Harmony students, panel explore politics, the media and civil discourse

When Anisa Curry-Vietze watched coverage of the November 2016 election, she found it hard to believe that politics had always been as nasty as the last election cycle.

And studying the history of elections in her class at Harmony School has made her even more curious.

“It’s not just bad policy we’re talking about. It’s more about this tone of harassment, like everything has to be a personal jab rather than a conversation about the issues,” the Harmony senior said in a video opening the Return to Civil Discourse Symposium on Friday afternoon.

What about now-President Donald Trump taunting opponents with nicknames such as “Lying Ted” Cruz and “Little Marco” Rubio, ridiculing the latter for requesting a water bottle during a debate? What about then-candidate Hillary Clinton referring to Trump supporters as a “basket of deplorables”?

“Is this just an intense part of a cycle that’s already been there? Or is it an issue? Is it a crisis?” Curry-Vietze asked in her video.

For the next hour and a half, she and fellow moderator Glen Breeden-Ost posed those and similar questions to a panel of speakers invited to help them tackle the subject: Shelli Yoder, a Monroe County Council member who ran in 2012 and 2016 for Indiana’s 9th Congressional District seat of the U.S. House of Representatives; Greg Ballard, who was mayor of Indianapolis from 2008 to 2016; and Bob Zaltsberg, who has been editor of The Herald-Times since 1985.

Sallyann Murphey teaches social studies at Harmony School. Chris Howell | Herald-Times

The symposium project grew out of discussions in Sallyann Murphey’s current events class. Her students wanted to put together a project that would bring in multiple perspectives to help discuss what they saw as a breakdown in the practice of civil discourse.

“Civil discourse is the ability for opposing points of view to be able to have a discussion and hear each other out respectfully. And that, currently, does not seem to be possible,” Murphey said.

After kicking around several ideas, students settled on the concept of a public panel discussion, and have worked since last spring to arrange the event: seeking out speakers, researching current events, narrowing down a set of questions and divvying up roles to produce and moderate the event itself.

Bob Zaltsberg, editor of the Herald-Times

On Friday, the three speakers told an auditorium full of Harmony’s upper-grade students and teachers that while the nastiness of recent political discourse might not be completely new, the shape it takes is different than it has been in past elections. Social media and online forums make it easier for people to “just yell at each other without having to face them,” said Zaltsberg.

Shelli Yoder. Monroe County Council member.

Those same outlets, Yoder said, make it easier for people to isolate themselves among only peers who share the same opinions they do.

Greg Ballard, former mayor of Indianapolis.

Ballard agreed, adding that the ease with which information spreads today has also altered the game.

“I think the level is a little bit different, and I think the (reactions are) on a much faster cycle,” he said. Mistakes, inaccuracies or intentionally misleading media can spread with a speed that makes it difficult for the truth to catch up, he said.

The conversation covered the role of news outlets and the very definition of the term “media.” The speakers discussed the role of gerrymandering in the polarization of politics, and what role or responsibility citizens have to read news critically and do their own fact-checking.

Sophomore Breeden-Ost said that in his role as moderator, the time seemed to fly by, and he only asked about half of the questions he had wanted to cover. He was particularly curious to question Ballard more thoroughly on gerrymandering, while several of the other students involved wished they’d had time to ask Yoder what role she thought gender had played in recent campaigns — both her own campaign against now-U.S. Rep. Trey Hollingsworth in 2016 and Hillary Clinton’s campaign against now-President Trump.

The students who helped organize the symposium felt that it accomplished at least one major goal: modeling for their classmates, especially younger peers, that it is possible for people of different perspectives to talk respectfully about difficult topics. Yoder said the symposium made her wonder how her own children were learning about civil discourse in their schools, and praised the students for their work in putting it together.

“I felt this was a great opportunity … to practice what we were preaching,” said Emily Little, a Harmony senior.

While the answers to their questions were complicated, a few students were particularly struck by the politicians’ experiences on the receiving end of negative ads from their opponents. Yoder, a Democrat whose 2016 opposition aired an ad claiming she would bring the terrorist group ISIS to Indiana, said that to a degree, you had to take negative campaigns — and outright lies — in stride, because it has come to be part of the process.

Ballard had a different perspective. As a Republican mayoral candidate, he said, Democratic-leaning blogs had leveled personal attacks against his own children.

“Then I have a wife crying at home, wondering what I’m doing, why I’m doing this. That’s not fun,” he said, and those who enter the political process have to weigh the toll it could take on their families. It can keep some people from running for office at all.

“Honestly, if that’s not a crisis in the breakdown of civil discourse, I’m not sure what is,” said Curry-Vietze.