

Friendship in a Divided World: BU Professor and New York Times Columnist Prove It Can Happen

By: Morgan Kee

For 35 years, David French and Andy Andres played hardball. As two self-proclaimed nerds, they met in a fantasy baseball league in a downtown Boston conference room and built their friendship on “WWE wrestling match” style political arguments, never giving the other an inch.

“We were arguing very vociferously, and I just kept thinking ... everyone should read this because I’m right,” said Andres. “I’m sure David felt the same thing, but I knew after I made my argument ... David would come back with 10,000 words that were even better.”

French is a New York Times opinion columnist, former litigator, and evangelical Christian, and Andres is a College of General Studies senior lecturer and progressive pacifist. They spoke at Boston University (BU) last Wednesday in a discussion titled “Frenemies to Friends: Building a Lifelong Friendship Across Political Difference.”

They use the story of their across-the-aisle friendship to offer insight into how to navigate deep personal bonds in a political landscape that’s intent on pitting them against one another.

Questrom professor Clark Warner moderated the discussion at the Howard Thurman Center for Common Ground, which featured an interview and an audience Q&A. About 60 to 70 BU students and faculty attended the event, listening as French and Andres discussed their long-standing friendship.

“You name *the* big issue for the last 25 years, and until, really, the Trump administration, we were on the opposite sides of that,” said French.

Their politics stem from their upbringings. French grew up in Kentucky, in what he described as a “theological bubble.” Andres, meanwhile, spent his childhood in a progressive union-and-military family.

But despite their differences and the state of the world, their friendship persevered. Every season, they join together with their group for another round of fantasy baseball.

“We were always the same in this sense that we did treat each other on a very personal level with kindness,” said French. “I never for a moment thought that Andy wished anything but the best for me and my family.”

During the interview portion, they discussed their friendship, highlighting the separation of policy from personal treatment through frameworks like humility and kindness. The Q&A followed, where French and Andres addressed topics such as free speech and when to disengage from strained relationships. One audience member asked about a time when they faced a deeply personal disagreement.

French and Andres agreed on the answer: the Iraq War in the early 2000s.

Andres described himself as a pacifist, noting the disconnect between his anti-war stance and his background in a military family.

French, however, said he felt a moral obligation and passionately supported the war. He deployed to Iraq as a Judge Advocate General (JAG) officer, to provide legal support to the Armed Forces and to “put his money where his mouth was,” aware that not everyone shared that vigor.

Yet, amid over 200 straight days of combat in the Middle East, French loaded the satellite video chat to talk to his fantasy league. When the call connected, everyone wore a T-shirt that read “For Dave” — even his war-opposed friend, Andres.

“Here's what I learned,” said Andres. “My friend David decided honorably ... to go to Iraq. So what I learned was to reconcile my love for David and my hatred of the military ... to respect the soldier and love the soldier.”

This moment is one snapshot in their three-decade story, moving beyond the tension to acknowledge and respect each other's beliefs.

“You know, for my part, I never asked Andy to not be a pacifist,” said French. “By that point, we've been friends for 20 years, but that T-shirt on him ... it meant the world to me.”

BU featured their friendship as the third event in the “Living Our Values” initiative that President Gilliam announced in 2024, and hopes this discussion will resonate with others, too. Previous

events covered workshopping principles for civic interaction and exploring hard conversations in a time when differing opinions end relationships.

The initiative used the friends to model what the previous sessions had built on: effective civil discourse that yielded insightful conversations grounded in seeing one another's humanity.

“These are two people who have known each other, liked each other, loved each other for years, and oh my gosh, they can't agree on anything,” said Sue Kennedy, Vice President for Strategy & Innovation in the Office of the President and co-chair of the “Living Our Values” committee.

“This was an exercise in a conversation to watch how two [prominent people] did it.”

They did it, and they did it humorously. In tandem with their anecdotes, French and Andres bantered and traded jokes, even sharing a fist bump, letting the audience see their friendship and laugh along.

French and Andres may disagree on many things, yet they remain confident in their friendship, no matter the latest political story to flood the internet. French believes that confidence in friendship, despite all odds and arguments, is important because those formed around virtues like “kindness and mercy” are “indispensable.”

Bonds serve as a vital safeguard against the toll of isolation, French said, a reality that becomes clear with age. He compared it to someone who smokes multiple packs of cigarettes a day:

something you don't feel the effects of when you're young, but becomes much more tangible years down the road.

French ultimately shared advice for his own 25-year-old self. "You love your friends, yes, but you don't love them enough," he said. "Just wait, you'll need them more than you know."