

RICHARD: It's our year-end special, Ashley.

ASHLEY: And 2022 was a year of surprises. In this show, we put the spotlight on six interviews we did during the past 12 months. We include insights on the partisan divide, abortion, guns, prison reform, how the news media could improve, and a lot more. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Our first guest is former South Texas congressman, Will Hurd. Before being elected as a Republican House member, Hurd was a CIA agent. He retired from Congress in 2020, and there's been some media speculation that Will Hurd could decide to run for president. Here's the extract from our interview.

ASHLEY: Most people would consider you a Moderate Republican, but you say you really can't stand the word "Moderate." Why is that?

WILL HURD: So I hate labels, anyways, right? That started at a young age. My dad is Black. My mom is white. The phrase "multiracial" or "biracial" didn't really exist when I was growing up, and so I didn't fit in with the white kids, and I didn't fit in with the Black kids. So that started my opposition to Moderates. But a lot of time, the phrase "Moderate" used in the media in Washington, D.C., specifically, means squishy, right? It means kind of middle-of-the-road, but, in reality, Moderates are the ones that do the hard work and get things done because they're the ones that are having to take a philosophy to people that may not identify with this.

In my old district, if every Republican voted for me, I would still lose. I had to get Independents. I had to get Democrats to vote for me. So I had to take a Conservative message to communities that didn't identify with me or with the little letter after my name. But, to me, a lot of folks use that as a derogatory term. You work harder, to be frank, and so that's where I get a little annoyed with that phrase, when it's used in a negative way.

RICHARD: You grew up as a multiracial kid in Texas. Has that affected how you think about the potential for Americans to come together and understand that they really do have stuff in common.

WILL HURD: 100%, and I also got bullied a lot as a kid. My head has been this size since I was four years old. I wore a size 13 shoe when I was in fifth grade.

RICHARD: Wow. That is something.

WILL HURD: Yeah, and this is back when the only size 13 shoe you can buy at Mervin's was red, and it wasn't cool to wear red shoes back in the '80s and '90s, okay? So all of those things influenced my experiences at a very young age, but it also taught me, one, you shouldn't care about what other people think except for the people that you love. That gave me a thick skin to take and deal with the negativity that some are going to direct at you for whatever reason, but it also taught me what it's like to be in a situation where you're unlike everybody else.

But here's what I learned representing a truly 50 district, meaning 50% Republican, 50% Democrat. Way more unites us than divides us. There's no question about that. When I would be in ruby red districts in San Antonio or deep blue districts in El Paso, I got asked the exact same questions. People brought up the exact same issues. They cared about the exact same things. They were worried about putting food

on the table, a roof over their head, and making sure the people that they love were healthy, happy, and safe.

RICHARD: Former congressman Will Hurd.

ASHLEY: Now to reforming today's Congress. In March, we released a podcast featuring two bridge-builders, a Republican and Democrat who discussed their work across the aisle to find common ground.

RICHARD: We spoke with Democrat Derek Kilmer and Republican William Timmons about their support for the Building Civic Bridges Act. They're both members of the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress.

ASHLEY: Richard asked Representative Kilmer this question.

RICHARD: You both have been working on your committee to strengthen and improve how Congress works. Assuming that it isn't functioning very well right now, make the case for why we need Congress to function, to work better.

DEREK KILMER: Well, I'll say up front it's strange to be part of an organization that, according to recent polling, is less popular than head lice, colonoscopies, and the rock band Nickelback. I think that's somewhat indicative of just the fact that too often, the dysfunction in Congress impacts the American people. Listen, when we see, even just outside of the toxicity that often shows up on cable news that repels the American public, there are consequences, for example, when Congress is unable to pass a budget, when we have a government shutdown, or when we have, as we've had for years and years and years, what's called "continuing resolutions" where Congress basically kicks the can on federal spending.

Really, the rationale behind the creation of this committee is something that happens basically every two or three decades or so. Congress realizes things aren't working the way they ought to, and they create a committee to try to do something about it, and this is the current iteration of that. The last one was in the early '90s, and our task is pretty simple but challenging, and that is make Congress work better for the American people.

WILLIAM TIMMONS: I'll follow up on that. I think technology is really advancing the human civilization in incredible ways, but I think it's creating challenges. I mean, they didn't have these until 2000-something. It allows us to remove the relationships that we have. When you think about it, most members of Congress do not have substantial interaction with the opposite party. They can tweet mean things at each other, and that is what replaced dialogue and conversations from decades ago. So we're struggling with maintaining the relationships that are necessary to find common ground, and we've spent a lot of time on the committee trying to see how we can build relationships across the aisle with our colleagues to get back to that.

I talk about evidence-based policy-making in a collaborative manner for a position of mutual respect. That's what we're supposed to do. We don't do that anymore, and so anything we can do to force people back into the room and use their inside voices and find a path forward, I think that's what this country and this Congress needs.

ASHLEY: Republican Congressman William Timmons with Democrat Derek Kilmer. For us on Let's Find Common Ground, one of the biggest issues is political polarization. Many of America's elected politicians are ideologues, either Progressive Democrats or deeply Conservative Republicans. But our next guest says voters are not as far apart as we've been led to believe.

RICHARD: That guest is entrepreneur and market researcher Diane Hessian. Over more than four years, she had a remarkable series of conversations with hundreds of voters from all across the country. They had many different political views. She checked in with them each week. What Diane found may surprise you.

DIANE HESSAN: Let's take the most controversial issue we have, which is abortion, and the reason I say it's the most controversial issue is there are more single-issue voters on abortion in this country than on any other issue. I found that talking to my voters about abortion was full of emotion, and I had one voter in particular who was a Republican from Alabama who spent a lot of time with me, trying to help me understand what it meant to be pro-life.

About a year after I did those conversations on abortion, he wrote me an email and said, "Can you call me? I have something I want to talk about." I called him, and he basically said, "I just wanted to share with you that my 15-year-old daughter came home and told us that she was pregnant. My family all got together, and we had a conversation, and we prayed, and this morning, she had an abortion."

ASHLEY: Wow.

DIANE HESSAN: I mean, I thought I was going to faint, and I just said to him, "Help me understand, help me understand." And he said, "Look, what you need to understand here is that we agonized over this. We cried. We debated. We prayed. We had conversations with each other unlike the people who are pro-choice, for whom this decision is easy and casual." And I thought, "Wow, what he thinks is that more women who have abortions use abortion as birth control. Someone who is pro-choice looked at abortion as a casual decision and that they took it lightly." And what I tried to explain to him is that the data says that most people who have abortions actually see it as an excruciating decision. He had no idea, and I think it shows all of the layers of nuance that rise in anybody's point of view, especially when the issues are so close to home.

RICHARD: And here's another moment from that show with Diane Hessian when we asked her about how voters from one side see the other.

DIANE HESSAN: If you ask most Republicans about the Democrat Party today, they will say, "Democrats are a bunch of elitist, woke socialists who want to take my hard-earned tax dollars and give them away to criminals and illegal immigrants and people who are too lazy to work and who want to take away my guns and who want to completely dismantle policing." Or if you ask most Democrats about Republicans, they will say, "They're a bunch of hypocritical, uneducated deplorables who refuse to wear masks, sleep with their guns, deny that climate change is happening, and never met a Black person they like." Both of these are wrong, but these stereotypes were on the ballot in our country, and they dominate our media, and they dominate our perspectives.

ASHLEY: Diane Hessian from Episode 59. Highlights from more of our interviews after the break. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. Let's Find Common Ground is produced for Common Ground Committee. Its mission is more progress and less division. The website is commongroundcommittee.org. You can learn about critical issues, positive change, and how to restore hope. There's a lot going on at that site.

ASHLEY: You know, Richard, our podcast would not be possible without the help of a smart, dedicated team of people.

RICHARD: Bruce Bond and Erik Olsen are the founders of Common Ground Committee.

ASHLEY: The team also includes Mary Anglade, Donna Vislocky, Brittany Chapman, Isabella Moore, and Cameron Glass.

RICHARD: Thanks to all, and now some more of our interviews that we recorded in 2022.

ASHLEY: A few minutes ago, we heard from Diane Hessian about voters' views on abortions. Next, we consider another highly polarizing issue: guns.

RICHARD: On Episode 55, we spoke with Ryan Busse, a former senior executive in the firearms industry.

ASHLEY: He told us he loves guns but sees the need for limits on how they're used and sold.

RICHARD: To be clear, you are not anti-gun. You're not opposed to the Second Amendment, are you?

RYAN BUSSE: Not at all. I think it's an important part of being an American, and it's an important part of my life. At the same time, I have come to refuse the idea that reasonable restrictions, cultural norms, responsibilities, that adhering to those sorts of things makes one anti-gun. In other words, just because I think background checks are a good idea, or because I believe in the rights of states to permit concealed carry, or I think that armed intimidation is wrong, or I think that open-carry should be outlawed in a democracy, there are those on the far right who believe that that makes me anti-gun. But I refuse to live under that label.

I'm not anti-gun. Literally, I don't even know how many guns I own, more than three dozen. I haven't counted them. I've sold millions of guns. I don't know how I can be labeled as anti-gun. But I think the idea that me, an award-winning firearms executive who shoots with his boys every chance he gets and doesn't know how many guns he owns can be labeled as anti-gun. I think there you have a very illustrative example about how divisive our country has become.

ASHLEY: What is the difference between responsible gun ownership, in your mind, and reckless use of guns.

RYAN BUSSE: Well, I think any healthy democracy is debating those sorts of questions every day. I don't think there is a clear answer to that. A healthy democracy lives its life in the gray area. I believe that guns is an extremely illustrative and important fault line in our society, but I think there are things that are clearly not responsible. I don't know where the line is exactly, but I can give you some examples of things that I think are not responsible: the idea that firearms should be used to intimidate protestors, lawmakers, average citizens, which we've seen many, many times in the last two to three years, this idea of authoritarian intimidation with guns in the open.

People who do that want to try to cover up what they're actually doing. They say that they're just exercising their rights. No, they're not. You take a gun out in the open in front of a bunch of kids who are protesting, you're trying to intimidate them. That's not reasonable. It's not responsible. Really, it has no place in a functioning democracy. So I guess, to me, that's a very clear example of something that's far over the responsible line.

RICHARD: And how do you contrast that with your behavior as a gun owner?

RYAN BUSSE: Most people who grew up like I did and are still being raised in responsible gun-owning America understand there are certain things that you never do. This applies to me. It was the way I was raised. It's the way that hundreds of people who have reached out to me since the release of my book and the various podcasts I've been on, they all adhere to these same sorts of things. You never take a gun to a fight. The idea of responsible gun ownership if you want to do everything possible to never have to use a gun against human interaction. So you never go to the fight. You always try to leave. You never brandish a gun to intimidate. It's not part of your identity. All of these things are things that responsible gun owners would never do. For me, it's very important that we adhere to those sorts of rules.

ASHLEY: Gun owner, hunter, and outdoorsman Ryan Busse, who spoke to us from his home in Montana.

RICHARD: Our final two interviews today were recorded with the help of two organizations that frequently work with Common Ground Committee. The first features one example of the groundbreaking efforts by the Convergence Center for Policy Resolution.

ASHLEY: Convergence brings together diverse groups of leaders, activists, and experts in the same room. They work together on solutions for some of the most difficult issues the country faces. One example is what happens when people are released from prison.

RICHARD: America has one of the highest rates of incarceration anywhere in the world, and once people leave prison, the hope is that they'll be law-abiding, productive members of society. But in this country, 4 in 10 prisoners are back behind bars within three years of release.

ASHLEY: We discuss the flaws of the reentry process with a former prison warden and overseer of regional prisons, Daren Swenson, and Georgetown University professor Marc Howard, who has long campaigned for the rights and humanity of incarcerated people. They work together after meeting at a Convergence session.

RICHARD: When you both began this process of working on the Reentry Project, both of you came from very different perspectives. Was there any tension in the room, Daren?

DAREN SWENSON: I think it's obvious that when you bring a group together to tackle a challenging social problem that have very wide perspectives and views on what are the right solutions, and how we can best tackle this problem, I think there's just a natural little bit of sense of unease and a period of time that necessary to get to know everybody and build some trust within the room so that we could have good open, honest conversations and be willing to hear and listen to others' perspectives. I think that was probably the way I came into it, especially as a practitioner.

In coming into the room, there were two other corrections professionals that did this every day, that work with the justice-involved population, and the rest of the room of 15 or 20 other people were all people that were either working in policy organizations or came from academia like Marc. So I think, coming into a room where you're one of the people that are actually out there doing the work, it was a little bit intimidating and took some time to settle in and to understand how we could come together to help tackle this problem.

RICHARD: Daren, you came from the private sector. Marc, you had a very different perspective on prisons. Were you a little bit suspicious of Daren?

MARC HOWARD: Well, I was certainly suspicious, I think, of anyone in corrections at that point in my career, in my journey in this domain because I came from a perspective that was really very focused on the rights of incarcerated people or the lack of them and a lot of the indignities that they face. So I felt that I was a defender of incarcerated people, and coming from that perspective, I had a strong view -- you might say strident view -- which I no longer have now -- and Daren has really helped me reshape that -- that people working in corrections kind of were the enemy, were the problem.

And through the Convergence process and through our getting to know each other, I really came to understand the challenges of corrections, particularly of running facilities, and also the good faith of many people, especially Daren and the people he works with, for finding good solutions. We actually have a lot more in common than we realized. The very first meeting, we were actually seated next to each other at the first dinner, which, it turns out, was intentional. I didn't realize that, but it went very well, and I think it started a process that's been really influential for both of us.

ASHLEY: Daren, how did you feel going in? Tell us a little bit more. Were you nervous, uncomfortable?

DAREN SWENSON: Yeah, I think it was a little bit of a mix of all of that. I think anytime you're going into a room as a practitioner, over time, I had some of the equal feelings about people coming from Marc's perspective, that they really don't understand what we do every day and that, to some people, it feels like it's so simple that we can just do A, B, C, and D, and we can fix these problems. But I really enjoyed Marc, right away, being open to listen to what those challenges were and saying, "Hey, I've been in prisons. I've toured prisons."

I think, also, the ability that I had to say to Marc, right away, "Hey, I'd love to have you come and tour one of our facilities. Let's go see one together. I'd like to hear your perspective on what we're doing, how we're doing things" and immediately saying that I was open to hearing the things that Marc might have as suggestions of how we could do things differently, I think really helped start that relationship between Marc. I really respect his approach and the way he's done things, and he's given me lots of things to think about that has helped me in my new role. So I've really appreciated that.

RICHARD: Daren Swenson and Marc Howard, part of the interview we recorded with them last February on Let's Find Common Ground.

ASHLEY: Next, we talk about restoring trust in news coverage with Mark Sappenfield, Editor of The Christian Science Monitor, and the paper's National Political Correspondent, Story Hinckley.

RICHARD: This conversation was recorded in the fall, soon before the midterm election. We begin with Story, who told us about how she thinks of trust and fairness as she reported on the views of voters during the run-up to the close Senate race in Pennsylvania.

STORY HINCKLEY: I hear outrageous things from voters at political rallies all the time because I'm talking to the political diehards, the really passionate people. And I could print some things that voters say that would get retweeted tons of times, but that's not my goal, right? My goal is to show an accurate photograph of this moment in time, a photograph through words, and to do that, it's a lot more nuanced than people think.

MARK SAPPENFIELD: What is Story doing there? She's acting the way that we should be acting as a populous. She is going out and talking to different people. She is going outside of her comfort zone. She's going outside of her biases. She's going outside of what's easy, what's hard, and this is what you at Common Ground do all the time, is you are getting people to come together and to have meaningful conversations. She's doing that. I think that's what we try and do at The Monitor. Reporting becomes hypocritical if you're not living what you're saying, and Story is really living this idea of going out and trying to give a whole picture of the population, and in doing so, you should present a portrait that will be something of an antidote to the polarization that happens.

RICHARD: Story, what I'm hearing from you is a parallel to what Mark is saying. Mark made a strong argument for why it's important to respect the reader. In your reporting, you're also respecting the voter.

STORY HINCKLEY: Well, I have to. When you talk to people face-to-face, you find it very difficult to be disrespectful. At least, I do. People are taking time out of their day to talk to me about politics, and I'm looking at them in the face. I'm shaking their hand. And every single person asks me, "Is this going to be published? Where can I see it?" And when people are a little hesitant to speak with me, I say, "You know, I've been doing this for a couple years now, talking to -- I would say it's probably thousands of people at this point across the country, and I've never had somebody say I mischaracterized their words because I send them the copy." And sometimes they don't agree with the angle of the article because it'll be critical of the candidate whom they're supporting, but they will say, "I don't agree with this or that," but they never say that I characterized their words wrong. And I think that's because I looked them in the eyes, I shook their hand, and I had a little two-minute relationship with them.

ASHLEY: Mark, how do you feel about the need to build trust in how you cover the news?

MARK SAPPENFIELD: You do need to build up trust with your reader. You do need to build trust with the audience, and that just, to me, comes from being transparent, being honest about your motives. So, for example, we have this podcast that we're starting that's called *Why We Wrote This*, which is really about exploring why we wrote this. It's about looking more deeply into some of our biggest pieces of content and really explaining, "Here's our motivation. Here's what we were trying to accomplish," and that's all a part of just trying to open the doors to readers so they can see who we are and say, "Yeah, I trust you. I understand that."

But there's also this part of it that, in some ways, I kind of am less interested in trust than before because I see, in so much of the news media, people seeking out news publications that tell them what they want to hear. You would say, "Oh, I have a lot of trust in that news organization," but I, as a journalist, might look at that and say, "That's not really the greatest journalism because I feel like it's

leaving out parts of the story, or there's places they're unwilling to go, or there's bias being expressed in that." And I feel like, in a lot of ways, the readers are not going a great job of holding us to account. In some ways, they're driving us more toward the poles because they're wanting that coverage that speaks to their worldview.

RICHARD: Mark Sappenfield with Story Hinckley of The Christian Science Monitor. We partnered with The Monitor on several podcast episodes during the year.

ASHLEY: And before we go, a quick mention of another episode we recorded for the holidays. We feature a prominent psychologist as well as a father and daughter who love each other but have very different political views. The show has some fascinating and practical tips about how to get along with friends and relatives who see the world differently than you do. That's Episode 72.

RICHARD: Check out all of our podcasts on commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts or wherever you listen to audio. This is the final edition of Let's Find Common Ground for 2022.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

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

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.