanks so much for talking to us for Let's Find Common Ground.

ANDREW: Thank you for having us.

DANIELLE: Thank you.

RICHARD: Andrew Brennen and Danielle Butcher on Let's Find Common Ground. We hope you enjoy our podcast, and if you do, we'd love it if you could leave us a review. The more reviews we get, the more likely it is that our podcast will come to the attention of others who also want to focus on what unites us, not what divides us.

ASHLEY: And if you're into our show, another podcast we think you'll like is Another Way. It's the podcast of Equal Citizens founded by democracy reformer and Harvard Law professor, Larry Lessig.

RICHARD: In each episode, they break down what's wrong with our democracy and how it can be fixed with some of the best minds in the business.

ASHLEY: They recently sat down with Jimmy Wales, Cofounder of Wikipedia, to unpack the growing polarization in the media, digital algorithms, and the addictiveness of technology. They also look at some solutions. Give it a listen. Just search for another way.

RICHARD: And you can find more episodes from our show, Let's Find Common Ground, in your podcast feed or by going to commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts. I'm Richard Davies.

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

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.