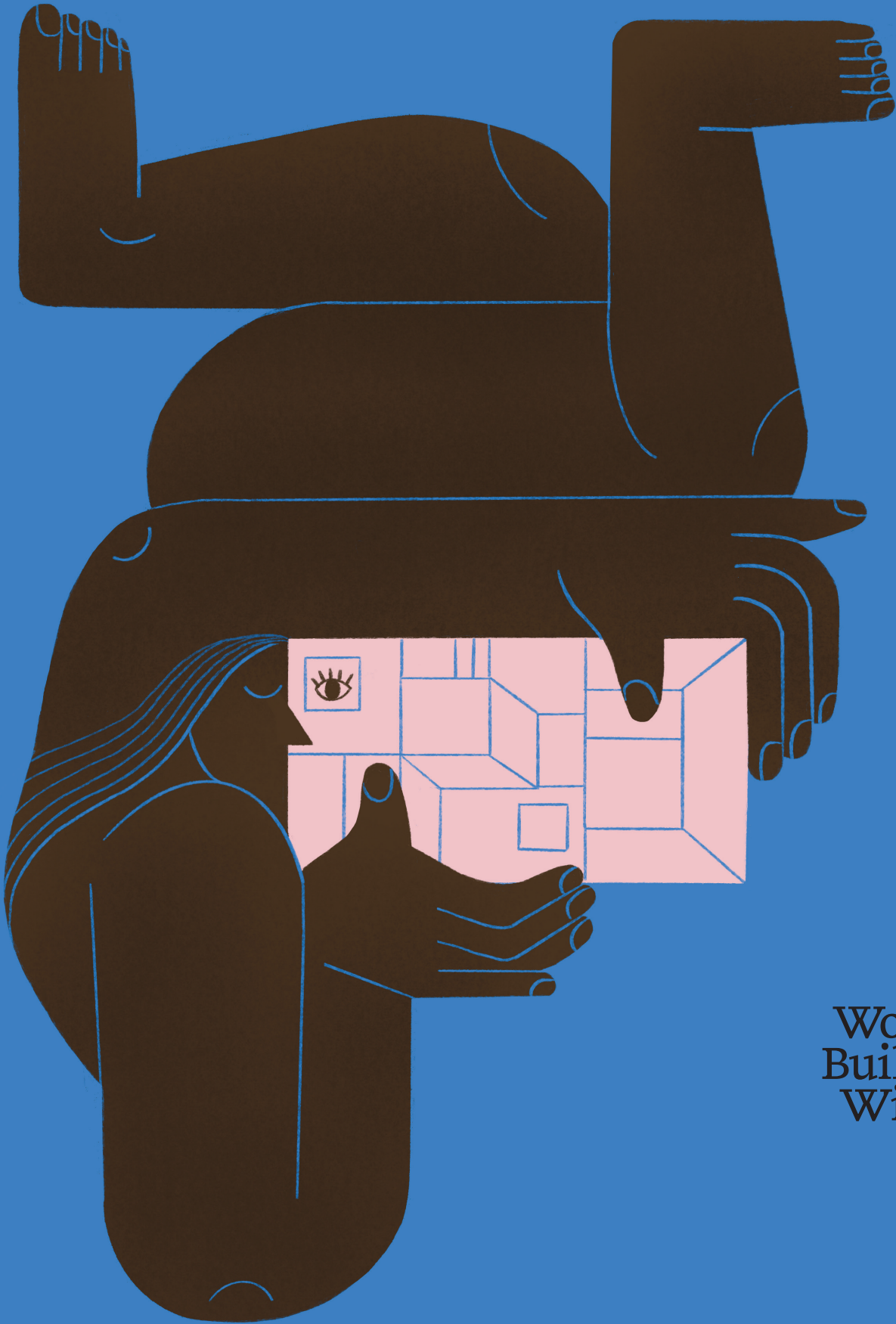


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“You’re Not as Alone in Your Beliefs as You Imagined”

FACULTY
FEATURE

BY
JULIAN K.
BRAXTON

In an age marked by polarization, partisanship, and tribalism, helping students cultivate the skills to engage in meaningful, open dialogue has never been more essential. Students today must navigate a world where differing viewpoints are often met with hostility rather than openness; social media silos, culture wars, and the pressures of conformity often discourage the kind of honest, curious conversations that foster understanding and connection.

As a history teacher and community engagement leader, I see firsthand how urgently young people need the tools to listen with empathy and speak with courage. Inspired by thought leaders and our own students—who often model the power of respectful exchange—Winsor faculty strive to create spaces where civil discourse can thrive. In the past few years, we have been fortunate to host writers and scholars who focus on civil discourse and the ways we connect meaningfully with others.

Mónica Guzmán, last year’s faculty and parent forum speaker and author of *I Never Thought of It That Way: How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times*, observed: “When you’re surrounded by people who reflect the same basic set of perspectives, you’ll find it harder to grasp any others. Not because you’re incapable of grasping them, but simply because you’re less likely to be given the chance.”

In 2024, Dr. Carol Gilligan, a feminist, ethicist, and psychologist well known for her work on ethical community and ethical relationships, came to Winsor as our commencement speaker. Her powerful charge is at the heart of my work promoting civil discourse: “Notice what happens when you replace judgment with curiosity.”

During last year’s Community Curriculum Day, **ANYA WEERAPANA ’25** shared this compelling reflection with our community: “Listen to different viewpoints because, after all, you’re not obligated to embrace them. From them, you might find that others’ political views are more nuanced and varied than you once thought. From them, you might discover you’re not as alone in your beliefs as you imagined.”

Our challenge as educators, parents, and community members to “bridge divides” and

build empathy and connections is more urgent and complex than at any time in recent memory. I see it as my calling to help students break down these silos and empower them to engage openly with diverse perspectives. One way I have been able to put these ideas into practice is in my senior elective, Politics of Identity. On the following spread is a reprint of an article I co-authored with Mr. Brad Faulhaber from Sidney High School in Montana, which appeared in *The Boston Globe* last year.

Right: Julian Braxton and Brad Faulhaber at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. in July 2023. Below: Braxton running the annual scream tunnel on the first day of school



THE WINSOR COMMUNITY HAS THOUGHTS

Across disciplines, my colleagues cultivate spaces where students learn to engage thoughtfully with differing perspectives. Whether through literature, science, world languages, or visual and performing arts, these teachers model what it means to foster dialogue rooted in respect, curiosity, and intellectual honesty. The quotes below highlight some of the ways they encourage meaningful exchange—even, and especially, when ideas clash.



"In art history, students create their own personal canon of art history, write a persuasive paragraph, and have a class discussion about the works that they include in their canon—often from historically marginalized artists—and why they chose them. In Intellectual Property and the Law, students learn to take a side on an issue (even if they don't believe it), debate and make a persuasive argument about it. They take on other debates in art history: What is art? Is this art? Was Marcel Duchamp an artist or con artist? Are posthumously cast Rodins authentic works of art? And in art classes, we teach students how to interact with each other in group critiques, how to have dialogue and meaningful exchange even if everyone doesn't 'like' the same thing."

Sara Macaulay
Visual Arts Department Head and Eleanor Thomas Nelson '49 Chair in Fine Arts



The Upper School Ethics Club discusses contemporary ethical issues during their lunch meeting each cycle and then participates in the Regional Ethics Bowl Competition at Tufts every February. The National High School Ethics Bowl (NHSEB) promotes respectful, supportive, and rigorous discussion of ethics among thousands of high school students nationwide.

Courtney Jackson
English Department Head



In Class I History, we had a discussion about British colonists declaring independence from Great Britain, with students presenting arguments of patriots and loyalists in a class debate. They were assigned their roles randomly after they studied and discussed arguments of both sides.

Ivana Brown
History Faculty



In AP Macro at the start of the year, we engage in a debate about whether we should raise the minimum wage in Massachusetts. In U.S. History we have a variety of debates—from federalist vs. antifederalist to whether we should pass the Equal Rights Amendment.

Ann-Marie Holland
History Faculty



In Class III English, especially when we are reading the novel *The Outsiders*, students participate in a four-corners agree/disagree practice about once a week. This entails a statement such as "Nobody is all bad or all good." Then students go to one of the four corners of the classroom labeled Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree. Once there, students discuss why they are standing where they are, and we hear thoughts from all corners. It is a space for students to voice their opinions, see how others might think differently, and have a civil discourse. In the end, in some sense, everyone agrees with what others say—it's really a matter of interpretation of the words in the statement. It's a fun and important activity for this age group.

Laura Beebe
English Faculty



In AP Spanish, students engage in a debate over the best and most fair outcome for Puerto Rico's future. After exploring in depth the history of the extraordinary status of Puerto Rico as an "associated free state" of the U.S., the students are divided in three groups that resemble three different and current political positions among most Puerto Rican residents. Students engage in a two-day-long debate in small groups. By presenting their research, arguing for their specific point of view, listening to the point of view of the other two sides, and imagining the best and most fair long-term solution for Puerto Rican residents, the students not only practice advanced grammatical concepts, extensive multidisciplinary vocabulary, and complex communicative functions, but also engage in a deep dive into Puerto Rican-American relations and history.

Laura Bravo
World Languages Faculty



In Class III Science, we have our students engage in an activity called the "Climate Change Mixer." It is a part of a book called *A People's Curriculum for the Earth*, which was developed by teachers to address complex issues related to climate change. Students are assigned a particular role and a climate change story to tell. The characters are people who live in different regions of the world and have all been affected by climate change in some way. The activity is set up as a "meet and greet" where students share their stories and they learn about the impacts of climate change in different communities. In our discussion afterwards, we unpack the following quote: "We are all affected by climate change, but we're not all affected equally, and we're not equally responsible for its causes." It is a powerful lesson on the impacts of climate change and the power of storytelling. Students are always surprised by how some people benefit—or will benefit—from climate change. You can learn a lot from listening to others about how our world has changed and is changing.

Theresa Evenson
Science Department Head

The Boston Globe

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Our students in Boston and Montana speak to one another and learn how to disagree

Regular Zoom calls help high schoolers make sense of America's cultural and political divides.

By Julian K. Braxton and Brad Faulhaber

"Stand up if you have fired a gun."

"Stand up if there is an AR-15 in your home or you have fired one."

All the students from a class at Sidney High School in Montana stood up in response to one or both of these prompts.

The students at Winsor School in Boston who had posed the prompts were surprised or even shocked.

This exchange took place during the first of what will be many Zoom meetings between seniors at these two schools this year. Such discussions, which are in their seventh year now, are meant to help students in each place better understand our nation's cultural, political, and social divides.

The Winsor students, who are all in a senior elective called Politics of Identity, weren't asking their counterparts in Sidney about their guns in a judgmental way. They were curious about the differences in the values of their respective communities.

Indeed, guns are part of the culture in Sidney, and every student in the honors government class—taught by one of the authors of this article, Brad Faulhaber—has fired a gun. Most hunt, and many own or have fired AR-15s. This is not the case for the students in the Politics of Identity class at Winsor, taught by the other author of this article, Julian K. Braxton. The Sidney students generally reacted to the questions good-naturedly, with smiling bemusement—and later, almost all of them wrote about it as the part of the conversation that most surprised them.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY AS CIVICS TEACHERS

"If I insist on giving you my truth, and if I never stop to receive your truth in return, then there can be no truth between us." This observation from theologian Thomas Merton has guided the regular meetings between students at Sidney High and the Winsor School over the years.

At a time when political hostility among Americans has reached its highest level in decades, we believe that as civics teachers, it's our responsibility to expose students to ideas they may disagree with or find uncomfortable—and ways of being that may not align with their values and ideas.

This is not an easy task in an age of callout culture on the left and dog-whistle politics on the right. We hope the Sidney/Winsor partnership models what dialogue, collaboration, and even depolarization can look like.

Julian is an African American native New Yorker who has lived in Boston for over 25 years. Brad is a white Montanan, born and raised in the Treasure State. Despite living in different regions and holding starkly different political views, we met because of our shared passion for teaching history. We became good friends in 2009, when we both attended the Global Lincoln Symposium at Oxford University, which brought together educators and historians from around the world to examine Lincoln's legacy.

We don't avoid discussing our political views; we often engage in thoughtful conversation because we know that

doing so will strengthen our personal beliefs and opinions on the issues that matter most. We work hard to hear each other. In many ways, our work embodies the sentiment former president Barack Obama shared at the Democratic National Convention in August: "To make progress on the things we care about, the things that really affect people's lives, we need to remember that we've all got our blind spots and contradictions and prejudices; and that if we want to win over those who aren't yet ready to support our candidate, we need to listen to their concerns—and maybe learn something in the process. Our fellow citizens deserve the same grace we hope they'll extend to us."

Winsor is an all-girls, racially diverse private school for students in grades 5-12, located near the hub of Boston's education, research, health care, and biotechnology industries. Boston, as readers of this paper know, is in a metropolitan area of 5 million people, and the median home price in the area is nearly \$1 million. Sidney High has a more homogeneous student body. It's located in rural northeast Montana, in a town with a population of about 6,100 residents, where the median home price is \$251,700. Sidney is the wellspring of Montana's oil and gas industries. In the last presidential election, residents in Sidney High's ZIP code voted 80 percent for Donald Trump and 18 percent for Joe Biden, while residents in Winsor's ZIP code voted 91 percent for Biden and 7 percent for Trump.

You will find differences of opinion and a range of ideologies among

students in each of our schools. Our hometowns, however, mirror the large American divide. And over the years we have found that conversations about such subjects as abortion rights, affirmative action, and the death penalty require grace.

The students learn how to disagree—we actually "practice" disagreeing—and understand those with different opinions. The goal is not to convince, persuade, or "own" the other side but to understand them as fellow Americans, teenagers, and human beings. We aim to unite around our common humanity rather than see each other as enemies to be vanquished.

Before meeting, students at Winsor and Sidney often hold stereotypical views of one another: conservative Christians in Montana and the liberal elite in Boston. But by getting to know one another, students find many similarities — like a love for Taylor Swift, Drake, Kendrick Lamar, and "The Hunger Games." This helps them eventually understand they share concerns but differ on the appropriate way of arriving at solutions. Many of our students also indicate they would likely be friends with one another if they lived in the same community or attended the same school.

Issues like abortion rights and gun control have always been divisive topics in our classes. For example, most Winsor students who have participated in the Zoom dialogues favor some form of gun control, while nearly all the Sidney students oppose any restrictions. As one Sidney student mentioned during a class discussion, "Guns are a fundamental part of life in Montana. We use them for hunting. If guns were restricted, that would be a significant problem in Montana."

During another session, Winsor students expressed their passion for environmental justice, but they also gained important insights as Sidney students shared stories about parents whose livelihood depends on fracking. This is a perspective students don't encounter in the Boston bubble. Similarly, when Winsor students discussed the challenges of losing green spaces, Sidney students had "light bulb" moments, realizing the significance of issues they had read about but never directly experienced.

As one Winsor student observed about last year's collaboration, "Our exchange showed me what good civil discourse looks like. We never dehumanized [each other] or looked down on each other's views. We learned to listen, truly listen, not to convince but to understand. This collaboration was also important because it reminded me that political affiliation is merely one aspect of a person's identity."

This year, we're trying something new in our collaboration: our first election night Zoom session, when we will be processing results that may be out of our comfort zones.