“Many of our problems today cannot be solved by legislation or the machinery of politics. They can be solved only through participation by individuals approaching each other with principles of justice, mercy and humility in mind.”

- Winthrop Rockefeller in the Arkansas Gazette, March 3, 1966
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Why “Beyond Civility?”

When it comes to political viewpoints and opinions, Americans have become increasingly divided. Political polarization appears to be the norm and we bemoan our inability to talk to one another. The problem is so acute that 93% of Americans identify a civility problem in our society.¹

Born from Rep. Charlotte Douglas’ idea that Arkansas’s next generation of leaders could bring back meaningful and respectful dialogue in public conversations, the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute recently brought 40 Arkansas juniors and seniors to the Institute to empower them with the tools to have difficult conversations across differences. The Institute is committed to bringing people

with diverse backgrounds and unique viewpoints together to solve problems and create positive change; modeling and encouraging civil discourse with this group of students is directly tied to the mission of the organization.

Beyond Civility program content included an examination of the meaning and importance of civil conversations and how to engage in meaningful and respectful dialogue in order to foster collaboration, promote mutual understanding, and resolve conflict. Junior and seniors from Alma, Arkadelphia, Blytheville, Dollarway and Pine Bluff school districts were selected to participate in the program. Students comprised various ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. The Institute provided guidelines for the schools to consider in student selection to ensure diversity in representation.

The program employed facilitated exercises and curriculum to empower students to model civil behavior and respectful dialogue in their communities. State representatives from the four school districts (Rep. Charlotte Douglas, Rep. Monty Hodges, Rep. Vivian Flowers and Rep. Richard Womack) attended the program and participated in a panel discussion about the role of civility and dialogue in their legislative service.

The Institute surveyed students prior to the program to learn more about their challenges in having difficult conversations. Over 40% of students acknowledged that they avoided difficult conversations because they wanted to avoid conflict. Thirty-five percent of students indicated that they found it difficult to talk about race, and a plurality of students (30%) indicated that the topic of race was one they would like to be able to discuss more often. Program staff chose race as the main issue to be investigated at Beyond Civility; other issues may be selected in the future.
Coming Together at the Institute

During the first day of the program small groups of five students, one from each school, were led by facilitators through a dialogue exercise about race. The students were asked to reflect on and then share their personal experience with the group. Questions asked included:

- How have events related to race affected you personally?
- Is there something you might be willing to share around your life experience with race that might help others understand your way of relating to race?
- What about the issue of race do you find difficult to sort out or talk about?
- Have you ever been in a situation where your thoughts on race have conflicted with some of your core values?

During this dialogue, some students admitted not having a direct experience with racial conflict or really understanding racial tension. Others dug deeply to share very emotional stories related to their experience with race. No matter the circumstance, the safe space for conversation provided an opportunity for mutual understanding and new perspectives to develop.

On the second day of Beyond Civility, Institute staff helped students engage in critical thinking to identify and commit to something they could do together in their school to promote civility and dialogue. They recorded their commitments and the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute will follow up at the end of the school year to measure what change has occurred. Many of the commitments from the students included taking what they had learned during Beyond Civility and sharing it with their classmates through workshops, trainings, and presentations.
Testimonials
A small sample of the testimonials students gave at the program’s conclusion.

“We talked about stuff that was hard to talk about.”

“I thought I communicated effectively, but I realized there are ways I can do better.”

“We were able to share our opinions without fear. And we found more similarities than differences in our group.”

“Everyone’s belief is rooted in their experience. I’ve learned [from this program] to ask ‘why’ more often to try to understand people that I disagree with.”
The Future of Beyond Civility

Institute staff, alongside champions like Charlotte Douglas, are actively planning the next step for this program. A second Beyond Civility program for high school students is planned for Fall 2019. Work is being done to examine how to scale this program and reach not only more students, but offer similar training to teachers, school administrators, and possibly the state legislature. We are building a coalition of partners who identify the need to go beyond civility and are willing to invest time in learning how we can have meaningful dialogue and promote civic engagement.

If you are interested, please email Program Coordinator Heather Southard, hsouthard@uawri.org.

“Every citizen has the duty to be informed, to be thoughtfully concerned, and to participate in the search for solutions.”

– Gov. Winthrop Rockefeller
This was an experience that none of those young men nor I will ever forget. By noon time the day after we returned, those five young men had told most of the school about their trip to the “Mountain”. This program provided these young men something many people never see, nevertheless, anyone they know. You provided two days of peace. You introduced them to people not like them and let them know that different is ok.

For this, I am eternally grateful.

- Frank Lyles, Dollarway Public Schools and Beyond Civility chaperone
About the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute

Established in 2005 by the Winthrop Rockefeller Charitable Trust, the Institute sits on a 188-acre campus in Central Arkansas that was once part of the mountaintop home and cattle farm of Gov. Winthrop Rockefeller.

Gov. Rockefeller believed the best approach to creating positive change in the world comes from collaboration and mutual understanding among people. By bringing together diverse stakeholders on any issue and guiding them beyond their differences using specific tools and techniques, we can find solutions to problems once thought unsolvable. We call this problem-solving process the “Rockefeller Ethic.”

During his 20 years atop Petit Jean Mountain, Gov. Rockefeller himself convened no fewer than 200 such conferences, addressing an astonishing range of subjects.

Institute Programs include:

**Uncommon Communities** is a community leadership development program that produces a group of community leaders equipped to work together in the areas of leadership, economic development, education, workforce development, and quality of life and place.

**Rural Health Summit** is a collaborative network of health care professionals exploring solutions to rural health challenges in Arkansas. The annual summits have resulted in action plans led by four working groups to drastically improve the quality of, and access to, rural health care.

**Walks with the Governor** is a leadership development experience using lessons drawn from Gov. Winthrop Rockefeller’s life. Participants tour the campus and hear stories told from the Governor’s own point of view. The experiential program fosters team building and personal development.
The Winthrop Rockefeller Institute perpetuates the legacy of Gov. Rockefeller by engaging citizens in the “Rockefeller Ethic.” The Rockefeller Ethic is a worldview that believes valuing diversity of opinion, practicing collaborative problem solving and engaging in respectful dialogue combine to create positive change and leave lasting impact. We need the input and participation of all Arkansans to serve our mission and encourage you to visit rockefellerinstitute.org to learn about our programs and how you can become involved.