

LFCG Episode 46

ASHLEY: From polarization to COVID, climate, and rising inflation, we're facing all kinds of problems right now. Today, we share stories of people who are responding in a positive way, problem solvers. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. This year-end episode is unusual. We're spotlighting another series of podcasts. They're called People Making a Difference from The Christian Science Monitor.

ASHLEY: We speak with the paper's engagement editor, Dave Scott, about these stories of extraordinary individuals, people who are stepping up, overcoming great obstacles, and using generosity, passion, and innovation to help others.

DAVE: What they have in common is that they are all loving their neighbors. They're out there finding ways to make the world better by reaching out to other people. They do that in a very unique way, whether it's Daisy Hampton, a 12-year-old from New York City who's addressing bullying by setting up a mentorship program, the bullying of disabled kids. In her case, she'd grown up going to school basically through fifth grade in what's called an ICT program. It's a program where you have disabled kids mixed in with regular kids, and they have a special ed teacher and a regular teacher. So she grew up watching these kids, becoming best friends with them, and then she started to see, as they got older, some of her friends were bullying some of the other friends.

ASHLEY: Here's part of what Daisy Hampton told you on your podcast.

DAISY: It was sad to see how some of my own friends who'd I known for a while making fun of my classmate with a disability. Yeah, that really, especially raised my awareness of the exclusion in school communities for kids with disabilities, and I really wanted to make others more aware of it.

RICHARD: And she did. Daisy and her mom founded Including You, an organization set up for kids to mentor other kids who experienced learning or physical disabilities.

ASHLEY: Given that the media tends to cover catastrophes and conflicts, and its focus is often on what is wrong with the world, was this also partly an attempt to counter that narrative?

DAVE: I think these stories do inherently do that. I think that, fundamentally, The Monitor believes that there's just as much good going on in the world as bad, which makes it distinct as a news organization in that approach. So these stories definitely go to a place where you're discovering people who are doing very positive, very uplifting things. And one of the intents

of the podcast was to help connect to those people and maybe uplift you to the point where you can see that this is possible to do in your own life, as well.

RICHARD: But, Dave, that's a challenge because it's much easier to tell the story of a clash or tell the story of a disaster than it is, often, to tell the quiet story of someone who's making a difference one-by-one, person-to-person.

DAVE: I guess. I just feel like, if you listen to these individuals, I get goosebumps even now when I listen back to the things that they're saying and doing. That's not hard for me to do, just go listen to people who are just inspiring and what they're doing and why they're doing it. It's just remarkable to me.

RICHARD: Well, let's listen to one of those individuals. Margaret Jankowski launched the Sewing Machine Project, which is a great example of what you're talking about.

MARGARET: And quite often, I would hear, "Well, I wonder what I'll do with my old sewing machine." And I was just thinking, "This is crazy, the imbalance." In fact, I remember sitting here holding up my two hands and thinking, "This is so out of balance. Here are people that just don't even know what they're going to do with this old thing, and then there are people to whom it would make a world of difference."

ASHLEY: Yeah, the Sewing Machine Project is a great example of what you're talking about. Margaret has given away, I think, more than 3,000 or 3,300 secondhand sewing machines. Can you talk about how that started, how that project got going in the first place, and why sewing machines?

DAVE: Sure. Well, first of all, Margaret is an aficionado. She works with sewing machines. She sells sewing machines. She sews. She just loves sewing machines. But, for her, it all started back in 2004 when the tsunami hit in Asia, and she, like the rest of us, was trying to figure out what she could do to help. And she saw a story by a BBC reporter following a woman back to her village, and the woman said the one thing she hoped she would find was her sewing machine. And, of course, Margaret immediately related to that, and she thought, "Well, I work in this sewing machine shop, and people all the time are buying new machines and then dropping off their old ones, wondering, 'What should I do with this?'" And she thought, "There's such an imbalance. Here's a woman on the other side of the planet who... the sewing machine is her lifeblood. Then people on this side of the planet are saying, 'Oh, what should I do with this old thing?'" And she thought, "Maybe I could connect the two." That's how she got started with this project. She said, "I was just feeling small. I was like, 'What can one person do to help in a situation like this?'" And she just started with that small idea of, "Maybe I can deliver a sewing machine or two to somebody on the other side of the planet."

ASHLEY: The Sewing Machine Project is partially about dealing with an imbalance. In wealthy countries, many people don't know what to do with their old sewing machines. But Margaret found that in places where meeting the most basic needs is a daily struggle, a sewing machine can make a big difference to people's daily lives.

DAVE: She gives the example of a woman named Mama Patrick, and Mama Patrick lives in Tanzania. So, when she got her sewing machine from the Sewing Machine Project in Madison, Wisconsin, she went ahead and started to sew. She started a business teaching others to sew, and then she started her own sort of fashion business. Out of that, she was able to pay for the school fees for her children and start to put food on the table for her kids. Margaret tells that story as how a sewing machine can just radically change the lives of other individuals around the world, and she's seen it again and again. When this story came out, I actually got an email from a woman from Nigeria who said that she and her two sisters' lives were transformed by sewing machines. One of her sisters is now a fashion designer in Europe because she learned how to sew.

ASHLEY: Going back to the beginning of 2005 when Margaret had her idea for the Sewing Machine Project, she got some pushback, right?

DAVE: Oh, absolutely. She went to her boss at one point and said... at the sewing machine shop and said, "How about we do this?" And he was like, "Eh, I don't think so." Again and again, she was met with questions like, "How are you going to do this?" These are reasonable doubts, raising key questions like, "Well, how are you going to get the machines there? Who are you going to actually send them to?" All these different questions, and I think what I found interesting about Margaret is that she learned how to overcome these doubts by sticking with her idea but also listening for answers. She calls it listening to the universe.

MARGARET: It has changed the way that I see the world. I would say, most significantly, it's changed the way that I approach any sort of challenge. Prior to doing this work, I wasn't really part of any faith community, and although the Sewing Machine Project isn't a faith-based community, it has informed my faith. It's taught me that my imagination is limited by what I know and by what I've experienced. But the imagination of the universe is boundless. So it's changed the way that I wish for things or I ask for things or, you could say, I pray for things. Instead of saying, "I wish I had a whatever," I think, "No, I don't know how this needs to end. I don't know how this needs to be answered." So I sit back and say, "Help me see what I need to do now."

DAVE: Again and again as she paused, listened, there was an answer that would come. For example, at one point, she was trying to raise money to send these sewing machines over to Asia. She had talked to the Rotary Club. She'd talked to Kiwanis. She'd talked to the Girl

Scouts. She'd gotten some response from that, and then she talked to somebody in the school district, and the school district said, "Well, we are raising money to help these people that have been victims of the tsunami, but we're not sure what we can get you." And Margaret just needed \$2,000. A few days later, the woman called back and said, "Well, I don't know if this is helpful. All I have is \$2,000." Again and again, Margaret would see the answers come like that. She learned along the way how to do this, and she learned to trust along the way.

RICHARD: Listening and trust are vital in Margaret's case. What about other people you spoke to? Were they also good listeners?

DAVE: Yes. I think one of the more interesting cases was a man named Ojok Okello in Uganda. Now, Ojok has two master's degrees, including one from the London School of Economics in Rural Development. He's worked for more than a decade with NGOs around Africa. But when he went back to his father's ancestral village... He'd never actually been there himself. His father had left 30 years before. He went back there to just sort of discover his roots. While he was there, he got an idea that maybe he could do something to help this village, but he was a stranger. They didn't know him. Even though his father had lived there way back when, nobody knew him. So he really went in there as a stranger. I said, "So how did you win their trust?" And he said, "By listening. They didn't care about my degrees from the London School of Economics. But as I listened," he was able to learn what they needed. They needed a primary school. They needed an adult literacy program. They needed some way to improve their banking. They needed a co-op. He listened and then helped facilitate each one of these things, and in the course of like two years, this village had rallied together with his help to create all these different things.

ASHLEY: It's interesting because listening has come up so often in our interviews for Let's Find Common Ground as being this key skill that you need to allow yourself to see that you have common ground with somebody else. I do want to ask you, do you think that there's a common ground element to these stories that you've looked into?

DAVE: Oh, yeah, absolutely. One of the profiles we did was of an NGO called LavaMaeX. "Lave mae" is "wash me" in Spanish. Their deal is they create mobile showers. They bring showers to the homeless. So a big truck will pull up with several showering facilities in it, and the homeless can come take a shower. They also have what they call pop-up care villages, which is lots of other services: legal aid, housing, haircuts, health care, all sorts of things around this. So the shower is essentially this first step for many people in restoring dignity and rekindling a sense of optimism. You know how we all feel after we step out of the shower. We just feel better. But there's a key ingredient there, which is finding that common ground you mentioned, which they call radical hospitality. It's a mindset of forming a relationship. They call them guests. They call each person who comes and takes a shower a guest.

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ASHLEY: I noticed that.

DAVE: Yeah, and for them, it's about building a relationship. They do that by showing up regularly. Every week, they're there.

RICHARD: Dave Scott of The Christian Science Monitor, talking about the folks he met while recording episodes of the podcast, People Making a Difference. More about LavaMaeX and other stories in a minute. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley. This is a special edition of our podcast. We're shining a light on personal efforts to help people in need. This is our 46th episode. Let's Find Common Ground is produced for Common Ground Committee.

RICHARD: Please consider making a tax-deductible year-end donation at commongroundcommittee.org to support our show and other bridge-building accomplishments of Common Ground Committee.

ASHLEY: Now a word about the National Day of Dialogue coming up on January 5th.

SPEAKER 1: I'm really looking forward to hearing people's views on abortion, environmentalism, and immigration.

SPEAKER 2: The division makes me feel frustrated.

SPEAKER 3: A single news story can make me feel like I'm an expert on a topic, but a single discussion with someone who knows a lot more than me will make me very quickly realize I am not.

SPEAKER 4: You just heard a clip from Ideos Institute's documentary, Dialogue Lab America, premiering on January 5th as part of the National Day of Dialogue. Sign up to watch the film and join a nationwide movement of empathy and action. Visit www.nationaldayofdialogue.com.

ASHLEY: Now, back to our interview with Dave Scott. As we've heard, LavaMaeX is about much more than bringing hot showers to homeless people.

DAVE: A key element is that pop-up care village where you're the... you step out of the shower, and then what? Well, you actually have all these different services, people they've gathered together to offer to help them facilitate the next step in their lives whether it's just getting a haircut or getting a job interview or whatever. I think the other thing that

struck me about LavaMaeX... I spoke with Kris Kepler, who's the CEO there. She says, "You know, that sense of empathy is so important, and it's just very simple. It's just stepping up and asking somebody their name and how they're doing." She says, "We are all just two paychecks and a crisis away from being on the street." And once you start to see individuals as your brother, your sister, your mother, your father, it makes a whole difference in how you treat the individuals that they're treating.

KRIS: When people are on the streets, they're seen is invisible, and their dignity is stripped from them. They are not even seen as humans. So part of what we do is we teach people how to re-humanize those that are on the streets. It really starts with simple, simple things like a, "Hello. How are you?" learning their name, "How was your day?" So part of it is how you interact with guests and making them feel seen and acknowledged.

RICHARD: Kris Kepler of LavaMaeX. We also spoke with Dave about finding common ground, the subject of our podcast. One of the projects that he's been reporting on has common ground in its DNA. It's called Global Gardens, a group that teaches kids gardening skills and works with young children through sixth grade at about a dozen schools in mostly low-income parts of Tulsa, Oklahoma.

DAVE: What they say their core values are science, peace, and empowerment, but really what they're teaching is not so much gardening as how to manage conflict, how to deal with each other. You could argue that in today's polarized world, what could be a more valuable skill than learning how to manage conflict?

ASHLEY: That was interesting in that podcast, the story came up of these two little girls who always kind of came to blows, not necessarily physical blows, but they always ended up arguing, right?

DAVE: Yes, Tamara and Javiana, they were constantly arguing with each other. One of the key pieces of this program is what they call a peace table. They say it's pretty normal for kids to have conflict, actually. Just put them together, and you're going to see conflict. But the way they manage that is quite interesting, which is they sit the two kids down with a facilitator, one of the teachers, and that's where they get to vent what it is that's on their mind and to share what it is that's going on. In this case with Tamara and Javiana, they were both feeling disrespected, and they weren't feeling like they were being heard. Once they both realized that they were both feeling exactly the same thing, they made a deal that they would try to listen to one another, and they would try not to yell, and they wouldn't have to feel like they had to yell to be heard. Now, the facilitator also said that it didn't immediately result in peace and harmony, but when things got tense again between them, they could turn around and say, "Remember we talked about this and that we can trust each other to really listen?" What a tremendous lesson for those kids to learn at an early age because we,

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too, as adults, when we feel angry or upset, it's often because we feel disrespected or not heard.

RICHARD: We've talked a fair amount about listening, but what about trust? So often, I think that when we believe we can't do anything to make a difference, it's because we're fearful. Is the work of these people you profiled also about building greater trust with people not like you?

DAVE: Yeah, I think LavaMaeX, the group that gives showers for the homeless, that's very much about building trust. But to get to a place of trust, you have to start to learn about other people. You have to listen, and you have to figure out what they need. That's getting out of yourself and focusing on someone else.

ASHLEY: Anyone who lives in a city is quite likely to walk past homeless people quite a lot, and you do wonder what you should be doing. Does Kris Kepler of LavaMaeX talk about that?

DAVE: She does. She's not encouraging you to give money. She's not encouraging you to go take them to give them a shower or whatever, but she says just talk to them. Treat them like a regular human being.

KRIS: When you see something like an encampment or you see somebody on the street, do not assume that they are drug-addicted or have mental health issues. They are someone's mother or brother or sister, and you need to be able to empathize with that and say, "It could be me," and ask, "Do you need anything?" Even just looking them in the eye and acknowledging them... I think the number one thing for us is we don't assume anything. We have zero judgment. We just understand, "What do you need, and how can I help?"

RICHARD: Did you get a sense from LavaMaeX volunteers or other people on other projects who gave their time out of care and love, what do they get from doing this work? It wasn't just a matter of helping others, was it?

DAVE: No. If you talk to Margaret Jankowski... I did ask her. I said, "You've been doing this now for 16 years." She's been giving out sewing machines all around the world whether it's with abused women in Madison or Hurricane Katrina survivors, all over the place. When I asked her, "So, Margaret, how has this transformed you?" she said, "It's changed the way I walk in the world." And I said, "Well, what do you mean by that?" And she said, "I just have learned that I can trust," what she calls, "the universe for answers. I know that if I listen for something, the answers come."

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MARGARET: My line that I use all the time is, "Shine a big old light on what I'm supposed to do now." More often than not, I get the answers I need, and they're almost always beyond anything I would've dreamed of. That's a huge game-changer for me. It has changed the way I walk in the world.

RICHARD: Dave, I want to ask you a personal question.

DAVE: Go.

RICHARD: What did you get out of this? Why did you approach this story in this way? I guess those are two questions.

DAVE: Right. Well, I do find these individuals, when I read about them, to be very inspiring, and I wanted to just connect and talk to them personally.

ASHLEY: Do you hope that everybody of all different types of political persuasions will be equally affected by these stories, get a lot out of them?

DAVE: I don't think there's any politics per se in the framing of these stories. These are just individuals. I don't know whether they're Left, Right, or down the middle. But these are individuals that just see their fellow man in need and are taking steps to help them.

RICHARD: We've talked about this in previous podcasts, and it's a question about media and what kinds of stories we choose to read. Do you think there's just too much negative coverage about the world out there?

DAVE: It probably isn't as important what I think as what audiences think, consumers of news thing. We've talked to dozens upon dozens of individuals over the last two years who have told us exactly that, "The news is too nasty I turn it off. It's not inspiring. It's mean. It's nasty. It comes from one side or comes from another, and I just don't find that it helps my life." And, yes, these People Making a Difference stories are a counterpoint to that and are for people that perhaps may have turned off to the Left and the Right and are looking for something a little more uplifting in their news diet.

ASHLEY: Dave Scott, Engagement Editor of The Christian Science Monitor. Hear all eight episodes of People Making a Difference on most podcast apps and at this website. Richard, you have the address.

RICHARD: Yeah, it's csmonitor.com/podcasts. We also have a link at our website, which is commongroundcommittee.org. I'm Richard Davies.

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ASHLEY: I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Thanks for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground, and thanks to our editor, Miranda Shafer, who we rely on to put this show together every two weeks.

RICHARD: And thanks to the team at Common Ground Committee, who helps us with ideas, inspiration, and much more, Erik Olsen, Bruce Bond, Donna Vislocky, Mary Anglade, and Isabella Moore.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.