

RICHARD: American democracy is in crisis with toxic polarization and political gridlock. For young people graduating college and entering the workforce, it can be difficult to be hopeful about the prospects for a better tomorrow. What are some new ways to think about this? This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. The political system will be in even more danger if the next generation is disengaged and polarized. BridgeUSA was formed by college students to tackle the crisis head-on.

RICHARD: In this episode, we'll learn about the goals of a group that aims to shake things up and teach constructive engagement as well as promoting a solution-oriented political culture for leaders of the future.

ASHLEY: Our guests are Manu Meel, a recent graduate of UC Berkeley and Chief Executive Officer of BridgeUSA, and Jessica Carpenter, a senior at Arizona State University. She runs brand management and communications for the group.

RICHARD: There are many campus debating societies that already bring students together on a range of issues. I asked Manu first what's new and different about BridgeUSA.

MANU: I think that's a great question because it is what someone that is listening to Bridge would probably ask, is, "Why is a Bridge discussion different than a debating society?" And I think the key is in that word "debate," right, Richard? So the concept of debate is this idea of an opportunity cost. Someone has to win. Someone has to lose. Someone's experience and perspective is quote/unquote "better" or has won the day. In fact, it's about eliminating that.

It's thinking about, how can we present a forum where the purpose of people entering that forum is not to trump the other person's argument, but it's to understand and empathize. The idea is to humanize. Our concept and vision is that the best antidote to polarization is humanization, and we need more of that, especially on college campuses.

RICHARD: Manu, you mentioned the phrase "opportunity cost" when we have a debate. What does that involve?

MANU: If I win that argument, the cost to you is that you lost that argument and you lost that debate. And so what you're going to be thinking about is not, "Okay, what was that person talking about?" You're going to be thinking about, "How do I make my argument better? How do I beat that person's argument?" And that is what's wrong in our current toxic polarizing debate and discourse. You can only get to a debate level when everyone is on the same level empathetically and on the emotional side of things.

If you and I both understand each other's values, if I understand what your life experience is, where you come from, where you grew up, how does that inform what you're thinking today? That deep introspection, what Jess and I would argue, is probably more important and a prerequisite to productive debate. And right now we're jumping to the debate. We're basically putting the cart before the horse and not thinking about, how do we actually have everyone on the same level?

ASHLEY: Jess, what would you like to add?

JESS: I think, also, what makes Bridge a little bit different is just you're going into these debates or discussions knowing that people are there to listen to and who are willing to understand. So it kind of totally gets rid of any worry of being able to talk freely because you know that no matter what you're going to say, these people are here to listen to your background and really try to get an understanding of what you're saying. And you get really good, constructive dialogue out of it, which is something that I don't really think we can say of politics too often nowadays.

ASHLEY: Talking of backgrounds, I'd love to hear a bit more about each of your backgrounds and, you know, what your foundations are and how you came to be where you are today. Jess, do you want to kick off? Tell me a little bit about how you grew up. Did you talk about politics at the dinner table?

JESS: No, I was talked to about politics at the dinner table. My mom is very politically active, very vocal, and I grew up in a one-way leaning household. It was more conservative. It's actually really interesting because having that kind of background, you really learn the value of money and working hard for yourself and for your family. And when I got to school, and I wanted to talk about these things that I was hearing at home, nobody really understood enough about politics to have a discussion, and I also wasn't getting very much new information put my way.

So then, when I got to college, it's an entirely different atmosphere. I was exposed to different cultures and different people. I joined Bridge to learn more about the different cultures that I was now interacting with on campus.

ASHLEY: Manu, how did you grow up? What's your background? How did you get into this?

MANU: My family came over from India. I was born here, but then I spent the first formative years, my first five to six years, in a town 40 kilometers west of New Delhi. And when I came back to the US, there was no concept of politics in our house. Politics was this sort of esoteric thing that the Americans practiced, and we sort of have to make it do -- whether it is my mom trying to pass her medical exams, my dad trying to get his next job, or for me, it's just trying to fit into Staten Island, which is where I grew up.

That really informed a lot of my work because for me, life was always adapting. It was always thinking about different perspective, recognizing the human in people and the good in people so that I could just interact with them. It's sort of what Jess echoed. I think she said it really well there -- is that we have these innate judgments about people, but when you grow up adapting to the circumstances around you, you're forced to abandon a lot of your preconditioned thoughts and go with an open mind. We need a little bit more of that, in my opinion.

RICHARD: Manu, you wrote a recent article that neatly summarizes why so many young people are down on democracy and pessimistic about the chances of reform. Here's a quote from you, "I was two years old when the United States was attacked on 9/11. I was ten when my family was shaken by the 2008 financial crisis. I was 18 when I witnessed one of the most tumultuous presidential election cycles in American history, and as I graduate from college, the world is battling a pandemic." Wow.

MANU: Usually, people say I'm an optimistic person. The rest of the article, though, and I think the title of that article is "Why I Still Believe in America." That's what's so fascinating about Bridge nationally, and I wish what other people understood is you meet people from so many different backgrounds and

realize that there is a lot of hope in this country because people in power don't want us to, oftentimes, see the differences, that those differences are so minute compared to what unites us. The idea about that quote is that the four major events that define someone, like my life, Jess's life, and most people that around 22 years old, so all of Gen Z is 9/11, the Great Recession, the 2016 election, and when I wrote that article, the Capitol riots hadn't happened yet, so the hodgepodge that is 2020. And that isn't a great sample size of democracy. It's why a lot of students are very apathetic about politics. So they either engage in a very radical way or they completely disengage because the system doesn't seem to be responding to the reality of the moment. We're already starting at a point where most people our age don't necessarily think of democracy as the best system and form of governance, and that's a huge problem for the future of our country.

ASHLEY: When you say they don't think of democracy as the best form of government, what do they think of, then, as the best form of government?

MANU: That's the problem there, is that there isn't a definitive answer yet. That's the opportunity for different models of governance. Countries are slowly realizing that there's so many fractures within our broader liberal order that there's an opportunity for new systems of governance to prove that they might be more effective because we've been taught that democracy's the right thing, but it doesn't feel that way right now, and we have to rescue that. But there's a lot of hope in how we can go about that, and that's what Bridge focuses on.

ASHLEY: Tell us more. How is that going to happen?

MANU: Well, I can talk about it at the national level, and the reason why I think someone -- and seeing from our students, for example Jess, she's an amazing leader both at the national level, but at the chapter at Arizona State. There's a national answer to that question. There's also a chapter-by-chapter answer to that question. In terms of the national organization, there's one fundamental assumption that Bridge rests on, and that is that the fundamental unit of democracy is people.

We drive what products dictate our life. We drive what decisions dictate our life. We drive which leaders are elected. And in this world where there's so much technology, where it seems like we have so little agency, we forget that. Bridge's job is to make those people more empathetic, more constructive, and more solution-oriented, and the two ways we go about realizing that assumption is first at the chapter level, and that's where Jess comes in and her experiences there with the Arizona State chapter, which is one of our flagship operations.

RICHARD: Jess, jump in on your chapter and your experience at Arizona State.

JESS: Yeah, ASU, we're actually one of the more large chapters within the BridgeUSA organization. What our chapter focuses on a lot is really communities on campus and opening up the platform for people to come and be able to share their opinions and speak openly with one another. One of our largest events that we do is called Bridge the Gap. The last two years -- not this last year because of COVID -- but the last two years, we've gotten, I think, over 130 students come together, and we do different roundtable discussions with different teachers, different student leaders on topics of interest and topics of importance to specifically younger people. It's really cool to see that so many people want to be having these discussions and so many people are looking forward to being able to talk civilly with one another when what we're seeing a lot when you pay attention to politics is kind of that battleground.

RICHARD: Jess, do you have an example of something that happened that maybe delighted, annoyed, or surprised you?

JESS: Yeah, last year, last spring before COVID -- it was actually our last really big event on campus -- we hosted a partnership discussion with Braver Angels. It was kind of like a town hall debate, and it was on border control and immigration, which is a really hot topic, especially being in Arizona. Obviously, you had the two sides where it was like, "What does more border security look like? What does less look like, the different immigration pathways to citizenship?"

And then there was one different side that I, myself, had never considered before. We had some Native American members come to the meeting, and some of the wall at the time was being built over their sacred land. That wasn't talked about before, at least not publicly and not enough for a lot of students to know that it was happening. That just goes to show the importance of having different voices involved in the discussion. But it also really -- I think it made everybody take a step back and be like, "Oh, yeah. There is more to this than just one side telling you this and the other side telling you this. There is more to consider there."

ASHLEY: What about the culture of college campuses? Are they dominated by Liberals or Progressives, even Marxists, Manu? Is that a problem?

MANU: The answer to that question is that it really depends, and you'll never see that in the media. If you go to a campus like Hillsdale in Michigan, very conservative campus. Students are very focused on specific issues, and at that campus, Liberals will tell you they're under siege. They are being canceled on a daily basis. If you go to Berkeley or you go to somewhere like ASU, which is more Left-leaning, especially somewhere like Berkeley, students are going to tell you that conservatives have never seen the light of day on Berkeley's campus. If you go to a campus like UT Austin, you'll have a huge argument on that question because both sides are very strong and fervent there because of the geographic location of that school.

ASHLEY: What about conversations on campus? Jess, where you are, is it easy for college students of different views to have frank and honest conversations with each other, or are people checking themselves or immediately jumping down the throat of someone on the other side and judging them?

JESS: I see, at least a lot of the political engagement, especially now in the last year, has taken place between students over social media. So that, in itself, kind of creates a different atmosphere because people are, I think, checking themselves or maybe looking to check others. I know, at ASU, we've had a couple different discussions come up in the last year on free speech.

There was one student who actually had something on social media, and she ended up getting asked to step down from her position because of what she had said. Then we had another student, also, who had written for The State paper. She also said something on social media and was asked to step down. But the backlash was different between these people, and I think it was more because of the social environment happening at the time. It was during the Black Lives Matter movement. It was during the beginning of elections and COVID and all of these things.

So I think that that had more of an impact on how we were discussing politics at the time and especially because social media, you're not face-to-face with somebody. It's easier to forget about having those conversations and to put a wall up and try to create gotcha moments between each other.

On campus, I'd say that the political atmosphere, again, is pretty civil to one another. There's spaces for both Republicans and Democrats to be able to discuss, and I know that they're also very interested in working with Bridge on campus because they, too, like the idea of being able to work across sides and just have that kind of conversation.

ASHLEY: We're speaking with Jessica Carpenter and Manu Meel on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard. This week, we want to tell you about another podcast series that we both enjoy, and we think you will, too. It's about American democracy, which deserves to be cultivated, protected, and improved.

ASHLEY: That's why we recommend Democracy Works from the McCourtney Institute at Penn State University. The show's about the many ways to reform democracy.

RICHARD: In one of my favorite recent interviews, they spoke with entrepreneur, investor, and professor Sinan Aral of MIT. It's a provocative conversation about social media and the impact on democracy.

ASHLEY: Democracy Works is part of The Democracy Group podcast network. To listen, search Democracy Works on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Overcast, or wherever you get your podcasts.

RICHARD: And now back to our interview with Manu Meel and Jessica Carpenter of BridgeUSA. Jess, from your perspective as a senior at Arizona State, what needs to happen to our broader political culture, one that you're going to be part of when you graduate.

JESS: I think what needs to happen is first just taking a step back, but I feel like everything that's said nowadays has some kind of underlying meaning, or we're looking for a double meaning in what's being said, which automatically creates tension between people when we're trying to have these discussions and when we're trying to create solutions for issues going forward. So I think that just taking a step back and knowing that not everything is going to be a personal attack, not expecting that is really important.

I also think that -- again, my own opinion -- but some prejudices need to be removed from the parties because a lot of people, especially young people, don't want to have discussions with somebody on the Right side because they assume that they're racist or they don't want to listen and empathize with you. And then, same for conversing with a Democrat, a lot of people will think that they're going to be sensitive or maybe take it the wrong way or twist their words. And I think this is kind of a narrative that's passed around very often. So, yeah, I would just say taking a step back, trying to look past the prejudices that have snuck their way into there. Then, from there, just really looking to understand.

RICHARD: Manu?

MANU: I think, picking up on what Jess said there, is essentially has two pillars. It's institutions and citizens. You can't have either one of those out of whack. You need the institutions to respond to the people, and you need the people to be active and engaged so that the institutions are held accountable to the people. And right now, what we're seeing in American democracy is both an erosion at the institutions level, where people are losing trust in the ability for our systems of governance to respond, but then that's sort of creating a feedback loop where people, within themselves, are deflecting that

lack of trust onto their neighbor. That externalization of feelings and resentment onto our fellow neighbors is what's really tearing apart our citizenry. So Bridge only looks at that citizen-level question, and within that citizen-level question, we look at: how can we make sure that the next generation of leaders have faith in democracy, have faith in each other and, as Jess said, have faith in the fact that people's arguments are different from their intentions. Oftentimes, when we argue, we have to look at our intentions. What is driving the belief? What is driving our thoughts and our answers toward specific concepts and ideas?

RICHARD: Manu, you say that strengthening democratic institutions, that democracy also requires an active citizenry. Explain.

MANU: I think the best example that I could point to you is a lot of, actually, the foreign building and country building efforts that we pursue in the Middle East. In Iraq, for example, after 2003, we tried to set up democratic institutions. We established a democracy. We had some elections. But the fact was that the people were not ready to accept it. The people were not ready to embrace that, and the people did not believe that it was possible. So you can have the best institutions on the planet, but if the citizenry is not behind those institutions and if that ethic is not ingrained within them, that idea does not exist, then your institutions are merely façade for a lack of engagement that happens behind the scenes.

I think we're starting to see this with the Biden administration. The Biden administration's trying to put on a very strong face with both unity and the need for better institutions, but the people don't seem to be ready. That's why we're so worried. And so Bridge, we're not the experts on the institutions. We're very humble about what we don't know, but the one thing we do know is that a lot unites students. And so we're going to do our best to try to make students realize those commonalities amidst the differences that get highlighted so often in the media.

ASHLEY: If you are successful, what will the public square look like in 10 years?

MANU: In my opinion, I think about Bridge chapters and the concept of BridgeUSA as civic spaces. Think about how you have, in cities, green spaces. Green spaces are basically areas where you just have greenery, where you have an escape from society. You feel like you're transplanted into a different environment. Take green spaces, BridgeUSA's developing civic spaces on college campuses, spaces where there's vibrant democratic engagement, where young people feel confident about what they have to say, and students don't have to worry about the backlash they'll face when expressing different ideas and beliefs. And, to me, success means that we have as many civic spaces on campuses as possible so that young people not only have the opportunity to practice engagement, but they see that other young people believe those things.

RICHARD: Jess?

JESS: What I really would like to see and hope to see is more young people active in politics but for the reason of coming up with solutions. I feel like, on college campuses, these discussions are the first step there, but I think, in the long run, what I would like to see is hopefully more tangible solutions, more solutions made for long-term, not just temporary band-aids to cover up things that have been instilled for so long.

RICHARD: The name of your group is BridgeUSA. What does Bridge mean to you, bridging differences?

JESS: In my mind, it's really just rebuilding this foundation for us to meet and have a common ground. You don't have to agree with each other. You don't have to convince each other. That's not the point. It's just being able to have a space where you can actually just discuss, knowing that you guys have differences, knowing that you're not going to come to a common conclusion all the time, but being able to have the space that is meant for conversations meant to build us forward together despite our differences.

ASHLEY: And what about you, Manu? You were at USC Berkeley when BridgeUSA began.

MANU: In 2017, I was a freshman, and it was my second semester, and a speaker by the name of Milo Yiannopoulos came to campus. And for those that don't know, he's a right-wing provocateur. Regardless of what you think of what he says, he says it in quite inflammatory ways. And he was invited by the College Republicans. Before this, there was only this political club at Notre Dame called Dialogue and Discourse, I think, and another organization at CU Boulder, I think maybe, at that point, called Bridge CU. But there was nothing at Berkeley, and I didn't know of this Bridge concept.

There were these huge protests because of this person's speech. The entire school at Berkeley was on CNN. We're walking around, and there was helicopters. A piece of our campus was on fire. But that night, I felt two things. I think, first, is, "Gosh, we're so hopeless at this moment," and not hopeless in that our country's hopeless, in that young people feel so hopeless because folks have to resort to that to feel like this person can't come to campus.

The second thing I felt was, "We can't let this continue," because if you let this exacerbate and pile on, history shows us that polarization really creates entrenched divisions that further these notions of people that disagree with us. So, the next day, there were these small little circles on Sproul Plaza of kids, five to six kids just talking with each other, kids like myself that were just like, "What do we do?" Some of them were cleaning up all the trash that happened as a result of the protests.

The thing that came out of that was this concept, what if we just had a place, a space on campus where we could just decompress as a student body without any administrators, without any sort of enforcement, without any vindication or threat of backlash, just discuss what the hell happened. And that was the genesis of Bridge. And to Jess's point, for me, Bridge has always meant, despite all of the progress we've had in the past couple years, despite the different folks that tell us to go one way or another, it's a place for understanding. It's a safe space for understanding.

We have to reclaim those words, to empower them, and to show that everyone's got a voice, everyone's got something to say, and if you say something that's different than me, it's probably because there's some lived experiences there. Let's get into those experiences.

ASHLEY: This isn't the only group with this mission. There are quite a lot of groups like Common Ground Committee, Listen First, Bridge Alliance that are all seeking common ground. What do these groups, what do we need to grow our cause, do you think?

MANU: I think there's two things there. One is, just in case you didn't know, there's about 200 organizations trying to bridge the political divide. We need to show people that this exists. The capacity's there. The infrastructure's there. Now what we need is elevation of narrative. The second thing we need in our space is a strong desire for organizations to put mission above self.

The same way we ask people to put country over party, and it's very easy to say that, we have to also do that with our organizations. Are we bringing value? Is there a niche for us? If not, what do we need to be doing better? And if we can't be doing something better, we've got to move out of the way and let other folks that have far more established institutions continue bridging.

RICHARD: Many of these bridging conversations are taking place among elite groups, and I'm thinking of BridgeUSA. Do you have chapters in community colleges and beyond liberal arts campuses? Jess?

JESS: We do have a couple at some community colleges, but we also are involved with different organizations also working on community campuses.

MANU: Yeah, we haven't touched the Ivy Leagues on purpose because everyone goes to the Ivy Leagues. Everyone engages them with opportunities because, again, it's putting organization above mission. The mission and the fact is that what's driven our politics for the past four years and what's become apparent is that there's large swaths of the country that are not just left behind but are forgotten, and not just in the Midwest and South but also in the inner cities. This forgotten problem exists across the political spectrum. And where does that forgotten problem begin? It begins when people are at the community college level. No one comes to them with opportunities. As a result, folks don't see what else is out there, and folks lack the ability to engage.

So, over the next two years, our emphasis is build on our community college networks and go to small private schools, small public schools that you've never heard of. Great example, school called Ball State University in Indiana, about 30 miles outside of South Bend.

RICHARD: That's where David Letterman went to college, I think.

MANU: That's amazing. I didn't know that.

RICHARD: Are both of you hopeful that you really can make a difference?

MANU: Jess, inspire us.

JESS: Yes, I definitely am just because every single time, like going into a Bridge discussion, especially over Zoom, you're like, "Are people going to come? Do they even still care? During COVID, are there other things to be worrying about besides bridging our civil dialogue?" And every single time we enter our meetings on campus via Zoom or however, there are people. There's upwards of 10, and sometimes there's more than 20. It's really good to see that, even in the midst of all this chaos, people are still really passionate about what we're doing and passionate about changing the future for the better. So, yes, I am definitely hopeful.

MANU: For me, after the Capitol riots, I went on a listening tour with some mentors and just folks that I think might know about the situation better than I do. And the fact of the matter is that it seems like no one has any idea where this thing's going. And that's scary, but there's also a lot of possibility that comes out of uncertainty. I think that's when the possibilities for disruption come.

To Jess's point, what inspires me the most is just meeting our students. Seeing that willingness is what drives me because I think what we're doing is correct. I think it's the right thing, and seeing people practice it helps me reaffirm that belief.

RICHARD: Manu Meel, Jessica Carpenter, thanks for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground.

ASHLEY: Yes, thank you.

MANU: Thank you for having us.

ASHLEY: How does your mum feel, Jess, about your work? Is she proud of you? Is she bemused?

JESS: She's very proud of me. She sometimes doesn't like that I throw her under the bus, saying I grew up hearing her talk politics to me, but it's not a bad thing. I don't say that like it's a bad thing. But she's very proud. She loves hearing me talk about Bridge because it's kind of all I talk about now.

ASHLEY: Manu Meel and Jessica Carpenter speaking about the mission and work of BridgeUSA. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. From Common Ground Committee, this is Let's Find Common Ground.

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