

RICHARD: Oklahoma is a deep red state with twice as many registered Republican voters compared with Democrats. Nearly all of its leading officials are from the GOP, and that includes the mayor of Tulsa, G.T. Bynum.

ASHLEY: But Mayor Bynum calls himself a common grounder. He was elected to office with support from Republicans and Democrats. He ran a nonpartisan campaign and says he governs that way.

MAYOR BYNUM: Our purpose in this is to show people that you can still work with people of different political views and find common ground and address the great challenges that are facing your city and move it forward together.

ASHLEY: This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Tulsa is one of the 50 largest cities in the United States, and it's growing fast. Many of its newest residents are immigrants. Some are refugees. The mayor says they're welcome in his city.

ASHLEY: And as well, here, G.T. Bynum is also working with communities of color in Tulsa as well as more conservative voters. We learn how he's pushing back against extremes. He says local communities are where common ground can be found.

RICHARD: But Tulsa's mayor also says it isn't easy, and he knows he's going up against the deep partisan divides of American politics.

ASHLEY: G.T. Bynum, thanks so much for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground.

MAYOR BYNUM: Wonderful to be with you. Thanks for having me on.

ASHLEY: Now, you've said that common ground is the "least-valued real estate" in American politics today, and it's time for a change, which definitely attracted our attention as hosts of this show. Make your case.

MAYOR BYNUM: First, I'll say that is mutual. I've tried to use the time that I've been in this job as kind of a working test case as to whether or not you can still use a public office in a nonpartisan way to find common ground and develop consensus. And when I found out about your podcast, it was like, wow, there are still people out there that think like this and value this approach. So when I had the opportunity to lead in this job as the mayor of the 50 largest cities in the United States, I thought our purpose in this is to show people that you can still work with people of different political views and find common ground and address the great challenges that are facing your city and move it forward together.

Six and a half years into that experiment, and on the one hand, we've found that you can achieve pretty remarkable things when you take that approach. The flipside of it is there is no angry extreme there to have your back when you're in the middle. You basically become the focal point of both extremes and their ire that you won't take their side. I've run into that quite a bit. So that's when I say it's probably the most dangerous ground in politics, it's the middle ground.

RICHARD: Mayor Bynum, for people who don't know who you are, how did you get elected mayor of Tulsa? What was notable about the lead-up to the election?

MAYOR BYNUM: Well, I had served on the Tulsa City Council for eight years, and there were really two factors that drove me to run. First, I felt like we were just underachieving as a city and that I didn't want to spin my wheels in the mud on the city council trying to drag along a city that didn't believe in itself. But I thought if we challenged ourselves to aim higher and to shoot for big goals that we could achieve, potentially, great things if people were willing to buy into that.

The other really defining moment for me was reading about the life expectancy disparity between the predominantly African American part of Tulsa and the rest of the city. It was 11 years, and that resonated with me as a parent.

RICHARD: So the average life expectancy of Black residents of Tulsa is 11 years less than whites or people who live in other parts of the city?

MAYOR BYNUM: In the predominantly African American part of Tulsa, that is correct. We had always known that there were disparities in Tulsa between—it's known as North Tulsa—and the rest of the city. But to have that number put on it, to know that kids that are growing up in that part of the city are being robbed of more than a decade of their life, I thought, if we're the kind of city that we want to believe we are, we ought to be rallying to do everything we can as a community to address that.

ASHLEY: Okay. So you and your team and your wife, I think, you discussed what a campaign for mayor might look like, right? What did you come up with?

MAYOR BYNUM: We're going to run, but we're going to run a 100 percent positive campaign. We will never run a single negative ad. We're not going to have this be a contest of tearing down my predecessor, but rather we're just going to challenge the city to aim higher. We're going to say what we would do if we got elected, and if people want that, then it's an alternative they can select. And we ended up winning by a landslide, by over 16 points. The key thing in that victory was that I ran as a true nonpartisan. I'm a registered Republican. I've worked for Republican elected officials. But I had prominent Republicans, prominent Democrats, and independents all working on my campaign.

I will always remember the night before the election, we had all these young, very engaged people who we went out and put up signs in rights of way and illegal places like you do the night before an election. And then we were all hanging out afterwards, and they were all talking about how sad they were that this is the only time they'd had an opportunity to work together on a campaign, that usually they were competing against one another in partisan races. But we had developed this consensus approach of aiming high, bringing people together, and trying to use data to solve great challenges, and it helped us win the election, and I've tried to govern in that spirit in the time that I've been mayor.

RICHARD: Do you think that's applicable elsewhere?

MAYOR BYNUM: Well, I really believe the great hope for America when it comes to this type of approach, of moving beyond partisanship and finding common ground, it's in local community service. I don't think my experience is all that unique for other mayors around the country. I just came back from the annual meeting of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. When you get together with mayors, and you're talking about your cities, partisanship almost never comes up. Everyone wants to know what you're

doing to address crime. What are other cities doing to address housing shortages and homelessness? What are you doing around economic development? Partisanship never comes into it, whereas, at the federal level, the system is designed around partisanship.

RICHARD: Former house speaker, Republican Newt Gingrich recently wrote that, going forward, the choice in next year's election may be between reasonable and crazy. That's a very far cry from the positive politics that you've just been talking about. Do you agree with Gingrich on what he's saying?

MAYOR BYNUM: I absolutely agree with him. It's fascinating to me. I remember when I was in high school and college, and the big issue in national politics was this battle between Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich for the policy agenda for the country. Yet, if you look back, what was Bill Clinton doing as president? He was famous probably mostly for triangulation, for identifying the common ground between two warring sides and then triangulating out and taking that position and advancing the ball in that regard. Taking that approach, he kept us out of war. He balanced the budget for the first time in 50 years and oversaw massive economic expansion, and he did that working with a Republican House of Representatives and a Republican Senate where they are fighting over policy and not personal destruction and that you had a president working with the Congress to find common ground and move things forward. And the battles were over how much of that common ground one side or the other were going to get. It feels like we have moved so far from that. That seems like ancient history today. So I think Speaker Gingrich is absolutely right.

ASHLEY: Yet, you, yourself, have said, "Being reasonable sucks." Why?

MAYOR BYNUM: I'll give you a great example, and this is kind of the height of probably the most challenging time that I've had to work as mayor, would be the summer of 2020 when you had a COVID pandemic, civil unrest after the murder of George Floyd. There was a single day where my family had to—there's no mayor's mansion in Tulsa. We just lived in our single-family ranch house, and one day my wife and kids and I had to be evacuated from our house by police because there was a Black Lives Matter protest that wanted me to settle a lawsuit that was coming to our house, and they were accompanied by counter-protestors who were 2nd Amendment activists who wanted to stand on the curb at my house, just feet from my kids' basketball goal with their AR-15 assault rifles to prove that they could be out in public with these firearms.

And both groups, I think, were mad at me because I wasn't jumping out to embrace their extreme on one side or the other. I faced that throughout the pandemic. There were people who were mad that we wouldn't move as fast as possible on COVID mitigation practices, but then there were other people who were mad that we adopted them. The challenge, I think, for those of us who seek the middle ground, is that there are not angry common grounders out there. And I remember thinking in that summer, like, "Okay, I get it. I see why there is comfort to be had in being in one of these extremes because even if people don't agree with you on everything, if you're going to agree with them on the thing they're really mad about at the time, they'll have your back." And when you're in the middle and trying to find the quieter, most of the time, common ground between those angry, vocal extremes, it's often very lonely.

ASHLEY: Just for people who haven't been, which may be quite a few of our listeners, can you just give a little bit of a sketch of Tulsa. You've mentioned that there's this great inequality, as there is in so many cities in this country. But what's Tulsa like? What's it famous for? Remind us.

MAYOR BYNUM: Oh, sure. Tulsa is the second-largest city in Oklahoma. It was settled by Muskogee Creek Indians at the end of the Trail of Tears in the 1830s. Driven out of their homeland, they brought the ashes from their last campfire in Georgia and planted it at the base of a tree near the Arkansas River that is still standing, the Council Oak Tree, and founded our city then.

Tulsa had, up until about 1910s—my great-great-grandfather was the mayor of Tulsa in 1899 when we had about 1,000. But then oil was discovered in eastern Oklahoma in the 1920s, and you had a boom here. Tulsa became known as the Oil Capital of the World in the 20th century and then really became a hub of the aviation industry. It was the busiest airport in the United States in the 1940s and is home, today, to the largest commercial aviation maintenance facility in the world that American Airlines has here. Tulsa also is a major hub for the arts.

And I would say the thing that defines the community and that I think probably plays a lot into why the approach that I've had from a governance standpoint has been successful is that we're in Tornado Alley, we're next to a river that used to flood a lot, we've been historically reliant on a boom-and-bust energy industry, and so it is baked into the DNA of the community that you help one another out in hard times.

RICHARD: Mayor, you made a pretty good case there. I had no plans whatsoever to go to Tulsa. You just put it up on my list.

MAYOR BYNUM: We also just opened the Bob Dylan Archive. It is housed in Tulsa right next to the Woody Guthrie Center, two of our key pieces of culture that we have here. I can keep going on the Tulsa pitch if you want.

RICHARD: I think you can.

ASHLEY: Why are you a Republican? Tell us about what influenced you.

MAYOR BYNUM: Sure. My hero my whole life has been my grandfather, who was the mayor of Tulsa when I was born. Just so we're keeping track, I'm the fourth member of my family to serve as mayor of the city, and my grandfather was mayor when I was born. He retired when I was six months old. But I was very close with him and my grandmother growing up, and he was a Republican but very much, I would say, of the Gerald Ford/George H.W. Bush style, both of whom he was close with.

I grew up around this notion that Republicans were very much about limited government, balanced budgets, strong national defense. I grew up in the Ronald Reagan era where there was a sunny optimism about the future of the country, but you had to run it the right way. There was this sense that the value of the individual is paramount and that you can achieve high ideals in their defense but that that's really what it's about. It's not a cult of personality. It's about what you can do to protect the individual and their rights.

RICHARD: Rhetoric in American politics on the national level has become increasingly intense, even furious. Many on the Right are in a state of uproar over the federal government's indictment of Donald Trump. What's your take?

MAYOR BYNUM: I'm a big believer in allowing the rule of law to follow its way through. We're going on, now, almost 250 years of a system of government that's based on the rule of law, that has checks and balances built within that system of the rule of law, and people need to allow that process to take its

course. I think a lot of the time, there's a desire to politicize or to jump out ahead and make predictions about how a particular case is going to pan out. In my experience, the best thing that we can do is allow the legal process to take its course and see what happens there.

ASHLEY: How worried are you about this moment in American politics where there's so much fury? It's a time when both sides of the political debate call each other evil.

MAYOR BYNUM: It's a great worry for me. It's a worry as a parent of a 16-year-old and a 13-year-old when I think about the country that they're going to grow up in. It's a worry for me as a former foreign relations policy advisor who sees other countries around the world both exploiting our divisions and advancing steadily while we spend a lot of time fighting with each other instead of being focused where we should be, on being united and competing with other countries around the world.

ASHLEY: Our guest is the mayor of Tulsa, Oklahoma, G.T. Bynum. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. During the first part of our interview with Mayor Bynum, we heard about his view of the criminal indictments against Donald Trump. He said we're a nation of laws and that both sides of the political aisle should calm down and let the legal process play out.

ASHLEY: Read what Common Ground Committee's cofounders, Bruce Bond and Erik Olsen, have to say about the indictment in their new blog. You can find it on our website at commongroundcommittee.org.

RICHARD: Erik and Bruce say that Americans should not get drawn into the partisan debate by the conflict entrepreneurs on social media and cable TV. They write, "We hope citizens will resist the emotionally satisfying urge to join in the food fight."

ASHLEY: Read more about what they have to say and check out our Common Ground Committee videos and learn about our scorecard of elected officials at commongroundcommittee.org.

RICHARD: Now more of our interview with the mayor of Tulsa, Oklahoma, G.T. Bynum.

ASHLEY: Back to your city and the divisions within it, the anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 was just recently, and it was a bitter reminder of race divisions in the city but also a chance to heal. How have you attempted to put some salve on that wound.

MAYOR BYNUM: That has been one of the great challenges, at least in the time that I've served in this job, because to understand the impact of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre on our city, you have to appreciate the fact that it was not talked about openly for about three-quarters of a century after it happened. There was an immediate acknowledgment of what a disgrace it was just in the immediate days right after it happened. There's documentary evidence of city leaders at the time saying, "We're not going to talk about this anymore." The reality is it wasn't taught in school. I took the state-mandated Oklahoma history course and never heard about it until I was in my early 20s. My parents didn't hear about it until they were in their 40s. It wasn't talked about in schools, wasn't reported in the news. There were hardly any books written about it.

You see this in movies or read about it in history in authoritarian regimes. You don't think that can happen in your hometown, and yet it really almost did here, the erasure of history, until thankfully you had some courageous historians and community leaders who began reporting that history in the 1990s.

There's a handful of things that I felt were very important for us to do. Probably the thing that we're most physically engaged on would be reversing decades of economic underinvestment into North Tulsa.

When I talked earlier about that life expectancy disparity, a lot of people make the mistake of thinking that's a public health issue. And it is, but our life expectancy is impacted by what's called the social determinants of health. A big impact in social determinants of health would be wealth and economic opportunity. So we've focused heavily on bringing economic opportunity into that part of our city. Also, I initiated, 95 years after the event—more than that—98 years after the event, the search for the graves of the victims. We know of at least 18 victims of the race massacre who were buried in a cemetery in unmarked graves and never identified. So their family members have no idea what happened to them, don't know where the remains are, and the city didn't look for them for 98 years.

And we're going through, right now, the search for those graves using national experts, and we've just had a major breakthrough from a DNA standpoint in tracking down the identity of remains that we've found and trying to connect those with descendants. We can't go back in time, but we can do what's in our power right now to do right by our neighbors. You see that occurring at a greater level right now whether it's from an educational standpoint, from a community relations standpoint, from an investment standpoint than at any time in my lifetime.

ASHLEY: Not quite everybody because I know at one point, and this is going back at least a couple of years, but you were approached in a diner. I think you were having breakfast with your family, and somebody was very angry about this attempt to bring some justice.

MAYOR BYNUM: I think a lot of people did not search for the graves of the victims because they thought there would be this giant backlash against whoever the mayor was that launched it. To me, it was more—again, so much of what I do comes back to: what kind of city do I want my children growing up in? And I don't want my kids growing up in a city where there could be a mass grave of murder victims that we didn't try to find.

ASHLEY: And when you said the search would go ahead, what was the public response?

MAYOR BYNUM: When we announced it, I was all braced for this giant backlash of anger in response to the search. Instead, what I found was most people, and white Tulsans, Black Tulsans, Democrats, and Republicans, and independents all reached out and told me, "Thank you. This is the right thing to do," and largely the same thing, "I don't want to live in a city that might have a mass grave in it that we didn't try to find and connect the victims with their families."

But that doesn't mean everybody was happy. The incident you described, it's one of the tradeoffs of local community service, is I was out at breakfast with my wife and kids at a diner we love going to, and a lady came up to me and just tore into me, telling me that I was trying to make all white people who lived in Tulsa in 1921 look like murderers. And I was like, "My family were white Tulsans who lived in Tulsa in 1921. I'm not trying to make them look like murderers, but if your grandmother was killed then, and you didn't know where she was, wouldn't you want to know what happened to her and find her?"

On the one hand, it was a challenging moment because I hate my children being exposed to the anger that's directed at me that I choose to take on as an elected official. But it was also very valuable for them because we got in the car, and it was a learning moment for them. They were kind of embarrassed by it,

and I just told them, "Doing the right thing is not always popular, but it's still the right thing." And they're very proud of the work that we're doing on this.

RICHARD: Speaking of coming to terms with the past, you mentioned that the Muskogee Indians were there in Tulsa right at the start of the settlement of your city.

MAYOR BYNUM: That's right.

RICHARD: What do we need to do with regard to Native Americans, Indian tribes, and there are many in your state, in Oklahoma, to try and heal some of the terrible wounds of the past?

MAYOR BYNUM: Tulsa is very unique in that we are—literally, where I am right here talking to you, I'm at the intersection of three different tribal nations. The Muskogee Nation, the Cherokee Nation, and the Osage Nation all intersect in Tulsa. I think the greatest thing that we can do is to do a better job of respecting them as sovereign nations, which I think a lot of people don't appreciate, and it's something that has been a challenge for us. We had a Supreme Court ruling a few years ago in 2020 that informed us, contrary to what we had been thinking for over 100 years, that Tulsa actually exists in a reservation. We thought it had been abolished when the state was created in 1907, but the Supreme Court ruled that, actually, the Cherokee and Muskogee Creek Nations still exist, and it makes Tulsa the largest city in America in a Native American reservation. But respecting their sovereignty, their leadership, and their cultures is so important. We've established Native American Day in Tulsa as a way to highlight the unique culture in each of our tribes that we have here in our city and the contributions that they have made to the community. Whether it's with Native Americans or with our racial history in the United States, I think it all comes down to education. The more that we can learn and understand what our fellow Americans have been through historically, it's going to help us do a better job of being a better country moving forward.

RICHARD: What about your state, Oklahoma? It's one of the very reddest of red states in America. Is it deeply conservative, or is there clearly room for moderates and common grounders like yourself?

MAYOR BYNUM: No Democrat has carried a county in Oklahoma since Al Gore in 2000, so it is arguably the most Republican state in the nation. Yet I don't find it to be mindless, knee-jerk conservatism or Republican devotion. Again, I've found it, time and again, to be the case that, when you get down at that community level, people relate to one another more as neighbors than as partisans.

I'll give you a great example. We in Tulsa, and I believe this is the case for the state of Oklahoma as well, but I know in Tulsa, we received the largest number of Afghan refugees of any city in America, period, not per capita, just at all. Now, a lot of people were surprised that a state as red and conservative as Oklahoma would be welcoming Afghan refugees at such a large number, but the reality is that Oklahomans have great compassion for refugees, a long history in Tulsa of supporting refugees. And in the case of Tulsa, you could even say we were founded by people who were driven out of their homeland in the case of the Muskogee Creek Indians.

So I think, whether it's in Tulsa or in Oklahoma overall, when you get out of the realm of philosophical debates, and you're dealing with a human being, more often than not, they're going to relate to them as the person rather than this dehumanization that I think occurs when you get into debating things at a national level. That's why I'm such a strong believer that the local level, somewhat at the state, but I

even really take it down to the community level, that's the hope for moving past this extreme division that you see in our country.

RICHARD: Beyond being nice, being empathetic, make the case for why it can be really helpful to the community and even to business, welcoming refugees.

MAYOR BYNUM: Well, in Tulsa, and not just with refugees but immigrants overall—this is another one where people were surprised that we did this—I created the New Tulsans Initiative when I became mayor because I wanted us to be the most welcoming city in America for immigrants. And we started it off with an economic analysis to show the economic impact the immigrants have in our community, the outsized level of entrepreneurship that happens in the immigrant community versus non-immigrants. We started hosting citizenship ceremonies every month at city hall. And for about the first two years that we did that, the single most popular post that I would put on social media were pictures with these new United States citizens that had just gone through the process. It was all across the political spectrum. You had very liberal Democrats who were excited about it, you had very conservative Republicans who were excited for them, and for different reasons, but we had found where there was an embracing and support for new immigrants who had come to the United States. When it comes to refugees in particular in Tulsa, I think it's very heavily driven by the faith community in our city. Tulsa has benefited greatly. We're the home of Oral Roberts University, which has brought a substantial number of refugees from Asian countries into our community over the last 30, 40 years. Tulsa benefits greatly from having been a place, around World War II, that was a safe haven for Jews leaving Europe and coming to the United States, building businesses here. So I think we have a demonstrated history of the positive impact both for refugees and immigrants overall. When people see that, it's a reminder of the value of it. Beyond, as you say, being nice, there's an overall community benefit to it.

RICHARD: You've talked about the importance of getting people together in one place to boost our sense of community and also find common ground.

MAYOR BYNUM: I think we have to find ways to replicate and find new ways of building community. We can't just say, "Well, the ways communities existed in the past are on the wane, so oh, well. My kids are just going to grow up in this horrible environment where everyone is suspicious of one another and calls each other evil and doesn't learn from one another." I think we have to find new ways of building community.

The other thing, and the reason I'm so thankful for your show, is that, in my experience, you make better decisions when you have a greater diversity of viewpoints around the table. That's the reason I set up my administration the way I did when I ran. It wasn't because, "Well, these are the people who helped me get elected, and so I owe them a political debt." It was I'm a true believer that the best decisions are made with a diversity of life experiences and viewpoints so that you don't have any blind spots when you're analyzing an issue. It doesn't mean that everybody is always going to agree, but you can have that respectful discourse and, more often than not, in my experience, find some common ground that you can move forward on together.

RICHARD: Mayor Bynum, thanks for being on Let's Find Common Ground.

ASHLEY: Yeah, thank you.

MAYOR BYNUM: Thank you so much.

RICHARD: G.T. Bynum, who says he's pushing back against the extremes in politics and what he calls the "easy sugar high" of hating the other side.

ASHLEY: That's our latest podcast. Tell us what you'd like to hear in future episodes of Let's Find Common Ground. Take our brief survey.

RICHARD: Find it at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts. We'd really like to hear from you. What are you not hearing that you want us to talk about? Fill out the survey. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.