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[00:00:27] **Speaker 1** Following the assassination of conservative influencer Charlie Kirk, dozens of people across the country have lost their jobs over social media comments they made in reaction. In Eau Claire, Republican Congressman Derek Van Orden threatened to pull federal funding going to the city over comments two council members made online, saying they celebrated Kirk's death. The council members reject that accusation. Political discourse, especially online and in social media, even before Kirk's assassination, has been beyond toxic. But how to agree to disagree and talk about it? Bridge Eau Claire is a chapter of Bridge USA, which brings college students of different persuasions together to discuss polarizing topics. UW Eau Clair political science professor, Adam Kunt, is the group's faculty advisor. And professor, thanks a lot for being here.

[00:01:20] **Speaker 2** Thanks for having me.

[00:01:21] **Speaker 1** So do you suppose that your next session you will be discussing Charlie Kirk?

[00:01:26] **Speaker 2** I believe the students actually already have. They've had their first session and they have discussed openly about what their views are on the event. And I believe that students are gonna have an ongoing conversation about it probably throughout the year.

[00:01:42] **Speaker 1** What kinds of other topics has Bridge Eau Claire engaged on?

[00:01:47] **Speaker 2** So, Bridge Eau Claire is basically what I would describe as the anti-debate club. The goal of the club is basically to be a conversation club. It's less about winning an argument. It's more about trying to discuss and understand one another in terms of our perspectives on politics. Culture, religious backgrounds, etc. And so the topics can be far-reaching. It can be anything from is a hot dog a sandwich all the way up to should the United States disassociate from Israel. So those those kinds of topics can rife with lots of different opinions and the goal behind any bridge meeting is basically to bring people from all different perspectives into a room, feel empowered to be able to share your opinions. And to try to understand one another. The goal is not to convince. The goal's not to win. The goal to basically try to get students listening to one another, understanding in a very sincere and genuine way, and then going away and kind of processing that for your own beliefs.

[00:02:49] **Speaker 1** So what are the ground rules? What are the mechanics of these discussions? How do you start?

[00:02:56] **Speaker 2** Yeah, so that's been a learning experience. This took off a couple years ago when we decided after an event that was run by the Menard Center for Constitutional Studies, which is what I'm affiliated with on campus, that we wanted to found a club like this. This is less about free speech, which certainly a right that every American citizen has. This is more about how do I exercise my free speech in responsible ways and to allow other people to express those free speech rights. Um, and so the ground rules are very much, um, first of all, guided by the national organization, um it's there's, there's a whole handbook that the students go through to kind of figure out how they would bring up a topic. Um, there is moderating time. There is a club president. There are people that are in charge for picking the topics themselves. But then within the local organizations, there's a lot of adaptability. And Eau Claire students are very polite students that got, you know, Wisconsin nice. And so I think that they add this extra layer of kind of wanting to build a community despite political differences. And I have to admire the Gen Z students because I think they are looking for ways to build that kind of social connection in a world that's mostly driven by algorithms.

[00:04:09] **Speaker 1** So how, to that, how eager have you found students to engage in actual civil discussion with this generation possibly craving real connections?

[00:04:22] **Speaker 2** Yeah, I think so I've watched I've been teaching for about 10 years in different capacities and I've watched as the Gen Z population has started to mature and it's interesting we're about three years away from having our first Gen Alpha student in a college which makes me feel so old but the the Gen z students are absolutely looking for ways to connect but there's this feeling among them that they don't really know how to connect. There's this kind of used to being targeted or trolled online. They're scared to be able to express their opinions. And so clubs like Bridge are a great way for them to learn, you know, those social skills in a real way and to do so in a closed environment where they don't feel like they're going to get piled on or misunderstood or have something screenshotted and taken out of context.

[00:05:12] **Speaker 1** Circling back to Charlie Kirk and the aftermath of his assassination, do you sense a chilling effect on freedom of expression with people across the country right now?

[00:05:22] **Speaker 2** I think that there is a huge divide right now over the terms of free speech. I think for many Americans, if you ask them on Pew Research questions, for instance, it's over a 90 percent threshold that Americans cherish the value of free-speech. I think the challenge that we always have, though, is what does that mean when it's the other person expressing it? Everybody wants free speech for themselves. Query as to whether or not we're going to allow free speech for others. There are, of course, categories of speech that are not protected. We know what those are, incitement, obscenity, et cetera. But for the most part, our First Amendment protects us. It gives us the chance to be able to express ourselves, and especially on university campuses. That means both Republican as well as Democratic students. And so, I think that universities have a real opportunity right now to show that, you know, in a pluralist society where people come with multiple beliefs, the university can be a place where people express themselves and do so in ways that are not going to be silencing to them. I wish that we could replicate that in the rest of the public sphere. I wish we could help other Americans after college or in other areas of life recognize that that is. Really the lifeblood of what we're doing in our American democracy.

[00:06:42] **Speaker 1** Indeed. Professor Adam Kuhns, thanks very much.

[00:06:45] **Speaker 2** Thank you for having me.

[00:06:49] **Speaker 1** That was great.

[00:06:52] **Speaker 2** Thank you. I appreciate it.

[00:06:53] **Speaker 1** We'd love to reach out to you again.

[00:06:56] **Speaker 2** Yeah, yeah, I'd love to chat again.

[00:06:57] **Speaker 1** Great, thank you.

[00:06:59] **Speaker 2** All right. Well, thank you very much. I guess I'll drop off. Okay, thanks, Marissa.