



Undivide Us: A Film Screening and Civic Friendship to Bridge Our Divides

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The James Madison Institute has long been a champion of civic education and free thought, and a community partner to The Village Square in our mission to build civic health between people who don't look or think alike. We both believe that what truly makes democracy work is not our agreement, but our willingness to engage in respectful *disagreement*.

At its best, democracy is a conversation — a messy, sometimes frustrating, but ultimately rewarding conversation. When we listen with the intent to understand rather than to respond, we pave the way for genuine dialogue and meaningful change. A joint screening of the film *Undivide Us*, along with a visit and community conversation with filmmaker Kristi Kendall and

Mercatus Center Executive Director Ben Klutsey, was the perfect kickoff for The Village Square's 18th program season on Friday, September 6th.

We demonstrated in real time that institutions with different objectives can come together because they share a common goal: a stronger, more united community. It's about saying, "We're in this together," even when our ideas might differ. By collaborating for this event, we created a space where diverse people could see firsthand what respectful civic engagement looks like. It was a small but significant step toward rebuilding the kind of community that values and listens to every voice.

Here's the thing about listening: it's not passive. It's an active choice, especially when you're listening to someone who challenges everything you believe. This film—and our gathering—remind us to rekindle that essential and increasingly rare practice of genuine curiosity. Why does your neighbor hold a belief so different from yours? What's their story and what are the experiences that shaped them? When we listen with curiosity, we start to see the world through someone else's eyes. And that doesn't just broaden our understanding; it makes us better and more empathetic citizens.

To listen well means that we put aside our assumptions for a moment and open our minds to the possibility that there is more to the story. It requires humility — a recognition that no one person has all the answers. Listening with curiosity is a radical act in a world that often rewards the loudest voice rather than the most thoughtful one. The willingness to truly hear someone deeply can strengthen relationships and



ultimately transform communities.

The Village Square knows something about unlikely friendships. Over the years, we've seen people who never thought they'd get along sit at the same table, laugh over a meal, and walk away with a deeper sense of respect. These friendships across political divides aren't just feel-good stories—they're acts of revolution in an era where division is the norm.

Undivide Us showcased real-life examples of friendships that defy the stereotypes, and we hope this screening ignited some new connections of its own. Maybe our guests will think twice and decide to sit next to someone who voted differently than they did. Maybe they will end up sharing a conversation that leaves them seeing the world a little differently. That's the dream—to make the impossible seem possible, one handshake and one shared laugh at a time.

It's easy to feel like friendship across divides is a relic of the past, something from a time before social media algorithms and 24-hour news cycles. But the truth is, those connections are still very much possible — and they're vital. We all have that friend or family member who sees the world differently and, while it may be tempting to avoid those conversations altogether, doing so denies us the richness that comes from understanding another perspective. It takes courage to bridge the divide, but the reward is profound: the kind of friendship that isn't swayed or fractured by headlines or tweets.

Lasting friendships between folks who don't look or think alike are the antidote to the toxic polarization that infects our communities. The Village Square and The James Madison Institute hope this film screening was a spark that encourages people to extend a hand, share a story, and build relationships that can weather even the most challenging political climates.

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