

The Civility Project Is Helping Dial Back the Vitriol

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Journalists Stephen Henderson and Nolan Finley. (Courtesy of the Civility Project)

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As we head into the 2020 elections, politics dominate the conversation, and with increasing incivility.

We certainly can't turn to political leaders as examples of civil discussion, and it certainly won't abate after the elections no matter who wins, so to prevent an unbearable 2021 that echos the breakdown of civil conversation we witnessed during the last election, we all really need to make an effort, according to Nolan Finley and Stephen Henderson.

Many see Finley and Henderson as a strange pair; a self-professed staunch conservative and liberal Democrat, the two journalists talk politics on a regular basis and see their differing opinions as something of value, rather than a cause for ending a 12-year friendship. They held the same position at competing newspapers in Detroit: Finley is the

editorial page editor for The Detroit News, a paper that leans conservative, and Henderson was the editorial page editor for The Detroit Free Press, which leans liberal, and is now the host of “Detroit Today” on WDET.

For about five years, the two threw bourbon parties, bringing people together with different political beliefs for drinks and discussion. People who wouldn’t otherwise became friends, and with each passing year, Finley and Henderson saw real value, and some rarity, in what they were doing.

After the 2016 elections, there was “a real deterioration in the quality of dialogue, and I think since then, we’ve really come to value what we are able to do, which is still talk to one another and talk about politics, and not resort to the nastiness that we see in other places,” Henderson said.

In 2017, NPR’s StoryCorps van came to Detroit, and Henderson decided to bring Finley to record an hour-long recounting of how they developed their views and how, despite those widely different views, they have stayed friends. Afterward, they decided they could help others do exactly what they have, and The Civility Project was born. The idea was to give 30- to 90-minute workshops on civility and bring people together for constructive conversations.

“Our society and our country is very divided—we’ve always been divided but we seem more maliciously divided today, and there seems to be much more hate,” Finley said. “We want to demonstrate to people that you can talk across this divide and you can have friendships across this divide, and just because you disagree with someone, in terms of your opinion and their opinion, doesn’t mean you can’t have friendships and that you can’t talk about these important issues without reaching pragmatic solutions.

“We feel that’s where we are today, this inability to talk toward compromise and to talk toward pragmatic solutions. We hope that we can diffuse some of the hate and some of the hostility.”

Think of the number of people who say they can’t even talk to family members anymore, or avoid conversation in their own neighborhoods and communities for fear of differences, Henderson said.

“I think there are a lot of people who are feeling that and don’t like it,” he said. “They feel like there’s something wrong with that dynamic, and they’re really eager to hear about ways to approach this differently and to take the emphasis off the differences they might have and really try to build relationships that allow those differences to exist without hostility, without anger, without this disrespect that we see constantly.”

“I think there’s a hunger for it; I think people recognize we’re in a very bad place,” Finley said. “You hear a lot of people talking about civility, but there’s not a lot of know-how

about how you get to that point. Steve and I, we go through a very specific exercise, we ask these people to do what we've done.”



Nolan Finley is the editorial page editor for The Detroit News, a paper that leans conservative.
(Courtesy of the Civility Project)

Listen and Learn

After a workshop held last year, a pair of women stood up and said they came as friends—they walked together for years, yet they had never talked about politics. One was a conservative and one was a liberal, and they avoided politics, so as to not disrupt the friendship.

“And they had made assumptions about each other based on their politics,” Finley said. “Once they sat down and talked about the reasons they made the political decisions they made, they had greater understanding, and they dropped their assumptions.”

The first thing Finley and Henderson ask everyone to do is to get to know the other person as a person.

“Sit down across from each other, and before you even talk about anything that divides you, try to find out who the other person is, what motivates them, how they came to form their values, what their experiences are, that formed their opinions,” Finley said.

“They come to their opinions the same way, with facts and data and analyzing them in a very honest way and coming to an opinion that’s informed by their values and their experiences.

“And if they come up with a different opinion than you, it doesn’t make them evil, it doesn’t make them stupid, it doesn’t mean they hate America, it just means they’re different.”

The workshops took place in person, but have moved online since the pandemic and the conversations haven’t suffered for it—1,200 people have attended since March. The Zoom workshops allow people to break into small groups and talk face to face as if they were still across from each other, and right across from Finley and Henderson, instead of watching them on stage.

In some cases, the people some want to build a relationship with isn’t a complete stranger, but perhaps a family member they no longer speak to because of differing political opinions. It can be more difficult with family, Finley and Henderson said, but the tools used in the workshop are still valuable.

“One of them is the art of listening,” Henderson said. “A lot of us don’t know how to listen, or want to listen. I think a lot of the times we feel like if you’re not talking, you’re listening. ... It’s a little more complicated than that. The truth is that active listening really is trying to understand what someone else is saying and where they’re coming from that’s different.”



Stephen Henderson is a former editorial page editor for The Detroit Free Press, which leans liberal. He is now the host of “Detroit Today” on WDET. (Courtesy of the Civility Project)

Finley said the key is to go into any conversation, whether it's with a stranger or with someone very close to you, with the idea that you may not be right, and you may learn something from that conversation.

“There's value in having a civil conversation with someone you disagree with,” he said. “If you decide to listen and honestly weight the things they're saying.

“Go in trying to get a better feel for why the person feels the way they feel, thinks the way they think. If you go into a conversation thinking you can win it or convert someone, it's not an honest conversation anymore.

“In order to have an honest conversation you've got to lose the self-righteousness, you've got to lose the smugness. You've got to avoid the condescending and actually sit there and say, ‘Where is the value in what the other person is saying?’

“The other thing that we've learned early on is that we both want the same outcomes; we both want a better world, a safer world, a better community—we have different ideas about how to get there but we want the same outcome.”

Henderson adds that the goal should be to have the kind of relationship where the differences are acknowledged, and the differences matter, but they don't matter more than the relationship itself. We do this through understanding why people believe what they believe, and understanding the experiences and values that shaped them.



Despite holding often conflicting views, journalists Stephen Henderson and Nolan Finley not only maintained their friendships but have been encouraging civil conversations—and giving people tools to do so. (Courtesy of the Civility Project)

Building Friendships

Politically, there is little that Finley and Henderson agree on.

“Nolan and I can have really intense arguments and debates, and there’s no holds barred there, there’s no holding back,” Henderson said. They get angry with each other too. “But when we’re done, we never get up from the discussing saying, ‘Well, I’m finished with this person, I’m never going to talk to this person again, I don’t want to have this discussion again.’”

“We always are looking for the next opportunity to have that exchange and because we value that exchange and what you get out of it that. There is something to be learned from this other person, that there might be different ways to see things that you can get from that other person and that’s why you keep coming back.”

In fact, because of their similar positions at rival papers, they get asked to do television segments in which they’re pitted against each other. People expected them to fight, but they didn’t expect them to become friends.

“The more we did that I think, first of all, we enjoyed it, we both have a real respect for each other’s point of view even if we really disagree with it,” Henderson said. They quickly

realized they had plenty in common outside of their politics and stayed good friends.

“And I think there was a kinship about that job; whoever is in charge of Opinion at the paper tends to be pretty unpopular. And just over time we learned that the work between us was better the more we became friends, the more we started knowing each other, and find space for an actual relationship, the work relationship really benefited from that and grew in value.”

Finley added they have respect for each other, and each other’s work.

“I don’t really agree with much of what Steve writes or talks about but I really admire the way he presents his arguments. I think he’s one of the best writers around and so I enjoy his arguments and enjoy reading his train of thought even if I didn’t agree with it,” he said. “I think you come to appreciate that in other people.”

Their friendship is certainly unlikely today, and it was more or less at the beginning too.

“We’ve had a lot of folks feel they have a right to pass judgment on us being friends, and well, it works for us. It felt natural to us, I think, though I know it did bother people even at the beginning,” Finley said. Years ago, he was at an upstate Republican convention and after having a conversation with Henderson at the bar, two women came up to Finley and asked how he could possibly be friends with Henderson, that he was such a terrible person, and so on.

“And I said, ‘Have you talked to him?’” Finley said. The women had never even met Henderson, and Finley encouraged them to go over and introduce themselves—and they did. Two hours later they came back all smiles, “Oh, he’s so wonderful!” they told him. People are more than their politics.

“There’s something to getting to know someone before passing judgment about how you feel about them,” Finley said.