

Training Future Bridgebuilders: HPI Students attend the Braver Angels Convention 2024

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At **Utah State University** and the **Heravi Peace Institute**, our mission is to foster global peacebuilding efforts by promoting dialogue, understanding, and collaborative problem-solving across diverse communities. We aim to equip our students with the tools to address conflicts constructively and create inclusive spaces for open conversations on critical social and political issues.

This mission aligns closely with the national organization, **Braver Angels (BA)**, where individuals from across the political spectrum come together to engage in civil discourse, challenge assumptions, and work toward bridging the nation's deep political divides—all essential steps toward lasting peace and reconciliation. Sponsored by the Heravi Peace Institute (HPI) and by BA, five USU students attended this year's BA national meeting.

The **2024 Braver Angels National Convention** brought together in June nearly **750 individuals**, representing liberals, conservatives, and independents at **Carthage College** in **Kenosha, Wisconsin**. Delegates gathered to debate critical issues such as immigration and healthcare while seeking common ground on divisive topics like free speech, cultural differences, and populism. Through open discussions, debates, and shared experiences, participants promoted mutual understanding and strengthened civic dialogue and friendship. The event also featured a cross-partisan **Biden-Trump debate watch**

party, allowing attendees to share their reactions in real time and fostering dialogue across political lines.

For **Jasmine Kemp**, an **International Studies** major pursuing an **HPI Global Peacebuilding Certificate**, the conference provided a valuable opportunity to connect with fellow attendees from her field, including an American diplomat stationed in France. She found the debates particularly relevant to her upcoming responsibilities at AmeriCorps, where she will lead a group of volunteers. "I took it as something I could apply to my AmeriCorps service... and by chance, I met someone who also served with AmeriCorps for many years!" she shared. Reflecting on her experience, Jasmine noted, "It was interesting to be the youngest in the room for most of the conference. It was a memorable experience that I'm glad I got to be a part of and be able to apply what I learned to my life."

Ta'Mariah Jenkins, a **Political Science** student earning a certificate in the HPI's **Non-Profit Organization & Social Entrepreneurship**, also found the Braver Angels conference to be an eye-opening experience. Attending sessions like the College Debates and Discourse Alliance Symposium, she learned valuable techniques for conflict transformation, such as reframing arguments and focusing on empathy. "The environment was very respectful, with participants demonstrating a genuine willingness to listen and understand each other," she shared. What stood out most to her was the realization that despite ideological differences, many shared concerns exist across party lines.

Kirsten Dannelly, who is pursuing a degree in criminal Justice and an **HPI Leadership and Diplomacy Certificate**, found the convention valuable, though she saw room for improvement. While she appreciated the focus on bridging gaps between liberals and conservatives, she felt that incorporating more diverse political affiliations would enrich the discussions further. "Although the main political polarization in the United States is between the Liberal and Conservative parties, it is also important to note other opinions so that we may be well-informed and able to communicate our views effectively," she reflected. Despite her suggestions, Kirsten valued the opportunity to engage in meaningful conversations on controversial topics, such as gender-affirming care for transgender youth.

Another **Global Peacebuilding** student and history major, **Morgan George**, highlighted two memorable sessions at the Braver Angels National Convention: a debate on capitalism and a session on economic

inequality. He appreciated the high level of conversation among participants, particularly how attendees from both sides of the political spectrum engaged in meaningful discussions despite their differences. "I saw firsthand the mission of Braver Angels realized: the Republicans and Democrats in the room could come together, at least in mutual condemnation of alternate (i.e., socialized) forms of economic production and distribution," Morgan remarked. However, the most important moments for him came outside of the structured sessions, where informal conversations allowed him to explore political ideas more freely, including a memorable interview with a **Washington Post** photojournalist and discussions with fellow attendees.

Katie Creglow, a **Political Science** and Global Peacebuilding major described the Braver Angels Conference as transformative. She attended sessions that taught essential skills, such as how to host respectful debates on controversial topics. A debate on the rights of mothers versus fetuses particularly stood out, demonstrating how shared core values—such as safety and respect for humanity—can lead to constructive policy discussions. Reflecting on her experience, Katie shared, "Depolarization is the personal defeat of political hatred," a quote from the conference that left her feeling hopeful about overcoming polarization in today's political climate.

The opening remarks from BA co-founder, **David Blankenhorn**, powerfully reminded us of the deep need for civic friendship and public conversation. He reflected, "Dark times result not from the problems themselves, but from the failure of talk... Without conversation, there is no friendship; without friendship, there is no trust; and without trust, there is little chance for compromise." These words laid the foundation for the convention's purpose: to reignite meaningful dialogue across political divides.

Dannelly beautifully summed up this sentiment, emphasizing, "The Braver Angels convention is truly something that the United States is in need of right now... with the help of more delegates and people from all sides helping bridge the gap, we may be able to move forward as one as a nation." The conference, grounded in both hope and action, serves as a beacon for what is possible when we choose to listen, connect, and build together as citizens with a shared purpose.



HPI students in Kenosha, Wisconsin - Photo by K. Dannelly

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