

ASHLEY: She lived in liberal Seattle and worked as a journalist covering science, climate change, and the environment for public radio for more than a decade. Then, in 2018, Ashley Ahearn made a big jump. She left Seattle and moved with her husband to one of the most conservative counties in rural Washington State. In this episode, Bridging the Rural-Urban Divide.

This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. What did Ashley Ahearn discover about her new neighbors and herself when she switched from city to country, now living on a 20-acre property with a horse and a pickup truck?

ASHLEY: And we'll also hear about her podcast Grouse about an endangered bird and what this says about the land and the changing climate. First, I asked Ashley Ahearn, why did she move and opt for a complete change in lifestyle?

ASHLEY AHEARN: Well, several different reasons. I would be lying if I said that I wasn't burned out on city life. I grew up in small towns in Massachusetts, suburban, not rural. But I knew that there was more to the story after the election in 2016 and that the voices from rural America were not being interrogated, covered, or really probed in a way that felt sincere and invested, I guess, for lack of a better word, that what we have in a lot of media now is a concentration of journalism jobs in urban centers. And what that translates into from a production standpoint is journalists that go out into rural communities, parachute in for a story, record, and then pick the sexiest sound bites, maybe in many cases the most radical, most Trump-y, most ignorant-sounding, and then bring them back to their liberal listenerships in the urban hubs. And it cements and furthers and perpetuates these divides that we see.

So, as an environment reporter living in Seattle, so many of those stories, so many of those divisions play out around environmental issues, whether it's conservation of a controversial bird or logging proposals or mining proposals. You can almost predict how people are going to fall on a certain issue based on what their political leanings are.

ASHLEY: This was at a time of increasing partisanship, including a bigger urban-rural divide. What changed?

ASHLEY AHEARN: Once Trump was elected, I think that's what really brought it to a head for me, was the sincere feeling that I didn't know the people who had elected that president. I didn't know them. I didn't interview them, or, if I did, I didn't spend time with them to really understand the context that would make them say the things that they were saying to journalists like myself.

RICHARD: Yeah. So were you shocked or surprised in 2016 by the election of Donald Trump?

ASHLEY AHEARN: Oh, sure. We all were. Nobody saw that coming. I mean, I think there were a few outliers that said, "We should've been ready." Part of that breakdown in communication between urban and rural and Conservative and Liberal America is that we didn't fully understand the scope and the breadth and the depth of his support, particularly in places like Okanogan County where I live now.

RICHARD: Yeah. Where do you live now? Tell us a bit more about that.

ASHLEY AHEARN: So I live on 20 acres of sagebrush about 20 miles from the Canadian border in North Central Washington State in a cabin that is about 650 square feet.

RICHARD: What are you looking at right now, or what can you see either out your window or from your front door?

ASHLEY AHEARN: Right now, I am going to look out the window and see if I can spot the coyotes that were there earlier this morning. Actually, just two days ago, one literally walked through... The chickens were out. I have four chickens. They are my first chickens, and I'm very attached to them. And a coyote walked through our yard literally 15 yards from the house and swiped Penny, one of my beloved chickens. Not a cluck, not a feather lost, and just trotted off like he just left the grocery store, and never to be seen again. So it's wild out here. It's real.

ASHLEY: So, just to be clear, your chicken is gone for good?

ASHLEY AHEARN: Oh, yeah. That chicken is dead. That chicken is very dead. And I am not a guns person, but in that moment, I wanted a gun very badly. I was just like, "You know, just being able to fire off a shot just to be able to put a little bit of the fear of God in them..." You understand, the longer you spend out here, why people operate the way they do when they live this close to predators and other kinds of animals.

ASHLEY: And coyotes aren't the only threat, right? In your podcast, you shared a story about a rattlesnake.

ASHLEY AHEARN: This was one of the first nights. I think we closed on the place and moved in like June 6th. So the rattlesnakes are out, the sun, it's warm. You're getting up into the 90s, 80s during the day, and the snakes are out all over the place. We live in a very snake-y area, and I didn't know this at the time, though, of course, because I just moved in. And I was doing the dishes, and the window was open, and the dog was out. It was dusk, and I hear this... I thought it was a sprinkler system. Honest to God, it was like, "Oh, I guess I didn't know this house had a sprinkler system when we bought it. Maybe it's on auto. I don't know." It sounded like a sprinkler system to me.

So I go outside, and it didn't take me long to realize that probably wasn't a sprinkler system because, if you live on 20 acres of sagebrush, probably not worrying about your green lawn irrigation as much. So I go outside, and I look under the deck, and sure enough, there is a pretty medium-sized rattlesnake coiled against the foundation of the house. And it, of course, had been hunting mice and hanging out under there in the cool during the hot parts of the day, and my dog was messing with it. So I was, of course, terrified and was screaming at him to get back into the house.

Go to bed, you know, leave it alone. That's not a problem we're going to solve right now. And get up in the morning, and we had a carpenter on the property, an awesome local guy named Luke. And I said, "Luke, what do we do about this?" And then I remembered that some dear friends from Idaho, when we bought the place, had given us, as a housewarming gift, a sharpened shovel. At the time, I wondered, again, city person, "Why would you need your shovel to be sharpened?"

So it turns out that when rattlesnakes are killed, they can still bite after they're dead. It's a reflex or something to just release all the venom. There are stories of people getting very, very, very badly hurt by snakes that are dead. So not only do you have to kill the snake, you then have to chop the head off, and that's where the sharpened shovel comes in. Luke... He had me crawl under the deck. So I crawled under the deck with a 2x4 and kind of stabbed it against the foundation of the house with the 2x4. The snake's writhing, and I'm screaming and sweating. Fortunately, the dog's inside at this point, and Luke's on the other side of the deck, and I start pushing the snake toward him. We get it out to the other side and he takes the shovel and chops the head off.

I used that story at the beginning because it illustrates, to me, how out of my comfort zone I was. And I got more hate mail for using that vignette at the beginning of the show than I ever could've expected.

RICHARD: What did people say?

ASHLEY AHEARN: You know, "How could you gleefully kill a wild animal? It was just minding its own business. It wasn't hurting anything. You're doing a whole show about a wild animal that we should arguably protect, and yet you're gleefully killing an animal on your own property. Snakes deserve to have a place, as well." And I don't think those people are wrong. I just think that many of them have not lived in country like this.

I live, again, 20 acres. I see snakes everywhere. The only ones I have ever killed are the ones that are in the immediate envelope of my home and are endangering myself or my pets. That's it.

ASHLEY: Remind me, how many years have you lived there now?

ASHLEY AHEARN: It's been three years.

ASHLEY: Talk about that transition. You were in a city environment. You said you grew up in a suburban environment. What has that transition been like?

ASHLEY AHEARN: It's been beautiful. It's been really beautiful. There's a lot of quiet out here, and there's a lot of visiting. Country people visit. They don't catch up. They visit. And you really spend a lot of time around campfires. You spend a lot of time on horseback. You spend a lot of time moving slowly through the landscape. I think that is what has afforded me the ability to truly fall in love with sagebrush country and the people that I've met here, who I may find some of their political views abhorrent, to be clear. But I have learned so much from them about how to live in this place and the history of this place and the culture of this place.

I think that, as I've built rapport and relationships with them, it's opened the door for conversations that I have never been able to have as a journalist showing up for a brief stint or a vacationer coming to country like this. I think it's made me a better journalist. And I can only say that I think, through conversation and through being the only person that's driving an electric car on my road, but also drives a pickup truck and hauls horses and moves cows, certain conversations happen with me and my husband in this community that aren't happening among the people who have always lived here, if that makes sense. And I think, by translation, I'm learning, and my perception has changed in terms of the kinds of questions I ask and the way I approach stories and the angles that I choose to interrogate that I don't think would've been possible if I was doing it from Seattle.

RICHARD: Ashley, I'm curious about your friendships. You lived in a busy city, had a job. Are your friendships now, in sage country, deeper? Do you have more moving or less transactional conversations with people?

ASHLEY AHEARN: My memories of living in the city over the years in my 20s and early 30s were you catch up with people. You get together, and you have dinner. You have a meal. You check out a new restaurant. Maybe you go for a walk at the local park. But they're very short periods of time, maybe a two-hour dinner party or a nice meal. But you're still sort of checking in, and when I think back on those times, many of my conversations were about work. People are very defined by their careers, I think, more in an urban environment, and it may have been in the circles that I was traveling in as a really career-focused and really obsessed with my work, I would say, in that last period of my life in Seattle.

RICHARD: And now?

ASHLEY AHEARN: It's a bit of a slower process. You don't just connect over things that you have in common, in part probably because I have less in common with many of the people that I'm meeting. But working the land has been a great way to connect. I joined the Back Country Horsemen, and they do a lot of trail maintenance work, so

getting out and just cutting back brush and clearing old barbed wire from the landscape, making sure trails are open, cutting trees that have fallen across the trees together. You spend hours. So little snippets of conversation happen, but it's less about what you do as a career and more about what you see in the landscape around you, what your goals are together. You're working with people toward something. It feels more concrete in some ways.

RICHARD: The maintenance work that you're doing, you are on horseback. You are with Trigger, your horse, right?

ASHLEY AHEARN: Pistol, Pistol.

RICHARD: Oh, I'm sorry, Pistol. Oh, god. I shouldn't have said that, crappy memory.

ASHLEY AHEARN: No, it's all right. It's all right. She won't be offended. She is uppity, though.

ASHLEY: What about your neighbors? When you moved in, did they just show up and introduce themselves? What happened?

ASHLEY AHEARN: I still remember when we first moved in, one of the cowboys up the road came to visit on his horse and brought a dozen eggs, just came riding up the driveway. We were like, "Who is this guy?" He's got his full cowboy hat on. He's riding a beautiful Paint. There's a deep sense of hospitality, I think, that's been tested in recent years as more city people move into places like this. I do think it gets a little bit... You have to really reach out. You have to really actively be putting yourself out there.

So, I think, after a while, it is about consistency, and it's about hard work more than it's about anything else, I think, in some of these places. I think, yes, it was hard to make friends at first but not once you cut through that initial, "Oh, where are you from? What did you do in the city? Okay. Well, actually, do you want to go ride horses, or do you want to go clear some trail, or do you want to move cows?" Once I was through that door, I think things got a little easier.

RICHARD: You've talked a little bit about how you've changed as a journalist, but how have you changed as a person as a result of this extraordinary immersion into a very different part of the country?

ASHLEY AHEARN: I think I'm calmer. I spend a lot more time by myself than maybe I ever did in the city. I am healthier. I am outdoors for hours of every day, and I also made the transition of working for an organization to being my own boss. So I'm just as successful financially, to be honest, and I control my hours, and I control my clients, and I control the work that I do. That's been a really big factor in my sense of wellbeing and happiness in this new life, is the ability to be up early and be working all morning and then to go move cows all afternoon or ride my horse all afternoon or do trail work.

I think my politics have maybe softened a little bit, as well. I'll always be Liberal on certain issues, but I certainly feel maybe more on the property rights issues and the guns, when you look at it from a rural perspective and you ask questions about why certain guns are needed at certain times... For example, if my horse, Pistol, and I go miles and miles and miles up into the backcountry, and if she ever broke her leg, there's not a vet that's going to come. You learn, okay, well, it's a .38, and you make the line from the ear to the eye and the ear to the eye, and the bullet goes right in the middle of the X. That's how you make your horse stop suffering when you're in the backcountry.

I shudder to ever think about having to do that if Pistol broke her leg, but I also know that, when we talk about guns, that's one side of that story. That's another facet that I think I wouldn't have considered when I was living in Seattle where it was just like, "No, just get rid of guns. We don't need guns."

ASHLEY: Well, yeah, I'm really glad you raised politics because I wanted to ask you about that, about how you differ from your neighbors politically. You describe yourself, have done, as very Liberal in Seattle. Tell us a little bit more about your neighbors of the place that you now live. What do they believe? What are their politics?

ASHLEY AHEARN: I had come here with certain assumptions that everybody was hardline, rabid Trump supporters out here, gun-toting, pro-life, all of that. The truth is much more gray. I move cows for one rancher who thinks climate change is cyclical, it's not real. But we have conversations now about how the wildfires are getting worse and more frequent, and the droughts are longer, and he can't find water as easily in his pastures in some of the high country areas where his cows go that used to be full of water for longer stretches of the summer.

So, while I would just assume that some people are hardliners, I'm finding that the cowboy I had Easter dinner with, his wife's a yoga instructor. He's maybe a little more on the Conservative side, but I think he voted for Biden. He might've voted for Trump the first time because he didn't like Hillary, but he voted for Biden this last time. It's a spectrum. I try not to put people in boxes.

I do have other neighbors who are hardline... I have a neighbor who makes gun holsters, and he's very Conservative. He calls me a libtard, and I call him an asshole on a regular basis. Then we laugh, and then we drink whiskey, and then we ride horses. We go on with our lives. The conversations are interesting because you get to see all of the gray in everybody's politics as opposed to coming to the table with the expectation that we're hardline opposed to one another.

Yes, I skew Liberal in the sense that I am a feminist, I'm pro-choice on certain issues, but in general, I would say I'm moving more toward the Independent side of things. So I maybe come from a Liberal background, but I live in a rural place, and I have deep respect and curiosity about this place. I hope that people will talk to me here because they can trust that I am open to listening and sincerely want to understand as

opposed to pretending that I'm objective and then finding out later on that I went back to Seattle and reported a story that confirms the Liberal bias of my listeners.

ASHLEY: Ashley Ahearn on Let's Find Common Ground, more coming up in a minute. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard. Let's Find Common Ground is part of The Democracy Group podcast network, one of 15 podcasts that look at the present state and future of our democracy.

ASHLEY: And the other show that you cohost, How Do We Fix It? is also a member, as it happens, and you are releasing your 300th episode this week.

RICHARD: Yeah, what about that? Six years working with Jim Meigs, my fellow podcast host. We ask guests on each show for their ideas about potential solutions.

ASHLEY: You can find out more about How Do We Fix It? at howdowefixit.me or on the The Democracy Group website, democracygroup.org. Now more of our interview with Ashley Ahearn.

RICHARD: We mentioned climate change and the environment. What can urban people learn from country people?

ASHLEY AHEARN: I think that we are going to be looking to rural America for survival advice. I think that as we look at how climate change unfolds in terms of more wildfires, more drought, more flooding, more natural disasters, when you live close to the land, you help one another survive. That can look a lot of different ways, but I think when we look at a climate-changed future, those survival skills are going to be things that more city people want to adopt and to learn from, whether it's from canning your own food to shooting your own prey to protecting your house from wildfire, natural disasters, to rebuilding these basic craft skills that I think people in rural America tend to use more regularly by necessity.

And then I think, in terms of how we talk about climate change, there's a lot to learn. If I use that word out here, or that phrase, I almost say it tongue-in-cheek. I prefer to talk about it as maybe more broadly changes that we're all seeing on the landscape and start with people's observations of this place.

ASHLEY: Give us an example of that.

ASHLEY AHEARN: It was one of the first years we were here, and we were gearing up for a really bad, really dry wildfire season. And the reason that I was kind of attuned to it was because all of my neighbors and people I knew were talking about how the creeks and the ponds were lower than they ever are in May. So I did a story. This community was the site of the largest wildfire in Washington State history until this past

summer, unfortunately. Back in 2014, the Carlton Complex Fire burned more than 250,000 acres.

So I started asking people, "It's pretty dry this year," and I went in hard-charging, "it's climate change, right? This is real. These fires are going to be more severe." And I realized pretty quickly that that was a nonstarter for a lot of my friends here, a lot of the community. So I started changing the way I would ask the question, which was, "How have you seen things change? Is this drier than you remember?"

I'll never forget it. I was at a Back Country Horsemen meeting, and I was talking to the matriarch of the Back Country Horsemen here, is a woman named Betty Wagner. She's in her 80s and still rides and still snowmobiles. She's a firecracker. She's lived in the valley her whole life. I love her. And I asked Betty, I was like, "Betty, we know climate change is happening. The creeks and the ponds are drier." And she said, "No, no, no, no, no. No," basically, "you're overreacting. You're one of those scared city Liberals who's just terrified of this thing, and it's fine. Don't worry about it." So maybe this is a nonstarter for her.

But I went around, and I did the story, anyway. I talked to a lot of other people in the community, and the story went in the local paper. And Betty saw her peers all collectively acknowledging that things were different, that things looked different than they had in previous years. Sure enough, I saw her at the next monthly Back Country Horsemen meeting, and she said, "Yeah, it is drier. It is drier out here, and it's drier than I remember. Good job on the story." I have to say that meant so much to me not because I think I changed her mind or she thinks climate change is real now. But I think that it's this iterative process of representing what is actually happening on the landscape that people out here respect more, in some ways, than the scientific papers that talk about what's going to happen in the future.

ASHLEY: And what about Liberals or Progressives? Do you think they understand people who live in rural areas and their concerns?

ASHLEY AHEARN: There's plenty of ignorance to go around. There are plenty of ignorant Republicans and Conservatives, and there are plenty of ignorant Liberals. I think that, when it comes to how Liberals perceive rural people, that people out here have their heads in the sand. They don't want to think about this. They're denying the science, and they aren't going to do anything about climate change.

The truth is people out here are adapting already in the way that they graze their cows, the pastures that they're... I mean, I was just out riding yesterday looking for how much water was on the landscape in one rancher's pastures to see, can he put his cows out here? Or, if he can, how long can they be out here, and does he need to truck water in to get the cows the water they need? So all these things that... I just hate to point fingers. I don't know. I don't want to just sit here and say city people don't understand country people and they want to say certain things. So maybe you should ask that question again, and I should think harder about how to answer it.

ASHLEY: Well, you said to me that those who support new laws and regulations to restrict may not necessarily realize the impact of their proposed changes on rural America. That's what I was getting at.

ASHLEY AHEARN: I have a theory. I think that some people, when they don't want to believe that climate change is real, if you peel back the onion a little bit on that, it's if you acknowledge that climate change is real, then that necessitates certain actions and certain carbon taxes or reductions or limitations in our emissions that could directly harm people who have lower incomes and live closer to the land, i.e. rural America. What I mean by that is this feeling that city Liberals will wring their hands about emissions, carbon emissions and then go to their nearby airport and take vacations and fly all over the place, whereas they'll be very quick, though, to point the finger at somebody who drives a pickup truck and gets low miles per gallon when, if you actually do the math on that, driving a pickup truck all year is less than taking your flight to Hawaii for your family vacation for four people. I don't know how people can live out here without a heavy-duty vehicle.

That's what I mean when city Liberals, and Seattle is particularly aggressive on this, carbon policy, climate policy is just the talk of... What do we do? How do we make this equitable? How do we reduce emissions across the state? And I think what that translates into out here is a very Liberal governor, a very Liberal voting concentration populous on the west side of the state that dictates policy that will affect people out here adversely and will cost them more money and threaten their ability to continue to do their livelihoods, i.e. raising livestock, farming, those kinds of things that really drive economies out here.

RICHARD: Your podcast series is called Grouse. Tell us why you decided to do it. Why Grouse? Why is Grouse a symbol of some of the issues that are really worth tackling when it comes to country life and environmental and conservation concerns?

ASHLEY AHEARN: Grouse, spotted owl, these are animals that divide us because they become symbols of environmental overreach, federal laws that protect endangered species that prohibit certain activities in areas where that species can be found. So this bird, as I spent more time in sagebrush country, it became more and more clear to me that if it wasn't the sage-grouse, it was going to be the coyotes, or it's the wild horse. Pick your species that people get riled up about and that speaks to their core values in terms of what side they're going to choose.

So I wanted to use this bird, which many of us may never see in our whole lives... It's very obscure. You can't make the case that it is an economic driver. You can't say that we need to protect these birds because we make money off of them.

ASHLEY: Well, there's one part of one episode of Grouse that I remember distinctly. It was an interview with Paul Ulrich, Vice President of Jonah Energy, which is an oil and gas company in Wyoming.

RICHARD: Here's a brief extract from your podcast.

ASHLEY: Paul seems genuinely concerned about the birds, but he's also concerned about the people in the oil and gas industry. Natural gas production in Wyoming has declined 37% over the past 10 years.

PAUL ULRICH: People are losing their jobs right and left in the state right now. My nephew was making a living working in the Jonah field with a service provider. He's no longer able to work. He's unemployed, and hundreds of individuals in this county and the surrounding area find themselves in that same boat today. It's heartbreaking. If you want to see a grown man cry, you're seeing it because people in my family have lost their jobs because of what we're going through today, and it's unbearable at times. It really is. Sorry.

ASHLEY: I found it really surprising, what I heard. Did you? Can you just talk about that for a minute?

ASHLEY AHEARN: Yeah. It meant a lot to me to meet with him in person, and he was going to take me out around the gas fields, actually, until the pandemic hit. Instead, we just ended up doing the interview from a safe distance outside at his house. Visiting in person and coming to him with a sincere interest of I want to understand your business because the truth is America does still run very much on natural gas. We need to own up to that, and we need to look at that.

But you don't get to just dismiss those people. The transition, fighting climate is going to hurt. It is going to cost people their livelihoods. It is going to affect communities like the gas fields of Wyoming, and we need to show some compassion and some sympathy and empathy for those communities. That's what I was hoping would come through in that conversation with that man.

RICHARD: A lot of these jobs are really dangerous, and they've been very much involved in giving us reliable energy for many decades. Even if we have to transition away, there does need to be some compassion and some empathy for people whose livelihoods may well be threatened or changed.

ASHLEY AHEARN: Well, and I think the other thing that's often missing from these conversations is, okay, if not coal or if not gas, then what in these communities? Why do people still live here? How will they feed their families if this is no longer the industry of note in their community? And coming with some solutions and some other options would also be a great way to be having these conversations as opposed to, like you said, which are just condemning those industries.

RICHARD: Our show is called Let's Find Common Ground. Do you think that there are opportunities for people from different parts of the country who have very different ways of looking at the world to find common ground?

ASHLEY AHEARN: I appreciate the premise of your show. I think it's important that we still strive for that and try to create spaces where at least those conversations can happen. I also don't know that we're going to find the common ground we need to to address climate change. Some of these entrenched belief systems are so strong, both on the Liberal side and on the Conservative side in this country that the science doesn't lie, the numbers are really not negotiable, and... I did a whole episode about this in the show. The idea of compromise and finding that common ground oftentimes does not get us to the solutions that are necessary, that the urgency and the crisis that we face requires of us to do in terms of emission cuts or conservation measures for the sage-grouse before we lose this bird.

The parallels there between the grouse and climate action, I think, are very striking to me. But I really applaud you for trying to find that common ground. I have gotten so much from the conversations that I've had with people here in my community who see things differently than I do. I do think that there is an opportunity for conversation. I just stop a little bit short of saying that we're going to find agreement. I hate to end on a downer note.

ASHLEY: Well, let me ask you, would you ever move back to a city, or are you there for good now?

ASHLEY AHEARN: It's a long life. Never say never, but I can't picture the job that would get me back to a city right now, and that would probably be the only reason I would move back to a city. If my family needs me back in Massachusetts, that's one thing, but it's going to be a tough sell to get me out of the sagebrush. I think I'm entrenched.

Thanks for having me, Ashley, squirreling me out and bringing me on. It's really great.

ASHLEY: Of course, of course.

RICHARD: Ashley Ahearn, the other Ashley here on this episode of Let's Find Common Ground. She certainly gave us a lot to think about.

ASHLEY: Yeah, she really did burst her bubble by moving and making friends with an entirely different tribe, really, and also learning a lot more about the place she'd moved to through that.

RICHARD: Yeah, it's one thing to talk about bursting your bubble, but she really did it. And if you want to find out more about her work and what she does, Grouse is a good

place to start. That's a wonderful series of podcasts, and you can find Grouse by searching the word Grouse, G-R-O-U-S-E, on your favorite podcast app.

ASHLEY: This is Let's Find Common Ground. Find more of our shows at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts. We're also on Facebook. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies, and thanks for joining us.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.