

Sadie Webb:

Okay. So, Jordan, Cheyanne, and Lukas, great to be here in Denver with all of you. Welcome to our podcast, Higher Ed Now. I'm your host for this episode, Sadie. Let's just jump right into it. I want you guys to tell me a little bit about your background and why you're passionate about this work. Why did you decide that you wanted to become more involved with this work? Lukas, do you want to get us started?

Lukas Rice:

Yeah. Sure. So, I started college around the same time that everybody started getting into politics a bunch because Donald Trump was running for president. And I sort of realized that on either side of an issue, both sides don't really seem to understand one another anymore. The other side is either Nazis or pedophiles or evil. And so I decided that whatever career path I was going to take, I wanted to try to eliminate that. I wanted people to understand one another and why they believe what they believe. Because even the people that I disagree with, I'm able to understand why they feel the way they do. And I think that makes it much easier to convince them to my side, because I'm not just a person screaming at them or calling them evil or something like that. So, my goal is to slowly bring people to my side, and I try to do that through working through their worldview rather than pushing mine on them.

Sadie Webb:

Yeah. Absolutely. Cheyanne, what about you?

Cheyenne Rider:

Not dissimilarly. I started back to school after taking a very long break during the pandemic. So 2020 election was hot and heavy. It was a nightmare. I attend Linn-Benton Community College. And Linn-Benton, that's the name of two counties that the college services, and Benton County is the home of Oregon State University. It's very blue. And Linn County is the world's largest grass seed producer. So it's very rural and very red. And so our student body is actually pretty split red and blue. And I come from a very long line of blue collar workers. And my brother's a welder. My dad's a machinist.

And I am a liberal arts major. And I really, really like to talk about my feelings and I like to try to understand people. And I've gotten good over the years of learning how to talk to people who aren't as good at talking about their feelings about things. And so I got involved with the Civil Discourse Program through my advisor and got to grow those skills and get to understand people and why they were so upset about these topics that were being politicized that, not that I didn't think they were a big deal, but I didn't understand why people were so mad.

Sadie Webb:

Yeah.

Cheyenne Rider:

And so I wanted to understand them better. And it's just something that's always been important to me, and I found a way to do it at a higher level.

Sadie Webb:

Yeah. Absolutely.

Cheyenne Rider:

That's so cool.

Sadie Webb:

All right, so Jordan, what about you?

Jordan:

Yeah. So hi, everyone listening at home. I'm Jordan, and I think my interest with political polarization came after my transition to college. So, I'm from South Dakota originally, and I grew up in a very rural community. I grew up really three and a half hours from the nearest town. But nobody knew that about me when I came. They just knew that I was the kid from South Dakota with the funny accent who says, Os pretty long. And so I show up at Duke University in my freshman year and people just start asking me questions like, "Oh, you're from South Dakota. Do you have running water there? Do you have electricity there? How do you get food?" And asking these, and at first, I just kind of laughed them off. Oh boy, ha ha.

But then I started to realize, if people are asking this question about this place, there's a fundamental misunderstanding about it. And so I was like, I've got a great idea. I'm going to do a podcast episode for one of my classes about South Dakota and about how great it is. And so I was like, for the intro of this podcast, I'll ask people what the first word that comes to their mind is when I say the words South Dakota. And so I went around and I asked a hundred first year students at Duke University in North Carolina what the first word that came to their mind when I said South Dakota was. And the top answers were racism and nothingness.

Sadie Webb:

Wow.

Lukas Rice:

[inaudible]

Jordan:

Oh yeah, eh.

Lukas Rice:

South Dakota eh.

Jordan:

You got some hot dish, eh? But when I saw that those were the results, I was, okay, now we've kind of understood the crux of the issue where not only do we not just understand the basic life that's being lived there, but also we don't trust those other people. There's a significant divide. And so I started thinking more and more about this. I got involved with Duke's Polis Center for Politics and started talking to Dr. Deandra Rose about just sort of ways that we could address cross-cultural communication and political polarization.

And that's what led me to Braver Angels, which was such an incredible sort of combining and meshing of all of the different things that I had always been interested in, but never was able to quite put my finger

on. And so, Braver Angels, I think, and the whole college discourse and debate program really helps me to hone in on my rural identity, but also better understand the world around me and the whys behind, both why was my coming to a campus so wild for me, but also why was it foreign to the people around me when we're all from the same place, but very different backgrounds.

Sadie Webb:

Yeah. Absolutely. And so something I just noticed from all of your stories is this want to communicate with people that are different from you. And I think oftentimes those can be tough conversations and sometimes lead to emotional responses, especially if you're trying to convince somebody to side with you or trying to expand their perspective. How do you approach those conversations?

Jordan:

That's the million dollar question.

Cheyenne Rider:

I think that Lukas actually touched on it earlier because it's all about values and everybody a little bit behind the scenes. Earlier today, we had a debate about banning books in middle schools, and what it came down to is everybody was trying to protect the children. And we were just trying to do that from a different point of view. And when you're talking politics, which it seems is what got at least Lukas and I into this kind of work, everyone is trying to do what they think is best for the United States. They're doing it because they love this country. They love their state, their community, and they want what is genuinely best for us to continue on in prosperity and all of the other patriotic words that you can think of.

But we have different approaches in doing that because we have different values. And so learning how to ask the right questions so that you can identify the person that disagrees with these values, I really like figuring out what their values are and figuring out why do we disagree. And it's oh, because you value, say personal liberty over safety. Not that you don't value safety, of course you do. It's just your personal liberty is over that. And for me, I would value public safety over liberty. And there's nothing wrong with either one of those things, but it's just being able to identify that they're flip flopped for us, and that's why we're different.

Lukas Rice:

So my goal is to try to, I mentioned this earlier, but it's to try to operate in the other person, whoever I'm arguing with or trying to convince, operate in their worldview. So for instance, if I'm having a debate about abortion, I could just say, "Oh. So you want to take women's rights away. Don't you think historically that's very dangerous, taking women's rights away?" And I could yell at them and I could hark on them and I could make my side look better, honestly.

Or I could say, "Okay. You think that life begins at conception? What about a zygote do you value?" And so to work from their perspective is much more likely to convince them, because if you're just yelling at them and throwing your perspective at them, that's not going to feel good to them. And it's much more rewarding to bring someone over to your side than to just win some virtue brownie points, essentially. So my main goal is to make it so that the other person feels like I understand their perspective and that I'm not fighting against them, but that I'm fighting with them, essentially, if that makes sense.

Sadie Webb:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Cheyenne Rider:

My grandma always says, the first person to yell in an argument is the first person to lose.

Lukas Rice:

That's great. I've never heard that before. That's good. That's good.

Sadie Webb:

I love that.

Jordan:

Yeah. Yeah. I think for me, sort of approaching those conversations, I mean, similar to what both of you just said, is it just comes down to trying to provide grace and empathy for that other person. So I was at work yesterday before I came out here to Denver for this student fellows gathering, and one of my coworkers comes up and he's like, oh, I heard you're going to be gone tomorrow. And I was like, oh, yeah, I'm going to Denver for this political polarization conference. And he goes, political polarization. Well, it's like the poles of the earth, one's on top, one's on bottom, and that's the way it's supposed to be. And I was like, that goes against fundamentally what we're trying to create here, but also why does he believe that? What was his set of life circumstances that led him to that?

What was the person who told him that that was the case or the reality that led him to believe that was the case? And so it started a conversation on that, and I think it admittedly, it rubbed me the wrong way. I still get rubbed the wrong way all of the time in these conversations, and I've been trying so hard to do this intentionally for the past, I guess three years ago was when I first around election season was when I first really got into this. And so just being able to give that grace and empathy and just leave that space for conversation, the biggest thing that you can provide somebody is your time and your silence.

Sadie Webb:

And your silence.

Cheyenne Rider:

Yeah.

Sadie Webb:

I love that. Listening to truly listen.

Cheyenne Rider:

Yeah. I think that's a really big deal and that I like what you said about things still rub you the wrong way. People often ask me when I tell them about what we do with civil discourse and what we do at Bravery Angels, but how do you listen to people that you disagree with so fundamentally? Or, oh, I could listen to somebody that disagrees with me about topic A, but if it comes to human rights, then no, I can't. I can't talk to somebody that I disagree with, and I fully understand that boundary. And it is hard to have a conversation with somebody that you fundamentally, on a very deep, maybe human rights level disagree with them, but allowing that space to be silent and to think about why you're reacting the

way that you are reacting, why you feel like you've been rubbed the wrong way, and be able to form a truly well thought out response, that's the skill that I want people to work on. You don't have to work on never being upset by anyone else's opinion. You can still get upset by other people's opinions, but...

Lukas Rice:

Well, yeah, disagreeing is certainly great for our country and great for our democracy, and I love arguing with people. I think where the problem comes in is when people are either uncomfortable disagreeing or people are unwilling to talk to somebody that they disagree with. And I think that's sort of my main aim isn't to end polarization, but for us to be a little bit more comfortable that we have disagreements and then being able to talk those disagreements out rationally. But I think people get so polarized, like you mentioned, that it's the other ends of the earth, and then it's like, how do we even get closer to one another anymore if we're on opposite sides of the spectrum and we're pushing as far apart as possible? So I think anything we can do or any single person that you can convince just to listen to you more, I think is really great.

So for instance, I was hanging out with some conservative friends of mine a while ago, and then I also have this transgender friend, and I don't think that this, my conservative friends have ever met a transgender person until I got them together. And I could see that it sort of melted their brains a little bit because they were actually meeting somebody and having a nice dinner. We were all getting pizza. They were having pizza with somebody who they thought was evil or destroying our country. And then vice versa, the transgender person, they told me that they thought that they were going to be much more uncomfortable before, but that they had a great time. And I think that it's little things like that, it's not even the big political wins. I think it's the little things of convincing the individual to be more comfortable with these disagreements and being around different people. That is super, super important. That's my main goal, my main push.

Sadie Webb:

Absolutely. Learning to be comfortable and okay with being uncomfortable.

Lukas Rice:

Absolutely.

Sadie Webb:

And focusing on expanding your capacity for empathy simply by interacting with people who are different from you.

Cheyenne Rider:

Yeah. I think those little wins are super important. My best friend moved to North Carolina after she got married, and I flew out there and Jacksonville's super tiny airport. It's in a military town, and I was getting on the plane and there was a guy wearing a Trump mask. This is when masks were still required. And I was, in my head, I was like, I know I'm going to have to sit next to that guy. I know it.

And we did sit right next to each other, and I was sitting there reading my graphic novel, and he was sitting next to me reading his Bible on his phone and we were not speaking. And then somehow we started a conversation, and I honestly don't remember how it started, but this was during the Black Lives Matter protest in Portland. And he'd asked me where I was going, and I said, I'm going to Portland. And he voiced his concern about what he had seen on the news about the protests and stuff. And so that

started a conversation that lasted the rest of the flight, and he gave me the best compliment. At the end he goes, you are not what I thought a Democrat from Portland would be like.

Sadie Webb:

Wow. And I said, that's really, thank you. I appreciate that. You are certainly not what I thought a man wearing a Trump mask in North Carolina was going to be like, and I didn't want to sit next to you. And we shook hands and we left that conversation and had a three hour flight, and we talked pretty much the whole way. And that man will probably not think about Portland and Democrats from Oregon the same way. And I will not think of someone wearing a Trump mask, I'm not going to make that many assumptions just because they are supporting somebody that I disagree with.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah. And I think the best part is there's always a chance that he goes home and he tells his friends, you know, I talked to this Democrat and they were very reasonable. And then you're telling the story on a podcast. So it seems like the individual level, but it's dominoes and they're going to come crashing down.

Jordan:

What I love about your story is that you didn't have this conversation and completely shift your views or your value system. You both go home probably with a lot of the same beliefs. And I think that that's so beautiful about civil discourse and something that we don't necessarily acknowledge within civil discourse is it's not supposed to be a watering down of our views so that we all have the same views in the middle. That'd be a really boring world to live in, and we probably wouldn't get much progress. And so the fact that you're able to have that experience where you walk away just with more empathy for other people, but not necessarily completely...

Cheyenne Rider:

Compromising.

Jordan:

Yeah.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah.

Jordan:

Compromising what you believe in, everybody believes in something and everybody believes in that thing for a reason. And I love that.

Cheyenne Rider:

Yeah.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah. That's cool.

Cheyenne Rider:

That's favorite stories and one of my favorite situations that I've ever been in. And it really checked myself and my own assumptions, and I'm glad that I could, 'cause I think that it's just so easy in today's world with social media and the bi-polarization of the media. You just, it's really easy to demonize each other and we forget that we're actual people and that these transgender people can eat pizza with these conservatives and have a totally wonderful evening or a completely, it doesn't even have to be wonderful, just a completely normal average evening and share stories and probably find a lot of things in common beyond what they have differences.

Sadie Webb:

Yeah. Absolutely. I love both of those stories that you just shared, Cheyanne and Lukas. And Lukas, you said the domino effect. Right?

Lukas Rice:

Yeah.

Sadie Webb:

So these small little incidents that happen that are moments that lead to something bigger.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah.

Sadie Webb:

And so I want us to take a minute and kind of think about that and talk about that. So how do you see Braver Angels debates on your campus having a domino effect? And then from the 30,000 foot view, why is this work important for the country as a whole? What we're doing is happening specifically and uniquely on college campuses, but there's also a greater impact. What do you guys think that impact is? Do you see it as a domino effect?

Jordan:

I definitely see it as a domino effect. So first, going to what this sort of looks like, at least on Duke's campus, and with my experience. Duke's program is pretty new. We got started late in this semester, and so we were only able to host one debate, but what was really cool was that we hosted it on a campus issue, not a political issue. So we have a lot of controversy, I say that in air quotes around our housing system. And so we hosted a debate on our housing system and whether or not we thought it was good or bad, and we had school administrators show up to the debate and listen to it. And I think being able to have an outlet for students to voice their opinions and realize what they're mad about and what they're not actually mad about and realize the validity of both things being true is huge for students.

And then that's just a life skill. I've taken some of the things that I've learned through Braver Angels in this program. I coach high school speech and debate, and I work a lot with my students on, I mean, the whole point of speech is to be able to get your ideas into a streamlined way so that you can try to convince people of your beliefs and share the things that are heaviest on your heart. And so I sit down with my students and I'll be like, what is the most pressing issue that you see? And one of my students will tell me, oh, it's that conservatives are ruining America. And it's like, okay, how do we take a couple

steps back, think about the root of that comment, and then how can we make that something that can, not necessarily reframe our ideals, but just reframe our view so that we can go through life running into people who have different beliefs than us and not shut down because of that, or not be afraid or not make them afraid?

That's huge. And that's where the domino effect comes into play, because you create this sort of generational movement that doesn't stand up for the sort of intolerance of beliefs that we see. I mean, even if on the smallest scale, which I don't think this will happen just because of the power of the mission, but Braver Angels only is on Duke's campus. And the things that these students learn only stay within their minds. It still affects their actions in the rest of the world. It still affects the way that these people interact with the world. And there's something about watching people interact a little bit differently, a little bit kinder, a little more empathetic than we see in a society that's so polarized that makes people go, oh, that's something that I want to do, and if I can pass it on to my students, awesome. But even if I can't, at least I can say hi to the stranger in the gas station and not carry that fear.

Cheyenne Rider:

I think these debates do a really good job of being the great equalizer because everyone in the room, with the exception of the chair, doesn't even get addressed directly, which is very purposeful and turns down the heat in the room so that you can ask the questions. But we've hosted debates at LB about academic dishonesty and whether or not there should be a zero tolerance policy for academic dishonesty. That debate was really great because we had a lot of faculty and instructors that came, it was a Zoom debate, but that logged in, and then we had a lot of students, and it was a really, really productive debate. And while it may not have been one of the spicier topics that we've ever done, it was really fulfilling because we got to hear the students say like, look, it's not that we want to cheat, or even that we're doing it on purpose.

Sometimes there's accidental plagiarism. But also there's a lot of pressures that these students are under, and you can tell when an instructor is kind of checked out of the class. And so they felt like, yeah, why should I put in all of this effort if the professor's kind of not, or instructor's not putting in all this effort? And then the instructors had their side of things and really voiced some concerns that they had about ChatGPT and things like that that are coming out. But a lot of both sides got heard and the students felt comfortable to share their opinions with faculty. Faculty was able to speak directly to the students, and it was just a direct way to have this kind of conversation and make it like they were equals. And that's what I really, really love about Braver Angels.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah. The domino effect is it's on the cultural level. It's on the individual level. But looking at the macro a little bit, and our democracy as a whole, I've noticed a trend in people mistrusting our democracy and our institutions and our government. And I think that a lot of that stems from this same problem of not understanding one another because, of course, you're going to mistrust your government if you believe that they want to murder babies or you believe that they want to mutilate children, essentially. And so understanding each other I think brings up the political efficacy because the politicians that you don't want to win, you don't want them to win because you have some sort of epistemic disagreement, but it's not because they're evil.

It's not so morally loaded. And I think that when we morally load our decisions for who we're voting for and sort of put down the other political party, I think that that sort of leads to almost like a cult-like mindset in the sense that we are the good guys. You are the bad guys. And as people, we all love



democracy. We know why that is a problem. It just doesn't work that way. So I think it's very important for increasing political efficacy that we understand one another in our political positions.

Sadie Webb:

Yeah. Absolutely. Okay. So I want to talk a little bit about your experience on campuses right now. So you all are on different campuses. Five years ago, we would've never imagined the College Debates and Discourse Alliance program would've scaled to the size that we have. Right? We have now worked with well over 6,000 students on over 75 different university and college campuses throughout the US. There's a huge demand for the programming that we're doing, and we're starting to explore the reasons for why. Why is that demand there? And so I'm curious what you guys all think about that. Jordan, you just mentioned this generational movement. Do you think that this is providing a sort of unique space for Gen Z? I mean, why are college students so fast to jump on and say, yeah, I want to do this. I want to participate.

Cheyenne Rider:

As the only millennial at the table, I will say that because I think that the previous generations have let it go really far to be...

Sadie Webb:

Say more.

Cheyenne Rider:

... to be honest.

Sadie Webb:

Yeah.

Cheyenne Rider:

Some of it was about that great equalizer that I was talking about. There was very much a respect your elders, kind of, they know better sort of way. Obviously this isn't for everyone. I can't speak for my entire generation, but I think it was very much like there was a kind of seeded trust for a long time. And I'm not an expert. I'm just a person with my own thoughts and my own experiences. So what could I possibly have to contribute? And something that I have seen being an older student, working with a lot of Gen Zers at university is that these kids know that they have a voice. I'm sorry. I don't mean to patronize you by calling you kids.

Lukas Rice:

It's okay.

Jordan:

It's all good.

Lukas Rice:

It makes me feel youthful. So

Cheyenne Rider:

I'm 31 years old, so to me, you guys are [inaudible] rub it in why don't you.

Lukas Rice:

[inaudible] take a drug after this, I think. Seriously.

Cheyenne Rider:

But you guys know that you have a voice.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah.

Cheyenne Rider:

And that your opinion matters. And maybe it's not the most important opinion in the room, but it matters and it should be heard. And by virtue of knowing that, you know that everyone else in the room's opinion also matters and also needs to be heard. And bless you guys for standing up there and making your voices heard. And I'm glad that it's happening. And I think that you guys do a better job of looking out for each other than the rest of us did.

Sadie Webb:

Yeah.

Cheyenne Rider:

I think we were all very much, not very much, but we were all kind of out for protecting ourselves or helping ourselves climb the ladder. And you guys are like this is garbage. This is not working. We got to help each other. And so I think that that's why this is really working out well in this time and place. That being said, there are a lot of people my age and older that love this work and...

Sadie Webb:

Absolutely.

Cheyenne Rider:

... that saw the wrong or saw the unfairness of it and didn't know how to go about fixing it. And this platform gives people an opportunity every day, normal, average people can log into a Braver Angel's debate about any topic and speak their mind and be heard and hear other people and expand their thoughts on a situation.

Okay. So just a few minutes ago, Cheyanne, you mentioned this most important voice in the room, and I want us to explore that a little bit more. Is there such a thing as the most important voice in the room? And if there is or if there isn't, how do you navigate that in conversations?

Lukas Rice:

I think there can be that for some issues, especially issues that are super undecided, such as moral or philosophical issues, there's not an most important person in the room. But for stuff like science or psychology, I know that's a type of science, or even politics, sometimes there is a most important person

in the room. Sometimes it's a specialist. And sometimes if you have concerns, voice your concerns. But at least make sure that your positions are as grounded in reality as the experts that you're talking to. Because otherwise you're going to be convincing a lot of people of a belief that's not grounded in reality all because you wanted to be equally important as the epidemiologist in the room.

Sadie Webb:

Should that person be allowed to share their belief though?

Lukas Rice:

Absolutely. Anybody should be allowed to share their belief no matter how horrendous it is.

Sadie Webb:

Absolutely.

Cheyenne Rider:

Yeah. I agree. I think that there can be a time and place where there is a most important voice in the room, but it's certainly not always. And I would put that in aspects where, I don't know, maybe there's a room full of white people talking about race issues. If there is a person of color in the room, their opinion probably is going to matter more than if you're talking about what it's like to be a person of color in the United States. If you're talking about trans rights and there is a trans person, their opinion matters more because it's their lived experience.

Sadie Webb:

Absolutely.

Cheyenne Rider:

And same thing, if you're talking about science, then an expert, their opinion probably matters more because they've dedicated their life to this area of study and probably know more about it than somebody that did a 30 second Google search.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah. I just want to say I agree that there can be a most important voice in the room, but I also think that there's never a voice that shouldn't be in the room.

Cheyenne Rider:

Yes.

Lukas Rice:

Essentially, I've been told before that I shouldn't have an opinion on abortion because I'm a man, and I agree, talking about important voices, a woman's opinion on abortion is more important than mine because she has that experience. If men could get pregnant, there would probably be Plan B at every single gas station on the planet, but that's not the case. Women get pregnant. But I think that I should still be allowed to have an opinion on that, but I also can accept that I may not be the most important

voice in the room, but I think that it's important to not disregard people's opinions, especially for things that they were born as such as their race or such as their gender or sexuality, et cetera.

Sadie Webb:

Absolutely. So how do we translate that into the Braver Angels debates that happen on campuses?

Jordan:

I think on campuses, one of the coolest things about them is that it really draws on that lived experience, just because a lot of times they're impromptu, or at least I've yet to see somebody come to a debate with a list that's just printed out facts after facts after facts that they can use to take someone down because it's inherently non-competitive. And so you rely on those lived experiences, especially when you're doing a debate where you're voting on the resolution and the time we were doing today, this debate, we were talking about book banning, and it came down to lived experiences and to the experiences of people's children. And we kind of got into the conversation of whose voice was more important in the room at that time. But just because of the way that the debate is structured, I think that it allows for those power dynamics to be shifted.

I think as far as incorporating it into the campus debates, I think it really involves intentionality on the part of the people participating. And it's hard because if you don't want to have a conversation on civil discourse, you're probably not going to show up to a Braver Angels debate in general, unless we trick you, which I've tried to do with some people. But when you finally get through that wall and you get people to sit down and just sort of take a second to clock their positionality in the room, to clock their lived experiences, I think naturally people kind of realize where they need to lend grace towards others. I know empathy is a big word of the night for me, but truly where they need to grant empathy for other people so that the importance of their word isn't convoluted in the importance of maybe my word.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah.

Cheyenne Rider:

Well, and I think it's important to note that just because somebody may be the most important voice in the room doesn't mean that they're like 100% right...

Sadie Webb:

Yeah.

Lukas Rice:

Certainly.

Cheyenne Rider:

... or that their opinion is the only one that matters. It just means that they may have a more well-rounded or clearer take on the situation, or they may have a richer lived experience in that particular situation, but it doesn't necessarily mean that they have to be right. And a big thing that I have learned through all of this is that there doesn't have to be one capital T truth at the end of it. Everyone can walk away with their own truth. Like you said earlier, you didn't have to compromise your ideas. If you believe something to your core, that can still be your core. And if I believe the absolute opposite at my

core, that can still be my core. But you're still a human being, and I still respect your thoughts and your feelings, and yeah, I will disagree with you until the day we both leave this planet. But you're a person and I respect you.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah.

Sadie Webb:

I love that.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah.

Jordan:

Baseline respect for everybody, regardless of their opinion.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah. If somebody is not-

Cheyenne Rider:

And it's hard sometimes.

Sadie Webb:

Absolutely.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah. If somebody is not making an effort to understand your position or your belief, I think that that's a conversation you should drop. So lately in when I do one-on-one debates, there's this new thing I'm doing where after I feel like we're getting stuck in the weeds a little bit, I'll say, do you mind restating my position back to me? Can you tell me my position? And if say, we're talking about abortion, this is always my go-to because it's so loaded, but say we're talking about abortion, and they say, yeah, your position is you think babies should die, leave that conversation instantly because they're not making an effort to try to understand you, and your energy could be spent so much better elsewhere. There are, unfortunately, in our country people whose minds are completely closed off. So I think focus on the people who you can make a change with, but don't spend so much time trying to change the mind of somebody who's not even attempting to understand you. I think that's a waste of time.

Sadie Webb:

Yes. Who's not coming into that conversation in good faith.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah. Exactly. Yeah. I think that's essential. In just any conversation they should be trying to understand you. Listening is way more important than speaking even I'd say. So if somebody's not making any

attempt to understand you, my advice is drop that conversation right there. It's not going to go anywhere.

Sadie Webb:

How do you just that? How do you break through to those people that are having trouble entering into a conversation genuinely with the intent to learn and the intent to listen? Because I think that's something that the Braver Angels debates really try and do is create a space for all voices to be heard, emphasis on heard. How do we break through to the people that maybe don't resonate with that?

Lukas Rice:

I think a lot of it stems from the thinking the other side is evil. And so going back to my transgender friend meeting my conservative friends, if you want to try to convince somebody of something, make sure that they don't see you as an enemy first. Maybe go get pizza with them. Get some chicken and waffles. Hang out. Work on homework or whatever. But if they can see you as a person, then they're going to be much more likely to listen to you than if they see you as just the opposition essentially. I think it's about trying to make friends with the people that adamantly disagree with you, because that's really the only way that you're going to get them to open their ears for you.

Jordan:

You got to have commonality in those situations.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah.

Cheyenne Rider:

Yeah.

Jordan:

That's so huge. And I think especially when you realize I think the most effective way to break through, I've especially noticed this in my hometown with people that I don't agree with. Because we're in a rural, isolated community, and I think that in on a campus like Duke, where basically all of our student body lives on campus, all around each other all the time, so tensions can get high, you got to recognize that you're a part of the same community, and so inherently you got to be a part of the same team. It all comes down to the support of community. If we don't understand where the other person is coming from, we're never going to be stronger as a community. We're never going to be able to withstand moments where things are hard.

And I think especially when you're approaching conversations where power dynamics are at play and conversations on race and things like that that get really, really hard because you have, especially when you start using words like bait tree, where it's like, wow, we just need to shut down because somebody's boundaries have been crossed, or I don't even want to say the word comfortability, but ability to function in the space has been completely compromised. That's when you got to go back to go to the very beginning and look and be like, okay, we are neighbors. We have to get through this.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah.

Cheyenne Rider:

Yeah.

Jordan:

Because you and I might see completely differently when it comes down to race. And, you know, if I approach a conversation as a white woman with someone who's a Black woman and we don't see eye to eye on something and I say something that makes that other person feel uncomfortable, I could completely damage the fabric of our community from that comment. And so you just got to go back to the, okay, we're on the same team here.

Cheyenne Rider:

Yeah. I think it's super important to always come from a place of good faith, always. It's one of my favorite terms, studying communication, and just be genuine and speak your truth. And if you don't know something, that's okay. Say that you don't know something. And ask that person for clarification, because that's going to bring you some level of connection, because now it's not you just preaching at them, they're getting to explain something to you. And when I'm having sort of a one-on-one conversation with somebody that's clearly not putting the same effort into understanding me as I am into trying to understand them, I will try to reframe with a different context. So I was having a conversation about the recent ban on drag in Tennessee with a fairly conservative friend of mine. And this led into a whole conversation about transgender rights and things, and it sounds strange, but the only thing I could think of was he didn't understand being trans at all.

And I am not a trans person, so I cannot speak, but from my layman's point of view of trying to explain it to this person, I said, have you ever been to someone's house where they pray before they eat and you don't pray before you eat at your house? And he's like, yeah. And I'm like, can you sit down? And you kind of start to eat, and then they start to pray and you feel really uncomfortable. And he's like, yeah. And I'm like, imagine feeling that all the time, everywhere you go, that moment of deep like, oh my god, did I just really offend somebody and, oh, are they going to be mad at me? What are they going to do? Imagine feeling that all the time and then having that be legislated. So I try to find something that they might be able to relate to, and hopefully that will connect to the bigger thing that we're talking about.

Sadie Webb:

Yeah. Find that comfortable space, that common ground.

Lukas Rice:

Something you brought up that I think is great is asking people questions. People love to explain themselves. Seriously, they can go on and on and on. And I've noticed that if you ask people really simple questions about stuff that you can tell they're interested in, even if you don't care, they're going to feel much more comfortable around you. So that's some more advice I have is ask people questions because they really enjoy that. They really love explaining themselves.

Cheyenne Rider:

Oh yeah. Ask an open-ended question. If you can say, I was actually going to save this for a speech later, but I'm going to tell you now. This is going to go on a podcast and it'll last longer. If someone were to ask

me is the 1985 cult classic, the Goonies, a great movie? The simple answer is yes. And I don't have to tell you anything else, just yes, it's a great movie.

Lukas Rice:

Objectively.

Cheyenne Rider:

Objectively, one of the best movies ever made. But if you say what makes the 1985 quote, classic film, the Goonies a great movie, you will get a comprehensive and extensive list of and reasons for why I love that movie, why it brings me so much nostalgia, why it's quite possibly the greatest movie ever made, and you're going to get to know me a lot better because of my love of the Goonies versus if you just ask if it's a great movie, and I say, yes. And there are only a few words that are different in those questions, so learning how to ask an open-ended question and kind of get to dig a little bit deeper and find out what those values are, and it's key.

Lukas Rice:

That's really good advice.

Cheyenne Rider:

It's really key.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah.

Cheyenne Rider:

Try to word it so that it's open-ended because people do want to talk about themselves.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah.

Sadie Webb:

Or being the person that says, okay, tell me more. I don't know anything about that. Tell me why you believe that.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah.

Sadie Webb:

So we're going to wrap up in a moment here, but we've had kind of a conversation about community throughout this as well, being empathetic to our neighbors and people in our direct community, because at the end of the day, we are all in this community, whatever our community, how big or large it is, we're all in it together. And so something that we are working to do in this program right now is establishing different communities of practice on campuses throughout the US. We're doing that on



each of your campuses. And so I'm curious, what does that mean to you, and what does that look like when it becomes actualized on your campus?

Jordan:

Everyone's looking at me.

Cheyenne Rider:

Well, you or that you haven't talked in the longest.

Jordan:

No. I know. I'm thinking deep thoughts.

Lukas Rice:

I can say something.

Jordan:

No. I got it. I got a flash. [inaudible] to throw out there. So I was reading an article because I'm a nerd that was talking about how something like 56% of conservative students on college campuses self-censor and I've been thinking about that a lot in the context of why aren't people fully showing up in the community that they're a part of? What barriers are in place that make them not want to be who they are or what they believe? And so when it comes to approaching the Duke community of practice that we're building, I think about the broader goal of, oh, I want everybody to be their authentic self. But then the less broad goal of being able to have those conversations individually outside of Braver Angels, I want people to become friends because of the things that they see, even though they start from a place of difference. And so I think when it comes to actually developing that community, we're really lucky in the size of our campus in that I think this might be a little idealistic, but I'm a big dreamer.

I think the entire Duke community can be encompassed in that community of practice. I really see that as a possibility because we have a bunch of super interested students who are willing to have tough conversations and just need the incentive to go beyond that layer of just tough to a little bit uncomfortable. And when you go beyond that and you really develop those connections, it's the Goonies example. If you ask me why the Goonies is my favorite movie, I am now a big fan of you because you care about me. And fundamentally, that's what it's all about.

And all of a sudden we're in community together because I like you. And then when I need something from you, when I need a shoulder to cry on, or even just an accountability buddy, when I'm thinking through something that's really hard and heavy to digest, you're there for me. And so it's all about creating that space. And I know that that sounds really theoretical, but I think when you sit in a classroom for people for two and a half hours and you have tough conversations, it becomes a whole lot more real a whole lot more quickly because you feel that connection.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah.

Sadie Webb:

Yeah.

Lukas Rice:

This is going to surprise a lot of people, but people used to talk to their neighbors, and that was a big thing. You'd have barbecue, you'd be the Democrat having barbecue with your Republican neighbors. And now we are all in these enclaves and these echo chambers. And so much animosity builds because you're not exposed to people that you disagree with. And so a part of building that culture and that cohesion is being comfortable with people that you disagree with. And a part of that is exposing yourself to people you disagree with. And so that's what Braver Angels is great for. That's what we bring to college campuses. We are creating this culture of being comfortable with the uncomfortable, and that's how democracy functions.

Jordan:

There's this book called Bowling Alone that's all about...

Lukas Rice:

Yes.

Jordan:

Have you read that?

Lukas Rice:

Yes.

Jordan:

Oh my gosh.

Lukas Rice:

Read it for class. It's great.

Jordan:

I love when nerds unite.

Cheyenne Rider:

Well, now I need to read it.

Jordan:

It's so great. And that's what it's all about. When you are in community with people, life is better in every single way. Growing up, my mom got really sick. It was because of the support of the community that my family was able to pull through from that. And that's what community's about. And when you're on a college campus and you're on your own for the first time, and you're figuring out for, a lot of people on your own for the first time, and figuring out how to be a mini adult, you got to get the fundamentals of how you rely on other people. And that starts by bridging those gaps between the people around you and building that trust.

Lukas Rice:

And it has to do with being understanding as well. I feel bad for the freshman that comes into college and feels like he has to watch everything he says because he doesn't want to offend everybody, and he doesn't want to get canceled. Obviously, you shouldn't be offending people or saying hate speech, but I see this increasing dogmatism and it kind of freaks me out because it's the antithesis of what I'm pushing for in people disagreeing and being comfortable disagreeing. So I think it's creating a culture of saying what you feel and being okay with other people saying what they feel.

Jordan:

Yeah.

Cheyenne Rider:

That's the part that's tricky for people.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah.

Cheyenne Rider:

Like we said, people like to talk about themselves and explain things. And so it's one thing to get them on board with speaking their own minds. And then it's a whole other thing to get them to be on board with listening to other people speaking their minds if those people disagree with them. And that's a trickier skill, but it's something you got to practice and you can't just do it once. And being from a community college that's a commuter campus, we don't have resident housing or anything like that.

Our average age skews a little higher than your average four year university. My goal might be more idealistic than yours. I want civil discourse to go beyond the campus just at all. I want these people to watch our debates, these students to watch our debates, and then go home and go to their jobs and practice this kind of active listening and this respect for other people's opinions in their workplace at the factory or at the grass seed plant or wherever they're at, and get to know each other. Get to know the guy working next to you that has pink hair while you overhear with your, I don't know...

Jordan:

Overalls.

Cheyenne Rider:

Yeah. Some really, yeah, a MAGA hats some really conservative stereotype.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah.

Cheyenne Rider:

Because you work at the same place, and you live in the same community. Your kids go to the same schools. They have classes together. You want this place to be better. We all live in this country. We want it to be better because we all live here. Our kids live here. Everyone we love lives, maybe not everyone, most of the people we love live here.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah.

Sadie Webb:

We're all on the same team.

Cheyenne Rider:

We're all in this together.

Sadie Webb:

And I think that's what we realize. [inaudible] Amen. And I think that's a great place for us to wrap up. We are all in this together at the end of the day. And recognizing that and humanizing people that we disagree with is wildly important.

Lukas Rice:

Yeah. It's essential.

Sadie Webb:

Absolutely.

Cheyenne Rider:

Agreed.

Sadie Webb:

Well...

Cheyenne Rider:

100%.

Sadie Webb:

Well, thank you all so much for being on the podcast.

Jordan:

Thanks for having us.

Lukas Rice:

Thank you for having us.

Cheyenne Rider:

Oh my gosh. This is so exciting [inaudible]

Sadie Webb:

[inaudible] to end. I motion to close.

Cheyenne Rider:

Motion to close. Can I get a second?

Sadie Webb:

Yeah.

Lukas Rice:

Right.

Sadie Webb:

Well, with that, thank you all. Thank you, Jordan, Cheyanne, Lukas, for sharing your opinions and speaking your truth.

Cheyenne Rider:

Thank you, Sadie.

Lukas Rice:

Thank you for having us, Sadie. That was fun.