

TALK OF THE TOWN

How a small group of retired journalists and civic-minded citizens transformed a church-hall speakers series in Washington (Conn.) into a political talk show with top-level figures and national reach.

And why they think it's just what the country needs right now.

BY DOUGLAS P. CLEMENT





Lindsey Gruson and Jane Whitney and their golden retriever Truman in their Washington living room, where Whitney led their show's panel discussions remotely over the past two years.

Whether you're team CNN or FOX News, you trust ABC, CBS and NBC for news, snub the U.S. market for something more cosmopolitan like the BBC, or prefer local affiliates for a steady diet of weather, feel-good stories and crime and crashes, you're likely missing one of the most compelling political talk shows out there—one that emerged from a homegrown speakers series in Washington, Connecticut, to gain a national profile and attract A-list guests.

What began a decade ago as a grassroots effort in a church parish hall to raise funds to aid local charities has evolved into a powerhouse public affairs program presented by Northern California Public Media and distributed nationally to PBS stations by American Public Television. It opens its 2022 season May 15 with "Fury: America's Uncivil War," featuring some of the biggest names on the news and analysis circuit: U.S. Reps. Jamie Raskin and Adam Kinzinger, professors Michael Eric Dyson of Georgetown University and Barbara F. Walter of UC San Diego, and Anthony Scaramucci, the financier, attorney and, briefly, White House communications director in the Trump administration.

So what is this series favored by admirers of masterfully orchestrated, deep-dive conversations into the pressing issues of the day as parsed by experts who are often partisans but manage to avoid the banter and baiting that infect even the most respected mainstream shows? It's called *Common Ground with Jane Whitney*, and its guiding lights are Whitney, the veteran television journalist, and her husband, Lindsey Gruson, the former *New York Times* correspondent who serves as executive director.

"A testament to the power of community activism, *Common Ground* is tied to current events but transcends conventional talk show boundaries by featuring long-form interviews and cross-pollinating historical, political, social and ethical perspectives," Gruson explains. Panelists have included writers, historians, scientists, legislators, politicians, theologians, critics, analysts and others.

COURTESY OF COMMON GROUND

Those who know Washington—a second-home haven for successful New Yorkers, actors and financiers, and the town that inspired Stars Hollow and *Gilmore Girls*—might mistake *Common Ground* for another manifestation of the local art of high-powered socializing for a cause, à la the Gunn Memorial Library, whose marquee fundraiser, Library Luminaries, features a who's who of dinner party guests that over the years has included the likes of Mia Farrow and Milos Forman, Henry Kissinger and *Sex and the City* author Candace Bushnell. That's well-intentioned tiptling and dishing; *Common Ground* is about substance and transformation.

Other Litchfield Hills sanctuaries for the well-heeled might claim a stake in the influence game, such as the Kent Memorial Library and its ability to attract high-caliber speakers like hometown dignitary Kissinger—but *Common Ground with Jane Whitney* doesn't just bring in audiences to attend and participate in local conversations; it then pivots and turns the dialogue into ripples of change via PBS stations across the country.

Statewide, the closest equivalent to *Common Ground* is The Connecticut Forum, the nonprofit founded in 1992 that presents "live, unscripted panel discussions among renowned experts and celebrities" four times a year at The Bushnell in Hartford, drawing audiences of up to 3,000 for events. Panelists have included Michelle Obama, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer, writer Toni Morrison, Anita Hill and many other notables. The May 13 event features *Humans of New York* creator Brandon Stanton.

Common Ground shares The Connecticut Forum's guiding principle to provide an "open, honest, civil dialogue—the free and active exchange of ideas that allows us to question our assumptions, consider new points of view, entertain our souls and connect with each other, stimulated by discovery and enriched by our differences ... no winners or losers, no 'them' versus 'us.'" Where the sympathetic efforts part ways is the Forum's local audience versus *Common Ground*'s national reach.

Guests for *Common Ground*'s 2021 season included Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski (the hosts of MSNBC's *Morning Joe*), former Sen. John Kerry, former CIA director John Brennan, and NPR's Supreme Court expert Nina Totenberg, who declared in a testimonial on the show's website, "Jane Whitney is a great moderator, and you can't do a good show without that."

It's Whitney's stature that brings in those big names. In a television career spanning more than 25 years, she was an NBC correspondent in Central America, served as anchor for shows on PBS, CNN and CNBC, and WCAU-TV in Philadelphia, as well as a reporter for *Entertainment Tonight*. She went on to host the nationally syndicated *Jane Whitney Show* on Warner Brothers in the '90s, and her commentaries and essays have been published in *Newsweek*, *The New York Times Magazine* and *The New York Observer*.

"I got out of network talk shows because of the trend of tabloid television," Whitney says in our Zoom interview. "I didn't want to be doing 'my mother's a slut' stories."

Common Ground's programming is the polar opposite, and its distinguished admirers are legion.

"Jane Whitney is a master interviewer who takes complicated issues and distills them down to messages and impactful points that benefit the audience," said Dr. Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota. "*Common Ground* is a remarkable show



Whitney has led conversations with (from top) former U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright, U.S. Sen. Chris Murphy and U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman; Dr. Anthony Fauci; TV host Joy Reid, political analyst Jason Johnson and civil rights activist Maya Wiley; U.S. climate envoy John Kerry; and actor John Lithgow.



It takes a lot of planning and effort to turn an elegant New England living room into a talk show host's makeshift studio. But that's what was required to keep *Common Ground* going during the pandemic.

where homework is job one.”

“When it comes to finding ‘common ground,’ we have so much to do in this country and you are helping us take the steps we need,” wrote Eddie Glaude Jr., Distinguished Professor of African American Studies at Princeton University.

Brennan chimed in with this: “I thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to discuss the very challenging threat of domestic violent extremism with Rep. Elissa Slotkin and former FBI assistant director Frank Figliuzzi. Your efforts to help inform our fellow citizens about crucial issues of the day are most worthwhile.”

In this second season of national distribution for *Common Ground*, the 90-minute programs return as in-person events that are also livestreamed before being edited down into an hour-long shows for PBS stations. Additionally, podcasts and digital versions of the programs are posted to social media platforms. (For details and the full season schedule as it’s announced, watch the website, commongroundwithjanewhitney.org. Livestreams can be purchased for \$25.)

Whitney offers a teaser for a program coming July 17, “SCOTUS: Triumph or Tragedy?” with a guest list including legal scholar and Harvard professor emeritus Laurence Tribe, former federal prosecutor Joyce Vance and legendary conservative attorney Ted Olson.

Programs typically feature four to five guests, and

this season the conversations will take place up the road a bit from Washington in the auditorium at Wamogo Regional High School in Litchfield. With COVID still a factor, 2022 programming remains “a hybrid situation,” with some guests appearing live and others participating via Zoom. (At least a couple of the bold-face names participating in “Fury: America’s Uncivil War” will be on the stage at Wamogo.)

“We have a diversity of voices, which is absolutely essential to this show,” Whitney says. “If one person hears something differently in watching the show, that’s a home run for us.” In what she labels the age of the information tsunami, when the sound byte is king, Whitney says *Common Ground* offers a curative, the salutary dynamic of being able to sit down for an hour and watch a very thoughtful conversation.

That distinguishing factor, and the elevated level of the dialogue, attracted two key players to the *Common Ground* team, Laura Neminski, executive director of Conversations on the Green, the nonprofit that produces *Common Ground*, and volunteer extraordinaire Sunday Fisher.

“Watching people leave the program with a different take on the subject has been remarkable, and getting people to talk without fighting or shouting has been wonderful. It’s one of the ways we’ve made a mark and an impact,” Neminski says.

Fisher was living the commute-to-the-city-for-work lifestyle from home base in Sherman when Neminski, a friend, finally persuaded her to attend a *Common Ground* event in August 2018. “Prescient Politics: Art Foreshadows Life” featured Tim Daly, the actor, producer, activist and co-star of the hit TV show *Madam Secretary*, and Academy Award-winning director and screenwriter Barry Levinson. “I was just amazed not only with what I learned but the way it all interacted,” Fisher says. “What they’re able to do with complex topics is really fantastic. You always walk away with something you didn’t realize about a subject.”

To Fisher, another aspect that makes *Common Ground* special is the town-hall approach and the priority placed on both empowering the audience to ask questions and the sanctity of fostering open and extended conversations in which guests don’t get cut off midway through an answer. “That’s where democracy happens,” Fisher says of the process, while remembering that the program with Daly and Levison was so interesting it lured her back for the 2019 season, which began with a show on climate change. It was her call to action to become involved with *Common Ground*.

That 2018 show was also an example of another hallmark of *Common Ground*; it provided support for New Milford Hospital, Greenwoods Counseling Referrals and The Susan B. Anthony Project — so it’s one non-profit helping many others.

“In recent years, we’ve supported Greenwoods Counseling Referrals and The Susan B. Anthony Project for abused families, both in Litchfield, New Milford Hospital and The American Nurses Association Pandemic Relief Fund,” Gruson elaborates. “The amounts have slowly increased over the years and last year each local charity received \$20,000, while the nurses were given \$10,000. But we don’t know if or for how long we’ll be able to continue this tradition as we now have to pay for all production expenses, which precipitously raises our costs.”

And that’s the rub for *Common Ground* in an era that has already presented enough challenges, including two seasons without in-person shows because of COVID. Connecticut Public Television had been producing and editing episodes of *Common Ground with Jane Whitney* but has passed the complex and costly responsibility back to the organization, though it continues to broadcast the program.

“What people don’t understand is when you have a show on PBS, you’re not getting paid by PBS. We have to raise money to put this on,” says Whitney, noting that, like 80 percent of the team, she and Gruson are volunteers. There’s a

core group of about a dozen people involved, and up to 40 when production is included. Now it’s the production crew who has to be paid, as well as professionals who handle the formalities of bookings, including travel and accommodations for panelists now that in-person events are resuming.

“When you look at producing a television show, you have to bring a whole crew. It’s not as expensive as my network shows, but to make broadcast-quality television is really expensive,” Whitney says. *Common Ground* is looking to raise \$1 million to ensure the legacy it has established will be sustained.

Development falls in part to Neminski, who is also on the board. She considers *Common Ground* a young organization, as it was incorporated in 2019, that remains in the growth stage. Part of that growth, she says, is the expansion of the base from friends, friends of friends, and supporters of charitable organizations to the much broader and far-flung audience that knows and loves *Common Ground with Jane Whitney*.

Assuming *Common Ground* perseveres, Gruson considers it a role model, “a paragon of the media’s new economics and what communities can do when they band together,” and “probably the best and most successful example ever of the power of public access television.”

Whitney considers sustaining *Common Ground* something of a moral imperative, saying, “We named the show *Common Ground* because that’s what we don’t have in this country and what we want, and it ties everything together.”

She is also hopeful for the future because of the talent and dedication of those drawn to the organization. “The fact that it’s very few people and it’s gotten this far tells you something about the dedication level of those volunteers,” Whitney says, relating how even young interns like college student Carter Day — an editing whiz who also spoke articulately at a donor event — make impressive contributions that buoy the process and advance the mission.

“This is a gift to be able to do this,” Whitney says. “If you have something you’re passionate about, it’s a gift.”

Douglas P. Clement is the principal of Boardwalk Media + Communications. Previously he was senior editor and digital editor of Connecticut Magazine, and executive editor of The Litchfield County Times publishing group. A national Editor of the Year in 2005, he won the nation's top award for lifestyle journalism from the University of Missouri School of Journalism seven times, and has covered arts, culture, design and theater regionally for The New York Times.

In what she labels the age of the **information tsunami**, when the sound byte is king, Whitney says *Common Ground* offers a **curative**, the salutary dynamic of being able to sit down for an hour and watch a very **thoughtful conversation**.

COMING UP:

Stay tuned to commongroundwithjanewhitney.org for details about the rest of this season’s shows, and tune in or risk the discontents of tuning out, Whitney warns, saying, “People are disappointed, disaffected and disenfranchised, but the more you drop out, the worse it’s going to get.”

COURTESY OF COMMON GROUND

TALK OF THE TOWN

How a small group of **RETIRED JOURNALISTS** and **CIVIC-MINDED CITIZENS** transformed a church-hall speakers series in the Northwest Corner into a political talk show with **TOP-LEVEL FIGURES** and **NATIONAL REACH**.

AND WHY THEY THINK IT'S JUST WHAT THE COUNTRY NEEDS RIGHT NOW.

BY DOUGLAS P. CLEMENT

