

Kelly Brownell (KB): Hello and welcome to Policy 360. I'm Kelly Brownell, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy. The country is divided politically, and those divisions are becoming more and more apparent almost by the day. With social media, it's possible for each of us to live in our own media bubble where we see only views and opinions and stories from people who have the same political leanings that we have. There's an initiative that's happening on college campuses here in North Carolina tackling this issue. It's called Leaders for Political Dialogue. The initiative gathers undergraduate and graduate students to discuss issues and learn from each other and hear each other's point of view with curiosity and without fear. My first guest is Linda Low. Linda founded the project. She's a graduate student studying international development policy here at Duke. Welcome, Linda, to Policy 360.

Linda Low (LL): Thank you, it's a pleasure to be here.

KB: So, Linda, how did this project come about?

LL: Yes, so first I should explain that I'm an international student and I'm from Canada- so not so far away- and I arrived about three months before the election. And, in the lead-up to the election, during the election, following the election, I was so struck by the tensions, by the emotions that were running across the campus, across the city, across the country. It was truly overwhelming and, when I spoke with my friends on campus, they also felt equally overwhelmed. So, we decided, "What can we do?" We talked a lot, we realized that it wasn't just something that was affecting our campus community, but reaching into our homes and our communities. You know, I have friends that stopped being friends with other people, that shut down their Facebook accounts, that had arguments with family at Thanksgiving dinner. In a world that is so broken, we felt we need to do something here at home, here in Durham, where we live. So, we developed an initiative called Leaders for Political Dialogue in response to a class call which asked us to address a local challenge with global implications. And the whole basis of Leaders for Political Dialogue is to enable people to have substantive, experiential conversations, not just coffee talk, but where you actually put yourself in somebody else's shoes and hear another person's perspective, not necessarily going in to change other's minds, but to try to understand better what is driving a different point of view.

KB: So, how does the project work?

LL: So, I'm really happy to say that we had collaboration from college students across the Triangle, from Duke, of course, where the initiative was founded, from UNC, from State, and from NCCU. Libertarian, Democrat, Republican, Unaffiliated; a rich diversity of voices in terms of race, in terms of age- be it graduate, undergraduate, PhD. We came together for two days and facilitated dialogue. And, on the first day, to break down barriers, we did something very unique- something called Third to First-Person Narrative, where you pair off, and you exchange a personal story on a common issue, whether it was, you know, "I'm pro-gun, you're not for guns," that sort of thing. And, you shared a personal story around why that issue is important to you and you regrouped as a big group and you told your partner the story in the first person. So, I am now filling the shoes of another person and telling their story as if it's my own. I am no longer against

guns, I'm for guns, or vice-versa. And, what that does is it makes you understand in a real, personal way why somebody, perhaps, has a different point of view than you. It doesn't have to change your mind, but it makes you empathize with what's driving a different sort of mindset. We did that first on the first day to break down walls immediately, to get personal, because to have hard conversations you have to be fearless and share those hard stories, those personal stories.

On the second day, we did a number of different techniques where we had really substantive dialogue. We focused on three issues that were crowd-sourced from the participants: Confederate statues, security, and education, and the different techniques invited people to share their viewpoints based on very thought-provoking prompts. So, as an example, when we talked about Confederate statues, we asked people in groups and different, sort of, ways of communicating, you know, "Do you think," for example, "the national government should determine what the symbols of the country should be?" And we had such interesting perspectives, from international perspectives to local perspectives, and we did it in ways such that, you know, you might have been for one exercise sitting facing each other, another exercise standing and literally using your body to voice your view, where, you know, if you agree on this opinion, you stand on this side of the line, if you disagree you stand on this side of the line. Now, you explain to each other why and you repeat to each other what you heard the other person say. So, it was very engaging, very substantive and, really, the outcome was extraordinary. You know, we did a post-form survey and 90% of the people that took part said participating in Leaders for Political Dialogue has changed the way that they will listen to people and communicate with people in the future.

KB: Well, it's nice to see that it had such striking effects, and it doesn't surprise me, given how you went about, that so thanks for that. And, I'd like to bring in three of your fellow students who participated in this process into the conversation now. So, first is Nicole Kiprilov, who is a Duke junior majoring in political science, philosophy, and economics. Welcome, Nicole.

Nicole Kiprilov (NK): Thank you so much for having me.

KB: Next is Allegra Panetto, who is a graduate student at Duke. Welcome, Allegra. And Travis Dauwalter is here. Travis spent a number of years in the Air Force and in business before pursuing his PhD. Welcome, Travis.

Travis Dauwalter (TD): Thanks.

KB: So, Nicole, let me start with you. Is it safe to say that you're on the conservative side of the spectrum?

NK: Yes, it definitely is.

KB: So, why did you decide to participate?

NK: So, I'm a Republican on a very liberal campus, and I've been feeling the suppression of the conservative voice on campus since my freshman year. This suppression became much more intense during the presidential election, right after which I witnessed a great deal of verbal

violence between my liberal and conservative friends. So, to give an example, one of my Trump-supporter friends received a text message from some of my liberal friends on campus and was told that because he voted for Trump he should be shot. A few weeks ago, I was told by a couple of students that I am responsible for all of the suicides that occurred the day after Trump's election, because I decided to abstain from voting in the election. So, in general, my family has received a lot of hate for being anti-socialists and many of my peers believe that my strong opinions are very harmful. In light of all of this, I realized that I was very interested in political polarization and what I as a student can do to make a difference. So, I started working with POLIS, the Center for Political Leadership Innovation and Service, at Duke's Sanford School of Public Policy. And, that is where I met Linda Lowe and I started working for Leaders for Political Dialogue. I designed LPD's website and have been working very closely with the other team members to launch the initiative.

KB: Well, it's wonderful that you're taking part in this and it sounds like it all came about from some very moving, and in some cases troubling, experiences that you went through.

NK: Yes.

KB: Allegra, I understand that Donald Trump's election had a big impact on you. Can you tell us about that?

Allegra Penero (AP): Sure. So, I'm part of Linda's program. I'm an International Development Policy master's student, but I'm only one of four Americans in my program, and I also did Peace Corps abroad. So, for me, as an American, it's really important to represent our ideals to an international audience and, after the election, I was very worried about what my fellow students would think about America. I also shut down my Facebook. (I was Linda's friend that she mentioned who shut down her Facebook.) I felt like I was in my own bubble and just kind of seeing the same what over and over again about what people thought. And why I became part of Leaders for Political Dialogue is because I really wanted to get to the "why", and I think that's what our initiative does. It takes all the "what", and what you feel, and what you believe, and makes it about "why", and I think that's where you get to core ideals that people can share, and really bond over which is important in this climate.

KB: So, it sounds like, so far- we'll hear from Travis in a moment- that this is a combination of wanting to learn from others and what their perspectives are, but also wanting to be heard. It's a very interesting combination of things. Now, Travis, can you give us an example of something that's happened during this dialogue that was particularly meaningful to you?

TD: Yeah, to take off from what Allegra, was just talking about, there seems to be some underlying core value sometimes on opposite issues. So, say, for instance, there's an individual who's interested in more gun control, and then there's an individual who's not interested in, you know keeping things the same or perhaps promoting more guns in the country. If you peel back the needs of both of those individuals, you might find that both of them are talking about safety, or public safety. And that's exactly what I think Allegra was talking about, and I think what LPD- the purpose of LPD and what it's trying to do- is just peel back all those layers of politics

so you get to that level of value and then find out that we're actually more alike than we are unlike.

KB: And so, how do you think that'll lead to positive outcomes?

TD: Yeah, I think if more people went through our training, we'd certainly have healthier dialogue, even dialogue that's around the dinner table at Thanksgiving, between your family members, dialogue that you have with friends. I think, right now, our country feels very divided. Everyone would probably agree with that. I agree with the preamble that you offered at the start of this podcast that we're divided, we don't talk to each other anymore, and if we allow ourselves to have those conversations and we allow ourselves to be thoughtful about how we talk to each other, then we'll get to those values and we'll find out that, you know, we can share, we share a lot of common ground.

KB: So, Allegra, same question. Can you give us an example of something happened during these dialogues that might have changed the way you think?

AP: Sure. So, at the end of the two days, we did kind of a crowd-sourcing of all the participants and what they would like to see moving forward and I'm, as Linda said, we had participants from four schools across the Triangle area, and a lot of people wanted to bring this to their own campuses, which we think is great, and then one person mentioned that they think Congress should go through this training, which we also think is a really neat idea and might be a possible future thing that we look into. But, I think that really just captures the sense of spirit and hope that this group has, no matter what political leanings they have, and I think that was really extraordinary to see at the end of the two days.

KB: Well, it wouldn't be surprising to me if some of you end up as elected leaders in our country- and, if you do, it sounds like this kind of experience would have been a very valuable one for you. Nicole, how about you? What was the highlight of the dialogue for you?

NK: So, one memorable part of the forum for me was when I was facilitating the circle discussion there was an exchange made between a white conservative student and a liberal student of color. The exchange was pretty heated because it was about Confederate statues, what our national symbols stand for, and how they have affected marginalized communities in our society. I remember the discussion mellowed out towards the end when both students realized that what they were arguing for, at its core, was essentially tolerance. It was just really fascinating to see how, at the surface, it may seem like we're all so divided and our differences are uncompromising, but many times we're all actually fighting for the same thing.

KB: So, just a question for all of you, it sounds like once you've decided to do this, that it struck a resonant chord with students at other universities, and you got others to join in. Do you think there's an unmet need here, do you think this is something that a lot of people in your generation care about, but just don't have a forum for pursuing and that you've provided them a very useful one? Anybody can speak up.

LL: Well, so this is Linda, and I'll say absolutely, I believe there's an unmet need. I think the story of how Leaders for Political Dialogue came to be speaks to that. You know, every person we spoke to as we developed the model and the concept, every single individual, whether it was a student group leader, a community group leader somebody from an NGO, a faculty member, a policymaker, a professional facilitator- I mean, we spoke to, you know, nearly 100 people in developing this model to make sure we'd be substantive and rewarding for everybody involved. Every individual said, "I want to be involved. I want to support this." Every individual that took part, you know, we put out a call for applications, we had to turn people away, because with too many people in the room, perhaps, the dialogue would have not been as substantive. All 40 people that were involved, you know, the majority of them have said, "We want to be involved next year." Some of them have already stepped up and said, "We want to be part of the people that organize this next year across the Triangle, in our own communities." Why do they want to be part of this? Because there is nothing out there right now that people can be part of where they feel like they are building towards a solution, where they can feel, in a substantive way, that they are helping to bridge the divide. So, absolutely, there's an unmet need, and I believe Leaders for Political Dialogue helps to meet that need in a small and humble way.

KB: Cool.

NK: So, I absolutely agree with Linda, and I think that it's also worth mentioning that a lot of students feel that maybe this is not very relevant to their lives because they're not very political. So, for example, my peers who are studying engineering, or math, and who don't regularly come into contact with students who are political. They feel that it's not very relevant to their lives, but I completely disagree. I think we all have examples of political intolerance in our lives and it happens every single day, and I think there's something that we can all do in our lives and now especially over the holidays to make sure that we are better communicators and that we really try to understand where the other side is coming from. So, for example I will be going back home to New York during Christmas, I'm very close to my family, we spend a lot of quality time together. However, my parents are raging Trump-supporters. They're immigrants from Eastern Europe and their political, economic, and social suppression while growing up in Eastern Europe has really influenced their stances and the way they make their political decisions in this country. So, I was put in a very difficult position during the presidential election because I also identify as a conservative, but I chose to abstain from voting because I was very much against Hillary's policy stances and her status as a politician in Washington, but I also did not feel that Trump would be a good president. And so, so I was called a "Bad Republican" for not voting for Trump, and I have had and still have a lot of clashes with my very own parents over political issues and sometimes it's very difficult for me to communicate my thoughts and opinions to them. So, one thing that I've found very helpful in terms of communicating with my parents is thinking about their stories and where they come from, framing their political dispositions, which I somewhat disagree with in, a more story-oriented context. During the Leaders for Political Dialogue forum, we did a lot of this. We had the Third to First-Person Narrative, where participants had an opportunity to tell each other stories, as Linda described, and the stories that have influenced their positions on certain controversial issues that are dividing the country are very significant. So, I think this is a very important strategy that can be applied to pretty much any home environment, regardless of the political ideology that dominates that particular household.

KB: Well, I'm glad you brought that up because one of the questions I was gonna ask is, what lessons have you learned that you can bring home around the holiday season that might be helpful in interacting with family members? Anybody else like to add to what Nicole said?

AP: I think Travis touched on it earlier, but it's something we called Reflective Listening. So, when you're listening to someone explain their what, about whatever policy or issue that they're talking about, listen in a way where you can reflect back the core value that you think they're espousing. And then, if you feel comfortable, communicate that core value to them, and ask them, "Oh, do you think what you're talking about relates to safety, or security, or equity?" And then you can see their reaction. It depends on the household, obviously, and the context, but it's kind of a simple idea that I think a lot of people can try out if they feel comfortable.

TW: One of the tenets of LPD is, we're not trying to go in there and necessarily change people's minds. So, as Allegra talking about, reflective listening- the idea is more to understand those values, to understand where people are coming from, but we're not getting into this realm where we're trying to convince people to come over to my side or come over to your side. And, maybe, if folks were to approach their holiday conversations from that standpoint, they would be less stressful.

KB: It makes good sense. One question I have is that- it seems like you created a beautiful model for perspective-taking, understanding how other people feel about particular issues, and I'm wondering if it's at all part of your conversation to think about some of the structural and historical and political reasons that have led us to be where we are, and whether people in your generation might be in a position to fix those? So, 24-hour news cycles, people in Washington who are in elected office having to be out of the District of Columbia a lot for fund-raising, so they can't get to spend time with each other or around their kids playing soccer together, and all these kind of- I mean, there are a lot of reasons people are proposed. Is that at all part of the discussion about what's causing the problem? You're trying to remedy it, which is fantastic, but is there any discussion about what's causing the problem, and how people in your generation might be able to go forward in the world to try to fix the reasons for the polarization?

TW: Well, I think, I'm not sure I'll be able to answer that question directly, but I think a lot of folks in our generation are sitting around and observing exactly what you described and wondering, "Well, what can we do?" And it feels really daunting when the answer is, "We'll just run for office, and change things." You know, it's such a big thing to take on, and how do you even begin to approach that? LPD provides that tidy little solution of taking two days out of your college semester to sit down and learn better ways to have conversations with people. Maybe, we're all looking around and wondering what we can do and LPD has been one of those things that we can do.

KB: Beautifully stated, Travis. That's very helpful suggestion, it also provides- the LPD provides an opportunity for people who aren't doing this as a career to still make a difference and take part in this. So, let me end, Linda, with a question for you. So, for listeners out there who might be thinking about starting something of this on their own, what kind of suggestions would you give them?

LL: Well, I would suggest that they reach out to us. We're available anytime, and we'd love to share the model that we've developed, and we'd love to learn from others who have also great ideas and are passionate about creating, you know, a more peaceful civil society. I would also say that the biggest takeaway I had from this was that hard conversations are hard work, and you have to be willing to invest the time to have those hard conversations, and that's hard to do, that's sometimes a scary thing to do, but the outcome is extraordinary. It's so rewarding when you can sit with someone, talk about hard issues, and walk away from that conversation feeling like you've learned from each other or shared something with each other. And so, so we have this beautiful model that we've created, we want to share it with other people. Please contact us. We're willing to, you know, we want to share our playbook. We want to collaborate with you, if you want to bring it to another community, a club- we want to work with you to do that.

KB: So, I want to thank you all very much for joining me today in this podcast and appreciate the fine work you've done. Thank you very much.

ALL: Thank you.

KB: So, we'll have a link to Leaders for Political Dialogue Project on our website, policy360.org. Until next time, I'm Kelly Brownell.