

POBJFKHS Students Get Lessons in Political Civility

The Nonprofit Organization Braver Angels Holds First-in-the-State Workshops on Polite Discussions on Difficult Topics for High Schoolers

PLAINVIEW, NEW YORK (October 2022)—Seniors at Plainview-Old Bethpage John F. Kennedy High School were treated to a special series of workshops on October 12 when they learned techniques on holding polite political discussions. The workshops were led by the nonprofit Braver Angels, which seeks to bridge an increasing partisan divide across the country. Normally reserved for adults and college-age students, this was the first time Braver Angels has held these workshops for high school students in New York State. The workshops were spearheaded by Plainview-Old Bethpage Social Studies Chair Maria Carnesi.

“The fundamental skills we taught in these workshops were how to listen better and how to speak better, and there are a whole range of skills associated with those goals,” said Sara Silver, a volunteer moderator for Braver Angels. “The idea is to be respectful when trying to understand another person’s point of view. The process is helpful both for the political conversations that occur between the students and in conversations with family and friends once they go off to college.”

Braver Angels formed in the wake of the 2016 presidential election in response to what research indicates has been a growing trend of political polarization between liberals and conservatives in the United States. The group works to build trust among people with differing political views. “The one thing Braver Angels does not do is that we are not in the business of changing people’s views,” Ms. Silver said.

Students who attended the workshops said they gained valuable techniques on how to maintain polite conversation despite controversial topics. Some of those techniques included maintaining neutral facial expressions; paraphrasing or repeating a portion of the other person’s argument back to them to indicate that you are listening; responding with open-ended questions instead of definitive statements; and using so called “I-statements” to denote that your responses are personally held opinions.

“Everyone has their own viewpoints, and the way you construct your sentences, your statements and your entire claim can make a big difference in how a conversation goes,” said POBJFKHS senior Nicole Adelson. “Having effective listening skills and being open to hearing what others have to say is important, especially in politics today where we have these really heated conversations.”

“Everyone views facts differently, and we learned the importance of speaking respectfully, and understanding other people’s viewpoints and being able to contribute to a positive conversation instead of arguing,” said senior Alex Berko. “It’s important to understand that you’re not always going to change each other’s opinions.”

Workshop exercises included analyzing past conversations that had gone wrong for the students. “We talked about a conversation we had in the past and how we might have failed in that conversation because the other person was not listening to us,” said senior Paula Andrade. “We were trying to understand what was making us feel bad about those conversations and try not to repeat the same mistakes.”

“This was a wonderful opportunity for our students—especially given the vitriol that has grown in the conversations surrounding major issues today,” said POBJFKHS Principal James Murray. “I hope students are able to take this unique experience home with them when talking with family around the dinner table or among new friends when they head off to college. Now more than ever it is important to maintain civility in our society, and I look forward to seeing our students lead the way.”

For more information about the Plainview-Old Bethpage Central School District, please visit the District's website at www.pobschools.org. Exciting activities happening throughout the District and programs celebrating student achievement can also be found on the District's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/pobschools/>.



Volunteers from the nonprofit Braver Angels held a series of workshops for seniors at POBJFKHS on how to maintain polite conversations despite difficult topics.



Students interacted with the instructors. It was the first time Braver Angels has held these workshops in New York State for high school-aged students.



The students broke off into small groups to discuss past conversations that might have gone wrong for them and how they could have better approached them.



The students discussed techniques on ways to potentially diffuse volatile conversations.