

# Finding common ground in uncommon times

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“Brother against brother” is often used to describe the American Civil War and its impact within families. Society now finds itself the most divided it has been since that dark period.

Our national family seems to be ripping apart, and actual families are estranged over politics. How can we heal our national family, and in some cases, our personal families?



Matt Hausman

In late 2016, a group decided to attempt healing our national family as they would a typical family on the brink. One weekend in Ohio, a mix of Donald Trump supporters and Hillary Clinton supporters came together for a workshop based on concepts used in marriage and family counseling.

While no one's political views were changed, their views of each other were profoundly impacted. Friendships were formed, and a national grassroots organization was born.

Braver Angels was named in honor of Lincoln's call for us to heed the “better angels of our nature.” Despite its “angelic” name, the mostly volunteer-led organization has no religious affiliation and is nonpartisan. Nor does it advocate for any specific policies, instead only seeking to foster better understanding between Americans and bridge the partisan divide.

Since 2016, Braver Angels has hosted workshops and debates, testified before Congress, held national conventions and grown to more than 10,000 members nationwide.

That number includes a group of Champaign County residents who began meeting in early 2021 and formed the Braver Angels Alliance of East-Central Illinois, the first in-person “alliance” (local chapter) in Illinois. Our local mix of “blues” and “reds” had each previously participated in a Braver Angels event or signed up with the national organization.

“Over the years, I noticed that political conversation was becoming increasingly acrimonious and divisive. I heard about Braver Angels, so I signed up for an online workshop on skills for bridging the divide,” explained early member Susan Thomas, who recently finished her term as “red” co-chair.

She joined “because I wanted to continue practicing the skills I learned in the workshop and also wanted to be a part of doing something constructive for our community and country.”

Today’s leaders ought to ask themselves: What would President Abraham Lincoln do? That’s the 16th president at the Springfield museum that bears his name.

We spent over a year getting to know one another, building depolarizing skills, and having passionate, yet respectful, debates about difficult topics such as abortion and gun control.

Eventually, our alliance felt confident in taking our message public. In October 2022, we hosted a roundtable of 12 local community leaders, representing organizations leaning left, right and center, at the Champaign Public Library. These leaders expressed to one another how their organizations’ missions have become more difficult in such divided times.

In February 2023, partnering with the University of Illinois, we hosted a town hall discussion with Bill Doherty, co-founder of Braver Angels, and UI professors Colleen Murphy, Scott Althaus and Ken Salo. More than 200 area residents came to the I Hotel to hear this discussion on polarization, demonstrating our community’s desire for something better.

Last June, we hosted a Constituent Conversation with state Sen. Paul Faraci, D-Champaign, and then-state Rep. Mike Marron, R-Fithian. A diverse group of about 60 community members came to Rantoul Township High School to discuss local workforce development with one another and their elected representatives. Participants expressed how they want these conversations to continue.

To close out 2023, UI Professor Ilana Redstone spoke with close to 50 people about “The Certainty Trap,” which can lead to animosity between people of differing viewpoints.

Former “blue” co-chair and current Braver Angels ambassador Jim Mayer is optimistic. “Getting involved in the mission and activities of the group has given me renewed hope for the future of our nation — and I now have many new friends who enrich my life with

their diverse views, and their love of this unique democracy we call the United States of America.”

Given that optimism, the positive community response and the growth of our local alliance, Braver Angels will maintain a public presence during yet another intense election year.

To help our efforts at improving political discourse in East Central Illinois, The News-Gazette has graciously offered us a regular column. Rotating members of the alliance will work together to write Braver Conversations every two weeks.

Looking ahead, it is important to reiterate that Braver Angels does not advocate for any policies or candidates. Instead, our role is to facilitate civil discourse and mutual respect.

Sometimes, our events can lead to shared policy ideas, but it is then up to citizens, other organizations, and community leaders to independently advocate for and implement any such ideas.

Also note that it took our country decades to become so divided, and it will take years of hard work to heal. Braver Angels simply hopes to be one part of a larger movement bringing Americans together.

Hopefully, Braver Conversations will further that cause in East Central Illinois by sharing inspirational stories of commonality discovered between people of different opinions, highlighting examples of public figures demonstrating civility, and having conversations with the community by discussing topics and questions submitted by readers. All with a local focus.

Most importantly, we want to share ideas and actionable tips that can help you better engage with people you may disagree with in your life. This is the core mission of Braver Angels.

In that spirit, we will conclude this inaugural edition of Braver Conversations with a tip that you can use immediately. It is also a guiding principle for Braver Angels: when interacting with others, instead of trying to convince them of something, seek to understand them and their thoughts.

This is not a novel concept. Stephen Covey writes of it in “Seven Habits of Highly Effective People,” and it is in the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi: “seek to understand, before being understood.” This approach underlies all of what Braver Angels does, and it can help you in many of your everyday personal interactions.

It is also exemplified by a lesser-known, yet insightful, Lincoln quote: “I do not like that man. I must get to know him better.”

This is the first installment of a [series](#) of “Braver Conversations” columns, authored by local Braver Angels members and appearing every two weeks in Town Hall. Matt Hausman is the organization’s Illinois red state coordinator and founding member of its East Central Illinois alliance.

Braver Angels is a national organization dedicated to bringing Americans together to bridge the partisan divide, with a local presence in East Central Illinois. Readers are encouraged to join these Braver Conversations and submit questions or topics they want to see addressed by local members. Learn more and submit questions by going to the state website at [IL.braverangels.org](http://IL.braverangels.org).