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Sam Fuqua: That's Tom Cosgrove, and this is Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present a diversity of ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. On this episode, we talk with Tom Cosgrove about making human connections with people who come from different backgrounds and different political beliefs. He's the founder and president of New Voice Strategies, a nonprofit with a mission of healing divides, restoring compassion, and strengthening self-government. He's also co-creator of the documentary film, *Divided We Fall: Unity Without Tragedy*.

I'm Sam Fuqua, co-host of the program with Alexis Miles. Hi Alexis.

Alexis Miles: Hi Sam.

Sam Fuqua: We're really glad to be joined for this conversation by Tom Cosgrove. Tom, welcome.

Tom Cosgrove: Thanks for having me.

Sam Fuqua: Tom, you were just describing before we started the recording, you were describing yourself as a civic futurist. What is that?

Tom Cosgrove: You know, I like to believe that, um, you know, the, the principles that got outlined almost 250 years ago in our, in our Constitution and how generation after generation we have worked to improve upon those, um, leads America on a path to the future. And so I like to believe in that. I like to believe in the idea that we can work collaboratively, together to constantly improve among, ourselves.

Sam Fuqua: I think you like, like many of us, uh, particularly with the election of Donald Trump in 2016, found a heightened level of division of ranker, and many of us struggled with an inability to, uh, to talk about it if we met people who were on the other side. You had a fairly, I think, simple but brilliant idea to bring those people together in a film. Can you tell us about it?

Tom Cosgrove: Yeah. So back in the summer of 2016, Larry Anderson, who's an amazing video editor, cameraman in Boston, who, we were working on another project there for Boston University, and we were just really, I think, more disgusted than frustrated as we looked at what was going on in that campaign and the political culture that was surrounding it, and for whatever reason, we decided we wanted to put the blame of that culture on reality television. This idea that we, you know, that we fascinate ourselves with other people's foibles and problems, um, fascinated by people who don't even get paid to put those on the screen. And that, that had somehow shifted the culture that was allowing for Donald Trump and, and other things of that ilk. And so we said, why don't we create an alternative to that? Why don't we create a different kind of reality show? And so we set off on a journey to do that. Uh, it took us, um, two years to, um, go from a title idea and a concept to actually filming a group of divided Americans. And so in the end,

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we twice

filmed a

dozen strangers that were divided over Trump on a simple zero-to-ten scale. With zero you strongly disapproved, and ten you strongly approved. And we had an equal number of people from

both ends and, um, what we discovered in filming them, what they discovered about themselves is that when they dropped down into their humanity, when they found those moments, when they could be empathetic with someone who didn't have their ideology, that didn't support Trump, for example, uh, they found a connection. And Larry, uh, Larry described it pretty simply, was that they learned or there came a moment when they learned to listen with curiosity instead of animosity to each other.

Sam Fuqua: Let's listen to an excerpt from the film. Uh, we'll hear several participants sharing their observations on the challenges we face when we try to talk with another person whose views are very different from our own:

Person 1: *It's not about convincing someone that I'm right, they're wrong, or vice versa. It's about finding the common ground and realizing that there is common ground.*

Person 2: *Well, we're coming in to prove that our way is right, instead of like coming in to listen and to hear like, okay, why do you feel that way? Why is it that way? It's just like we want to come in and dominate the conversation.*

Person 3: *Admitting to being wrong, that ego, uh, that people aren't willing to say, "You know what? I don't have all the facts. I don't have all the info." Uh, it's like that being vulnerable thing. On the other end of that, people will ridicule you and shame you for being vulnerable. They have that attack mode.*

Person 4: *To Dan's point, no one wants to step outside their bubble and be vulnerable or be the bigger person and, you know, try to understand the other side of the argument.*

Person 5: *You just have to be willing and committed to put that work in and to take that extra effort to look for those bridges. Look for that shared respect, and to find something of value in another person.*

Person 6: *What's really dividing all of us is anger. You can't be angry and listen. It doesn't work that way because you, when you're angry, you only hear what you want to hear.*

Sam Fuqua: That's an excerpt from the documentary, *Divided We Fall: Unity Without Tragedy*. Do you think that's what brings out empathy is just opening yourself to being curious about someone with whom you may have a sharp disagreement politically?

Tom Cosgrove: I think it, I think it's a start, right? So we, we just had, uh, uh, because of COVID, we just had our live show, first live showing of the film, and a third of the participants came out for it to be in a cast audience, talk back panel afterwards. But more importantly, to spend Saturday with us so that we could film them again. Um, and I'd like to produce a sequel where we get into what created this connection.

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'Cause

not only

did they find this ability in the, um, you know, the 48 hours that they were with us when we filmed them, they've stayed in touch, they've stayed connected with each, each other. And, you know, we, we drew people from both casts. Half of those were from Boston and half from Chicago. Some had been on online panels together, but they'd never been in a physical space together, and they just, they, you know, it was a little love fest. They were excited to be with each other. And by the time the weekend had ended,

they committed to all coming together in mid-August, uh, in Massachusetts, which was like the crazy part of the first cast we filmed when we got to Sunday. One of the participants volunteered his house three weekends later on Cape Cod for a Sunday afternoon barbecue, and eight of the twelve were there. So like, I think people are hungry to find connection with each other and learn that we, if we go into everything where we have an expectation, we're gonna school each other on, on our beliefs, uh, there's not a lot of progress with that.

If we go into it and we set some norms around how are we gonna engage, am I willing to sit and listen to you rather than yell at you, for example, we can find that the common ground we have is that we all live in this country and we want it to succeed. And as time goes on, the sharpness of the positions we hold start to soften, you know. One of the participants was asked, well, all the participants were asked in the talk back to share something that appalled them, uh, over the course of the weekend. It didn't end up in the film. And just so your listeners don't think that we were overly selective, we had 58 hours of footage by the time we were ready to edit it, a 57-minute show for public television. So there was a lot that was not, you know, not in the film. And one young African American woman who was in the film said, "You know, it was the moment when I, I was told that I should get over slavery." And totally understand that. And it went on, and one of the Trump supporters, um, or Trump supporter at the time said, "You know, I haven't watched this film in a couple years and I'm appalled at myself." And when we filmed him, he was very outspoken about the border wall. Uh, and, you know, three years go by and, and that he didn't like holding that argument anymore.

Alexis Miles: So Tom, I wanted to ask you about process and, and practices that you use, 'cause lots of people have done this experiment of bringing polarized people together in an attempt to create unity and community and it hasn't worked.

Tom Cosgrove: Mm-hmm.

Alexis Miles: So can you talk more about what process, what practices made this work so that other people might attempt to replicate?

Tom Cosgrove: So, I mean, that's part of what I wanna try to, uh, explore in a, in a, you know, in a 30-minute form with this sequel so that there is something out there for people to watch and say, okay, this is how I can try it in my life. Um, 'cause some of the stuff we did just isn't replicable, right? Like, give up your life for 48 hours and be with a group of strangers in a kind of offbeat or interesting place. But other things I think are replicable. And the first is with, is engaging with people about who they are that isn't about what they believe. And that's when connection starts to appear in the room. And confusion. And the other part of it was when they gathered, they had no idea who anybody else was in terms of tribal, red, blue, tribal

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kinda

stuff,

right? Um, so I think the first part of that is our exercises where you have to sit in conversation with someone else. And one of them, I learned from a graphic journalist in San Francisco, even though uh, I learned it from a woman named Wendy MacNaughton, and it is an old art school class, drawing class exercise. Uh, what we did was something I learned from Wendy, and the very first thing they did when they came together after, you know, we introduced each other, was they randomly got a partner and they had to draw each other's space for three minutes. And the rule was you had to look at each other's face for three minutes and not take, and you weren't allowed to take the pen off the paper or look at the paper. It wasn't about the art you were about to produce. It was about this uncomfortable human

moment of looking at someone else's face, particularly their eyes. 'Cause we don't, I mean, we don't really do that with the people we love for that length of time, let alone a stranger.

And then after that they shared a story with each other of a time someone surprised them with compassion, and they were asked to write it down so that they could tell it back as that person. So I, you know, we would all share stories and I would say, "Hi, I'm, I'm Sam, and here's my story." And Sam would say, "Hi, I'm Alexis and here's my story." "I'm Tom, here's..." Well, that took up a fairly good chunk of time, and then we broke for dinner. And like any well run household, people were asked to either be on helping to serve or help clean up, right? And then we said, okay, here's your first real challenge of the weekend. We would like you to establish the rules you want to have for this conversation, the norms you wanna hold. And to be honest, when Larry and I first had this idea of this film, we actually thought you could be in a process. You could spend days just trying to get agreement on how you were gonna do it. And, you know, this thing was over and done in 20, 30 minutes. And the, the fun part was the longest debate in either cast was the Gen-Xers debating if they could swear, and if so, which words and in what settings, so that it wouldn't be offensive to anyone, but just be their, usual energetic f-ing self.

Sam Fuqua: You know, these are such great, uh, ideas and I think the work you've done and others have done in implementing them is laudable. But how do we expand that? How do we carry that forward? I mean, we, we, I'm using a generalization here.

Tom Cosgrove: Mm-hmm.

Sam Fuqua: We listen to the media, we listen to, that often reinforces our view. We live where we live often amongst people who think like us. And certainly, our own networks are made up of folks often of like mind. It's, it's really difficult to, to break out of that and do the kinds of things that you have, uh, put together in a very structured way.

Tom Cosgrove: Yeah, I mean, so there's a couple things I could say about that. First of all, we set out to create a television show because that is how you get people to change, right? Like television so, has for ge, you know, uh, decades, half century really in, influenced who we are and how we operate. And if, uh, there's the, there's, there's a, uh, sociologist pollster who died, I don't know, 20 years ago named Daniel Yankelovich, who in the nineties wrote a book where he talked about the power of proxy dialogue. Like we would see people on a television show and, um, and they, they might be describing a trip they're gonna take on, a meal they're gonna engage with, something they're doing in their lives, and people can be so

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immersed in following that character, an individual on a show, they might imagine that they've already done the same thing, or they've just opened their mind to it. So what, part of what we were trying to do with the diversity of people we put, uh, in the room to film was so a viewer could find themselves among those 24 people, uh, and, and say, "Oh, I, I like, I like how J.J. ended up here. I like what he, you know, I can open my mind to better behavior or taking my good behavior in real life into social media," for example. That was the goal. We didn't get there. I mean, we didn't, we ended up with a film instead of a series and not without trying, but a lot of it had to do with COVID and the timing of all this. And then I'd say like, you know, a simple rule for people, uh, and again, it gets to be one-sided. You have to set your own example in this stuff.

There's a guy named Arthur Brooks, who was a longtime conservative, ran the American Enterprise Institute, has written a whole, you know, number of books, uh, of the people I know. He's spent the most time with the Dalai Lama and yet late in life, he became a Catholic. So, you know, he's a, he's a mix of, of contrast. But Arthur has a book that came out a couple years ago, 'cause, *Love Your Enemies*, and, uh, he talks about in that book that, you know, anger is a normal, it's a normal emotion, right? Uh, believing about believing something passionately, we all want to do that. And so often something we are passionate about isn't gonna come to pass. Um, we're allowed to get angry about that. The difference is that I can have my belief and I can be angry that my way isn't gonna happen, but I don't have to hold the other person in contempt. And it's this contempt culture. And it's not that contempt hasn't existed for generations of human beings, but we're in this moment where contempt and hate and fear, and I can go on and on, have all been monetized in a way that has just never happened before. You know, the, the, the hate megaphone that social media has, that they make a buck on, is a lot of the problem.

Sam Fuqua: It's a culture of resentment to me, you know, like, you should resent this other person for reasons X, Y, Z. Yeah.

Tom Cosgrove: Yeah.

Sam Fuqua: And, and...

Tom Cosgrove: And that, you know, and fear of the other, again, it's like biblical. It goes back so far about people have, you know, written about that kind of stuff, and we're, that's what we're living with. Like I, you know, the easiest motivator to get somebody to vote isn't vote for something. It's to vote against something. And unfortunately, hugely unfortunately, in the last chunk of years, that big reason to vote against something's about race. I was the program, co-program director of the Democratic National Committee in 2004. And I'm literally the person who brought to everybody and said, "Hey, there's this state senator out in Illinois who's running for the United States Senate, and he's an amazing speaker. And look at this New Yorker article, and we should make him our keynote speaker." Right? And you know, if we remember what Barack Obama said on the stage in Boston, he was the first to take the, you know, the color codes of the news networks on election night, red and blue, and turned it into a speech where he was preaching for purple. And you know, hope, right? Hope was the message. It was awesome. Biggest turnout in the history of the country at that point. And we all wanted to believe as I, as a civic futurist did,

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that

we've hit

this moment where we were gonna be on this accelerated path to a better future, not understanding the Jim Crow faction of American culture that is still out there and the blowback that came from them. And that's what we're living in right now. We're living in that blowback.

Alexis Miles: Tom you talk about hope. So I, I know that the film had its first showing in Boulder, and to a sold out house. Did the audience's response give you hope that we are coming to a place where we can have these conversations and reach a sense of unity?

Tom Cosgrove: Yeah. You know, it's an interesting thing 'cause I've, you know, you and I have both been in, in those theaters, uh, at the, at the, uh, at the Dairy Arts Center. Nobody left, right? Typically, when the show ends and its talk back time, you know, there's at least a trickle of people out of the seats, nobody left. Um, and we could have kept going in the questions. So, I think that was the audience itself, thinking, oh, there's a lot to learn here and I wanna be curious about. And so yeah, that part was hopeful. But, but the,

the more hopeful part was the words that came out of the, uh, out of the cast when they were asked questions. I mean, like Nikki, uh, Miller, um, she's married now, I think her last name is now Strait. She's a, she was the youngest person that we filmed, and she was also the only, at the time, the only single mother, and from outside Chicago. And, she talked about how important it is to learn to be wrong and how as humans, we just hate it, right? Nobody wants to be wrong, but if we can't accept that, you can't grow. And then I came across this awesome quote this week, um, from this film that, um, somebody asked me to watch to help him with. It was, it was about, um, uh, these two high schools in Cleveland, Mississippi, Brown v. Board of Education never came to be there. They are still separate. And one of the people in the community was interviewed and he, he said, uh, "Change is inevitable. Growth is optional." And I'd like to believe about, you know, the sold out crowd, there was a lot of chosen growth that people stepped into and I think will stick with them after they left.

Alexis Miles: I watched the film again, uh, a couple of nights ago, and I noticed, so I've said it several times, but I get this reaction every time I hear this woman describe her proudest moment as being when Trump was elected.

Tom Cosgrove: Yeah.

Alexis Miles: So, even though I know there's going to be transformation over the course of the film, I still get that gut reaction. But having looked at this film has helped me to understand that I can just sit with that feeling.

Tom Cosgrove: Mm-hmm.

Alexis Miles: Of, of that stomach churning feeling, and just keep watching it for points of humanity. And I say that because one woman talked about the role of eating meals together.

Tom Cosgrove: Mm-hmm.

Alexis

Miles:

That, that was helpful for her. So, can you say something about that?

Tom Cosgrove: Yeah.

Alexis Miles: And earlier you talked about giving people chores, like you helped set up for dinner or you clean up after. So, what's the role of those kinds of things?

Tom Cosgrove: Yeah, you know, it's interesting. So, I put together a really broad group of advisors from around the country, um, before we filmed it because I wasn't sure what we were doing, right? So, reality television is marketed as, uh, it's not marketed as reality television. That's not what the industry calls it. They call it unscripted program. There's no script. They're just these moments where they know these emotions are gonna be in the room. They're, they, they've artificially set it up for people's emotions to over, to flood the room. And then when it's all finished, they create a story arc out of that, and that's what we watch. And I had no interest in that. Uh, and I had no interest in just bringing a group of people together and saying, you know, "Okay, you're on your own, you know, um, and we'll, we'll, we're gonna film you while you figure out what you wanna talk about," or et cetera. We need to have some flowed. So I engage

with a lot of people, ethicists and people in the civil discourse space, and political people that I've known and, and Motus Theater here in Boulder. And over time, I shaped what I called a conversation choreography. We're gonna start with this exercise or this discussion point we're gonna put in the room, and then we're gonna move to this one, and then to the next one, and so on. And so, part of that purpose was we're gonna begin and spend a good chunk of time, um, hearing about each other, um, and things we've lived our lives through in a way that maybe that opens me up to be curious about. And then we're gonna have a meal. And we wanted the meal to be, not that we were serving them, we wanted them to be invested in this weekend. And so very early on, the investment was half of you are serving and half of you are cleaning up.

With, you know, we, we had two great locations, this double-edged theater in Western Mass. that has a live-in, uh, cast company and does camps. So they had, you know, they had a kitchen. They had the space for it. They had a shop. And likewise experimental station in Chicago, which is just this really cool building, nonprofit, that has lots of things in it, and so we were able to bring a caterer in there and had this big table. Both places having a big table matter 'cause nobody was shuttled off to the kiddie table. Uh, nobody got the round table, wanted, they wanted to be at the square table. They were all together. And so that was there and we wanted to take advantage whenever we were having a meal and so, the setup on Friday after that meal is when we move into a room where we ask those two questions that I know is gonna put the difference there. And that is your most and least proud moment in your own lifetime as an American. And I knew that Trump and Obama were gonna be part of that conversation. You know, the surprise in the Gen-Xers was the weeks after 9/11 were the proudest moment for three-quarters of the people in the room. And in that cast, the rest of the pride was Obama. You know, it was the younger cast in Chicago where uh, the pride in Trump came in the room.

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But the
next day

at breakfast in Massachusetts, they still were not sure who was who as a group, 'cause we didn't let any crosstalk happen Friday night. But as they came to breakfast with us, I assigned them to a table looking to do it as randomly as I could, standing at the entrance to this diner in, in, uh, Elmer's Diner in, in Nashville, Massachusetts. But I purposely put them in their tribes, in their red and blue groups. And I knew that when that recognition was gonna be there, the conversations would change in, in, at both tables. And the bigger change is really in the Trump table because they're no longer alone and they carry a level of shame and embarrassment about their support for him or their voting for him. And we did the same thing in Chicago. All, they had already figured out who was who because of Friday night's conversation. We still left it that way. Then on Sunday, we switch it up. By Sunday, we put them in these pairs. We do this exercise Saturday night where we ask them to pair up with the person they're least likely to be friends with, or least likely to be connected with when they leave. And so everything is in those pairs on Sunday. And so each table is, you know, was equally divided. But again, food is what, it comforts us, you know, it nourishes us, it's a platform we're familiar with conversation around. So yeah, it was very purposeful.

Sam Fuqua: You also have a couple of other projects that I'd like to talk to you about that maybe are in more earlier stages, but relate to our history, our culture, and how we understand one another in the United States today. Uh, can you tell us about the Constitution project?

Tom Cosgrove: So we've, we have a project, uh, it's called the *Preamble Project: We the People*, that I started developing in the fall of 2020, in part because, again, watching the election play out and how, uh, little movement is left in adult America on one side or the other, and then witnessing the insurrection on January 6th, realized that a lot of our future is, uh, is in the hands of people who are a long way from

having the right, having the legal age right to vote, right? So these are the students of today. And I discovered that the, uh, ad industry has already identified them as a generation. So if you've been born since 2010, you're Gen Alpha. And so in 2032, Gen Alpha and Gen Z are gonna be by far the plurality of American voters, and they might be right on the cusp of being the majority of American voters. And so how much belief they have in our democracy and their place in it, is really gonna matter. So we decided to create something in part because Constitution Day, which is not a federal holiday, it is a federal day of observation, when it was created in 2005, in the law that was passed, it says all government offices must provide educational programming, all federal government offices, on Constitution Day, and all schools, whether that's a college or it's a kindergarten class that receives federal funding in that fiscal year, must also provide educational programming on Constitution Day.

And I thought wow, you know, here's our hook. Here's this opportunity. Every school in America is supposed to be doing this. If we could create a program around celebrating some part of the Constitution that became annualized, we would help kids grow a pro-democracy muscle, and exercise it for at least twelve years. And when I looked around, I saw, I mean, there are lots of Constitution Day things, and there are lots of people that have lots of fascinating, you know, well-run programming around the Constitution. Most of it centered on the amendments. And the amendments are literally, you know, those rights from the, that we indiv, you know, outline our individual rights are also the things we argue the most about. We can, they can interpret them in lots of ways. And I thought, but, but the setup for the Constitution, the preamble, which was written to sell it, really, was the marketing paragraph, if we don't have a belief in those values, in those words, um, you know, we're, you know, we got a lot to do. And so that's what we set

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out to

do. And

it just starts with literally the very first three words, which are "We the people." The choice to represent this new nation, this new republic. That, what was most important about it was we were a collective of people. And I, you know, my own belief is our own individual rights won't exist if we aren't collectively all seen equally in the 'We'. We created it, we tested it last year, we're on track to launch it to 6,000 middle and high schools, um, this September.

Sam Fuqua: Another project you have started, I think, or you're at least in the thinking about stages, relates to the songs we sing and the songs that we, we know that purport, in some cases, to celebrate what America is all about. And maybe, maybe they're not necessarily the right songs or there are other songs that might be, uh, deeper and more meaningful in reflecting the, the American experience.

Tom Cosgrove: Yeah, so I mean, it's the sa, it's the same project, actually. So we are working on creating a, what would be the curriculum or the program in the K to 2 space. Like how, how, where do you start this conversation and then how do you advance it over time? And, we're really interested in, um, in doing it through song and art. You know, again, it's a, back about the culture here. And so to me, if we have a song that has the same power for letting every child see and feel themselves equally in, in the 'We', we the people, then it's like, now I know my ABCs. It just becomes part of, part of life. And so I've, you know, I've had a, a former music critic in Boston who has been doing a search of songs throughout our history that fit in this lane. There's a huge chunk of music that's in, you know, the 1960s and 70s all out in the civil rights era. But the, the song of the American Revolution was a song called The Liberty Song. It was written by a man named John Dickinson. He was inspired to write a song 'cause he'd written a series of essays, and he didn't think enough people were reading his essays, if I, if I'm remembering the history of this correctly. And so he wrote a song with the idea more people would be exposed to it. And what my favorite parts of this liberty song were, in one of the last stanzas he talks about, um, "United we stand and divided we fall."

And I always thought of that line about "divided we fall" to Lincoln's speech, and yet it was baked into the music of the revolution when people decided they wanted to break away from Britain.

I think what you and I talked about, Sam, was that, uh, Tom Morello of the *Rage Against the Machine* was writing this, this culture newsletter for the New York Times, and the very first issue that he wrote, he wrote about Joe Hill. And so Joe Hill was, could be thought of as America's most famous communist. So he was an organizer in the teens in the 20s. He was a, he was a "wobbly." He was a member of the International Workers Party. He eventually was hung on trumped up charges in Idaho in the 1920s. But what Morello writes about is that Hill was a songwriter, and he was a songwriter that inspired people like Woody Guthrie to follow. But there's no recordings of Hill, uh, of anything that he wrote and saw and sang. But there is this quote where he says, "Why waste my time writing a pamphlet that might be read once before it's thrown away when I can write a song that will be repeated over and over in hearts and minds?" And I went, "Oh! Yeah!" Like, that's, that's the power of music.

Sam Fuqua: Tom Cosgrove, it's great to spend time with you. Thank you for your, for your time and for your work.

Tom Cosgrove: Yeah. Thank you and Alexis, Sam, for, for the invitation. This has been a lot of fun.



PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

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Sam

Fuqua:

Tom Cosgrove is the founder and president of New Voice Strategies, a nonprofit with a mission of healing divides, restoring compassion, and strengthening self-government. He's also co-creator of the documentary film *Divided We Fall: Unity Without Tragedy*. You can watch the film and find out more about his work at the website, newvoicestrategies.com.

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