

ASHLEY: So far this year, there have been more than 10 mass shootings in America every week. The tragic pace is on a par with last year. Mass shootings are so frequent they're often barely mentioned on network news. While most Americans say gun policies will be important to their vote in the midterm election, people are still divided on gun control versus gun rights. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Our guests on today's show are part of the school shooting generation, Gen Z. Each grew up with active shooter drills and concerns that their school could be next. Today, students Sophie Holtzman and Jackson Hoppe are both sophomores at George Washington University.

ASHLEY: They're also joint vice presidents of their college's chapter of BridgeUSA, an organization that brings students of different ideologies together to have open discussions on politics and seek a path to common ground.

RICHARD: Sophie Holtzman and Jackson Hoppe, welcome to Let's Find Common Ground.

SOPHIE: Thank you.

JACKSON: Yeah, thank you.

RICHARD: We wanted to talk to you now because the school year has begun. How important or divisive is the issue of gun reform on campus? Sophie, first.

SOPHIE: I think that it's both of utmost importance and also of utmost divisiveness. I think that GW could not be more politically polarized in terms of where people stand on various issues, and it's really important that we come together on things. And that's why we're here today.

RICHARD: Jackson?

JACKSON: Yeah, I completely agree with Sophie. I think that the issue that we're seeing after school shootings is that there's no solutions, and if there are, they conflict with other people's solutions. And the important thing is that we need to find common ground to reduce this massive issue, and, if we don't, it's just going to keep happening. It's the same cycle over and over again of nothing happening and no change being made. And, I mean, after the shootings we've seen this summer and in the spring, I think it's time for us to come together to come up with a solution.

ASHLEY: You two grew up in the years after the massacres at Sandy Hook, the one at Parkland High School, and then most recently, Uvalde. Security at schools across the country was tightened because of these killings. There's a far less relaxed, easygoing atmosphere in schools than there was 20 or 30 years ago or more that Richard and I were in school. How personal is this for each of you?

SOPHIE: Growing up with news that is almost desensitizing every day, I almost feel like the first time I heard about a mass shooting, I was just completely gutted by it, and now, when I read about them, it's almost just another day in the news, which is horrible.

RICHARD: Were you frightened when you heard an alarm? Because when I heard an alarm as a kid at school, I thought, "Oh, it's just a fire alarm, just testing out equipment."

SOPHIE: Yeah, I can definitely say I was frightened every time I heard an alarm, and I was almost relieved when I graduated high school because the possibility of a school shooting was a lot less. Unfortunately, I still have a little sister in high school. My mom works in a high school. So I still think about it pretty frequently.

RICHARD: Where is that?

SOPHIE: It's in Kentucky. I went to school in Kentucky, and that is where I am located right now, also.

ASHLEY: Jackson?

JACKSON: Yeah, I completely agree with Sophie. I went to a private school here in Nashville, Tennessee, and we had a resource officer, and we had someone who would, you know, be the guy if a shooter came into our school. We would have drills, and we wouldn't know if it was a drill or not, pretty much, until it was over.

ASHLEY: Just switching to your backgrounds for a minute, Sophie, how would you describe your politics and your political leanings?

SOPHIE: I would say that I'm definitely left-leaning politically. Recently, I've been going a little bit more back and forth about it. I used to be a lot further left, I would say. But I also think that it's important that, while I have my left-leaning ideologies, I am tolerant of other people's. That's kind of because where I come from in Kentucky, I have family on both sides of the political spectrum, and navigating family events, as I'm sure many people have experienced, it's really, really difficult, and it's very stressful to keep up with political conversations and conversations about current events. No matter what, I love all of my family members and friends, and that has really shown me that no matter the political view, people are people. And there are a lot of good people out there whose voices are getting drowned out by all the bad people who are extremists on either side of the spectrum.

ASHLEY: Jackson, how about you? Can you give us a sense of where and how you grew up and where you lean politically?

JACKSON: I would definitely say I'm on the right wing, Conservative side specifically. This summer and in the spring, I started working in a variety of positions that have kind of, I guess, nurtured that both on the campaign and federal and state levels here in Tennessee. As you

might know, Tennessee is a very conservative state. I grew up in kind of the conservative suburbs of Nashville, if you will. So that really changed and altered my perspective on politics. However, that being said, I think that there is definitely a time and a place for finding common ground and finding bipartisanship. I think it's really sad to see people get cut off from each other simply because of politics. I don't think that that's right, and you see a lot of it, I will admit, at GW where people get harassed for their political beliefs, and things and stereotypes are said about them that aren't even true.

ASHLEY: Has that ever happened to you?

JACKSON: Yeah, there have been certain times where I felt people only focused on my political beliefs, and they didn't try to talk to me as a person or try to understand where I was coming from.

SOPHIE: Yeah, I would definitely agree with that. I feel like, at my high school, I was on the other end of it. People weren't necessarily willing to talk to me about politics because I was in a very conservative environment. Then, coming to GW, I almost feel like it's a little bit of an echo chamber sometimes with Liberal ideologies, and that's completely different for me. I've never experienced it before, and I think that people have a lot of different ideas about the South, specifically, as a region. Jackson has probably experienced this. I get a lot of stereotypes about my history with my education and my political views. So I think that no matter where you go, people say the grass is always greener, but I feel like both environments that I've been in, I've been navigating a very divisive political climate.

ASHLEY: Going back to guns, the last time we talked to somebody about guns on this show, he was a gun owner. He owned a ton of guns. So I'm just curious, Jackson, starting with you, did you grow up shooting? Are you familiar with guns?

JACKSON: No, I didn't grow up shooting, surprisingly. The first time I ever went shooting was actually this past January or February in Virginia with some friends, while we were in school, and I had a great time. Growing up, I didn't really go hunting or any of that. I had plenty of friends who did that, and it looked like a lot of fun. So, yeah, I would say it's a very personal thing to me, in a way, even though I don't own a gun right now. I know plenty of people who do.

SOPHIE: I would echo what Jackson just said. I don't personally own a gun, but actually I did kind of grow up around guns. I had a youth hunting license in the State of Kentucky for pretty much the entirety of my elementary school and middle school years, and I have a lot of family members and friends who own guns. So I would say that this is a sensitive issue for me, as well. And I think it's important to come in the gun rights and gun control debate with a knowledge of guns and kind of the basic parts that make guns work because one of the most annoying things is seeing people who agree with me on the topic of gun control but could not tell you a single fact about how guns work or differentiate a semiautomatic rifle from just a handgun.

RICHARD: Recently, a new compromise gun control and safety bill became law. Jackson, did it go too far? Do you like it? Do you support it?

JACKSON: Well, I'm more a fan of the Restoring Hope for Mental Health and Well-being Act. It was almost unanimously bipartisan in the House. But I'm more a fan of these bills that are pressing mental health and school safety itself because I really think that that's the issue, rather than making rules about the guns themselves that may or may not do anything. It is good to see that there is a form of bipartisan consensus. I don't always agree if something is bipartisan, but I do think that it is a good afterthought to go like, "Oh, well, Republicans and Democrats found common ground on something." While I may not agree with it, I think that, in today's age, it's important to look at that and know that there is common ground that can be found.

RICHARD: Just for our listeners, when you talk about supporting a bill or legislation on mental health, what do you mean? What would that involve?

JACKSON: I think that it's important to include things like provisions aimed at addressing mental health and substance abuse in schools and in everyday life. A lot of times, we see that people who are on the lists made by the FBI or who are threats to schools have serious mental health issues or abuse drugs. I think that's where we really need to hit, and I think that that is something everyone can agree on.

RICHARD: So you're okay with red flag laws, with people who do have documented mental health problems or could be a threat to others, that they should not have access to guns?

JACKSON: I do think that it is important to make sure that the "bad guys" don't get guns. Whether red flag laws are the solution or not, I don't know. We'll have to see how this bill affects that and if it does anything. But I am, I guess, worried, in a way, that this could turn into overreach, and it could be the trickle-down effect.

RICHARD: Sophie, how do you view it?

SOPHIE: I think that bill is a great step forward. It's \$750 million towards crisis intervention programs, which is pretty much exactly what Jackson was talking about. That allocates money towards drug courts, mental health courts, and veteran courts. It really does keep guns out of the hands of people who may pose a threat to others.

ASHLEY: Do you wish it had gone further, that bill?

SOPHIE: For me, the biggest priority is urgency. While I support a number of other bills and measures in terms of gun control, I think that any step forward is exactly that, a step forward. Any life saved is just as valuable as any of ours or any of our families' or friends'. So, if closing that domestic violence loophole or making it harder for a certain person who poses a threat to

get a gun is what people will vote on right now, then I think that that is worth voting on and enacting because it definitely will save a substantial number of lives.

ASHLEY: You know how incredibly polarized the gun debate is. I mean, gun control supporters say that background checks aren't nearly as rigorous as they should be, and they'd like to ban the sale of what they often call "weapons of war," like semiautomatic guns. Gun rights supporters are generally completely opposed to that. Jackson, where do you stand, first?

JACKSON: Well, on the issue of guns, I've said it before, it is very established that law-abiding citizens have a right to owning a firearm. The real policy debate here should be getting them out of the hands of felons and the bad guys, per se, and we need to protect schools, advocate for mental health, and do all of these things that I think will make our country a better place, as well as not infringing on an American's right to the Second Amendment.

ASHLEY: So, even people who aren't in the military, they have just as much right to a semiautomatic as somebody who is in the armed services?

JACKSON: George Mason, one of the principal authors of the Bill of Rights, explained the Second Amendment, meaning that he said, "What is a militia? It is the whole people except for a few public officials," and that is essentially what George Mason is talking about. What we're saying is that American citizens have a right to own firearms. It is a very well-established constitutional principle on the Supreme Court and in the past with various other precedents. So yes.

ASHLEY: Sophie?

SOPHIE: I would agree with Jackson about parts of that, I'm sure. I definitely think that we can increase the criminal penalty for stolen firearms, and Jackson was saying that they should not be in the hands of felons. I would agree with that, and I think increasing the criminal penalty for stolen firearms would greatly benefit low-income communities who are largely affected by gun violence, and it would create a stigma around stealing a firearm. In terms of the Second Amendment thing, I think that the Second Amendment is not an unlimited right to own a firearm. Growing up around guns, I was able to learn about the different parts of guns. So I fully support the protection of hunting and sporting firearms and shotguns, and there's competition rifles, center-fire rifles, and bolt-action rifles, and those are the most accurate guns you can get, but they cannot fire 100 rounds per minute like a semiautomatic would. I think that's an important distinction to make when we're talking about street violence versus hunting versus a mass shooting. I really think that it really comes down to gun laws being as precise as possible.

ASHLEY: You're listening to Let's Find Common Ground with George Washington University students Jackson Hoppe and Sophie Holtzman. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. And we have a live event coming up that we want to tell you about that's very much related to today's conversation. It's called Finding Common Ground on Guns

presented by Common Ground Committee. The event takes place on Tuesday, September 27th at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. The time? 6:30 p.m. Eastern.

ASHLEY: The panelists are Chris Murphy, Democratic senator from Connecticut and recent guest on this show, Will Hurd, a former Republican congressman from Texas. The event will be moderated by former CBS News correspondent Jaqueline Adams.

RICHARD: Chris Murphy was a key author of the recent bipartisan gun safety bill. He vowed to fight gun violence after the infamous school shooting in Sandy Hook, Connecticut about a decade ago. Will Hurd held a top rating from the NRA when he was in Congress, but as he told us in the podcast we did with him earlier this year, he believes a lot can be done to keep firearms out of the wrong hands. We can promise a stimulating evening.

ASHLEY: If you can't make the event in person, you can always watch it on Facebook and YouTube Live at the Common Ground Committee Facebook page and on our YouTube channel. For more on the event, go to commongroundcommittee.org. You'll see details right there on the homepage.

RICHARD: Now back to our interview with Sophie Holtzman and Jackson Hoppe. They're co-vice presidents of their university's chapter of BridgeUSA, a group that aims to depolarize campus politics.

ASHLEY: Circling back to guns in schools for a moment, how do you feel about the idea of professors and/or teachers being allowed to carry concealed guns in classrooms. Is that something you'd be in favor of?

SOPHIE: I personally would not be in favor of that. There was a study done over the course of 30 years about arming various employees in schools, and it showed that it did not significantly reduce the risk associated with shootings. Guns certainly are a means of protection for people, but when you have them in schools, and there are students who could pose a risk, teachers who could pose a risk, the risk is greater than the reward, to me.

JACKSON: I think that if you're a teacher, if you want to have a gun, I think you should have a right to that. I'm not saying that a school should mandate that or anything, but if you're a teacher who wants to be able to defend themselves, I think that's a reasonable plan. I do think what is even more reasonable is funding resources to defend our schools even more whether that's resource officers, whether that's informing the police in regards to that issue because we've seen a lot of issues with the past couple of major school shootings where the police forces, as much as we hate to admit it, they could've done a better job. We need to find those holes to fill.

ASHLEY: This upcoming event on guns with Senator Chris Murphy and former Congressman Will Hurd, they're coming to your school to talk about guns. What would you like to hear from them on guns? Jackson, do you want to go first?

JACKSON: I personally would like to hear Senator Murphy's thoughts and thought process behind his recent legislation that was proposed with Senator Cornyn. I think that would be very interesting, to hear how he came to an agreement with the Republicans. It could serve as a very important example to the students at GW and whoever attends. At GW and Georgetown and other D.C. universities, we are, in a way, the leaders of tomorrow. They're all over the country, but, in D.C., there's such a high concentration of students who want to work on the Hill and want to be involved in government in a variety of forms. And I think that if we have a great turnout, it would be very interesting to hear Senator Murphy talk about his experiences with bipartisanship on gun reform because that was a pretty big bill, and it hit the news pretty quick. On the side with Congressman Hurd, he hasn't been in office for a few years, but I would also like to hear his thoughts on bipartisanship in kind of a different age because, again, he's not in Congress right now, but he was a congressman a few years ago. That was a completely different time in politics, pre-COVID, different president, all of that stuff. And I would be very interested to see the juxtaposition, if there is one, between the current age of bipartisanship and the old age.

SOPHIE: I would like to hear Senator Murphy's thoughts on any no votes on his bipartisan bill, like why he thinks people oppose his bill, and does he think that it's because of political pressures? Because when I read about gun control and gun rights, I often read stories of Republican politicians who may support some form of gun control, but they know that it has political consequences for them. The loudest voices in this debate are extremists on both sides, and a Republican politician knows that an extremist could play a part in voting them out. I think it's all about the names that are on these bills. If someone sees that Biden is supporting a bill, AOC is supporting a bill, I think that makes it less attractive to a Republican. If a Democrat sees that Mitch McConnell is supporting a bill, it could make it less attractive to them. So I would like to know if both of them think that making this issue political -- I would like to know if they think that that's kind of the downfall of the whole issue and why we're not making progress.

RICHARD: How important do you think it is to hear from elected officials on the issue of guns?

JACKSON: I think that when people hear directly from their elected officials, it can have an effect on the constituents' beliefs on an issue. And it's the reverse, too. I think when an elected official hears from their constituents, it can change how they might vote. Having worked in a variety of offices and posts, getting to hear feedback from constituents, from the people like you and me, it was very interesting, and it was a lot of fun because you get to hear about how the person next door to you might feel about a certain piece of legislation, and that's important. The system that we live in, the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. It's very important for elected officials to be transparent. I'm very much looking forward to hearing from both Senator Murphy and Representative Byrd even though I'm not a constituent of either of them. But I know constituents. I know people who voted for Senator Murphy. I know people who were in Representative Byrd's district, and how those elected officials may talk may change how those constituents feel, and it may provide a new perspective, whether other constituents disagree or not. And I would look forward to doing even more events like this,

expanding it to different types of issues, expanding it to different perspectives. I'm sure Sophie would agree with me.

SOPHIE: Yeah, I would. A great thing about this event is that it will bring many people peace of mind. Sometimes I worry that our politicians aren't really doing anything because what they are doing gets outweighed in the news by horrible news every day that just keeps happening in politics. I think that this event will give me peace of mind that our politicians share our sentiment that something needs to happen in politics, and it needs to happen now. I also think that this is a unique opportunity to talk with representatives. We have a small auditorium that we're operating out of, and students and attendees will be able to ask questions to both of the speakers. I think that that could influence the speakers just as much as it influences us.

RICHARD: Final question from me. You're both members of this relatively new chapter of BridgeUSA. What are your hopes going forward for this organization and for trying to reduce deep political divides and political tensions?

SOPHIE: I am hoping we can build a movement that changes the culture of our school, and I think that that's shooting really high for the first couple of years. But I'm hoping that we can pick out people who will come after us, after we've built a foundation, that we know will keep the movement going strong. We have seen so many school-specific issues at GW that have divided people. We've had anti-Semitic incidents that have caused people to go out and protest in the streets on our campus. We've had issues over COVID and COVID policies. We've had racist or xenophobic posters put up in our cafeteria. I feel like those things are happening on an elevated scale, and we are hoping to shift that culture and make it a political school where people are interested in hearing other people's opinions and, in fact, they're willing to let other people's opinions maybe change their opinions or, at the very least, change their level of tolerance.

JACKSON: I completely agree with Sophie. From the get-go, our vision for our organization was to create a safe forum for debate in the heart of our country, and we really feel like we have a great opportunity being in D.C., only just down the street from the White House and the Capitol. We have a very politically charged student body, and we feel that this has been needed. We're watching history unfold in our backyard. Our kids are going to read about a lot of the stuff that happens in their history books. It's cool, in a way, to have that in mind, to be like, "Wow, history is happening right in front of us." But a lot of the times, change can be scary, and we want people to have that forum to be able to express their worries and concerns without being shot down or anything like that. I keep using the phrase "a comfortable forum," but that is, essentially, what we're trying to do here.

ASHLEY: Jackson and Sophie, thanks so much for coming on Let's Find Common Ground.

SOPHIE: Yeah, thank you so much for having us.

JACKSON: Yes, thank you for having us. It was a great time.

RICHARD: Jackson and Sophie will be part of the audience at our live event, Finding Common Ground on Guns at George Washington University on September 27th, and we hope some of you will be, too. Find out more at commongroundcommitte.org.

ASHLEY: The team at Common Ground Committee includes Erik Olsen, Bruce Bond, Donna Vislocky, Mary Anglade, Isabella Moore, and Brittany Chapman. Our producer is Miranda Shafer. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.