

ASHLEY: Rigid polarization and political division are among the biggest challenges facing America. Young people often feel tribalism is better than unity and that conversations across political and cultural divides are impossible. We look at how to push back. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. The work of the national group, BridgeUSA, is a springboard for this episode and our conversation with two college students, Clare Ashcraft and Jackson Richter. Clare is an English and philosophy student at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio, while Jackson is studying for a master's degree in public policy at Stanford University.

ASHLEY: Both are leading members of their BridgeUSA chapters on campus. They're part of a national movement of students who are working to emphasize the importance of empathy, understanding, and ideological diversity.

RICHARD: So, first, we asked Clare about her personal political beliefs.

CLARE: I identify as pretty close to the center, and I essentially came to that because I come from a politically divided family. Most of my family is really conservative and supports Donald Trump. I ended up being really liberal in high school because of the environment I was in in high school. I ended up butting heads, actually a lot, with my dad in particular, over those conservative values, and eventually it came to a point where it was like, "I can't do this anymore." I think it's because, in his generation, political debates were something that's a fun intellectual exercise, but in our generation, it is more attached to morality. How you feel about abortion says something about you as a person, and how you feel about climate change and immigration are all not just political issues but moral issues.

ASHLEY: Not just political issues, but moral issues. How does that way of thinking about politics affect the way you feel?

CLARE: Some people are in a camp where they would say, "Oh, if that person is bigoted in any way, just cut them off." But I also knew that my parents are good people. I knew their character, and so that was not an option for me. But then, other people might say, "Oh, it's just politics," like it's nothing, and that was also not an option for me because I'm really passionate about these issues. So that's how I kind of came into the bridging space.

Then I ended up moving more towards the center because I was spending every day seeking people with wildly different opinions to me and listening to the best arguments from the Left and the Right every day. It was pretty impossible for me not to gain a lot more nuance and realize where the best arguments on the Left and Right really were for both sides. And I do want to emphasize, for people who are not in the bridge-building space, the goal is not to create more moderate people, necessarily. I just think it happens to quite a few of us as a side effect of listening to people with different opinions, that there are going to be good arguments you hadn't considered before.

RICHARD: Jackson, I want to turn to you. How about your political beliefs?

JACKSON: Growing up, I didn't have much of a political identity. I considered my main duty to be my academics. So I always felt like I didn't really have a whole lot of time to really understand politics. That actually matched a little bit with a different view that I had, or that I should say I was exposed to, around politics that Clare described, which is it's not really something to be talked about. In fact, it can be

perceived as rude to ask somebody about their political opinion about something just as it might be considered rude to ask them how much money they make or what religion they follow.

But, as I learned more about the injustices that people were suffering across the country in the criminal justice system, the education system, I became compelled to learn more about the policies that have led to those becoming case, which made me really excited to study public policy at Stanford. And throughout my time there, I definitely affiliated myself more with the liberal points of view, with the liberal opinions, and I would certainly consider myself somebody who is much more liberal than conservative. But for a long time, I wasn't registered with any political party. I was an Independent because I took pride in not taking sides.

To a great extent, I still do. I am registered as a Democrat now because the Supreme Court's decision overturning Roe v. Wade and some of the mass shootings in places like Uvalde have compelled me to register with the Democrats, but I would not consider myself any less excited about hearing all perspectives or any less passionate about being a part of BridgeUSA, a part of bridge-building initiatives to really hear from people from perspectives that I agree with and disagree with.

ASHLEY: Clare, Jackson just mentioned he's at Stanford University. Can you talk for a minute about where you're studying and what that's like?

CLARE: I'm at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio. It's not too far from Ohio State University, and it's a very, very small, liberal campus.

RICHARD: Liberal arts or liberal?

CLARE: Both, little bit of both. It has a little over 2,000 students.

ASHLEY: What did your parents think about you going there? Just curious.

CLARE: I don't think they thought too much of the politics because it was really hard to see it at first glance. When you're coming to college, you're thinking, "Are there professors I like? Do I get along with the other students?" It's not really readily apparent whether they have a political leaning, especially because they are affiliated with the Lutheran Church, and sometimes religious universities are more conservative. It's really hard to tell. So I don't think they gave much thought to the political leanings of any university I might go to, and it is kind of expected that most universities nowadays do lean more liberal unless they're explicitly conservative.

RICHARD: You're both members of BridgeUSA, a group that encourages students to have conversations across political differences. The homepage for BridgeUSA says, "Campus politics is toxic. Let's do better." Do you guys both agree with that? Is campus politics toxic?

JACKSON: Well, I think, to channel what our CEO, Manu Meel, might say, oftentimes in politics, we consider a horizontal axis from liberal to conservative. What we don't talk enough about is this vertical axis from politically apathetic to politically aggressive. We have a lot of students who are very adamant about their political views being 100% correct, and as Clare mentioned, there are issues of morality there but also issues of just not being willing to listen to the other side.

Then, on the other end of that axis, we see a lot of students who -- they're more politically apathetic. They're not really interested in hearing from others, not because they think that they're wrong or terrible people but just because it's not issues that really interest them. So I think what BridgeUSA and what Clare and I are trying to do is to get more folks to come to the middle of that axis, to be willing to engage in these kinds of conversations, cognizant of the notion that they might hear some things and maybe even learn some things that they didn't previously feel. But we want to get folks from all parts of the political aisle to come together and communicate, and I think that's something that Bridge is doing a really great job emphasizing on college campuses. Anything I can do to be a part of that solution is something that makes me really passionate.

RICHARD: Clare, let me ask that question of you. Do you think that campus politics is toxic?

CLARE: Yes, I think they are, and I completely agree with Jackson. It's not at all about where they are on the Left or Right spectrum, but it's about where they are in the temperamental spectrum and how they talk to each other. What I think is particularly so important about college campuses is it hinders our education if we can't talk about certain things and we feel like we can't ask certain questions or state certain viewpoints because we need to talk to people who think differently in order to come to better ideas. We need both liberal and conservative forces to come to the best solution, and if one of those forces is completely shut down, and we're not allowed to question those things, then we have people now coming into the workforce that are going to be unprepared, really, to lead our nation to a better place.

ASHLEY: Clare, have you found that on your own college campus, that you're reluctant to state certain views or you're feeling you have to hold yourself back in saying certain things?

CLARE: I don't find personally that I have to do a lot of self-censorship, but I know that that's not the experience of everyone because, in particular, last spring, our school implemented a vaccine mandate, and they ran a piece about it in our school newspaper, and they tried to interview people who agreed with the mandate and disagreed. People who agreed were very willing to step up. It was like 70% or 80% of the campus population. People who disagreed actually refused to be interviewed, wanted to stay anonymous because they said they were afraid of either retaliation from administration not accepting vaccine exemptions or retaliation from their peers. That's what really struck me as being like, okay, we need something like BridgeUSA on this campus if people feel like they can't state their beliefs for fear of retaliation."

ASHLEY: You describe the campus as very liberal, but it sounds like there are some conservatives or more conservatives there who are just kind of keeping their heads down.

CLARE: I think there are, but they're definitely really hard to find. We don't even have a College Republicans on our campus. We have College Democrats and College Socialists.

RICHARD: Jackson, what about you? Have you had personal experience of students or professors who've had to censor themselves.

JACKSON: Stanford kind of mirrors a lot of college campuses. The dominant political perspective among the student body definitely seem to be liberal. There definitely are outspoken conservatives, specifically on the Stanford College Republicans, but people who are very outspoken in that club tend to be towards the top of that vertical axis that I was talking about of being politically aggressive and often

intolerant when it comes to other people's views. And the reaction that a lot of people have had, the negative reaction that people have had to those intolerant conservative opinions, while, in many cases, justified, I do think has had a bit of a chilling effect on speech from conservatives who do not identify exactly with the more aggressive, often less tolerant positions of the more outspoken conservatives on campus. The conservative opinions that we're not hearing on campus, I think, are the same ones organizations like BridgeUSA are pushing to be more heard.

ASHLEY: We're going to come back to Jackson and Clare in a few minutes, but these questions of speech, self-censorship, and cancel culture also came up during our recent interview with Sophie Holtzman and another Jackson, Jackson Hoppe. They're both students at George Washington University and also members of BridgeUSA. Richard, you asked Jackson, who's a committed conservative, about the passionate views of other people on campus.

RICHARD: How has that been for you both personally? Do you feel, at times, you were upset or that you really had to censor what you were saying? Jackson first. You're a conservative on a very liberal college campus. That must be tough sometimes.

JACKSON HOPPE: I mean, it can be. I serve as the Director of Public Relations for GW College Republicans. So I'm kind of the first line of defense if anyone wants to talk to us or say anything. And so, with that, I've become less afraid to express my opinion because I'm like a public figure in that regard, and I can't really hide my opinion. But, before I was that, I will admit it caused me some anxiety, and it did worry me if I openly expressed I was a conservative on campus. You see this all over colleges in America on liberal campuses. Conservatives are afraid to speak their mind and need a forum for that, and we need a place where conservatives can feel safe to express their opinions.

RICHARD: Yeah, and as, I think, it's pretty clear to our listeners, just because you're a part of a common ground movement doesn't mean you're not a conservative. It doesn't mean that you've all of a sudden become a moderate.

JACKSON HOPPE: There's always a time and a place for finding common ground on issues. I'm sure Sophie would agree with me, if she wants to say anything on that.

SOPHIE: Yeah, I would agree with that. I think even joining Bridge, I was a little bit nervous because GW is a place where people will kind of sniff out your political beliefs. That's very important to people, and they pick and choose who to be friends with based on those assumptions and stereotypes. So I was a little bit worried about being grouped with conservatives because, even if you are Left-leaning, it's so easy to be labeled as a conservative or quote/unquote "canceled" just because you are in a group with them or associated with them.

ASHLEY: That's so interesting, what you just said, Sophie, about people sniffing out your political beliefs and basing their friendships on that because that doesn't resonate with me at all from my time in college. I'd find that quite stressful. Is it?

SOPHIE: It's a little bit stressful, and I think that in the era of social media, it's so easy to just completely be canceled online. Things can be taken out of context within a matter of two seconds and just go completely viral. And even with coming on this podcast, I had a brief worry in the back of my mind that if I said something with one word that was wrong or a stat that was wrong or a fact that was

wrong, someone can take that clip and post it on TikTok, on Instagram, and, in a matter of seconds, I have no credibility within the political world or on our campus.

ASHLEY: Wow.

RICHARD: And you also had a similar experience when you were younger at a more conservative school.

SOPHIE: Yes, I definitely did. At my high school and in my elementary school and middle school, I felt like I was always the politically correct person, which I think that there is kind of a negative stigma around that these days. There were a lot of jokes about different things. This was a private Catholic school, so there were Holocaust jokes, gay jokes, all these jokes about different groups, and I think Jackson and I would both agree that no matter our political views, we don't stand for that kind of thing. People were kind of nervous to say certain things around me because I was the political girl or I was the Democrat. And I think it's not achieving anything to not say something just because I am there when you shouldn't be saying it, period.

RICHARD: Sophie Holtzman and Jackson Hoppe. We'll have more of our featured interview with Jackson Richter and Clare Ashcraft coming up on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley. Find more episodes of our show at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts. We'd also love you to take our listener's survey. You can answer questions or just leave us an audio message with your ideas for the podcast and comments about how we're doing.

RICHARD: We make this podcast for Common Ground Committee, a group that's working hard to bring more light, less heat to urgent issues and public conversation. The Common Ground Committee website has links to videos of public events, blogs. There's a weekly newsletter, a lot to discover.

ASHLEY: Now back to our interview with Clare and Jackson. I asked them about the impact of social media on politics. Are TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook part of the polarization problem?

JACKSON: I would say so, and I don't want to be that kind of person who says that social media is terrible, and it is the root cause for everything that's going on, but, at the same time, it would be really naive for any of us to deny its major influence on the state of polarization not just on our campuses but on our country.

RICHARD: Clare, I'm really struck by something that you said, which is, for many of us older folk, we can talk about politics without it becoming a fundamental moral issue. Yet, you said that, for many students, that's not the case.

CLARE: Yeah, and I think a lot of it does go back to that point about social media. Our generation has grown up on social media, and we know that it's a small minority of people that are manufacturing most of the content on social media, and those are people who have really strong beliefs and have incentives to kind of spread that belief. That seeps into the broader culture because a lot of us participate in social media, but we aren't necessarily the main creators on there.

And I am with Jackson that social media isn't the root of all evil. I think the internet can be a very good place if you live in a very blue or a very red area, to find other perspectives, but I think the way it

currently is doesn't incentivize that. It incentivizes more of a performance, and that performance is part of what's seeping into our culture, I think.

ASHLEY: Clare, you had an experience fairly recently with social media that involved feelings and thoughts about your dad.

CLARE: Yeah, after the Roe v. Wade decision came down, I was in the comments section of a post and just trying to explain to some people that were being really aggressive on the Pro-Choice side because they did feel attacked. It was a matter of morality for them. But I was trying to explain that Pro-Life people don't just wake up every day and decide they're going to oppress women today. They have beliefs that are strongly held about protecting life, and they have that view coming from religious beliefs or other beliefs that life begins at conception.

So I was trying to explain why some of those people hold those beliefs and cited my dad as an example of someone who holds those beliefs. And I had people responding to me in the comments section, saying, "I don't know how to tell you this, but actually your dad does wake up and want to oppress women," and saying that, "breaking bread with the oppressor will never lead to the solutions we want to see." So, after that experience, I completely deleted Instagram for over a month because I was like, this is not a productive place for conversation if they're not willing to see and engage with my experiences at all.

ASHLEY: Talking of cancellation, we have heard a lot in the news over the last several years about cancel culture, particularly at colleges, and speakers being canceled at the last minute for their views, usually more on the Right. And it paints students, at least at elite colleges, as snowflakes who can't countenance anyone else's point of view. I wonder if that's happened where you are.

CLARE: I actually invited a somewhat controversial speaker to campus last semester, Dr. Peter Boghossian, who has had those experiences at other campuses, at Brown and Princeton. He's had posters ripped down and events canceled on him. Nothing like that happened on our campus. They did ask to have security there in case something were to happen because they have had that. I do think it is part of the positives of going to a small school that if I explain what I'm doing to people and they do get a chance to understand it, a lot of professors would back me on something like this because they understand that I'm trying to show different perspectives.

ASHLEY: Tell us more about Dr. Peter Boghossian, that professor you invited to speak.

CLARE: He's a philosopher that recently left his job at Portland State University that he had for over 20 years, very publicly wrote a resignation letter about some of the things that he had faced because he had brought people of different perspectives into his classroom. He brought Flat-Earthers, Anti-Vaxxers, people who really disagreed with him, and he had faced some Title IX accusations because of that, some attacks from students. So he eventually left and is now one of the founding faculty at the new University of Austin, which is a university that is saying they pursue truth and are holding to those classical liberal values.

ASHLEY: Jackson, what's your view of cancel culture on campus?

JACKSON: I certainly would not consider myself as somebody who strongly opposes certain people coming to our campus. For example, we had former Vice President Mike Pence speak at Stanford's

campus earlier in the academic year. He was brought by the Stanford College Republicans. And there were a lot of people who were very opposed to him being here and protesting very passionately outside of the event. That is absolutely their right to do so, but I will say I didn't feel super comfortable making it clear that I didn't necessarily have a huge problem with Mike Pence speaking on our campus despite how vehemently I disagree with him on most political issues, I'll say.

RICHARD: Roughly 50% of the country frequently vote Republican, and they vote for conservative politicians. They vote for politicians who are opposed to choice or abortion rights. They voting for politicians who want to strictly limit immigration. Does it do students a disservice not to have them interact with and be exposed to arguments by people from the Right?

JACKSON: I certainly feel so, and if I didn't feel that way, then, frankly, I wouldn't be here today. All of the work that I do around bridging is based on the notion that it would do any of us a disservice not to engage with views that aren't our own, views that directly oppose our own. But that being said, I do think it's important to acknowledge all of the reasons why certain folks might feel uncomfortable engaging with these points of view because if we don't get to the bottom of that, then we'll never be able to have those kinds of conversations, if we're not familiar with the specific reasons why people on any and all sides might not be willing to.

RICHARD: BridgeUSA, the group that you're part of, do you think that you're making a difference and perhaps turning the tide against cancel culture or outright intolerance of different points of view. Clare?

CLARE: Yeah. I think, to what Jackson was saying, we really need to work on building trust between fellow Americans and goodwill that your political opposite doesn't hate you. Assume the best of them, and I think that BridgeUSA helps encourage that in a lot of ways. A lot of people form friendships through BridgeUSA across the aisle that really allows them to see that just because the other side may have different values, that doesn't mean they're against you as a person. And I think we're really helping build that trust in a way that we'll need to do to continue forward as a nation.

JACKSON: I'm really proud of and passionate about the work that Bridge has done. In terms of a specific example, I'll point to me, Clare, and a lot of other students having the opportunity to attend BridgeUSA's national summit in Washington, D.C. in April. My bridge chapter at Stanford is relatively new. I'm still doing a whole lot of work to get my chapter off the ground, but coming to the summit was my first real chance to engage with other students across the country in these kinds of exercises that I've been privy to as I look to make this chapter much bigger on campus.

We did an activity during that called Bridging the Gap in which there were several tables scattered throughout the room, and each table was dedicated to discussing one particular issue. It might be abortion, it might be voting rights, climate change, gun laws, a whole lot of different areas of legislation and politics, and we had students rotating from table to table. I didn't think it was scary to chat with somebody who might oppose abortion as much as I support abortion rights. This was something that kind of reaffirmed my desire to get out of bed in the morning and to do something about, say, the polarization in this country.

RICHARD: Common Ground Committee, which is very much involved with our podcast, Let's Find Common Ground, produces something called the Scorecard, which rates members of Congress, senators, governors on their ability to reach across the political aisle. Is that something that's valuable to you. Do you think that that's helpful?

CLARE: Yeah. I've actually seen the scorecard, and I really appreciate what it does because it does help me vote. Incumbents have a really, extremely high reelection rate, but we see that Congress itself has a really low approval. So, when I'm voting, I want to intentionally decide, if I'm voting for an incumbent, not that I'm just saying, "Oh, the status quo's fine with me," that I'm making an intentional choice to vote for someone that will work across the aisle to get solutions that are not only important but other people in the nation will agree with, that they're truly representing the population that they've been elected to represent. So I think that scorecard is really effective in helping us decide whether they take their job seriously in representing the entirety of the area they're elected to.

RICHARD: Jackson?

JACKSON: I would say, as somebody who is solidly a Democrat but also somebody who's really passionate about bridging, I really value these kinds of resources to get an idea of which senators, congresspeople, just legislators in general are actually in line with the bridging mission. I think there are politicians on both sides of the aisle who are not in line with the mission of bridging to reach across the aisle, and I think that has fueled a lot of the polarization that we see in this country. So I think to have a concrete metric to see who best aligns with the notion that it is important to consider perspectives that are not our own and are not necessarily the party's, and that's something that I personally value, and I think that's a great idea.

ASHLEY: Thank you both for coming on the show. It's been really lovely to have you.

JACKSON: Well, thank you for having us.

CLARE: Thank you.

ASHLEY: Clare Ashcraft and Jackson Richter on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.