

**Michael:**

Hello, I'm Michael Rendon, your host of Beyond the Bell, a podcast produced by Animas High School of Durango, Colorado.

**Greg:** And I'm your co-host, Greg Phillips. This podcast series asks the question, what must our education system do to best prepare the next generation of students, Gen Zers, to lead meaningful, fulfilling, impactful, purposeful, and satisfying lives? No small task.

We'll begin each episode speaking with a local high schooler, college student, or recent addition to the nine to five workforce to hear about their educational experience, their lives, and their visions and hopes for the future. Next, we'll talk with local experts about how we can ensure that education is meaningful, challenging, and engaging. We'll look at what's working and what isn't. So join us as we rethink education for a new generation, because we believe preparing for the future means more than just passing tests. It means empowering young people to thrive, lead and shape a better world.

Today I'm visiting with Nico, a 2024 graduate of Animas High School. Welcome to Beyond the Bell.

**Niko:** Thank you, I appreciate it.

**Greg:** Emotionally, you had some pretty powerful experiences during your high school years. The pandemic, and I know you experienced an incredible loss. Tell me about that and tell me about how you managed and how you coped with it.

**Niko:** Yeah, so we lost our best friend, my best friend in 2022 in December to an accidental fentanyl overdose where his drugs were laced with fentanyl. And that was one of the most difficult things I've ever had to go through in my entire life. Cause I've lost classmates before, I've lost family members before, through a lot of difficult things.

At the age I was at with the connection we had, mean, our birthdays were a day apart. We were identical in our home lives, our histories with our families. Just, it was like a twin flame, if you know what that is. It was one of the worst things that again, I've ever had to experience. Along with a lot of our classmates, they were just as heavily affected. And the way the Animas handled it was phenomenal. I want to commend every single person who was there for us during that time. We had teachers and faculty coming to our houses that we were all hanging out together just to be together. They would come to our houses to check on us, to make sure we were okay, to sit on the floor and cry with us. It was just a very impactful moment. And I think that the way that Animas went about handling it was very respectful and very honorable.

And the way that they didn't expect us to get all of our work done and didn't expect us to be normal and be okay with being at school for the next couple of days. So they gave us the grace and the time to feel and cope and grieve. And that for me personally was huge because I think that the school would have been a much more negative place if the teachers and the faculty hadn't tried so hard to make us feel okay there.

**Greg:** So what, there's a lot to unpack here. So you had this massive loss of essentially a brother and you were together in a community at the school that were grieving and sharing and working through that process. How did you turn that? What did you do?

**Niko:** Well, I did a lot actually. It took a while to grieve and to process and to, you know, ask why, all these questions that you ask when someone dies. I was talking with some of my friends and we realized that this issue of overdose and fentanyl and laced drugs and everything

is too big of an issue in our community to go unseen anymore. And so a friend of mine, Zoe and I, decided that we were going to get policy change within the 9R school systems to allow Narcan to be distributed and carried on campus so that if in the event that somebody were to overdose, the students would know how to handle it and know how to respond to it.

So we started doing that, was working with the 9R district and the city. We're going to all the board meetings, all the city town hall meetings, speaking to the board, speaking to the city council, doing everything we can. Then after a nine month battle, we were able to get policy change, actually be the first school in Colorado to allow Narcan to be carried and distributed in the school building.

And then after that, we started getting some media attention and people started recognizing the movement that we were making and we decided to partner with Barbara McLachlan and Kachina Weaver and lobby and author a bill. It's an opiate antagonist and detection policies within schools bill. Essentially what it does is it allows schools to have Narcan, fentanyl test strips, et cetera, on school campus, in buses, on field trips, wherever the school property, the school jurisdiction goes, that is allowed now.

But yeah, we've, we did a lot of work and tried to turn it around. We didn't want his image to be an overdose campaign. We wanted his image to be the reason things are changing and the face of a movement and not just some kid who overdosed, you know. We didn't want to let our best friend die in vain. That was our main thing. Nothing happened legally. We had to do something about it working with adults and government entities.

**Greg:** I know you said you were working with Zoe there were other kids involved as well right?

**Niko:** Yes, yes, a lot of them actually.

**Greg:** So the two of you organized the groups together. Tell me a little bit about the process of how how'd you put all this together? How'd you make this happen?

**Niko:** So the very beginning was just me and Zoe talking about it, figuring out what we wanted to do and figuring out where can we go with this, right? How are we supposed to make change? And we found Leo and Hayes Striticus. They were president slash co-president of the student council and debate team over at DHS. And we found out that they're actually trying to get policy change for this as well. So we decided to kind of partner up in a way. And Zoe and I handled Animas and they handled DHS.

So we would do the quote unquote lobbying for our policy change at Animas and we would be quarterbacking that side and then they would be taking the DHS side and changing policy over there. But then when we would go to city council meetings, 9R meetings, we'd come together and we'd join up and then work together. It was a big group of people, probably 15 people, 10, 15 people. And we just joined forces and made it happen.

**Greg:** Fantastic. Now, did you have somebody, a faculty member or administrator or somebody that was helping to facilitate that or were you guys just doing it on your own?

**Niko:** It was really just on our own. We decided that we wanted to make this bill happen. And so we started working with Barbara McLachlan and she was super willing to help us out and really happy to see us young people trying to make change and make real tangible change. And so she got, we got on the horse and started lobbying for us and started bringing in everybody she could to support our bill. We had a lot of help for sure. I think that the faculty at Animas were nothing but supportive and understanding.

We had to tiptoe around legalities and making sure there was no liability and no issues around that. And then we had to make sure parents actually wanted their kids to learn this stuff. So there was a lot of logistics that we had to get through and a lot of hurdles to jump. We were doing a lot of hard work to kind of counteract all those negative opinions and show the positive change that this would bring.

**Greg:** I imagine that you learned a lot along the way, not only about how government works, but also about how to work together and collaborate to bring about change. What were some of the lessons that you, looking back on that, do think you learned in terms of working with a group of 15 people?

**Niko:** Well, there's a lot of opinions and especially with people who are so passionate about what you're doing, it can almost be more challenging to get things done and to figure out what you want to do because there are so many extremely passionate loud voices that want to do all the things that are going to be beneficial. But you have to find a common ground and decide on certain things that you want to find and people you want to reach out to, companies you want to get the support of for the bill.

There are a lot of very strong opinions. I learned how to kind of let the reins go a little bit and just be the supporter and be there to help do whatever is needed to be done, but also kind of stay in my corner and let them figure out what they're going to do. And then I kind of do what they need. I'm a very loud personality myself and like to take the lead on things. So I had to kind of learn how to sit back.

**Greg:** It's messy trying to bring about change and working with folks with differing opinions. It takes a lot of maturity and discipline, I think, to keep the process moving forward, to keep engaging people, to listen to folks. I imagine you learn a lot, and I imagine that it's probably going to go a long ways in helping you go forward. So you learned a lot about collaboration. You learned a lot about grassroots efforts. I'm interested, has this influenced you in what you want to do next in life?

**Niko:** I'd say it definitely has shown me what I'm good at and some of my strengths and some of my weaknesses and it's helping me point me in the right direction. I know for a fact that I don't want to be a politician because I don't like how strenuous and negative the world is a lot of the time and I think that that's something that with the morals that I have would be hard to get anywhere with.

**Greg:** The world's got a lot of issues that we're all facing. There's no end to the anxiety and the concern that we're all feeling about the future. What's your perspective on what lies ahead and how hopeful are you?

**Niko:** Very. That's, to be concise, very hopeful. I think that our generation has shown so much drive and positivity and want for success and growth for not only ourselves, but our communities, our country, our families, everything. I think that right now is a very scary time to be in such a transitional period in life, for sure. It's intimidating to think that the mean income in this nation won't even buy a house anymore. And it's very, in a way, discouraging to a lot of young people making them want to go out and do that, you know, seems a lot more impossible now. And the idea of the quote unquote American dream has kind of, kind of gone away. So I'd say that I'm very hopeful because I know my age group and I know how much we want to see progress being made and positive change being made in our community, in our country, and the world. I'm not generalizing for my entire, you know, Gen Z, but I think majority of our generation has hope for the future and is driven enough to create that change that we need. So

I think come the next 10, 15 years, 20 years, I think that it will have a lot of very positive change.

**Greg:** You've got faith, and I imagine some of that has come from just your own experience of succeeding at making change with your whole legislative effort with the Narcon. I mean, that's a great, great way to view the potential that you have to make things happen through that lens.

**Niko:** Yeah, I mean anybody can do it. That's the thing is I never would have thought that I was the type of person who would be able to get a bill passed in the state legislature, but I did and I was a big part of that. Anybody can make the change that they want to make and they have to be the change. They have to be the change. And I was the change and it worked out.

**Michael:** Today we're joined by two incredible guests who bring unique perspectives on the value of civic engagement and community service and the role that they play in education. Barbara McLachlan was a beloved English and journalism teacher at Durango High School for 20 years before serving for eight years as a Colorado State Representative. Barbara is someone who has seen civic engagement from both the classroom as well as the state house. Additionally, we're joined by Dr. Paul DeBell, an associate professor of political science at Fort Lewis College who's doing fascinating work on political psychology and democratic citizenship. Dr. DeBell leads the Fort Lewis College Political Engagement Project and has firsthand knowledge about how to help young people navigate our complex political landscape. Welcome both of you to the show.

**Barbara:** Thank you.

**Dr. DeBell:** Thank you.

**Michael:** Alright, so I have a question for both of you. This is a fundamental question. Are we facing a civic engagement crisis? Or are young people actually very engaged just engaging differently than previous generations?

**Barbara:** Civic engagement looks differently now than it did in my generation. You we think that having house parties and, you all that stuff and go do door knocking is the best way to meet with people as far as elections go. And I don't think students see it that way now. They, they think that there's too much money in there, which I totally agree. They don't want to donate. They want to be heard.

And I think that's what we really need to focus on is actually listening to the next generation. Sometimes if they're not giving money or if they, you know, people assume they're too young to know anything that they're doing, they are not listened to. And I think it's very, very important that we engage them by listening and responding. It's not always that we need to do what they want us to do, but it is a fact that we just, we need to hear them. We need to understand. I think that's what we all want in life is just to be heard and.

So I think civic engagement, that gets them started in there when they know they can be heard and when they say something, it means something.

**Dr. DeBell:** I would very much agree that we are undergoing, I think, an interconnected set of crises surrounding our politics and civic engagement. And there are lots of causes and trends going on. And some of those have to do with the enormous changes that we have in the way that we experience politics, right, in our media landscape and the technologies. And so just like Barbara said, that is changing the way that we engage with politics and some of the models that many of us cut our teeth on.

are less pertinent than they used to be, while others, like digital organizing, were really thinking about the way the news cycle has changed. These are things that younger people are going to be more adapted to. So I would say that this is a common trend of my field, political psychology, that our brains evolved for a certain set of environments. And we're in a really different set of environments now. And that disjuncture causes us all sorts of troubles, whether it's making public decisions together in politics or just governing our own mental health. And so we're really seeing that. And I think it's going to take us, just like Barbara said, learning from each other and creating spaces where everybody can kind of be heard because different generations, different geographic locations are all going to be experiencing similar issues and problems. And it's going to take all of us, think, to confront them.

**Greg:** Dr. DeBell, Barbara, really excited that you guys are here. I can tell already this is going to be a great conversation. I've got a question for each of you as well. Let's go to Dr. DeBell first. How can educators and families help young people cultivate a sense of hope and agency and, you know, belief that they not only should want to create positive change, but that they in fact can?

**Dr. DeBell:** Yeah, that's a great question. That's sort of the great motivating question of my life as an educator in political science. I would say two things. The first is that I think we learn and we create a sense of hope and efficacy and effectiveness by doing, by actually practicing. And that can be really hard and intimidating. So in my introduction to political science class, students will often do their own ballot measure research and present that to the public. And when I introduced that idea to them, the faces that I get are not excited. They're really like, what do you want me to do? And they're very intimidated. And they can't imagine that they're going to be able to do that. But then when we go through this process and we work with community partners like the League of Women Voters, we have this big event where students are showing their explainer videos on the Colorado ballot measures. And they're really the experts. And so that learning by doing, I think, gives them this great sense of efficacy. And then when we think about hope,

I think also of Martin Luther King Jr.'s idea of creative maladjustment. And he would say things like, you know, it can be useful to be maladjusted to systems that are broken, that are oppressive. So he talks about never getting adjusted to discrimination or segregation, but being sort of creative about how we think about living in those systems and trying to change them. And so getting a sense of hope from, well, I don't have to be happy with the status quo if, as think many young people feel, the status quo is harmful to me, but rather I can think about ways to do things that would, in my everyday life and in my community, hopefully change things for the better. And I think that that sense of activity, really doing something, gives us that sense of hope. Because when we engage in our local communities and we engage on issues that we care about, we can actually start to see changes in meaningful ways.

**Barbara:** It's kind of an old teacher adage for me that show don't tell. And I think as parents, when we show them that we're going to protest, we're reading, we're debating, we're not classifying everybody as right or wrong because of their party or because we don't agree with them. Same with teaching. I think if you show them what you can do and what other people have done, then they see that there's a model out there. If the only model they see is everybody saying the election was stolen and we can't do this and all the the garbage that gets put out there, why would they ever want to get involved in something like that? So I think you need to show that it can be done and that's kind of, think, showing them. I mean, you always see parents taking their little kids to those protests and they're holding signs that are larger than they are. And the kids don't really know what it is, but they know it is.

**Greg:** Parents are modeling behavior for the kids to emulate.

Dr. DeBell, your research focuses on political psychology. What do we know about how young people form their civic identities and political beliefs? Is it strictly from modeling, watching others behave?

**Dr. DeBell:** We know that formative period in the development of our political values and identities typically happens as young adults in particular. Thinking kind of the ages of like, you know, 14, 15, so those first year high school students up until kind of after college, like just after college age, mid-20s. And what's interesting there is that you do see some modeling. You know, we're all raised with a certain set of values and experiences and perspectives from our family, from our community. And you'll see lots of people when we start striking out on our own as adolescents and young adults who really find those views and values and perspectives that they were raised with reinforced. But you also find a lot of examples where the experiences that they have as individuals as they strike out into the world directly contradict with some of those. And you see some folks really swinging across the political spectrum or really changing the way that they orient with politics from their family. And of course, any family holiday dinner can bring those tensions up as they did often when I was in college.

So you can think about this as blending lots of different influences together and whether some of those are from family and environment growing up and some of those really are what's going on in the world when they are out there.

**Greg:** There's a lot of research now showing that the young people have a lot of mistrust in the institutions. How do we teach civic responsibility to them when they're skeptical of the systems that we're asking them to engage in?

**Dr. DeBell:** I was looking at some data about this this morning. So it's not just young people. You and Gallup have both been tracking general trust in institutions and in government. So in 2024, only 22 % of Americans said, across all generations, said that they trusted the government to do what's right most of the time. That's down from a high of like the upper 70s into 80 percentiles when they started asking that question in the 50s and 60s. And really starting with Vietnam and Watergate, those numbers have plummeted across generations without, you know, sort of going back up. So it's really a crisis across generations, but I think that this is one of those instances, I think that'll come up several times in our conversation today, where the data might reflect even sharper shifts among young people because this is the only world that they've known. So those of us who are raised in the 80s or 90s might remember a very different world and may have had more optimism.

And I think that because of changes in our media landscape and in our politics, and the way we talk about politics and our hyper-polarization and lots of other trends that I'm sure we'll get into today, that if those are your only experiences of politics, it is not irrational to have a lower view. But again, I think that this is a trend that's more pronounced among younger people, but they're not sort of so distinct. This is something that's happening across the entire population.

And you know, I think that what I often tell people is, like, work within the system, work without the system, whatever it is, find things that are meaningful to you and your community, your family, your people, and try and take real action with real people. If you want to fight against the system, if you want to change the system, whatever that might look like. But that sort of actual action and community with folks is going to be more effective at whatever you're trying to achieve. And it's going to make you feel more fulfilled and connected and happy in the process.

**Michael:** And Barbara, how do you see that? Because I'm assuming that as a teacher, you saw people that were passionate, cared about issues, wanted to make a difference in the world. But as Paul was talking about, skeptical of the system and didn't believe in the system and that. So how do you bridge that gap? Or how did you bridge that gap and how do we bridge that gap moving forward?

**Barbara:** I taught newspaper for 20 years. And in that class, we were encouraged to talk about things. It was never me telling students how to think. And you had to be really careful in high school about what you discuss in class, because they will go home and say, she told me to think this and that. And of course, I'm in trouble then, because I never said that. But I'll tell you that when I first ran for office and my students did not know if I was a Democrat or Republican, they're like, really? You're a Democrat? I didn't know that.

I felt really good about that, that I was able to, you know, to bridge that and not tell them what to think, what to do, and open it up for discussion. I think we have to start with really young kids, teaching them, that's when you teach them to be nice to people and to understand his clothes may be dirty because he doesn't have money at home. Don't belittle him, just, you know, treat him gently. Be nice. Nice is such a weird squishy word, but I think when you start being kind to people and nice to people very, very early on, politics becomes a different thing as you get older because you already realize what other people are going through. And to me politics is out there to help people, not to punish people or say you're right or wrong or right or left, up or down.

So that's kind of where I see is that, again, it's show, don't tell, but we also need to encourage kindness. We need to encourage discussion, thoughtfulness. If you're watching TV with your kids, pause it and say, what do you think? Ask them questions about what they think so they can actually start putting it into their words instead of words of what they hear at school or a dinner table or wherever they're hearing it. So I think it takes some training, but it's teachers, parents, community, we all need to kind of do that with all kids.

**Michael:** What's the most effective or inspiring civic engagement project or experience that you witnessed and what made it effective or inspiring?

**Dr. DeBell:** I think that the projects that have been the most inspiring and effective have been those that have two things. The first is student leadership and sort of their own ideas and inspiration. And then the second is a lot of collaboration with students, with other groups of students, and then of course, across community groups. The group that I've been the faculty advisor for the political engagement project or PEP at Fort Lewis College, the students had this idea to have a Rock the Vote concert. You know, I was like, okay, let's try.

They really led and they worked with Residence Life and different, you know, the Welcome Week at Fort Lewis College and then a lot of musicians in town and KDUR. And we put it together, you know, it sounded logistically like a nightmare to me, but many hands make light work. And so lots of people, know, the KDUR folks were amazing. They dealt with the musicians thanks to them. The housing folks dealt with food. We dealt with the political engagement part, right? And so that was really fun because we had this party and we also registered a lot of voters the first weeks of the semester.

Another is we have for years at Fort Lewis College done these better conversation skills training using political psychology to help people have better conversations. And students had the idea that last year we should do a version of it that has to do with family holiday dinners because everybody was headed back home for the Thanksgiving break after the election and was very nervous about it. And so that was very much a student idea. And then the students

wanted to bring in actors from the theater department who had just done a play called the Thanksgiving play. And so we brought in those actors and we did skits about family conversations at Thanksgiving, blowing up, and some really practical things that people could do. So again, that was sort of student leadership, but it involved a lot of collaboration. And I guess I had a third thing, sort of very practical things. The Rock the Vote concert, people were able to get registered to vote and to learn about how to vote, ask any questions they had about the upcoming elections and ways they could get involved.

At the conversation dinner, right, we learned some really tactical, concrete things that people could write down and say, this is what I'm going to do when my uncle has too many beers and starts ranting about this, that or the other. And like they went with some very concrete action items. Cause I think a lot of this, we're all swimming in this deluge of outrage at all times. And it can just feel really hard to know when and how to take action.

So I really reject the premise that young people are less engaged is that they're just, they're swimming in this deluge, like all of us. And we're all grasping for like, care about this. I know the passion is there for young people, but it's how do we turn that passion into something to do? And I think that collaborating with other people and figuring out concrete action steps is the way to go.

**Michael:** So Barbara, I'll turn that to you. Paul says that what makes it effective student leadership or I'm hearing ownership of the project, collaboration with others and providing something that's practical. And so I'm wondering, what's the most effective or inspiring civic engagement project or experience you've witnessed and what do you think made it effective or inspiring?

**Barbara:** I think both of those things are really important, you know, with student-led. Mine happened after both Animas High and Durango High went to their school boards and had resolutions made that the students could have Narcan on campus. And that was really important and they did that by themselves. They took the initiative and they were doing it for a friend from Animas High. But then they took that to the state legislature and that was a little bit bigger audience for them.

But they did their research. We found a lobbyist who would work with them for free. It was really amazing. They came in and they came to Denver and testified in front of committees and they talked to legislators about it. They did all their research. They were able to answer all the questions. We did practice sessions together. But they told me what they needed. And I got to run this bill and it passed through both the House and the Senate and the governor signed it. And it was because of these kids that did it. And everybody in the committees came up to me afterwards and go,

God, those kids know what they're doing, don't they? I yeah, they do. They're really our next generation. Aren't we happy? So that was fun for me was to see them. They came to me. I didn't go to them about anything. They presented it to me and said, let's do it. And I go, OK. So we got it on the calendar, and they did it.

**Greg:** The Narcan Project obviously grew from the pain and trauma. These kids experienced the loss of a fellow classmate and they needed to get out and transform that pain into something productive. In our society, it's often a crisis or catastrophe that moves us to take action. Barbara, do you think there's a benefit to teaching and discussing that in classes? The critical events that precipitate change? The civil rights movement comes to mind. What do you think?



**Barbara:** I think that would be great. People see that there's protests, but what started all this? And that happens all the time. But it also happens that we don't get a stoplight until somebody, know, so many people are killed at an intersection and then we go, well, maybe we should do something about it too. So there's always that aspect. But I think learning from history is one of the best ways to learn that how would you react in this case? What do you think they did? How do you think they got it started from, you know, going across this bridge in Selma. They all knew they could be killed there. What gave them the courage to do this march? You have it. How do you use what you have?

**Michael:** I'm gonna shift a little bit here. Barbara, earlier you mentioned that today's world, civic engagement is different as far as politics go. It's not going door to door. It's not buying a bunch of TV ads. I'm wondering how does social media and digital activism fit into traditional notions of civic engagement? And I guess this could be for either of you.

**Barbara:** For me, it kind of takes away the one-on-one. It's really easy for people to be anonymous on social media and to write everything in all caps because they want to yell at you and then disappear and you're just left with this bag in front of you of, it's moving and squirming and you don't know what to do with all that stuff in there. Social media is what's here, but I prefer the one-on-one. I like debates and conversations and talking and listening to people.

I wish we could do better with that, but some people just sit at home and they get online and argue with everybody and it's not really civil discourse to me, civilized discourse perhaps.

**Michael:** Well, and it's interesting because I feel the same way, but I'm also older, you know? And so most of my life is without social media. I prefer one-on-one chatting. And I teach with Dr. DeBell as well. And my students, they live in the social media world. Like that's their reality. So I guess maybe for Paul, how do you see that, Paul, with your students, this idea of social media and digital activism? And how do you see that in today's politics?

**Dr. DeBell:** One of those big things that we're all grappling with. And young people have always had social media, right? And so like you mentioned, Michael, it's like the natural way in which they're engaging. And I think that we should think about the sort of problematic aspects of it, but there are also the benefits of just how quickly information can flow. I'm always, I come into class, I'm like, what's going on? And students often know something, like a story is breaking before I do, because they're kind of closer to the pulse.

So for sharing information and getting information, it can be really useful if you have the media literacy and savvy skills to like get to the bottom of it. But I'll say two things that worry me. This is from a political psychology point of view. The first is that I worry that sometimes by sharing or liking, we feel like we're taking action. We're often just sort of like preaching to the choir. We're talking to people who already agree with us. And that's dangerous because of a psychological phenomenon called moral licensing.

This is the idea like you do one good thing and then you kind of give yourself an excuse to kind of do whatever you want after. So the classic study on this was actually with when Prius's first came out as the first hybrid that was popularly available. If Prius owners were actually taking fewer pro-environmental steps in their personal life because they felt like they bought a Prius so they could drink all the bottled water, could whatever else. So that idea of moral licensing is like, well, I saw a problem in the world. I shared the story. I took action, but that's not really action. And so that kind of worries me.

The other thing that would worry me about social media is that we are kind of fed these things to algorithms that are not there for our information or mental health. Give us all this information. Those algorithms exist to sell ads and to make ad executives and tech executives a lot of money. And so I think that if we are passive and only accepting what the algorithm gives us, we're going to have a very skewed version of reality.

So, I think that social media can be a super useful tool for sharing information and getting information, but we have to be in control and acknowledge that that's maybe an entry to action, but it is not in itself action. And also that just because something came across my feed, that might be more beneficial to Musk or Zuckerberg than to me or my community. So getting beyond that and thinking about things that I can actually do with real people could be really helpful.

**Michael:** This is a question for both of you. How do we teach students to disagree respectfully and find common ground in this era of political polarization? I want to just add the key question is how do we teach students to do this? Not why do we think it's important.

**Barbara:** You know, in the legislature, I was elected as a Democrat, but I also represent a whole bunch of Republicans and a whole bunch of independents.

Talking like that and listening to everybody on every issue was really, really important. You know, these people ran for office for the same reason I did. They were passionate about doing something. What they wanted to do and what I wanted to do was often different, but at least, you know, we all had that in common. I went to a program once and it was a whole bunch of us. It was the first day of this big meeting. There were like 80 people in this room. And they said, okay, we're going to throw out topics. Let's see what you do. And you could do this in the classroom.

I go, OK, gun control. If you think we should have gun control, go right. If you think we should not have gun control on it, you could go left. If you're somewhere in between, go in between. And they just threw out dozens of issues. And so we were all going across the room. And afterwards, we found out that we were in a group with every single person in that room at one time or another during that day. And we all had something in common.

But it took a while to find it. And everybody was trying to guess who was Republican, who was Democrat, who was, you know, what everybody was.

**Michael:** Paul, what about you? How do you think we teach students to disagree respectfully and find common ground?

**Dr. DeBell:** This is a huge issue. think we could talk for hours and hours on this because it's super complicated and it's really hard because the environment politically and in terms of media that we live in is not structured to make this easy. It's structured as Barbara was getting at to make it really hard. Political scientists have called our era the age of mega identity politics, which means you tell somebody you're a Democrat or a Republican and they can assume all sorts of other things about you. Your age, your income, your race, your cultural preferences, where you got to eat, like everything.

And of course, as Barbara just showed with that example, we're all unique individuals. And so I think getting away from that automatic us versus them, like there's the good side, and then there's, which is my side, obviously, and then there's the other side, which is the bad side, right? If we can get away from that and make it a little more complex through allowing people to be surprising.

So I'll often open up classes where we're going to have tough conversations by really trying to find examples, whether it's a story or a poll that show surprising things, for example, a large majority of NRA members support common sense gun control measures, for example. That makes them more complex. It complicates narratives. And then in terms of motivation, and so there's a lot that we could talk about in terms of how to do it. I think it goes back to the lead by example or show don't tell, like actually practicing listening to others and modeling in yourself that you can be wrong and you can get a new perspective or that you can disagree and not take it too personal or explode.

In terms of motivation, I will often say two things to students. The first is that do what's good for you. And what's good for you is actually connecting to other people and listening to them because it feels good. The disgust and contempt that we feel about the other side is profitable for politicians and elites across business and the media. It is really bad for us. In fact, holding high levels of disgust and contempt toward other people is a cause of what's called all-cause mortality. That means people just die earlier from all sorts of things.

Do it not for the warm fuzzies or morals of it, but do it because it'll actually make you happier and healthier. And it won't be advantaging the people that already have plenty of money and power in the world. This is actually, I think, working together with people in our communities who we've been divided from for profit and for political advantage is a way for us to regain some of our political power and agency as well as our health. The other is, let's say, some people are not in the mood to compromise or listen right now. I would still argue that it's always important to listen even to adversaries.

**Greg:** Barbara, we've been talking a lot about civic engagement from the perspective of politics, but I want to expand that to go back to what some one of you said earlier about community service. I see civic engagement as being more than just getting involved in politics. I see it as making a choice to get involved to help others, to help your community, and have responsibility to others. If you were going to design, and I'm going to say civic engagement, but I want you to broaden it to include community service curriculum today. What would be different about it than say perhaps a traditional government class that might have been taught a couple decades ago?

**Barbara:** I would do a lot of Socratic seminars because I think talking and listening, in a Socratic seminar you kind of have to do one person at a time. It's kind of against the rules to yell over everybody. I think that's a good safe place to talk. Everybody gets a voice, everybody gets to comment, and everybody hears. I think community engagement, it's kind of the entryway into civic responsibility is to get involved in the community in some way. And people can kind of choose.

My newspaper class used to adopt families every Christmas and they would go out and buy gifts and gift certificates and cash and kids who couldn't afford it would wrap the gifts. Everybody kind of got involved in it. And to this day, many students always send me photos of them doing the exact same thing with their families now. But they're also voting and they're also understanding that not everybody is as lucky as we are that we can afford a Christmas without getting help.

So those kind of things I think would be important in a classroom. I think textbooks would probably be out. I think more news, articles, current events. I think we need to start bringing more current events into our normal teaching, whatever we're teaching. I taught a lot of literature in my class. And so there's always a current event that has something to do with the

literature. And it's kind of an aside reading. But it gets kids thinking that this isn't just a novel situation.

**Greg:** What about service learning? I know a lot of the high schools in our area here have opportunities or requirements to participate in service learning. What are some of the components of service learning that you think are important so that they're actually gaining some sense of self and some self-reflection as a result of being a part of this? Something that we can help recognize the value of other than just simply putting in the time and getting check in the box for credit.

**Barbara:** I think meeting people outside the school is always a good idea. That you can learn from somebody who is older, younger, in a completely different profession than anything you've ever been in. But you get to help them and they are helping other people. And volunteering is a really good way to spend a day. Having conversations that you might not have had anywhere else. To me, that's what service learning does. And if it's a passion that you have, even better. If you got to choose what you want to do. The required ones, sometimes kids get stuff they don't really want, but that's on them.

**Michael:** Paul, you talked a lot about political engagement project and projects that you were working on, what inspired you, that sort of thing. And I'm wondering, is it focused on national politics? Is it focused on local politics? Is a step to civic engagement to start with the local and then move on to the national? Or is it you start with national because those are the big issues and then you focus on the local? Or how do you think about that?

**Dr. DeBell:** Yeah, this is a great question because what sucks up all the oxygen when we think about political coverage is really what's happening at the national level. And of course, that's the drama. It's salacious. It's outrageous. It's also where it matters. Like our votes for our national representatives matter ton. But we can actually have a lot more impact in our local communities, right? And local organizations we're part of. Whether that's a school or a county government, we can actually have a lot of voice and say, and I think that's a much more powerful entry point to developing the habits of political engagement and of listening to people who are different than you, right?

Because to Barbara's earlier point, if I am talking about the president or a Senate bill, I can all caps curse at somebody across the country anonymously, no problem, right? But that's going to be a lot harder to do in a city council meeting or a school board meeting surrounded by my neighbors. So I think that trying to get people to think more about the local is important. As a political psychologist, we know about something called the negativity bias, where humans, like many animals, were attracted to negative news over positive news because attending to the negative helps keep us alive. Unfortunately, that tendency has been hijacked for profit by particularly social media algorithms, but all sorts of information purveyors and outraged entrepreneurs as they're known in the literature that I play in. I think trying to translate that, like take that and say, okay, like you're really angry about what's happening with the Environmental Protection Agency on a federal level. What does that look like in La Plata County or in Colorado or in your hometown? Who's working on it? What organizations? So I should really trying to take that, the emotion that can often come from the high drama, shall we say, and funneling that into something.

We have, and Michael, you've been in these conversations on campus, we've had some post-election conversations, we've brought our counseling center in, and our amazing director of the counseling center, Jen Shupe, has several times shared that the best thing we can be doing for our mental health right now is taking some sort of action with others that is in line with our values. And that can be really hard. I some people have the means to fly to Washington, D.C.

and do the things, or even to Denver, but for most of us, doing that and, you know, which we do for ourselves really, to live with ourselves and improve our own health and mental health, that's going to be much more accessible within the institution. We're embedded as individuals into schools and companies and governmental organizations, all sorts of places where really important decisions are being made that are going to impact our community and are going to impact our lives in those concrete ways. And I think trying to siphon a lot of that emotion into those more local issues as a way to create sort of what I would say it's like a virtuous cycle of, wow, I saw how actually having a bunch of people like getting my neighbors to show up to this community comment on like zoning or something, which sounds really dry, but that's gonna be really important for the Animas River or for the National Forest or whatever it might be. And then having had that experience, we're more likely to stay plugged into those things.

**Michael:** It seems like there's an accountability on the local level as well that's really interesting. I like to tell my students too, you'll see somebody write something crazy in the paper, but then you see that person the next day and you can say, hey Bob, that was kind of crazy. And you have that conversation and that accountability. Barb, I saw you nodding along to Paul and I was wondering if you could speak a little bit about that, the local versus the national and how do you see that?

**Barbara:** It's really hard for me to go grocery shopping sometimes because if I'm in a hurry, you just can't. Well, I want to talk to you. And you can't not talk to them. But you don't get to do that with your federal representative. But when you look at a county commission and there's three people for the whole county, they wield a lot of power in that. They are open to discussions. They have those on-the-road things all the time where they want to hear from people. And I'm not sure that people understand that that's what local government does.

Local government is what really counts. Their decisions have a day-to-day influence on you. What county commissioners are doing right now or city councils doing right now, even school boards doing now, will affect you in the immediate. And I think people forget that, that all they do is they go, I never vote locally. I always just vote the presidential and leave it. And I'm like, yeah, you're kind of leaving out. We're asking for your voice here. And this is the time to do it. So yeah. So I agree that local is more immediate, more personal.

**Michael:** Barbara, from your time in the legislature, what would you want young activists to know about how change actually happens in government?

**Barbara:** I think they need to know change can happen in government and that there are more than two sides to an issue. Sometimes there's 12 sides to an issue. And I think those kids who came from Animas and Durango up to Denver, they had to look at all 12 sides of that issue. There were people completely against it, completely for it, whatever. But that's what they learned is that if they did their work and if they came prepared and professional, you know, the guys all had ties on and everybody was adjusting their ties for them because they were kind of wrapped around their necks.

But it was really, it was wonderful to know that if they were passionate about something, they called a legislator. They didn't just say, we can do this on our own. They called me first thing and I said, yeah, let's get you some help. And we got somebody from the Senate who was going to help. We got people from all sides in there to help these kids. And it was bipartisan support that they had. We got a Republican senator, you know.

We kind of did all the work over there, but we did the work that we could do, but they did the work of getting it across the finish line. If they're passionate about something, they need to talk to somebody and look at all sides of the issue. So they're not just saying, well, I'm right and

you're wrong. And so that's how it is. You have to be prepared for everybody. Somebody out there is going to hate you for whatever you put out. So you just have to be able to respond to them. Yeah, but it can be done.

**Greg:** Barbara, if you were going to give one piece of advice, and this is to educators, not to students, but to educators, trying to foster civic engagement, what would it be?

**Barbara:** Listen to what they want to do. What is civic engagements are important to your students? It's not just here's what I think is important and you should do this. What do they care about? I courage working in that arena is to go out and do something because if their heart's in it, their heads will follow and that becomes a habit.

**Michael:** This is a question for both of you. want you to complete this sentence.

**Dr. DeBell:** A civically engaged young person today should be able to find multiple good sources of information on issues they care about, as well as multiple pathways to taking action on those issues.

**Michael:** Barbara, what about you? A civically engaged young person today should be able to...

**Barbara:** Think, listen, understand, which kind of goes into what Paul was saying, advocate, and they need to be kind.

**Greg:** Love it. Final question. Final Jeopardy. What gives you hope about the next generation's capacity for civic leadership? Let's go to you, Dr. DeBell.

**Dr. DeBell:** I mean, think the thing that gives me the greatest hope, this is a theme running throughout this whole conversation, is the actual doing. So the actual being with students gives me enormous hope. It's funny, community members, you after a tough election or after a difficult piece of news breaks, I'll often have friends and community members say to me, must be really hard to face these issues in the college classroom. And it is hard, but it's hard, it's important because the issues are hard, but actually the students are where I get my hope because I see them.

I see their passion, enormous passion, and also they are, at least the students that I work with, are really willing to listen to one another. Just where Barbara concluded here, sort of listening and being kind to one another. I think that they want to do that. The environment that they're in doesn't make it easy to do it, but there is definitely a lot of will and passion there. And so that gives me an enormous amount of hope. And it's just the sheer passion and creativity that the young people that I work with every day are bringing to issues that really matter to them. And I think that it is incumbent upon us to help them and provide some pathways forward for their own passions to find real impacts in the world. But I'm hopeful.

**Greg:** Barbara, are you hopeful?

**Barbara:** Yeah, I don't think I could survive if I wasn't hopeful on a lot of stuff. These students are smart and capable, and they just need to know that that's what you need to change the world, is to be smart and capable. They're doing so much more now than I ever did at that age. And I think they've seen, and I'll take the blame, is my generation has really blown it as far as climate change and that money matters more than a lot of other stuff. When I talk to them about that, and I do apologize to them, they see that there's hope out there and that they need to know that they have all the tools and they have all the intelligence. They just need to band

together and use that for the better good. They can change and they can undo what has been done. I have great faith in them.

**Michael:** Well, Dr. Paul DeBell and Representative Barbara McLaughlin, thank you both for your time. It's been a pleasure and I've really enjoyed this conversation. So thank you.

**Barbara:** Thank you.

**Dr. DeBell:** Yes, thank you, this is wonderful.

**Michael:** After that eye-opening conversation with Barbara and Dr. DeBell about civic engagement, I keep coming back to something that they both emphasized, that none of this happens in isolation. Students don't just magically become engaged citizens on their own. And there's actually some really compelling research backing this up. The Colorado Department of Education has been studying family-school community partnerships for years now, and what they've found is pretty remarkable. When families, schools, and communities work together effectively, it makes a real difference – better student outcomes, closing achievement gaps, and improved graduation rates.

**Greg:** And Michael, another study out of the Harvard Graduate School of Education has documented that these partnerships don't just help students, they actually strengthen all the partners involved. Schools get better, community organizations become more effective, and everyone benefits. The challenge though, and this is where it gets real, is that most people agree collaboration is important, but actually making it work, that's the hard part. It's one thing to say it takes a village, but it's another thing entirely to figure out how to get that village working together.

**Michael:** True. I think we all recognize that students need more than just good schools. They need safe places to go after school. They need mentors. They need opportunities to contribute and they need to see connections between what they're learning and the world around them.

So join us next episode of Beyond the Bell. We'll be talking with two people who are doing this very work. Bruce LeClair runs the Boys and Girls Club of the Southern Ute Indian Tribe and he just received national recognition for his work.

Also joining us is Elliot Baglini, the Work-Based Learning and Intern Coordinator at Animas High School.

**Greg:** So join us for It Takes a Village as we explore how to move beyond the buzzwords and actually build the partnerships that help young people thrive.

**Michael:** See you then.