

BUILDING BRIDGES

America is more politically polarized than ever, but one teen organization is getting conservatives and liberals to talk to each other

BY CHRISANNE GRISE

It was the summer of 2016, and Joseph Touma and Clara Nevins were in the midst of a heated debate about politics. Touma, a 17-year-old Republican from West Virginia, held many differing views from Nevins, a 17-year-old Democrat from California—but the two had still bonded during a summer program at Yale University. So after a few minutes of arguing, they agreed to stop defending their own beliefs so they could each listen to what the other person was saying. Before long, they began to understand each other's point of view, even if they didn't agree with it. It was a moment that would change their lives.

"We looked around and realized that we had peers there from Russia, Syria, the U.S., Mexico—all these different countries whose leaders were at each other's throats," Touma, now 21, says. "And yet we were all able to study together and live harmoniously."

That realization sparked an idea: What if they were to create an organization that encouraged productive

political conversation among young people from all walks of life? Within a month, Touma, Nevins, and a handful of other teens had launched a website and were reaching out to students across the country. Bridge the Divide was born.

Policy-makers of the Future

The organization began recruiting young ambassadors who were dedicated to starting constructive discussions around the world. Soon there were more than 100 ambassadors; those teens have since gone on to start Bridge the Divide chapters in schools, write op-eds, attend leadership summits, join in



"I have been exposed to perspectives that I hadn't heard."

—Maya Siegel, 19
Bridge the Divide Ambassador,
Colorado

a global pen pal program, and, of course, participate in many political conversations, both in person and online. Small groups of ambassadors sometimes get together on Google Hangouts for hour-long discussions about various political topics, such as the Syrian refugee crisis, criminal justice, or health care. And the group recently helped launch Mismatch, an online platform that encourages these dialogues in schools.

All of these conversations aren't necessarily meant to change anyone's mind. Rather, the group believes that teens who venture out beyond the echo chambers of their social media



COURTESY OF MAYA SIEGEL/MAY JOHNSON PHOTOGRAPHY, OPPOSITE: ILLUSTRATION BY JASON RAISH.

feeds to engage with those with other perspectives will be better able to reach compromises and discourage divisive rhetoric later.

“We really want to listen to the other side,” says Crystal Foretia, an 18-year-old ambassador from Maryland. “We want to prevent polarization and retreating into our own ideologies.”

Although Bridge the Divide now has ambassadors in 30 countries, its members are particularly focused on changing the way American youth interact with each other. Since the 2016 presidential election, the anger between liberals and conservatives seems to have reached unsustainable levels, culminating in the fight over President Trump’s recent impeachment and acquittal; one 2018 poll found that more than 8 in 10 Americans



The government has a hard time getting work done when the political parties won't cooperate.

77% of Americans are dissatisfied with the current state of politics.

feel the country is greatly divided about important issues, and 77 percent say they’re dissatisfied with the current state of politics in the country. And with the 2020 election looming, many don’t expect things to get better anytime soon.

“I think it’s awful that nowadays we don’t talk about politics at Thanksgiving,” says Levi Cannon, the group’s 16-year-old director of operations from Massachusetts. “As American teens, we’re the policymakers of the future. It’s important that we learn to work with people, even those we disagree with, so that we can work together to make change when it really matters.”

‘Trickle-Up Effect’

To spread its message even further, Bridge the Divide teamed up with other organizations, including AllSides, a service that offers balanced news coverage, to launch Mismatch. The program pairs classrooms in politically divergent parts of the country and encourages them to learn from each other as they share their opinions on free speech, voting, technology, and other relevant topics.

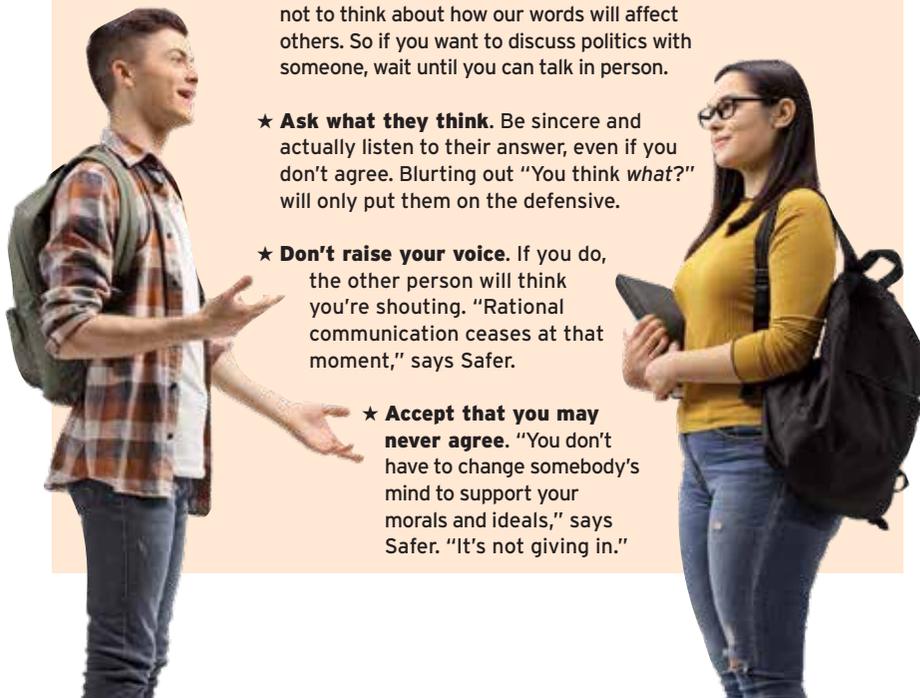
Using Mismatch, Laura Sofen’s 12th-grade public school class in

DAVE GRANLUND/POLITICALCARTOONS.COM (CARTOON); LUJPCO SIMOKOVSKI/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM (CONVERSATION)

HOW TO HAVE MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS

When it comes to politics, we often feel like people who disagree with us are our enemies. But that attitude only makes the situation worse. “You have to realize that there are people on the other side who, should you actually talk to them, really are good people,” says Jeanne Safer, psychoanalyst and author of *I Love You, But I Hate Your Politics*. Here are her other tips to start a productive political discussion.

- ★ **Take it offline.** It’s easy to be impulsive when posting on social media, and we tend not to think about how our words will affect others. So if you want to discuss politics with someone, wait until you can talk in person.
- ★ **Ask what they think.** Be sincere and actually listen to their answer, even if you don’t agree. Blurting out “You think what?” will only put them on the defensive.
- ★ **Don’t raise your voice.** If you do, the other person will think you’re shouting. “Rational communication ceases at that moment,” says Safer.
- ★ **Accept that you may never agree.** “You don’t have to change somebody’s mind to support your morals and ideals,” says Safer. “It’s not giving in.”



MATCHED UP

How Bridge the Divide is helping classrooms around the country connect

Students in suburban New Jersey live very different lives than those in rural Utah. That’s why Bridge the Divide helped create Mismatch, a video chat platform that pairs classrooms in politically divergent parts of the country. Teens use it to talk to each other about school, their interests, politics, and more, often learning from each other in the process.

NEW JERSEY



UTAH



suburban New Jersey was paired with students from Ruel Haymond’s religious private school in Utah. They spent about an hour videochatting with their partners—and the results were impressive, both teachers say. “My students . . . were primed with these expectations [about the Utah class]: They’re Mormons, they all have huge families,” Sofen says. And Haymond’s class was shocked that the suburban students could swear in school, a serious offense on their campus.

But despite their differences, the two classrooms were able to bond quickly. They talked about families, sports, hobbies, and more. Some of the teens in Utah brought their laptops outside so they could show their New Jersey partners the mountains. There was even some dancing in front of the camera.

“I think they learned that everyone’s pretty much the same,” Haymond says. “We want the same things. We want happiness, we want prosperity,

we want to be successful, we want opportunities to use our talents.” Many teachers agree that finding common ground with others is crucial. “My students repeatedly commented that they are just like us,” says Jessica Minick, an 11th-grade teacher in Suffern, New York, whose class used Mismatch. “Small epiphanies like that—realizations that dispel assumptions and stereotypes and highlight what is shared among those who are perceived to be different—will help to change the tone of our national conversation.”

As Mismatch expands into more schools this year, Bridge the Divide is hoping teens will be the ones to help this message catch on.

“We’re looking for a trickle-up effect, where if young people start doing it, maybe our leaders can begin coming to the table and just listen to one another,” Touma says. “People would like to listen to us because they realize that we are coming at this with this unique perspective.”

“It’s crazy to me that both of our major political parties can disagree so passionately when trying to fix the same problems that all Americans face.”



—Levi Cannon, 16
Bridge the Divide Ambassador,
Massachusetts

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