

Judith Kelley: These days it's becoming easier and easier to stay in our own bubbles politically. Many of us work at places with people who share our beliefs or worldviews. And with the pandemic, we certainly got together with people in the real world, less and less often. And the way that social media is designed, platforms keep track of what we like and give us more of it. And our politicians, they're giants, sometimes they seem insurmountable devices there too. So today we have a breath of fresh air to counter this atmosphere. We have two people who are on the opposite side of the political aisle, who got to know each other through a program specifically designed to tackle this issue with civic, political and business leaders in North Carolina. It's a program that we run at Duke University called the North Carolina Leadership Forum. Ray Starling is a former Principal Agriculture Advisor to former President Trump and current General Council for the North Carolina Chamber and president of its Legal Institute. So welcome to you, Ray.

Ray Starling: Thank you, Dean Kelley. Good to be here and thank you for your support of the Leadership Forum, it's a pretty cool institution.

Judith Kelley: Thank you. I'm so glad to have you here with us today. And Abdullah Antepli is a Duke professor and a Muslim leader in national politics around interfaith relations and policy. So welcome to you too, Abdullah.

Abdullah Antepli: Thank you very much. Glad to be here.

Judith Kelley: So first, let's talk about where you both sit politically. Ray, I presume it's safe to say you're a conservative, so tell us a bit about yourself and why you lean conservative.

Ray Starling: Yeah. Well, if we're going to talk about the political spectrum, we have to acknowledge out front that it's a pretty big spectrum. So we'll admit that none of us are on the fringe, that's all the other people, but admittedly, I am clearly right of center. I did work for the President, I worked for President Trump. I was his agriculture advisor and so literally was in the White House for about 15 months, which could be interesting for some of the folks that tune in. Somebody could be saying, wow, somebody that worked for Trump, I've never actually met one of them before.

But although at the time my boss was actually a registered Democrat, Gary Cohn, I worked on the National Economic Council. And after that, I had a chance to be a chief of staff over in the US Department of Agriculture for Secretary Perdue, who is a former two term Governor out of Georgia. So clearly most of my political credentials have been on the right of the political spectrum. But one of the things I like about being here at the chamber is to get things done, we've got to work with folks from all backgrounds, all walks of life, all parts of the political spectrum. And I think I would describe, Dean Kelley, my approach as pragmatic, more than anything.

- Judith Kelley: So, obviously you sit on and have worked for folks on the, as you say right of center, but is there anything when you think about your upbringing or who you are, what is it that you think makes you lean in that direction?
- Ray Starling: Yeah, well, I really believe in the power of individuality and the power of people to chart a great degree of their own destiny. I certainly recognize there are things that happen, conditions that occur, circumstances in which people find themselves to no fault of their own that make life more difficult and that don't necessarily put them all at the same starting line in the race. But I do believe at the end of the day that we prosper as a society when individuals are largely held responsible for their own success. Again, recognizing there's some wiggle room in there, but that's generally sort of my personal philosophy. And I believe our country was founded on sort of this idea of exceptionalism that we were different than everyone else. And that we agreed that government would play a minimal role in protect our ability to be individuals and to pursue individual goals. And that government would essentially protect individual rights. That's kind of where I'm coming from.
- Judith Kelley: So let's get to know you a little bit better, I'm going to throw out a question from left field here. A day in the life of Ray when he was five.
- Ray Starling: I would've had my first job by the time I was five. I grew up on my family's hog and tobacco farm in Sampson County. And so part of my job, it was not a very big job, it was important because if you didn't do it correctly, other things would back up. But my job when we would take out tobacco, which was literally the process of getting the tobacco out of the barn after it had been cured and then you would sheet it up and take it off to the market. That tobacco was typically cured in something we called racks. It was essentially the container that you put the tobacco in inside the barn so the air would move through it and dry it out.
- And my job was to get the racks off the table once you open them up to take the tobacco and then take those racks around to the side of the barn and store them in a way that they didn't fall over. And so I will tell you that if you had asked me to describe my resume, I'd be happy to tell you about all kinds of cool things I've done, but nothing had a greater impact on forming my understanding, my positions, my respect, frankly, for the working world than growing up on a family farm down in Southeast North Carolina.
- Judith Kelley: So agriculture definitely runs in your veins.
- Ray Starling: That's exactly right. Very proud of that industry.
- Judith Kelley: Yeah. Well, that's wonderful. Abdullah, so the same question for you, so tell us a little bit about yourself and your political leanings. And then afterwards I'll ask you the five year old question as well.

Abdullah Antepi: Yes. Like you Dean Kelley, I am a naturalized American citizen. I am an American by choice. I came to this country because I fell in love in this country. And in many aspects of this country that really opened my eyes and warmed my heart is exactly what Ray said, that American entrepreneurial spirit, that individualism, that we can do if you work hard enough. At the same time because of my experience in the Middle East in non-democratic countries and societies that I grew up, maybe more than Ray, I believe our government has a role to eliminate systemic and structural obstacles from individuals and eliminate some of the issues and make the playing field equal for all its citizens. I refuse to believe that poverty is a choice. I refuse to believe that individuals, if they are given enough and equal opportunity, they would choose to be poor or backward.

I think this race as we call it life, is not equal to everyone one. And therefore government, our social services, our ethical moral commitments needs to force us to lift up the people from the... Or at least make the playing field equal, that's what I'm saying. That would put me in the political and ideological spectrum in the center left. Absolutely. And in so many as a religious Muslim, I am little bit of an odd breed because I am religious. I take my religion and anybody who takes his or her religion incredibly seriously, I admire them. In addition, in so many social issues like abortion, same sex marriage, I am socially very liberal and progressive.

Judith Kelley: So Abdullah, same question for you, day in the life of Abdullah when he was five.

Abdullah Antepi: Five-year-old Abdullah was in a slum, in a Southeastern part of Turkey, in a incredibly poor family of seven. His mother never went to school, she's still illiterate. His father only had up to fifth grade education. His surrounding was in a cycle of failure, disappointment, poverty and violence. And wondering, am I going to be part of this perpetual failing and misery? Is there any way I can get out of this cycle? And it is really an incredible story that I am a professor at Duke University living in Durham, North Carolina right now. Because back then that five year old could have never imagined anything close to the life that I'm living right now.

Judith Kelley: It is truly wonderful to think about how five year old Ray working in the tobacco farm ends up meeting five year old Abdullah from Turkey who grew up in a slum. But it happened, so you were part of a program, the two of you here in North Carolina at Duke, the North Carolina Leadership Forum. So tell me a little bit about how the program works. Abdullah, maybe you're a good person to explain that, I know you're involved in the leadership a bit.

Abdullah Antepi: Sure. North Carolina Leadership Forum is one of many, an increasing number of bridge building, reconciliation, bipartisanship building efforts. What is unique about North Carolina Leadership Forum is unlike many other similar programs, it doesn't really intentionally force people to come into consensus. But it is designed to build deeper relationship with people who politically, ideologically

and even morally different yet they try to make sense of their differences. They try to build trust, not to reconcile their differences immediately and try to open up a larger space in their hearts and minds to people who politically, ideologically or partisan wise disagree. I don't know if Ray, you would agree with that summary.

Ray Starling: Yeah, I totally agree with that Abdullah and I think it's a very key group of folks. I mean, it's a carefully procured class of individuals who aren't just simply interested in better social discourse or political discourse, but these are in fact folks who are having political discourse. These are legislators, they are county and civic leaders. They are business owners, they are public policy professionals and folks like Abdullah that are engaged in the university systems. It's a pretty impressive group of individuals and getting that group to stop and talk about some really difficult topics, I think is really a hallmark of the program. You are literally bringing them together and forcing them into conversation in a bit of a structured way is I think a core attribute if you will, of the program.

Judith Kelley: And we've been running this program for several years now. And so, the way it works is that there's a new cohort every year and every cohort has a topic. So Ray, what was the topic and what kind of things did you talk about in the program the year you were part of it?

Ray Starling: It's interesting you mentioned the different cohorts. Abdullah and I were actually students in the same cohort and apparently performed so poorly that they brought us back for round two. So we're now involved in the steering committee.

Judith Kelley: So you failed and then you had to do a retake?

Ray Starling: I would have said that much more kindly, Dean, but I think you're probably onto something. We started out in, I think it was 2020. We started out with a plan to talk about immigration and to talk about the state of flux that so many people are in, because we haven't been able to come to consensus on our federal immigration policy. That conversation went well the first time we were beginning to roll up our sleeves and dive into that. And I'm not sure if you've heard though, but there was a pretty major event in 2020 that started changing things. So by the second meeting of the cohort, it essentially became a discussion of COVID and how government and business was responding and individuals were responding to that. Abdullah and I are extraordinarily lucky we get to actually be on the steering committee of the program now. And so our job is to somewhat guide and lead the discussions in subsequent cohorts. And so this year, the focus is healthcare and the state of the healthcare industry.

Judith Kelley: So a question to both of you, was there a moment that you recall meaningful discussion where you sort of said to yourself, wow, I had not thought about it from that perspective before I learned something that I didn't realize.

Abdullah Antepi: Many, if it helped our audience here, each cohort selected group of elected officials, equally half Republican, half Democrat, half conservative, half liberal. And we pick up a potentially controversial topic and we go through, again, not to reach a consensus, but try to make sense of why and how we approach to these topics very differently. And the program starts with identifying values and concerns. Actually, first concerns, we put out our concerns and our values. What becomes inevitably and quickly clear to me, at least it was clear to me and many people, when you politically oppose somebody, you assume this is a moral opposition or moral disagreement, or people are coming from a morally different place.

And when you try to match your values with your concerns, when you map it out, it's very clear quickly that actually people that you oppose or you disagree, they are not moralless, or they don't have a very distinctly different set of moral values, it's just they've ranked their values differently. What is your number one, number two? What is the greatest moral voltage on any given issue is number nine and number 10 on the other side. That really creates an incredibly helpful paradigm shift, meaning they come from somewhat the same set of values, but because of their life experiences, because of what they do, because of the frame of reference that shaped their moral philosophies, either religion or secular, they rank these values differently. This is one thing I got with this program and I truly cherish it.

Judith Kelley: Ray, is there a moment that you recall or some takeaway that's been really meaningful for you?

Ray Starling: Yeah. Mine might be a little more philosophical than that. In that I remember distinctly we of course were doing one of the sessions online, which is not ideal, but the conversation in my view really got out of hand just in terms of at least one or two individuals who, for lack of a better way to describe it, they were on the other side of the issue than I mentally was. And we're just, I mean, socking it to us. I mean, there was no other way to see this issue. We must be insane if we did not see it the way they saw it. And in fact, it actually made me want to disengage. I actually wanted to pull back because part of me is like I only have so much energy. I only have so much desire to engage here. This is a mock exercise, I'm not going to actually get my blood pressure up.

But what happened over the next few minutes, I was literally called into that conversation and asked to share some competing views as were other folks. And what I saw happen was over time, that couple of folks that had been really vocal, almost combative, the folks on their side of the issue actually seemed to come our way. And what I think I realized, and this is the philosophical observation piece was that folks who are interested in solving the problem and who may be a little closer to being willing to find the middle, they need folks on the other side to draw that out. To bring that conversation out and to give them something to agree with almost in a way so that they can shun the loudest voices on the side of the issue that they're on.

I'll just never forget that because largely I wanted to just wave it off. I was like, this is ridiculous, I don't have to take this, I'm going to just sort of tune out for a moment. And I got drawn back into the conversation and I realized that a part of that was frankly getting folks on the other side, back to the table as well, more reasonable conversation, kind of bringing things back to the middle. So I want to forget that. I would've never thought that my voice was important that way had I not seen it in a little bit of this games player, war game or tabletop exercise that we do.

Judith Kelley: Oh, that's really wonderful to hear. The two of you wrote an article together about your experience.

Ray Starling: Yes.

Judith Kelley: One of your first points seems to be fairly simple. I mean that it's important to talk about points for we disagree, but your second point is that we need to build trusted relationships with others and work on bipartisan projects together. Can you talk a little bit more about how the North Carolina Leadership Forum and in general, how do we go about building trust, Ray? Because when you say things like, I wanted to disengage, I was almost just, I'm not going to take this. How do you go there to, I trust this other person?

Ray Starling: Well, and look, I think the greater context for that is coming to an understanding and agreement that government neither at the state level here in our state or at the federal level is going to be purely left of center or purely right of center. And I think there's a temptation to think, oh, I'm going to wait this out until my side runs all of state government or all of the federal government. But I think we're closely divided enough in our state and again, across the country that having a majority of all seats in both chambers and the executive branch and even on the courts is highly unlikely. And so I think coming to grips with that and understanding, we've got to find folks that we can work with.

And so I think partly the program does that. I mean, it targets individuals that are apt to engage and that you're more comfortable building trust with. But I think a lot of that happens organically. A lot of it happens in the coming and going and in the lunch and in the break and in the, hey, can I borrow a pen kind of thing? I mean, you just, when you're forced into the room to sit there longer, I think some of that trust inevitably gets built and you understand these folks on the other side or credentialed, they're intelligent, they care deeply. All things that you don't get through as you mentioned at the top Twitter, social media, whatever the medium of the day happens to be.

Judith Kelley: I remember we had Richard Burr here to give a lecture a couple of years ago, right before COVID. And I remember thinking, darn it, why does he have to be so likable?

Ray Starling: That's exactly right. We actually had two congressional members come in. One that would clearly identify left and one that would clearly identify right. Well, and they were fantastic. I mean, not only were they both very prepared, very polished speakers, they were also very nice to each other. I mean, they were just delightful to be with, and that was Congressman Butterfield and Congressman Foxx.

Abdullah Anteppli: And also the programs founders and leaders. Initially, this is a very gradual and slow process to build trust. Initially, what brings people to the table is there are enough credible leadership involved. John Hood and Leslie Winner, a Democrat and a Republican who through their own friendship can see this idea and with the help of Sanford and Duke created this program. People usually come based on their credibility, understanding in their own communities. They are trusting that if this person is involved, that person is involved, at least it's minimally safe. That should remind all of us what a leadership position, how much this kind of leadership, not just building your own partisan base, but using some of the equity and credibility you'll earn in your own community to reach out and present a picture, which is much more reconciliatory, much more bipartisan. It makes an impact on people.

And then the values exercises that I just mentioned earlier, once you rehumanize somebody, once you see members of the opposing party through their own humanity, not through the character truth that you hear about them in your choice of news agency, always mocking them or representing them with the worst members of that community. I know as a Muslim how destructive to be represented by the worst members of your own community, but there is so much of that going on all around that we associate the most ridiculous, most outrageous members of the community as if they are the mainstream of that community.

Ray Starling: Well, Abdullah, you talked about the leadership and sort of the folks that started the program and the balance there. We also spend a lot of time thinking about who is recruited to come to the program. It is not, as we might say at the roller rink, an all skate, there is very much a meticulous frankly, a ton of time goes into procuring again, the members of the class that are a part of the cohort. So that they're not just diverse politically, but also geographically across the state, that diverse gender, diverse race, diverse ethnicity, those are all intentional elements and parts of the planning of the program.

Judith Kelley: So another thing you say in the article is that, political leaders need to work together in a bipartisan way. And obviously that makes a lot of sense, but is that actually something... First of all, it's not necessarily so easy to do, but will voters reward that? Is that something that today has come to be seen as a weakness rather than a strength because the voters that end up deciding the elections are the ones that tend to be on the extremes in the primary season?

Ray Starling: That is a great question, Dean Kelley. I jump in only because... And I'm not going to tell you the answer you want to hear. I mean, I think generally the answer is

no. At least in the short term, I think our political decisions are largely predominated by what is the sound bite you can get out there? What is the sport you can get from your own party? I don't necessarily think we're in a period of history where that bridge building is supported, but I think that begs the question, so how do we get there? And I think one of the ways we do that is rebuilding some trust in our institutions, rebuilding this ability to dialogue, having sensible people spend time talking about hard issues because the real problem is the hardest issues are frankly not being addressed. Once again, both sides are kind of waiting till they get their entire team on the field and then they'll fix it the way they want it. That's just unrealistic. I mean, I don't think that's going to happen politically.

I mean even, there's a lot of talk about this fall. The election will be very one-sided. I don't know that's necessarily going to ultimately end up being true, but even if it is, our government is designed to be slow, our government is designed to be divided power. Our government is designed to have lots of puts and stops and calls in that process. And so I think the short answer to your question is no, that's not going to be immediately rewarded, but that's all the more reason that it's important to have the conversation, is we've got to make progress on reconstructing dialogue, particularly around tough public policy issues that they're only going to be decided in the political realm. I mean that is how we've chosen to make those decisions. And I think this lay some of the ground work for that.

Abdullah Antepi:

I totally agree with my friend, Ray, here, which makes all the reason that we need to try harder and do better. If I may add a few more nuances and maybe complexity on the national politics, it's almost beyond repair. In that kind of national politics and partisan divide and polarization has gone almost out of control that any kind of collaboration, partnership reaching the other side is seen as treason, as betrayal and the consequence is very severe in your primaries, you will face it in one way or another. But maybe bringing these conversations to state and local level where this North Carolina Leadership Forum is thriving, not all politics is national, not all politics is between blue and red America or broadly speaking as liberal and progressive issues.

If you bring it to the state level and even the local level, if there are some leaders who have developed moral courage, despite its inevitable cost, their political and personal and maybe professional life who are willing to be that prophetic voice, allow me to use that religious term. What does it mean to be prophetic? None of the prophets that we know of, they came to their own community and said, you guys are awesome. God is so happy with you. You don't have to change anything. The role of a prophetic leadership if you believe in the value of that, is to in addition to attacking and critiquing your opponents, but also self critiquing your own community without losing your own standing and credibility and point out and push your community to places where they need to be not only where they want to be.

Judith Kelley: Right. So if I think about where we started this conversation and you're talking about how the North Carolina Leadership Forum starts by kind of mapping out issues and values rather than necessarily political affiliations. My five year old self was in Copenhagen, in the suburb growing up in Denmark. And we have a lot of different political parties, not just two, there's many. There's so many that it's actually a little bit confusing for one individual voter to sometimes what party aligns with their values and their political viewpoints. And so a lot of times before an election, we can go to, say a newspaper website and they may have some quiz we can take that basically asks us about a lot of different issues. It may say, do you believe that schools should do X? Or do you believe that healthcare should be Y? And so you go and you answer these questions and then at the end it will say, you are most aligned with the Christian Democrat Party.

And then it will show you where their positions are and where your positions are and where they differ. And you can say, all right, well, there's some of these that are maybe a no-go for me, so I just won't work for them. I'm going to have to figure something else. Or you can say, no, that looks pretty good, I'll go vote for them. But in the United States, a lot of times, I wonder whether what comes first is our political affiliation that is then informing our views or our views is informing our how we think about ourselves politically. What do you think all that means for how we think about talking across divides?

Abdullah Antepi: Despite it's challenges, I prefer American model to that European model. I think having fewer options forces each camp to be a big tent. If every single issue become a party to itself, I think for a society to create a cohesive social fabric and build at least one or two big tent where a broad coalition of social harmony is achieved and created. I think this is the beauty of representative democracy. It gets incredibly messy when you have way too many options and it doesn't create the kind of moral and pragmatic incentives to negotiate, collaborate, compromise. Ray, what do you think, do you want more?

Ray Starling: Well, yeah, look, I actually think the Dean has teed up a great comparison there. It reminds me of a conversation I had with my boss when I worked at the White House, when I worked with Gary Cohn on the National Economic Council. He was working feverishly to try to effectuate the adoption of a tax reform package. So put aside for a moment any sort of personal views about whether that's good policy, bad policy. What he came back, I'll never forget, we sat in a meeting he had of course spent time London with Goldman. He was familiar with the politics there, but in his mind he said, I've always thought about a lot of our European friends governing through coalitions, through several smaller parties coming together to elect a leader of the chamber, if you will. But I've always thought of American politics as two major parties.

And I think in reality we do have... And I think Abdullah actually set this up very well. I think we do have two major parties obviously, but I actually think the spectrum within those parties is extraordinarily wide. And so, the lack of a place for those folks to go in any sort of structured political party means that you've

got pretty wide views on either side of the aisle. And that leads to some pretty interesting results, right? I mean, I'm always afraid, kudos to you, Judith, if you take those tests, I'm always afraid to take them because I'm afraid I'll come out as a far left leaning liberal and somehow be conflicted then for months after that.

And then there's even this theory in politics, right, the horseshoe theory, that the far left and the far right actually kind of meet back up at some point. And so I love it. I mean, I think you're highlighting sort of the challenge of these conversations. And I wonder, and I'd be curious what you think leading the school there, do you think people think of those issues that way? I mean, do you think most people process hard political questions through any sort of lens of, hey, I'm a conservative or I'm a liberal or is it just, hey, this is my kitchen table issue. This is how this issue is affecting me today. I think sometimes those of us that are in this business, we might overthink it a little bit.

Judith Kelley: It seems to me that a lot of, I mean, I hate to generalize across everybody, of course, but it seems to me that there's a real tendency to think first and foremost of oneself as belonging to a certain party. And then sort of in the frame of rational ignorance, which is this concept that it is impossible for anyone given voter to acquire the necessary information, to understand all the issues that are out there. And it's not actually in the interest of the voter to spend all their time doing that because they truly have to do that. They wouldn't have time to do their job.

So, and it's a rational thing to do, to choose to therefore sort of heuristically refer to certain labels or certain leaders that you have trust in. But the downside of that is that we just sort of assume different camps rather than what the leadership program tries to do is say, okay, let's talk about immigration. Let's talk about the real issues on the tables. Let's first of all make sure there's a sort of a shared set of facts. Let's talk about our values. Let's talk about what the outcomes are we care about. And then there might be more grounds for making progress.

Ray Starling: I love it. And I think it underscores. I worry a lot when I hear folks say the system is broken. Actually I'll defend our systems as long as I can. I don't think the system is broken. I really think that the system, my metaphor is imagine you and your spouse can't agree on what's for dinner, so you both throw something at the stove, nothing happens. It produces nothing that either of you like, and then you blame the stove. I think our governmental system here in this country absolutely can handle disagreement. We can get to right answers. The system is not broken, we don't need to rewrite our processes. We just need to be able to discourse better and come to conclusions about what we want from that system and to try to find some common ground with that. And I think is exactly what the program is designed to create.

Judith Kelley: So you've stayed in touch throughout this time, is that something you could have imagined some years ago that you would have a friend like each other?

- Abdullah Antepi: I personally could have never imagined. I lived in North Carolina 14 years before joining to this program. If I would've lived another 400 years, I don't think I would've met someone like Ray and many of my little bit more conservative and even Republican friends that I met through this program. That really shows the challenge of how isolated silos that we are pushed into live in this modern life, despite social media, information revolution, et cetera. If you don't take intentional and deliberate efforts to diversify your source of circles, your source of information. And if you don't take this as a moral cause and deliberately go to find out people who are different than you, I don't think it's very easy, especially in a purple state like North Carolina.
- Ray Starling: Yeah. I think they relate, we all agree when we go through these sorts of adult camps, if you will, the relationships that you come out with is really one of the bigger benefits and just respectfully, I wouldn't take anything for the relationship I feel like I've built with Abdullah. And I would say that even if he didn't get us immediately seated at the Turkish restaurant in Cary that we both love.
- Abdullah Antepi: What happens when you built friendship and relationship across the aisle, across radical, really significant differences without compromising your own, your friends who think differently, who come from a very different background, they become a voice in your mind. What becomes different is you constantly think, what will they think? How will what I say, what I'm about to do in this particular case will land to their ears and eyes. And again, you are the same person. You still vehemently disagree on those social or political or policy issues, but you have a greater space in your heart and mind, and you have a better understanding of seeing the world through their eyes. It is an incredible gift that I will always cherish.
- Ray Starling: Yeah. And I think what you're describing Abdullah is just a matter of tempering and frankly, something that's in very short supply generally, but particularly in policy debate frankly it's humility. It's realizing someone else here as educated, as credentialed and as excited about this topic as I am, or as invested in it, merely has a different point of view. And I need to temper and think about how I address it.
- Judith Kelley: And it's important because to reach the best solutions in this country, you can't just have one side produce the solutions, you are impoverishing your source of ideas. Right?
- Ray Starling: I think that's exactly right. I mean, again, go back to where we started, this idea that our country is this collective experiment. And we ought to think about that word collective as broadly as possible.
- Judith Kelley: Ray, what's the top tip for people who are interested in making connections across the political aisle, other than join the North Carolina Leadership Forum?

Ray Starling:

Yeah. Wow. Tough question. I would give you, I think, a personal and then professional recommendation. I think on the personal side, purposefully going out of your way to use these very tools that we've talked about that sometimes divide us, use them to at least broaden your own views. I am a fan of following people on Twitter that make me very frustrated, but that are really bright people. I don't need to listen to the far left, I feel like I need to listen to those just barely left of center that can be reasonable. And then I think on the professional level, it's frankly exposure. And again, to sort of tout the role here at the chamber.

And I think it would be similar in the university setting, very reasonable people can disagree and come at issues from very different angles. And we certainly have to contend with that, right? Every company has a little bit different personality, comes from a little bit different place, wants something a little bit different out of how they're regulated and how state and federal government run. And I think listening to that, I mean, I think some folks probably think the business community only thinks one way or the other. And what I've learned is, again, a part of that humility and that tempering is engaging professionally in the business world with folks that really see problems differently.

Abdullah Antepi:

I will say a few things, it might come across as paradoxical or contradictory on the surface. First thing, I think the level of partisan polarization and division, no one should underestimate this. The signs, the scientists from the different political spectrum are sounding alarm that our division, our polarization is getting in dangerous level. So first we have to defeat the individual and collective empathy and take this problem seriously, we should not underestimate. If this goes out of control for a long time. If Americans in great numbers see fellow Americans as morally intolerable, morally deviant, unacceptable people, for a long time, our social fabric cannot hold. Our institutions cannot hold what we have achieved. Our experiment will fail. But in addition to attacking and defeating apathy, we should also defeat hopelessness and despair. As Ray was saying, we should overestimate this division and polarization and the partisan bickering.

If we catastrophize everything, if every time when things are tense, we say the sky is folding and pump fear and despair and hopelessness, which will result for further apathy and paralysis, then that exaggeration, that hyperbolic will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. So we have to take it seriously, energize and mobilize people enough that they will take this intentional deliberate efforts to see how we can bring to center left, center right spectrum. But also constantly pumping fear and exaggerated amount of hopeless and despair, which always effectively makes the problem worse, we shouldn't over estimate in that sense as well. There is everything you can do, especially North Carolina. We are in a purple state, we are not in an entirely blue or red state. We have every opportunity to engage with people who are politically different than us on any issue that we care about. Opportunities are endless. One has to just willing to go one extra mile intentionally and deliberately diversify their efforts, their sources

of information, their engagement, their civic contribution to this wonderful State of North Carolina.

Ray Starling: I'd be curious to hear, go ahead, Dean Kelley.

Judith Kelley: I was just going say, I wonder whether... I just kind of casually threw out this question to you both in the beginning about a day in the life of five year old you, but I wonder if we asked each other that question a little bit more, how that might change our perspective of one another. Because clearly, the two stories you told could not have been more different and once you realize that, of course you're going to have different perspectives. But of course, you're also going to be curious, you're going to be like, oh my goodness, this is so interesting. This is so different from my life experience and I just think sometimes that human element goes missing.

Ray Starling: I love that question and I'm stealing it. I do wonder though, I'd love to hear you remark on how will we know if we've turned a corner. In other words, what would the proof be that this is getting better? What are we looking for? What is the measurement? I mean, I certainly was impressed with your scholarship on benchmarking and how that sort of creates almost a market driven desire to do better. In your minds, if the goal here is to do better, what is the first outcropping of that? What would be a sign that maybe we've turned the corner on that?

Abdullah Antepi: Great question.

Judith Kelley: My hope would be that we would start to see small steps in which those bipartisan policy solutions actually are appreciated and not condemned, or that we can actually start to see common solutions in practice. Because you called yourself a pragmatic in the beginning, Ray. I think that what we need to see at the end of the day is results on the ground that matters for people. And once people can start to see, oh, they came together around school reform and that actually improved my kids' experience. Maybe that's a really important first concrete step in saying, yeah, maybe we are turning a corner. Even at the small local level, maybe we are, maybe we can. If we can do it locally, then maybe later, maybe we can do it on a state level. And yeah, I don't know, what do you each think? You asked the question, so usually when people ask a question, they have some answer in mind themselves.

Ray Starling: I actually don't. I love your answer. I think, yeah, the fact that a pragmatic solution that was not merely one side or the other getting their way, being rewarded, I think that's a great test. I really like that answer. I mean, I think what most of us want the answer to be is, oh, well, when my policy solution wins, then I think this process works better. And that can't be the answer.

Abdullah Antepi: Ray will get out of his liberal closet and become liberal and progressive.

Ray Starling: And it's funny because we champion people that switch sides, both sides the aisle, they hold no hard more highly than, hey, we converted one of yours. And I don't think that's winning.

Abdullah Antepli: How many times regretful I heard from Duke students when I asked them about the same question, like what will happen? What will solve this issue? Naively, I heard many times they rely on this invisible hands of time saying people who are of the opposing side, often more conservative members of the American landscape. The younger generation will become all different and the invisible hands of time will look like them. They will join their party. The common sense will prevail in a sense that there will be more people like them and opposing team will convert to their team. There's such naivete unfortunately in our society.

Judith Kelley: Well, it's been a really refreshing conversation between the two of you. And I appreciate the time that you've taken to talk about this topic. Ray Starling and Duke Professor Abdullah Antepli are both parts of the North Carolina Leadership Forum, a project that is convened by Duke University. And we'll have a link to the project on our website, policy360.org. There, you can also find episode 131, which is on redistricting an American democracy in which you can also hear people from different sides of the aisle discussing the topic of redistricting if that's of interest. I'll be back soon with another conversation. I'm Judith Kelley.