

Museum on Main Street, Smithsonian Institution

Charlotte: Working to Improve Civil Discourse, Florida

As told by Charlotte

Bartow, Florida

Introduction: In early 2020 (just weeks before the pandemic), Smithsonian staff and their storytelling partners at the Peale, Baltimore, traveled to multiple states in the U.S. to ask residents of those states about voting experiences, the current state of American democracy, what issues brought them to the polls, how they made a difference in their communities, and what Americans' civic responsibilities were, among other complex questions.

Story Narrative:

Charlotte: As a teenager, the issues that I face in my community are a tad different from those of adults. We constantly fight with the issue that we don't feel that we're totally heard, but social media has pushed this along and we found a way to contribute our voice to society in a way that's heard equally. And we can have civilized discussions about very large topics such as abortion or marijuana or anything controversial that really gets our blood boiling.

And we've found a way that we can channel our voice into something that's bigger than us. The community of teenagers in general is paving the way for the future of America and we're starting to have those discussions earlier, which is very important. And as we develop with each other, we also develop our ideas and our identity as individuals.

Our community has found a way to have civil discussions with one another, and we've developed that over time. I've been speaking with my peers about politics since middle school. It's just something that has come naturally with news can be heard in seconds, and it's on our phones and we see it walking down the hallway, so why wouldn't we discuss it? And even if you don't come from a family that's particularly affluent in politics, you have access to this information and you have a way to form your own opinion, and that develops as you grow.

So even if adults aren't exactly listening or if we can't really convince our parents to hear our point of view, because of all the tension we've seen through people older than us, we've realized that it's more important to work as a community and actually be open-minded and hear what our peers think of one another and what they think of our ideas in a civil way before we go about fighting or making an argumentative standpoint. It's more of debating ideas and not the person that's presenting the idea.

I think the word polarization is used very heavily in media and very heavily in our country in general. A lot of people you'll hear just be like, "Oh, our country is so torn apart right now.

We're so polarized. We don't listen to one another." And through my experience with my community, that's not really the case because, like I've stated earlier, the teenagers in my community, we've seen that and we're like, "We're going to have no part in that. There's no reason why we should be polarized or torn apart." And I found that the young people are actually very open-minded to different sides. Whether you're conservative or liberal, it doesn't matter. We've found a way where we can be civil about things, and that's something we've seen lacking in generations before.

So as we progress through time and as we progress as young voters and political activists, we strive for open mindedness and really coming together with what America stood for in the first place, which is just this melting pot of ideas and hope for the future, and going back to that and remembering why we were founded, the way we were founded, and how we can continue that legacy as we grow and build.

Asset ID: 2022.37.05.a-b

Museum on Main Street, Smithsonian Institution