

POLITICS

'Have a soda with someone you disagree with.' Local Dems and Republicans ask next generation to find common ground

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After a divisive presidential election, a former president who refused to concede and a riot at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., people across the country have wondered what, if anything, can unite the country, or even whether the country should unite at all.

The quest for unity brought local Democrats and Republicans to the auditorium of St. Xavier High School in Springfield Township in suburban Cincinnati.

They asked the next generation to do a better job of political discourse than the current generation.

"It's really important to remember there were days it wasn't like this," Hamilton County Prosecutor Joe Deters, a Republican, told the couple dozen high school students and parents assembled for St. X's "I Beg to Differ" panel discussion.

"If you take anything home tonight from me, there are crazy people on the left. There are crazy people on right. The technology has outraced common sense."

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Deters joined Cincinnati Mayor John Cranley, city councilmembers Jan-Michele Lemon Kearny and Betsy Sundermann, and several other Democratic and Republican leaders to talk about how to have a civil public debate today. Many of them were St. X alumni.

At least for a night, Republicans and Democrats laughed with each other on stage. St. X grads Deters, a Republican, and former state Senator Eric Kearney, a Democrat, joked whose class was smarter.

Social media took the brunt of the blame for the widening divide in the country among the panel. Lemon Kearney, a Democratic member of Cincinnati City Council, urged students to be better than previous generations on the Internet.

"Your generation has to be the generation to put a stop to that and say we are going to be civil," she said. "When it's cruel, it's going too far."

They urged the students in the auditorium and watching via live stream to socialize with people of different political beliefs. Cranley, Cincinnati's Democratic mayor, complimented Deters and other Republicans on the stage for being able to work together.

"It's hard to be nasty with someone you worked with on something good," Cranley said.

Sundermann, a Republican member of Cincinnati City Council, is married to a Democrat.

"I went all-in on understanding the other side and I married a Democrat," Sundermann said. "Obviously I love my husband even though he has crazy political ideas."

Ohio Supreme Court Justice Pat Fischer, a Republican on the panel, gave the students some advice.

"I beg you have a soda with someone you disagree with," Fischer said.

The message seemed to be received by some of the students. St. Xavier senior Allen Teddy Ford, 17, of Sharonville said he's glad to hear the older generation has hope for the future.

"I want to make sure that we all as a generation, as my generation, can help with the problems that we're seeing today, to fix the problems that we're seeing today," Ford said. "And I don't want to let them down."