

Doug Sprei ([00:11](#)):

Welcome to Higher Ed Now, ACTA's podcast on pivotal issues, trends, and leadership in higher education. I'm Doug Sprei, and I guess I can say I'm talking with you today from two distinct vantage points. One, as the usual producer of this podcast series, and two, as a Founder and Director of the College Debates and Discourse Alliance, a joint initiative between ACTA, Braver Angels, and BridgeUSA that has rapidly been expanding across the nation since 2018. The CD&D Alliance has organized and launched more than 300 Braver Angels debates, workshops, and related events, engaging at least 11,000 students who are enrolled at a few hundred colleges and universities from coast to coast. We've directly partnered with nearly 100 institutions, and I would say the model that has enabled our success is at this point evidence-based and replicable from school to school and even classroom to classroom.

([01:10](#)):

Now, at the very center of this model is a highly collaborative approach we've developed by cultivating student and faculty leaders on each campus. And that brings us to today's conversation with a distinguished professor and remarkable student from Duke University, an institution our alliance has partnered with for several years. In fact, Duke is one of 10 institutions, or what we call communities of practice, that are involved in our two-year deep research project generously funded by the John Templeton Foundation. I went down to Duke this past spring semester to chair a series of Braver Angels classroom debates, and also grabbed some face time with our faculty fellow Mark Dalhouse and our student fellow Ari Miller. I'm really glad that our program brings opportunities for intergenerational conversations like this. We sat down to explore Mark and Ari's views on the current state of political and social conversation in the nation and what motivates them to bring highly impactful civil discourse efforts to Duke's campus. I hope you enjoy the conversation.

([02:20](#)):

Mark Dalhouse and Ari Miller, welcome to our podcast on the College Debates and Discourse Alliance work at Duke University. This is about my fourth time at Duke, and I couldn't be more jazzed, especially having come out of an amazing debate that took place in the class of Professor Suzanne Katzenstein. We all experienced true civil discourse together in a room full of students debating on whether artificial intelligence holds out more promise than peril. We had students speaking in the affirmative and the negative on that topic and opening up a conversation that I found to be really scintillating. I wanted to talk to both of you together as the kind of unit that we have on a campus, which consists of a faculty member and some student leaders working together to help cascade this kind of discourse across the campus community. We've been working with Duke for a couple of years. I get more and more inspired every time I come here. Individually for each of you, what drew you to this work? Why are you working with our team? I'll start with you, Ari as the student, and then we'll go to Professor Dalhouse.

Ari Miller ([03:30](#)):

Yeah. Well, first of all, Doug, it's been an honor to have you here. I really appreciate you being so active and so interested in myself and Mark and all the other student fellows, as well as the students here at Duke. I have been interested in politics since about eighth grade, did some moderating of school board forums and in city commissioner, county commissioner forums. And so when I came to Duke, I knew exactly that I wanted to study public policy. I grew up in a town that was pretty homogenous when it came to political views, and I had political views that were opposite of that homogeneity. Anyways, and so I grew up learning how to have civil discourse with people who disagreed with me. I had to learn how to have conversations with these people who were my teachers, who were my administrators, who were my bosses, who were my peers, people who had a very direct impact in my life.

[\(04:27\)](#):

And so when I came to Duke, I knew that I wanted to continue that work. I knew that I wanted to study public policy. I knew that I wanted to be in the realm of politics because I think there's this misunderstanding among people that politics doesn't have to be something you are involved in, that it's its own sector. But politics affects every part of your life. It doesn't matter if you're a politician, if you are an active voter, politics affects every aspect. And so I knew that that was something I wanted to be a part of.

[\(04:58\)](#):

And so when it came to Braver Angels, I was a part of a orientation called Project Citizen during my first week of being at Duke. Part of our trip was... or part of our orientation was going to DC, and in DC we did a Braver Angels debate with Sadie chairing. The resolution was on whether or not we should regulate extremist media. I opened in the affirmative talking about the effects of misinformation on communities across the world, and I just fell in love with it. I love the idea of not speaking directly to other people because that's when it can become very accusatory. I think now more than ever it is so important to have these conversations with people who don't politically align with you, so that's why I'm involved.

Doug Sprei [\(05:47\)](#):

Great. And Mark, the first year of our Templeton Project work with Duke University, Deondre Rose, former Director of Policy Center for Politics, was our faculty fellow and has become a great friend and ally of the program and a great friend to me personally and couldn't have more appreciation for her. But one of the things she did when letting us know that she's taking on a new assignment at Duke, might be really too busy to service the fellow this year, she recommended you to succeed her. I feel very fortunate that that took place. And so you came in highly recommended and all of that, but this is my first time actually meeting you.

Mark Dalhouse [\(06:26\)](#):

Yes, that's right.

Doug Sprei [\(06:27\)](#):

So I wanted to ask you the same question, what drew you to this work? What prompted you to take on the fellowship that you're doing with us, and how does it fit into your life and work as an educator here at Duke?

Mark Dalhouse [\(06:38\)](#):

Yes. Well, thank you. I would just add my welcome and thank you that you're here at Duke today. So glad to have you honored with your presence in the work that you do with Braver Angels. That's a great question how I got here. I don't want to drag you down too far memory lane, but I think my interest in all of this I can trace to a grandmother who was keenly interested in politics and would talk about it and encouraged me to be in the news and paying attention. And that as a seventh grade boy led me to become intrigued with a fellow I kept seeing on TV who was running for president, whose name was Jimmy Carter. I talked my parents into every Saturday driving me down to the Jimmy Carter headquarters in Raleigh where I grew up, and I would stuff envelopes and do various things for the Jimmy Carter campaign in 1976.

[\(07:29\)](#):

That got in my blood. And then I have followed that ever since being aware of politics and then as a student of history, I pursued my PhD in American history and studied post World War II American History, much of it centered around politics, so I came to know it as a historian. But also as my career developed, I gained a lot of experience also in student life work, in residence life, in service learning, in these areas that took me outside of the classroom and connected me with students. And in fact, I think that's one of the things that drew me to Braver Angels, is that this is an opportunity... I teach here at Duke in the fall, I teach a first year seminar, I'm an academic dean, but my work is primarily student-facing. The whole point of a liberal arts education is to take your education outside of the classroom and connect it to all areas of your life.

[\(08:21\)](#):

I would echo what was said earlier about, of course, politics affects your life. One of the things, in fact unrelated to this but we were talking about in the office this morning, is something that I really would like to do further work on, and I think Braver Angels lends itself to that, is I'm a Dean in Trinity College, which is the College of Arts and Science at Duke. It occurred to me that the goals we have for students in terms of what we want them to look like on the other side of having gained a liberal arts education at Duke, that frame of mind, those intellectual habits very much go hand in hand with the habits of good citizenship and critical thinking, the ability to reflect, the ability to act, the ability to put things in context. All of those things are vital for a well-informed act of citizenry.

[\(09:11\)](#):

And so I am really intrigued by that notion of the hand in glove relationship between the goals of a liberal arts education regardless of one's major in the work of Braver Angels. And so when Deondra contacted me and said she had thrown my name in the hopper for this, I was delighted, we connected, we hit it off, and that's how I got here.

Doug Sprei [\(09:32\)](#):

Ari, obviously when we recruit student leaders, we go for the best. As you've seen in this morning's debate and other debates you've spoken at and been to, there's usually a little slate of opening speakers who are very confident and make really well-thought-out arguments and speeches, and they basically ignite the whole room into conversation around the given topic. And so that extends to how we choose student fellows, we want to get student leaders who are really all in on civil discourse and depolarization and just encouraging students to have difficult conversations and learn those skills. What really satisfies us most on the college debates and discourse team is watching the second layer of students behind the opening speakers, the ones who are more reticent, the ones who are much more prone to self-censoring their political and social viewpoints on campus and in the classroom. They rise up and make statements and speeches courageously, and sometimes the timid students turn out to be the ones that rock the rest of the room.

[\(10:40\)](#):

I guess I'm focusing in on a question for you about how do we ignite a passion and interest and a deep base of skills-building on this campus with the larger population of students that are really not so adept in debate or even interested in it or experienced in having conversations like this that's part of why you took on the fellowship role. Did you want to speak to that a little bit?

Ari Miller [\(11:02\)](#):

Yeah, I mean, I think there's two points that I want to make. The first one is something that I touched on at first is this false idea that we as my generation doesn't need to be involved in politics or doesn't have

a voice in politics. I think that growing up we grew up in a very polarized time where we're seeing all of this misinformation, this rhetoric, we're seeing me versus you, party versus party, and that makes us think, "We don't want to participate in that system" or "We don't want to get involved because we don't want to be divided among our peers. And there's also another side of politics I think has been built with intentionally leaving groups out. When you look at the language of legislation, the language is hard to understand unless you are trained to understand. The policy is hard to read unless you know what the language means, unless you are given an education where you are taught how to dissect legislation.

[\(12:01\)](#):

I think that that is done intentionally to make sure that there are people who are left out of the political process. I think now with the internet and social media, our younger generation is seeing that. We're seeing they don't want us to participate in this process. And so we grew up with this sort of, "We don't want to be a part of that status quo. We don't want to be a part of that system," or we feel like it doesn't matter what my vote does because my vote doesn't matter. It's just one vote versus all these other ones. So if we want to get people involved, we need to show them that they are important to this political process, their opinions do matter, that politicians do care about what young people think.

[\(12:42\)](#):

I mean, this is another change, but we have a big generational gap in Congress. When we have the average politician being 20 years older than the average American, there's a big generational gap. And that creates policy and issues that people care about not being addressed. And so there's that one side of it, but also you have to personalize it to each people. There's not a one-size-fits-all message that you can give to people. I know that, for me, I work for the Phonathon, which means I have the pleasure to call alumni and ask them for money even though they already spent like \$300,000 on this education. And so we are given this script right off the bat that tells us, "This is what you say. This is what you say to their response," and it's very much supposed to appease the masses, it's not personalized. But we are taught the more we do this job that we are supposed to personalize it. We ask them questions that are specific to them. We make a connection.

[\(13:38\)](#):

That is important because at the end of the day, the stuff that I'm passionate in politics is not necessarily the things that my neighbor is passionate about in politics. I don't know much about health policy. That's not what is getting me out and voting, that's not what is getting me to these debates and speaking about it. I'm more passionate about child and family policy, voter access. If we can personalize these connections to these students, then we are going to mobilize them. If we tell them, "Your voice matters. Your opinion matters", then they're going to show up. And I think we're seeing that with our generation. Our generation's very politically active because we are starting to realize, hey, we can make a difference. So sorry, that was a very long, drawn-out explanation.

Doug Sprei [\(14:22\)](#):

No, I like that. Let's keep drawing it out even more. But maybe you have a little bit of a response to that, Mark.

Mark Dalhouse [\(14:29\)](#):

Yeah, I appreciate your thoughts. I think that was spot on. I would add to that I am not sure I could produce data to prove this, but I think Ari's generation, these students have come of age in America where they were never really known anything other than intense division and polarization. And not that things were idyllic at an earlier time, but I know just speaking for myself, it was not till within the last

eight years that I felt something existential was at stake in what I did in terms of my civic involvement, the fact whether or not I voted.

(15:06):

A theory of mine, but thinking back to how John Kennedy in his 1960 campaign, one of the most enthusiastic responses he got in a campaign speech, which he wasn't even planning on giving, it was a throw in when he mentioned something about a possible Peace Corps. He did it at the University of Michigan in October 1960, and it ignited. Young people started flocking to hear him speak, and they signed up in droves later when he was president to the Peace Corps. I would like to think that this generation of students is waiting to be asked to step forward to be a part of something that's larger than they are, to give back, to serve. I think that no one's appealing to that. I think that people like to be asked, and I think if there were more of that from our candidates, if there were more of that, not just, "Something vital is at stake, you need to do this for your own good," but no, the positive part of this can be a part of putting this mosaic together of all of us moving forward together.

(16:10):

Whether we're Democrats or Republicans or liberals or conservatives, at the end of the day, it's remarkably similar how the things that we all want, how remarkably similar they are. Getting to that point, and I think that's why Braver Angels is such an important organization, the work they do on campus because I think it helps get students to that point where through our disagreements that there are things that we can agree on and that we can advance together. I think recovering that vision for these young people is a vital task of our time.

Doug Sprei (16:45):

I'm going to keep the mic on you for just a moment.

Mark Dalhouse (16:47):

Sure.

Doug Sprei (16:48):

Do you think that there could be some kind of vector inserted into the 2024 process that we're in right now that would be something akin to what then candidate Kennedy did in 1960? I never even thought of it that way, that something that appeals to this generation to really help them get them to step into the political process. And I'm going to have you speak to that too, Ari, because I know you're very motivated by that.

Mark Dalhouse (17:15):

Well, I think one of those efforts that I could see bringing about that outcome is already going on. And that is the fact that as students become aware and engage with the idea that they have a right to vote, they have a right to be involved, and here we go back to liberal arts education, having the context and the background to know that that privilege, that right was gained at great expense. And we in a sense are protecting something that's very precious and getting it ready to hand to the Americans that will come after us. I think that that emphasis on covering a tradition, recovering something that is kind of your birthright in a sense that was earned at great cost.

(17:59):

I think of a hero of mine who died within the last four or five years, John Lewis, Congressman Lewis. He got involved as an 18-year-old student in Nashville. I had a chance to have a conversation with him, and he told me when he went off to college as a first year student, he said the last thing his mom and dad said to him when he got on the bus to go to Nashville was, "Remember, you're going up there to get an education. Don't cause trouble." And he said, "I went, I got an education, and I caused trouble. I caused good trouble." I think both owning that right to vote and looking for the areas where we can cause good trouble and put ourselves in the way as he encouraged us to do, I think that... And I think that that's a great responsibility our office holders have. I think that's a great responsibility that the candidates have on either side. Everybody wins when that appeal is made. I know that's rather idealistic, but I think we're beginning something now that I think will pay off in the future.

Doug Sprei ([18:58](#)):

So Ari, this is the perfect springboard for you in that the present condition we're in 2024 is that the the American electoral system is under relentless assault in terms of half the country questioning the integrity of it. Professor Dalhouse just talked about how important it's for students to recognize and young people to recognize that their vote makes a difference. Do students feel that way right now in your experience, and how do we ignite and reinvigorate their interest and their trust in the system?

Ari Miller ([19:33](#)):

Yeah, I want to first start off with this, I think that young people do understand that their vote makes a difference, that if they go out and they vote that it will be an integral part of this system. I think the problem is that young people don't like this system. They don't like how it's set up. They don't like how it only supports, really, two of the majority parties. They don't like that it's Democrat versus Republican. They want to get away from that. They recognize that the polarization of Democrat versus Republican, and it's something that young people are really upset about.

([20:07](#)):

I have done a lot of partisan work, now nonpartisan work, which I'm really enjoying. And in the partisan work that I've done from both sides, I've heard this underplaying of my generation, this, "Oh, young people don't understand the political process. They don't have the experience that is needed to understand these complex issues. They are voting based on emotion and morality, which is not going to get either party ahead." It's like, "No, young people do understand the process. They do understand how our political system is brought up and how it works. They don't want to participate in this political process. They don't want this system."

([20:49](#)):

That is why people are abstaining from voting. That is why people are so outspoken against it. I think we're seeing a major societal shift in how generations have seen this political process, and that's normal, that's natural. That is exactly how our country has become as prosperous as it has, that's exactly how our country is still standing today, is these generational shifts. I think the problem that I'm seeing more recently is the fact that young people are being left out of the room where it happens. And that's something that I have experienced for my entire life, is being left out of this room.

([21:30](#)):

I started making space for myself. I started forcing myself into these rooms. Not everyone can do that, not everyone wants to have to force themselves into these rooms. And so for me, I am okay with having a target on my back. I'm okay with making sacrifices and risks. I'm fine with that. But there is a great number of people who are already on the fence about voting, already on the fence about the political

system that is in place. So if you create additional hurdles where they can't even be in the room, they can't even be in the decision-making process, you are just oppressing them more. And so when it comes to that, I think that's the main concern with young people.

(22:15):

I'll even add this other thing that we are now finally seeing Gen Z congressmen and congresswomen who are getting voted into our bodies, and I think that that's great. I think that we need young people in governing bodies. Why isn't it that we don't have student representation on school boards? Why isn't that a universal thing? Why aren't we having people who are directly affected by these policies represented on this governing board? I mean, that's the whole reason our country was founded, right? We separated from the British Crown because we didn't have representation when we were being affected by this policy and this legislation. So if our country was founded on that, why are we continuing that pattern? And furthermore, recognizing that we're continuing that pattern, why are we upset that people are calling that out?

Doug Sprei (23:04):

But when I was your age, there were two political parties and there were occasional third party candidates, but there was a great deal more, I guess, trust across the board in the institution itself. What's happened in this time of our lives is that the two parties have become so hyperpolarized and that the ranker and the loss of respect among them is just so extreme now. In the old days, Democrats and Republicans worked together in Congress and that the President and the Speaker of the House might be in different parties but had a collegial relationship and a friendly relationship, and that was visible to the public. So what has broken down? I mean, I just heard on NPR on the news the other day that public trust or public approval of Congress is at 12%. How did we get here, and what can we do about it? It seems like we're trying to do something tiny with the Braver Angel's effort that we're making, but how do both of you see that?

Ari Miller (24:10):

Yeah, actually, I want to push back.

Doug Sprei (24:12):

You want to push back? Okay.

Ari Miller (24:14):

I do. I do. I don't think that the majority of our parties are as polarized as everyone says they are. I think that we have very loud people who are on the extreme sides of both spectrums. You can see this in Congress. We have a Speaker of the House who has barely had his job for very long who is now trying to be ousted by a small percentage of the Republican Party in Congress because he tried to do bipartisan deals with the other party. That's not a reflection of the entire Republican Party. If you look at that faction that's doing that, I mean, it's a very small percentage of the party. The issue is that people are so scared of the rhetoric and how loud these people are that they're not willing to stand up against them.

(25:07):

I don't think that the majority of Republicans think that, just like how I don't think the majority of Democrats harbor those extreme leftist ideals that people say is a problem. I just think that they're loud. I think they're loud. I think that because people aren't speaking up against them, that is getting this perception that that's how all Republicans think. I come from a Republican town or Republican state.

That is not how all Republicans think. It's not. And so if we don't start pushing back on this idea that, oh, we're so divided, we're so divided, I don't think we are. And we see that in these debates on Duke's campus. This debate that we just did, we came in with a very affirmative versus negative. But I mean, something that we both saw was that we all agreed, we all agreed on the fact that AI should be regulated. But these things are being framed in a very Democrat versus Republican thing when that is just not the case anymore.

Mark Dalhouse ([26:07](#)):

I agree with Ari. I would add also just from a generational perspective, you talked about the importance of generational shifts in the development of American politics and the evolving of the different ethos that different generations live in. It occurred to me as you were talking, Ari, that one of the differences for you all growing up in the America that you did is that there are these existential issues. There's climate change. There is the erosion of the standard of living in the United States, the structural factors that are making the future much more murky, obscure, and frightening for young people. And so I think that we need to guard against that. I can see how people we get to the point of they're just throwing in the towel. I'm going to come to college and get a degree that makes me the most money, and I'm moving on, because with the array of all of these things that seem overwhelming and that impervious to change.

([27:12](#)):

But I agree with you that we are not nearly as divided as it might seem at first glance. It's interesting, I'm just thinking out loud here, but I teach a course here at Duke on September 11th as history. The title of the course is September 11th and the World You've Inherited. We talk about, it was short lived, but the national unity that followed in the aftermath of that catastrophe and whether or not, God forbid, if something like that happened today, what would be the reaction. Would we have that kind of national unity? Now we have social media which is much more pronounced. I mean, how would it be different? And to think about how that affects our ideas of community.

Doug Sprei ([28:02](#)):

In assessing our debates, looking at the impact of them and studying how students generally are that come into the funnel of our large student cohort across the country, we have seen repeatedly that students self-censor on campus, again because they're afraid to express political viewpoints and social viewpoints for all kinds of reasons. But I'm interested in your view on how can we restore trust in the political parties if they are so driven by affect of polarization, meaning they're basically spending all their time vilifying the other side instead of bringing out all of the maybe merits and virtues of their own platforms.

Ari Miller ([28:45](#)):

I mean, that is the question of the century. I was just talking to my friend the other day about the election and really just the presidential space that has taken shape over the past 8, 12 years. I mean, if you look at the administrations, a lot of what presidents do... Well, first of all, we never really have three terms in a row where it's all Republican or three terms in a row where it's all democratic. Which means that when we are switching off from Republican to Democrat, and when we see these campaigns saying, "Oh, look at what this party has done for the past four, eight years. You need to elect us so that we can undo everything that they did so that we can make this country better."

([29:33](#)):

And so now we're getting these presidents who are coming in and they're not doing anything new for our country, they're undoing everything the last guy did. And so are they really president for four years? No, they're undoing everything the last guy did for three years and then they're like, "Hey, maybe I should actually add something to this political landscape. Maybe I should introduce something." That is a problem. If we have these candidates who are running on these campaigns saying, "Hey, if you elect the other guy, our democracy is going to be gone. If you elect the other guy and this is going to be a problem," it's getting to the point where you can't run on fear anymore. You just can't do it. Because the flip side of it is just, as Mark had said, our generation has never lived in a world where we haven't been divided. We have never lived in a world where someone hasn't said, "If the other person gets elected, democracy is over."

[\(30:24\)](#):

So the more that you say democracy is over, fascism is going to take over, the less that that's going to have an impact on us, the less that that's going to want us to go vote. Where you've been saying fascism for the past four years, how do we know that this is true? So parties need to shift from this, "If you elect the other guy, it's going to be over," and they need to, in their campaign, bring innovative ideas that's going to transform our country. They need to add things, not work on undoing everything the last guy did.

Mark Dalhouse [\(30:56\)](#):

To your point, Ari, and this is going to be free political advice to the Biden campaign, but I think this is one of the shortcomings, in my opinion, of the Biden campaign because listening to you talk. I actually think President Biden has compiled a record of where he has launched some innovative, creative, long-term things that are not in reaction to undoing something the previous occupant did.

Doug Sprei [\(31:21\)](#):

That message isn't getting across.

Mark Dalhouse [\(31:23\)](#):

It is not. I think that if that were teased out, as it were, that agenda the president has pursued would be attractive to young voters because it benefits everybody. And so I think that that's one of the shortcomings of his campaign. But I think also, and this goes back to the need to revolutionize politics because this is about demonizing your enemy in voting on your fears instead of your hopes. And so in that-

Doug Sprei [\(31:57\)](#):

Wait a minute, so many people in the country, they won't even allow for that conversation to happen because of Biden's being 81 years old.

Ari Miller [\(32:08\)](#):

Yeah. I mean, listen, I do think that the parties are realizing that they can't run on fear anymore, that they can't run on, "We got to undo everything the last person did." And I think the Biden campaign is shifting on that. I've seen a lot of their ads coming out recently where they're talking about all the things that the Biden administration did as opposed to saying, "Hey, if Trump wins, he's going to undo all of this." I think they are seeing a shift in that, but I think the biggest thing that these political parties need to get behind is the fact that we can't run on fear anymore because it's getting to the point where it's...

Honestly, we're desensitized to it, and that's not good. We shouldn't be desensitized to the words fascism and extremism, but we are because they're repeated so often in our everyday life. I mean, I would be curious to see how many times it would come up in a conversation, the word extremism, over a week. I bet it would be a lot.

Doug Sprei ([33:10](#)):

Well, let's talk about how media coverage may reinforce some of these embedded problems that we have. I did a Google search recently because I love looking at the headlines and how they're crafted. So I did a Google search for Trump lashes out. There are hundreds if not thousands of articles, Trump lashes out at this, Trump lashes out at that. And then by extension other people lash out. So it's lashing out, it's attacking, it's castigating, it's vilifying. Media coverage seems to feast on vitriol and the attacking mentality that both parties often exhibit when that phenomenon is reinforced in your ears and in your eyes on social media and in broadcast media and so forth. How do we overcome that?

Ari Miller ([34:05](#)):

I think this is more of an issue of humanity in and of itself. I mean, I was in the journalism sector all throughout my senior year of high school. I wrote for my newspaper over 30 articles. Some of them were political. I think the issue here, and push back on me if you think this is wrong, but I think Americans are more keen to pressing on headlines that are divisive, that are outraging, than they are clicking on a headline that's like nice. If you see a headline that says, "Oh, Biden administration rolls out new student debt relief plan that cancels out a billion dollars of student debt" versus "Trump lashes out in rally in Florida," more people are going to be keen to press that second one because it's interesting, it gets people fired up, it's provocative. We use that strategy in our debate resolutions when we are talking about debate resolutions. Everyone factors into that.

([35:07](#)):

If you look at the data, provocative language is effective. I think that's going to require a shift in human attitude. I want to be an attorney, which means that most of the time when people are coming to talk to me as an attorney it's because they need me to fix a problem, they need me to clean up a mess. And I think that that is a big factor of society, that we only talk about bad things, that we only focus on bad things. We don't focus on the positive, and I think that's in human nature. I don't necessarily think that that is all bad. I think that it's good to talk about bad things, but it is that shift, because you're right, media is playing into that. Because at the end of the day, some of these media places, they don't care about whether or not it further polarizes America or our population. They care about what's making them money, and more clicks is more money.

([36:00](#)):

But I will say as someone who was in journalism, that is not the case for every publication. Because I had people in my community who did not like our newspaper, who said our newspaper was biased, who said our newspaper only cared about certain things. That's not always the case. So whenever I'm talking about media, I'm very careful to say, "All media does this," because I don't think so. I think media is important, and I think that it's a good sector, but I do agree with you.

Doug Sprei ([36:30](#)):

Well, I hope that your education at Duke and becoming an attorney are only stepping stones for you to perform the larger work that you wish to do in this world. Because we spoke about this at breakfast and don't have time to explore that in this podcast, but I hope that those are really steps along the path

toward a larger capacity to serve in the ways that you think will do most good. And so I want to circle back in this conversation as we bring it to a conclusion on education itself. Ari, you're a student, Mark, you're a professor. There's a dynamic synergy there upon which this entire university is founded. And here we come in our little College Debates and Discourse program hoping to provide something that compliments the educational mission of the institution and also your goals as an educator personally and your goals as a student personally. So let's just unpack a little bit if we can the work we're doing as Braver Angels, College Debates and Discourse fellows in partnership with ACTA and BridgeUSA and how can this work that we're doing together inform the educational process and help students in the way that we hope.

Mark Dalhouse ([37:45](#)):

Well, one observation that I would make is that, and I think this is an occupational hazard for those of us who are educators, and that is that I think that a lot of the work, if not most of the work, that we do, we will not live to see the outcome. We're planting seeds, we are introducing students to ideas and concepts. We don't know when we will have tripped a wire in someone's mind and they become engaged in the topic. It may happen right after class, it may not happen for 20 more years. But something that engages a student that makes them want to... We consider the rest of the day, I could give you anecdotal evidence that in the course of my career of things that have come back as something I've long forgotten that I said in a class, it meant something to a student at the time that actually take the trouble to come back and say, "This changed me."

Doug Sprei ([38:39](#)):

How does that make you feel as a professional?

Mark Dalhouse ([38:42](#)):

Old.

Doug Sprei ([38:43](#)):

Not only old, right?

Mark Dalhouse ([38:45](#)):

I got a book in the mail the other day at the office here. I hadn't ordered it, it came to me. There was a handwritten letter to it, and it was a student of mine at the institution I taught at 21 years ago who had taken a class. He said, "We just found this new book on this subject," he married one of my other students, "and we've talked about your class for years. We thought of you when we saw this book, we wanted you to have it. And thanks for teaching the class." And so it gives you a sense of we're doing something that will outlast us, that it is a part of something that's much bigger than we are. And so I think that that's key.

([39:19](#)):

But I'll say to localize it with Braver Angels in Duke, I think Braver Angels is coming into a space, there's a long tradition of student faculty researching together, teaching together, mentoring. And so I think that the ground is already fallow for that kind of approach. And back to what I said originally, that I think a lot of what we're starting will not bear fruit for some time to come, but we are making a difference.

Doug Sprei ([39:47](#)):

You get the last word on this.

Ari Miller ([39:49](#)):

Yeah. I mean, I want to start with this, I took a class last semester about civic engagement in higher education, so very, very relevant to this discussion. I took it with Eric Mlyn, who's a professor here, and one of the things he told me that has stuck with me is that Duke students, before coming to Duke, when they're accepted, we're told that we are special, that we are some of the top students in the country, that we can walk on water, that we're going to save the world. And then when we're at Duke and we're doing things with civic engagement, doing things like with service learning like DukeEngage where we go to different countries, we are then backtracked and told, "Okay, well, you can't walk on water. You got to learn how to walk first." And then we're sort of humbled.

([40:34](#)):

I think that that is important, right? I'm going into this work with Braver Angels, I'm going into this work in my personal life not with the intention of thinking that I'm going to change the world. I don't think that I'm going to reform any political system during my lifetime. I don't think I'm going to reform an entire child welfare space within this lifetime. But I think that there is this issue of this perception saying that people don't want to enter into big change because they don't see the results in their lifetime, because it's too big of an overhaul, it's going to take too much time, too much resource... too many resources, I should say. And to that, I heavily disagree with that notion, because all of the systemic change that we have seen, all of the improvements that we have made on society started off with people doing the legwork that, yeah, it's not great work, yeah, we're not going to be able to see these results in our lifetime. And that stinks, right?

([41:30](#)):

I think as a species, we are very much motivated by the output of the work that we do, but if someone doesn't start the work, if we don't start this groundwork, it's never going to happen. And that is the issue, that's something that I've had to learn with the activism that I do, is coming to this point of knowing that the work that I'm doing may seem like it's just stagnant, that it's not doing anything, that it's staying on one level, but if you zoom out and look 10,000 feet out, that line is gradually getting higher and higher and higher, and we are working towards something. And that is what Braver Angels is doing. Yeah, we're not going to see complete depolarization of our society, we are not going to see polarization eradicated from society, that's not what's going to happen in our lifetime, but if we don't start this work, it is never going to change.

Doug Sprei ([42:25](#)):

Okay, one lightning round question for you. It's very brief and a brief answer is what I hope for. In a half hour we're going to another building, we're doing our second Braver Angels debate of the day with Professor Katzenstein's class, another 75 students. If they're anything like the students I encountered this morning while chairing the debate, it's going to be amazing, because I was totally awe-inspired by the debate this morning. Give me your quick impressions of what took place this morning in our first classroom debate.

Ari Miller ([42:57](#)):

I think my impressions were that people really did listen and they engaged. I think that's the issue that we run into, is are people really going to engage? Are they really going to be interested in it? I think people were, and people were changing their mind.

Doug Sprei ([43:11](#)):

How does it relate to the big picture stuff we've just been talking about?

Ari Miller ([43:15](#)):

Because it plants seeds in people's head. If they can see, "Oh, in this debate that I had a pretty strong opinion on, and I listened to the other side and I'm like, 'Hmm, they made some good points.'" that plants a seed of like, "Hey, maybe I should listen to the other side. Maybe if I was wrong on this or if I was apprehensive on this topic, maybe I should be apprehensive on other topics."

Doug Sprei ([43:35](#)):

You get the last word, and I don't know what to make it about.

Mark Dalhouse ([43:40](#)):

Well, no, the last thing I want to say is something Ari said about starting the work, and reminds me, in 1966, Robert Kennedy gave a speech to some young college students in South Africa. He talked about one person starting something starts a ripple that then collides with other ripples, other individual efforts, and together, he said, they form a mighty wall that washes over even the tallest walls of oppression. And so I think that recovering that vision is key.

Doug Sprei ([44:16](#)):

Well, here's to the ripple effect we can collectively produce together. Professor Mark Dalhouse and Ari Miller, I can't thank you enough for being part of this conversation.

Mark Dalhouse ([44:24](#)):

Thank you.

Ari Miller ([44:24](#)):

Yeah, thank you.

Doug Sprei ([44:26](#)):

And even more so, I'm grateful to you and our whole team is grateful to you for joining College Debates and Discourse Alliance and helping us cascade this work across the country.

Mark Dalhouse ([44:36](#)):

Thank you.

Ari Miller ([44:36](#)):

Thank you.

Doug Sprei ([44:55](#)):

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