



A Reasons to be Cheerful project

Bridging Divides: Glenn Stanton and Sheila Kloefkorn (Braver Angels)

She's a gay rights activist. He's an evangelical Christian. They explain why "impossible" friendships can be our most valuable.

Sheila Kloefkorn: I think we ended up sitting together at a meeting, we went around the table doing introductions and I was just impressed by Glenn. He's a captivating person, very engaging, and we started talking about marriage right off the bat.

So we were sitting across the room from each other at the initial meeting, and I told the story of how in 2013 I had had a non-legal wedding at the Botanical Gardens in Phoenix and it was a beautiful ceremony with 170 people of our friends and it was just the most magical fun evening that I can ever remember and so much love, so much celebration that evening at our wedding. And then we went to a hotel in Scottsdale near where the botanical gardens are — we were both in our wedding



Photo Courtesy of Sheila Kloefkorn

dresses — and I had a piece of paper that proved we had a suite on reserve that had already been paid for. But the folks at the desk couldn't seem to find a room for us, and they were pretty unfriendly. It took a couple of hours to get a room there which kind of marred the evening, and so to be denied service on this most special day, our wedding day, was really heartbreaking.



Glenn Stanton: And so I'm the guy across the table — the guy from Focus on the Family — so, you know, people are expecting particular things of me. And I responded to her story in such a way, and I just said, 'I find that absolutely unbelievable that anybody would treat you that way.' And, you know, there was sort of surprise in the room like, 'Well, gosh, aren't you against this?' And it allowed me the opportunity to go, 'Yes, I'm against this. But in this situation, there are these nuances that are very, very important.'

And I think what happened in the room was like, 'OK, gosh, these are complex issues.' It doesn't necessarily mean this hate versus love and that these issues are much, much more complex than that. And I mean, I really connected humanly with Sheila and her story, not compromising anything that I believe.

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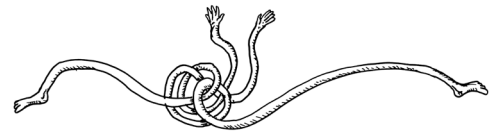


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But when you bring that human angle into it, it doesn't mean that people have to switch their positions. But we can find out that, yes, these issues are more complex and more multilayered than we tend to assume that they are. And even just the way that Sheila responded to me, to my response was like I thought I mean, I remember thinking, wow, she's a very interesting individual and somebody that I would like to get to know more.

SK: Glenn, he just heard that story and he really was touched by it and that meant a lot to me.

SS: I'm curious, you know, I think what some people might be feeling is: "how is this possible?" I mean, it almost feels unfathomable, especially in the context of our culture. Is this a PR stunt, or is this an actual friendship and how does that work? Do you push away each other's ideologies that you don't agree with? Are you trying to move each other closer to towards your own? Are there certain topics you avoid completely? Like, how are you able to be in right relationship with each other? How is that possible?



SK: I don't think it was hard with Glenn because we just hit it off right away. But I think in general, it's important for me to be connected with other people. I am a blue Democrat in a red state, I grew up in Wyoming, which is a very red state and I was deathly afraid of coming out as gay. I was pretty confident growing up that if I had come out, that I would be killed, and four years after I'd gone to the very same college a young man was killed for being gay. He was drug out into a pasture and tied to a fence and beaten within an inch of his life. Matthew Shepard gave his life for being who he was and that's the environment

that I grew up in. So my whole life I've felt like I don't I have the luxury of living in a bubble with people who believe what I believe. I've had to always make inroads and connections with other people and I think my life has been great because of that.



Photo Courtesy of Glenn Stanton

GS: Yeah, and I mean, in many ways, I mean, I live in a bubble, in a particular bubble, but I also speak on college campuses, secular college campuses, not, you know

Christian college campuses. So I'm interacting with people who are very different than I am and oftentimes extremely hostile, extremely hostile. So I know what it's like to be treated hostilely. But I also know what it's like to try to desire for myself to be heard and listened to and ask me tough questions, ask me penetrating questions, but honest questions, seeking questions. And I try to do the same with somebody that I disagree with.

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SS: I'm wondering, how does language play into this division that we're experiencing in our culture, specifically with marriage as an example or anything that you both have had conversations about?

GS: You know, you mentioned equality and, you know, for me, being an opponent of same-sex marriage and when the term developed and started being used — 'marriage equality' — I mean, I immediately reacted so negatively to that because I knew that the strategy of that word, you know, OK, I'll raise my hand: I'm the guy that's against equality. You know, if we want to put it in those terms, like, no, that's just not fair.

It's a tricky thing when certain words are applied to things that back your opponent into an undesirable corner. And I think that's something that's important for all of us to realize is the way I'm framing the debate, putting my opponent in a just absolutely untenable light. And if that's the case, then we have to think, well, there may be a problem with my framing of it. And I think that's important. So, to try to use language that does honor, if you will, to your opponent in the very best way that it can. Because words are, words are loaded, and we have to ask ourselves: what am I loading these words up with? And what loaded angles am I maybe not aware of that makes my friend on the other side feel uncomfortable or, not devalued, but made to be the bad person?

SK: In another meeting, I think it was the next year after we'd gotten together and become friends, we were standing off in a corner and a couple of the guys and Glenn were talking about the same-sex marriage ruling that happened in 2014 and they were talking about how the rainbow flag had been projected onto the White House. And they were really disturbed and they felt like "oh my gosh, that Whitehouse is for all of us" and by projecting the rainbow flag onto the White House, it meant that it wasn't theirs. And I was so taken aback because I felt like it was the first time that the White House was mine and that



Obama White House / Flickr (CC BY-NC 2.0)

I was a first-class citizen, not a second-class citizen. And so we had equally powerful experiences of that day, and it was great to find out that the other person felt that strongly about the White House and also to understand that it could be hurtful for something like that to happen. So while I continue to celebrate what that happened, I can certainly understand why they felt so strongly about it, because I feel like the White House is mine too and it should be.

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SS: And so, I'm curious — why do you think this is important? Why do you think it's important for us to have this conversation and to demonstrate that it is possible and to encourage others to have the courage and to be hopeful about making connections across differences?



Photo Courtesy of Sheila Kloefkorn and Glenn Stanton

GS: And I would first start by saying, I mean, because it involves human to human, I mean, there's little that's more important than that. You know, of the dignity, the importance, the significance of that person right there that you're interacting with. How can I honor them? How can I learn more about them? How can I connect with them? And that I have the privilege to get to do that, you know, to learn from somebody else's story.

Sheila: I'm reminded of my mom is or was a pastor's wife and somebody who worked tirelessly for the homeless and a social worker, somebody who is really incredible in my life. And she always used to say "Is it more important for you to be right or is the relationship more important?" And she definitely taught me that the relationship is more important and I believe that in everything that I do. That my beliefs and being right in those beliefs are deeply held. But at the end of the day, the relationships that I have in my life are the things that make my life magical.