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SUNDAY NOVEMBER 21, 2021

The Wichita Eagle

'IT'S HARD TO HATE UP CLOSE'

How Wichitans are taking One Small Step to bridge the political divide



JAIMIE GREEN The Wichita Eagle



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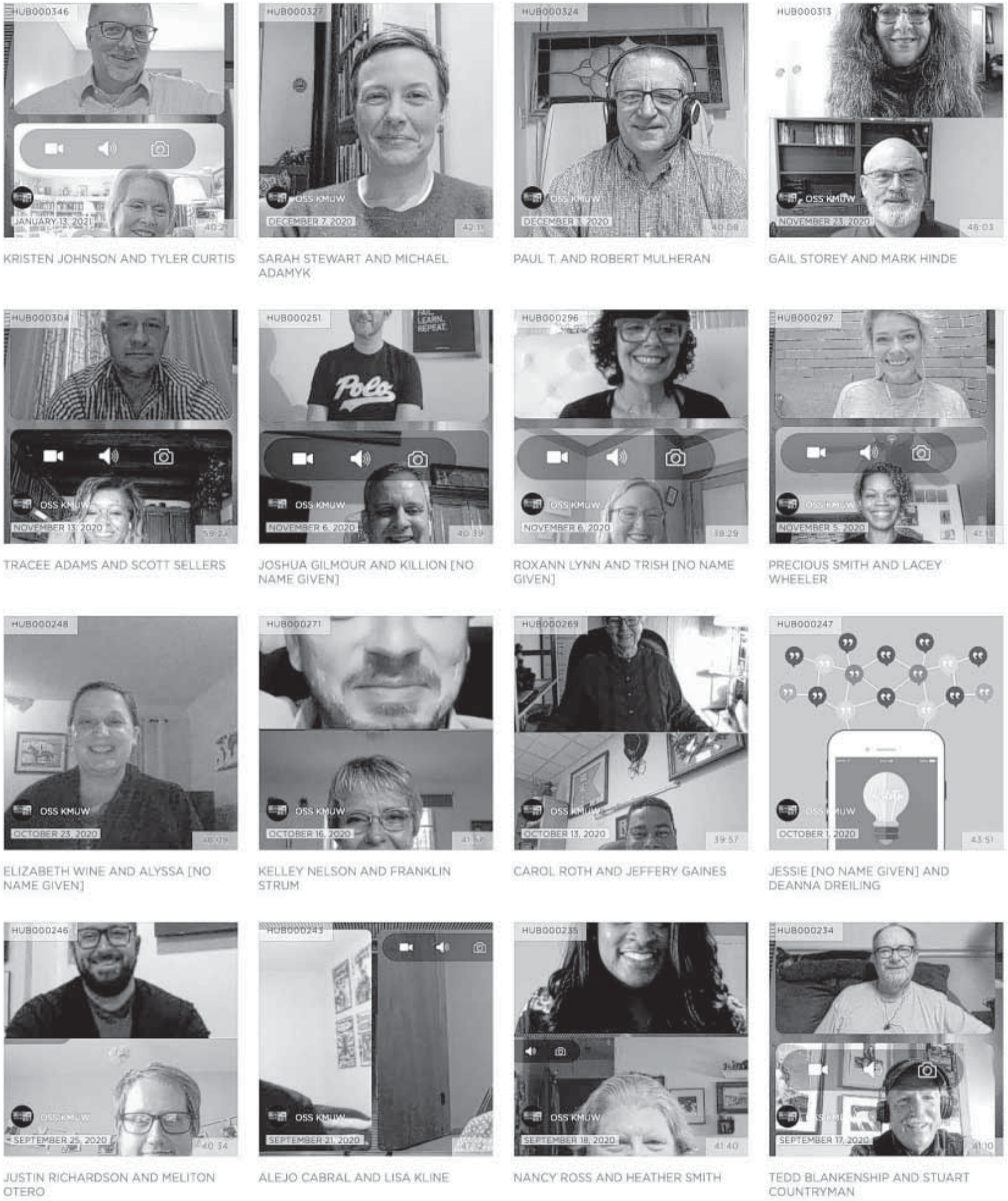
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This screenshot shows some of the Wichitans who participated in One Small Step. Wichita was a test market for the national project aimed at closing the political divide.

It starts with a step

Wichita continues to be a test market for One Small Step, a national project aimed at conquering dehumanization across party lines

BY CARRIE RENGERS
crengers@wichitaeagle.com

Tracee Adams and Scott Sellers not only are on opposite ends of the political spectrum, the Wichita and Goddard residents each had the opposite reaction about participating in One Small Step. That's a project that grew out of StoryCorps, a national nonprofit that records vignettes of everyday Americans. Wichita is a test market for One Small Step, which brings together pairs of people with differing beliefs for approximately 40-minute recorded discussions aimed at conquering dehumanization across political lines. The point is to search for common ground — not in politics but in humanity. Like StoryCorps' vignettes, One Small Step's conversations will be stored at the Library of Congress. "When I first saw it . . . I immediately said, 'Yes,' to prove my hypothesis," said Adams, who calls herself a centrist. That hypothesis is that "Main Street neighborhoods in America get along more than the media like to portray." Sellers, though, balked when a friend suggested he participate. He's conservative



Courtesy of KMUW

Sarah Jane Crespo, KMUW's director of community engagement, facilitated each of the first year's 26 sessions for One Small Step in Wichita.

and doesn't like the labels society sometimes gives people like him. "People generally think that we're hostile."

SEE STEP, 4A

“IT'S NOT LIKE FALLING INTO CONVERSATION WITH YOUR UNCLE BOB AT THE THANKSGIVING TABLE. THE STAKES ARE A LOT LOWER. THE HEAT IS A LOT LOWER. ... YOU'RE TOLD TO BE CURIOUS. IT'S A RECIPE FOR, REALLY, PROFOUND CONVERSATIONS.

Sarah Jane Crespo, KMUW's director of community engagement and a One Small Step facilitator



Common ground
What is One Small Step? Learn more about the test project's goals and processes in this video.

“

THERE PROBABLY ARE MORE PEOPLE WHO ARE ABLE AND WILLING TO HAVE CIVIL CONVERSATIONS THAN SOCIAL MEDIA WOULD HAVE ME OR ANYONE ELSE BELIEVE. IT SORT OF EMPOWERED ME THROUGH OPTIMISM.

Jennifer Szambecki, a political conservative and One Small Step participant

FROM PAGE 3A

STEP

Sellers said he decided to “suck it up” and participate anyway. Even though he and Adams disagree on topics such as abortion and the term “African American,” Sellers found there was one big point on which they did agree: People focus too much on differences even though they agree on much.

By the end of their first session, Adams said, “We definitely were agreeing and laughing.”

Then, she said, “At the end of the second one, we were friends.”

Most people paired through One Small Step met for only one recorded session, but almost everyone seemed to end their sessions by exchanging contact information and expressing the desire to meet again.

As StoryCorps and One Small Step founder Dave Isay said: “It’s hard to hate up close.”

Wichita was chosen as a test market for a number of reasons. As Isay and his team did research and polling, they found the city is both a polarized market but also one in which people are willing to listen to others. Another factor is what Isay called the strength of KMUW, 89.1-FM, which was a One Small Step partner for its first year in Wichita and played three radio features based on excerpts from the sessions.

Sarah Jane Crespo, KMUW’s director of community engagement, facilitated each of the first year’s 26 sessions.

“It taught me so much about just the conversational tactics that are really useful for people now.”

Crespo said she liked how the fairly regimented formula of the sessions created a good atmosphere for listening and learning.

“It’s not like falling into conversation with your Uncle Bob at the Thanksgiving table,” she said. “The stakes are a lot lower. The heat is a lot lower. ... You’re told to be curious. It’s a recipe for, really, profound conversations.”

A SUPER-CRAZY WORLD

Just as Isay was moved to start One Small Step after seeing an increasingly divided nation following the 2016 election, that divisiveness inspired some Wichitans to participate in One Small Step.

“The world ... was getting super crazy, and it seemed like a really, really good idea to pull people together,” said Cheryl Plucker, a former Republican who has moved to being more Libertarian or independent lately. “I just thought it would be good to talk to someone with a different viewpoint.”

She said she feels like these days “you’re either wrong or right. It’s all black and white, and I just know that’s not the case.”

Jess Frieze, who describes himself as just to the left of moderate, said no one from any political party should be describing others “as evil or an enemy. That’s not how democracy works.”

He and the person he was paired with, pragmatic conservative District Judge Phillip Journey, are far apart on a lot of topics but are lock-step in what they think needs to be done to heal divides.

“There is no doubt in my mind that if we are going to fix our society that many more people need to take that step,” Journey said. “That we need to understand the difference between an enemy and an opponent.”

They both look forward to visiting again.

“It’s a long-term process,” Frieze said.

Trish Hileman, who describes herself as a moderate, said “that if you don’t engage with people who are different than you, then you just miss so much richness.”

Social psychologist Peter Coleman called One Small Step’s scientific, systematic approach a smart one.

The Columbia University professor studies conflict resolution and has written a book called “The Way Out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarization.” He also serves on what Isay calls the national brain trust for One Small Step.

Coleman said there are a lot of misbegotten attempts to do something about polarization and that part of what helps One Small Step succeed is participants connect on a human level first and are discouraged from talking politics immediately.



ON THE COVER

JAIME GREEN The Wichita Eagle

Scott Sellers and Tracee Adams participated in the One Small Step project, which brings together pairs of people for recorded discussions aimed at conquering dehumanization across party lines. Sellers and Adams are on opposite ends of the political spectrum.



Brandon Johnson



Bryan Frye



Civil discourse

Listen to Wichita-area people's

conversations about the political divide in their community through StoryCorps' One Small Step.

He said he was ready to give up on trying to find a way to share the sessions, but his national brain trust and one he created in Wichita — the only other brain trust for One Small Step nationally — said it’s important for him to figure it out.

“Anything good is really hard,” Isay said.

What One Small Step is trying to accomplish is “a David and Goliath kind of battle,” he said.

“Just the magnitude of the problem and the odds of us being able to make a dent in it ... is hard.”

Former Sedgwick County Republican Party chairman Dalton Glasscock took part in a One Small Step session and said he believes “the way that we heal our communities is through storytelling.”

“Facts don’t change people, people change people, and relationships change people.”

He said even one conversation “breaks down barriers for future conversations as well.”

THE POSSIBILITY OF CIVILITY

Inherent in the name One Small Step is the acknowledgment that that’s all it is — one small step toward solving an especially huge problem. Is it, though, a big enough step to even be worth taking?

For Jennifer Szambecki, it was.

“I was afraid that we as a society had reached a point where ... civil discourse was impossible,” she said.

Szambecki, a conservative, was so pessimistic about political conversations, “I was just avoiding them.”

Her session with the self-described “very liberal” Elise Chavez changed things for them both. Each described the conversation as open and easy.

“There probably are more people who are able and willing to have civil conversations than social media would have me or anyone else believe,” Szambecki said. “It sort of empowered me through optimism.”

She said they continue to check in with each other on topics such as “How are you doing at being a temperate voice among your ... passionate friends?”

Chavez said she’s “talked to a lot of people after that because I was so excited and so invigorated by the experience.”

“Every single person who had a response for me (said), ‘I’m scared because I don’t think I can talk to someone who feels so differently.’”

She said she wants everyone to experience what she did.

So does Butler Community Col-

“

I THINK ... WE’RE NOW MORE OPEN TO THE OTHER’S PERSPECTIVE. THE POLITICAL DISAGREEMENTS BECOME SMALL. YOU CAN HASH THOSE OUT.

Brandon Johnson, Wichita City Council member who participated in a One Small Step session

“We’re all socialized to move immediately into debate, and debate is a game to win,” Coleman said.

He said One Small Step isn’t about debate but dialogue.

“They tend to be kind of lovely emotional connections that people have.”

When Wichita City Council members Brandon Johnson and Bryan Frye recorded a session together, the Democrat and Republican discovered they both experienced their first bee stings on the playground at Carter Elementary School.

“It’s hilarious,” Johnson said.

On a deeper level, he said their session “gave me insight into why he believes what he believes.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever sway him, but I think ... we’re now more open to the other’s perspective,” Johnson said. “The political disagreements become small. You can hash those out.”

Hileman said the success of the sessions depends on a couple of things, including “how vulnerable the participants get.”

“When two people from different sides actually get vulnerable and real with each other, that’s ... real tolerance, right?”

She said she’d hoped to hear more of the sessions played on KMUW or elsewhere.

“If it’s just two people talking together, and I have a new friend, that’s nice, but it’s not terribly impactful outside of myself and my partner.”

Isay said One Small Step’s format doesn’t lend itself for sharing as easily as the StoryCorps format.

“One of the things I’m struggling with is how do we get content out of these stories?”

lege English professor Kathy McCoskey, an evangelical Christian who participated in part to be an example for young people.

“It would be hard to grow up right now and be surrounded by so much polarization,” she said. “If people do things like this and other people hear it on the radio ... it could encourage other people to take risks.”

McCoskey was paired with former Newman University President Noreen Carrocci, a Catholic, who said she learned a lesson through the experience.

“I thought it was a great way to spend some time ... getting to know somebody else who I might have written off because of their ... evangelical Christian self description,” she said. “I might have made a lot of assumptions that I learned were different through the conversation.”

Shelly Prichard, a moderate independent who is president and CEO of the Wichita Community Foundation and a member of Isay’s Wichita brain trust, learned something by participating in a session, too.

“The process is just one small step, but I think the ramifications of the process have already impacted me in different ways very positively. It can teach you things literally in an hour. It can help teach you some processes (to) apply to other things.”

She said she’s caught herself in how she responds to people since then.

“If I’m starting to be judgmental or critical of somebody, I take a step back and think about the lens of where they’re coming from.”

Prichard was surprised to find she was paired with Kim Hurtig, who goes to her church.

Hurtig, who calls herself very conservative, had been apprehensive about participating and was a bit frustrated the session happened on her birthday, which is not what she had planned for the day.

“I got done, and I was like, ‘This is the best birthday present ever.’”

That’s even though she and Prichard both ended up crying.

“We got on some subjects such as homosexuality and a little bit on racism, and those can be hot topic things, and just the rawness of sharing thoughts with someone made me cry,” Hurtig said. “It was much more intimate than I thought it would be.”

Prichard, too, has encountered friends who don’t want to put themselves out there through One Small Step.

“We have to keep trying things so our community is not so divisive,” she said. “If we can get a groundswell on projects like this ... then the loud voices get smaller and smaller, and the good voices drown out the negative ones.”

Council member Johnson agreed.

“That small step, if you really try to live that out, can make a major impact.”

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