

Opponents, not enemies: Leading the way toward civility

Oz Guinness told attendees of the Iowa Prayer Breakfast April 2 that true liberty requires a *civil* public square, a society where people are free to hold and speak their conscience without threat of coercion or attack.

Which makes what happened on the campus of Drake University in Des Moines only one hour later either a remarkable coincidence or a Divine appointment.

On a beautiful spring morning when just about anyone would rather be out on the campus green than in class, three dozen students crammed into a crowded room on the third floor of Drake University's Howard Hall. The space overflowing, most of the students had to sit on the floor.

They came to hear about an unlikely friendship and a series of civil discussions between two people who stand as public opponents on some of the day's most heated issues, yet who also insist they are *not* "enemies."



Donna Red Wing has been an advocate and activist for LGBT causes for 30 years and today is executive director of One Iowa, the state's leading lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) organization.

Bob Vander Plaats is the president and CEO of The FAMILY LEADER, a Christian organization with a mission to strengthen families and a reputation for opposing same-sex marriage.

As leaders in their respective causes, the news media often quotes Vander Plaats and Red Wing as diametrically opposed voices in news reports on marriage and LGBT issues.

Yet in 2013, Red Wing was challenged by the death of a friend who exemplified reconciliation to attempt a conversation with the very person she would be most likely to call an "enemy."

"Who's the person who would be the most difficult to reach out to?" Red Wing asked herself. "I emailed Bob."

Thus began the oddest of friendships, a relationship so out of the ordinary in today's environment of partisan bickering and Internet flame wars that Des Moines Register's Rekha Basu

wrote a story about the relationship she said “left me nearly speechless.”

Watch video of Donna and Bob telling Drake students about their first, uncertain meeting:

But how do you forge a respectful friendship and civil dialogue when you disagree vehemently?

That was the question students of Drake Prof. Carol Spaulding-Kruse and her class, “Talking with the Enemy: Dialogue in a Polarized Age,” were asking.

“The first thing Donna and I did, I wanted to learn more about who Donna is as a person. She wanted to know, who is Bob as a person?” Vander Plaats explained. “In the media today, people are made into polar opposites, but who *are* you? Understand, I care deeply about the issue, but I care deeply about you. ... I think it’s OK to model that. You can be passionate about issues without tearing each other down.”

“We made an agreement early on that nothing we did in those private, quiet conversations would change what One Iowa cared about or what The FAMIly LEADER cared about,” Red Wing added, “but we did change how we as organizations interacted. For example, nothing goes out of One Iowa that will denigrate human beings, individuals at The FAMIly LEADER, we’re very careful about that. And we’ve noticed The FAMIly LEADER doesn’t attack Donna Red Wing.

“I don’t see us ‘enemies,’” Red Wing continued. “We’re political ‘opponents.’ Our understanding of social justice is very different. But if all that happens in what we do is that our organizations took a civil tone, it doesn’t diminish the passion of our work. It doesn’t diminish what The FAMIly LEADER does.”

“Some of my best conversations, bar none, are with people who

disagree with me," Vander Plaats stressed. "You can sing to the choir all day long, and really, what did you get out of it? ... I like to have intellectual conversation, and quite frankly, no matter where you're at on the issues of the day, our country would benefit from civil dialogue and discussion, intellectual conversation. Not emotions, signs and pointing fingers – we've had enough of that."

In fact, Bob and Donna learned in time there's more to one another than their respective causes and more to their relationship than merely argument.

"It's developing a better understanding of Donna's perspective and Donna's understanding of my perspective," Vander Plaats said. "I think we would both be disingenuous if we [denied], 'Boy would I love to have Donna come on over to my side and say [she] was wrong,' ... and she'd like for me to do that [too], but if you go in with that, you're going to be disappointed a lot."

The pair told Drake students how learning to see one another as people, not just ideological punching bags, led to a civil discourse that even included defending one another.

When an LGBTQ conference for youth turned Vander Plaats into a comic book villain, for example, Red Wing addressed it with the publisher. When a national radio host called Red Wing a "thug" and a "mob boss," Bob emailed Donna that day, saying, "You are not a thug, and I'm going to talk to [the host]."

"That meant the world to me," Donna said.

"Donna knows that genuinely I love her," Vander Plaats told the students, while Red Wing nodded her agreement. "It sounds odd, but I do. I love Donna, and she knows I would do anything for her. And I think she would do the same for me. And we also know that we vehemently, fundamentally, foundationally disagree on some key issues to both of us."

And while their coffee-shop conversations are intentionally quiet and private, Vander Plaats and Red Wing are willing to talk openly about this unusual path they've forged, in large part, because true civil dialogue is both too rare and desperately needed in America.

"Iowa for whatever reason is in the crosshairs of the world's attention, whether we like it or not because of this presidential thing," Vander Plaats said. "But it may be a good way for Iowa to model how to have civil dialogue on big issues, because our country could really use that today."

"In this place and this time, here in Iowa, we get to model how those conversations happen," Red Wing added. "That doesn't mean if there were a bill to eradicate same-gender marriage in Iowa [One Iowa] wouldn't be out there fighting with everything we have."

"Freedom is tough. Freedom is not easy," Vander Plaats said. "In some countries you can think whatever you want, you can believe whatever you want, as long as you don't say it. That's not this country. ... So you have to be willing to engage in these kinds of dialogues if you really want to have a civil, free society."

*The FAMiLY LEADER is committed not only to leading the way on some of our culture's biggest issues, but also setting the example of how to engage in these discussions with civility and respect. Would you consider making a donation to The FAMiLY LEADER today? [**If so, click here.**](#)*