

Creating Change

One person can't solve every problem in our world. Instead if everyone focuses on one passion, change will be created.

BY JESSICA ROTHSTEIN AND LUCY LOWENSCHUSS

► As part of the production team for Community Ensemble Theatre's fall show of "Fahrenheit 451," we sat in the otherwise empty auditorium, watching the last scene of the show play out on stage. Each book character, representing a different book, said a line from their story and then settled in to read their book. Each character had memorized and taken on a book to keep the knowledge alive in a time of government control and the burning of books. Each person carried with them only one book; they each saved just one story. But together, they created a library. This idea of creating change piece by piece to build a whole movement stuck with us.

The common themes in "Fahrenheit 451," the book and the play, are book banning, censorship and government control. These are all important themes in today's world, but they've become rote morals of an important story. We believe that the more timely lesson from the show is

not the one that points out the problems, but the one that suggests how to fix them.

It's hard to look around the world right now and figure out where to start. There is so much that needs changing, and it can feel overwhelming. It's impossible for a single person to do all of it.

But nowadays there's a mindset that we have to. Cue apathy, exhaustion and guilt.

That mindset, though, is culturally specific and more around individualism, isolationism and lone heroes than actually creating real change.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, a plant ecologist, talks about an alternative idea that is common in some Native cultures, including the Potawatomi — interdependence. Kimmerer points out two examples of how natural interdependence works: aster and goldenrod flowers, and squash, beans and corn (three vegetables often referred to as "the three sisters"). In both cases, by growing together, the pair of flowers and trio of vegeta-

bles all thrive more than if they were to grow alone.

Aster and goldenrod grow together in the wild. The contrast of aster's purple to goldenrod's yellow makes them more visible to bees and other pollinators.

"Growing together, both receive more pollinator visits than they would if they were growing alone," Kimmerer said. "It's a testable hypothesis. It's a question of science, a question of art and a question of beauty."

Similarly, growing the three sisters together produces more food than if they were grown separately. The corn blocks the sun and creates a ladder that the beans climb; the squash reduces weeds and retains moisture in the soil; the beans are a natural nitrogen fertilizer.

"The beauty of the partnership is that each plant does what it does in order to increase its own growth," Kimmerer said. "But as it happens, when the individuals flourish, so does the whole."

The ways that nature shows individualism reminds Kimmerer of one of the basic teachings of her people: the most important thing is everyone finding their unique gift and how to use it in the world. She describes a gift as something that you love too much to lose, so you commit yourself to it. She suggests remembering back to your childhood.

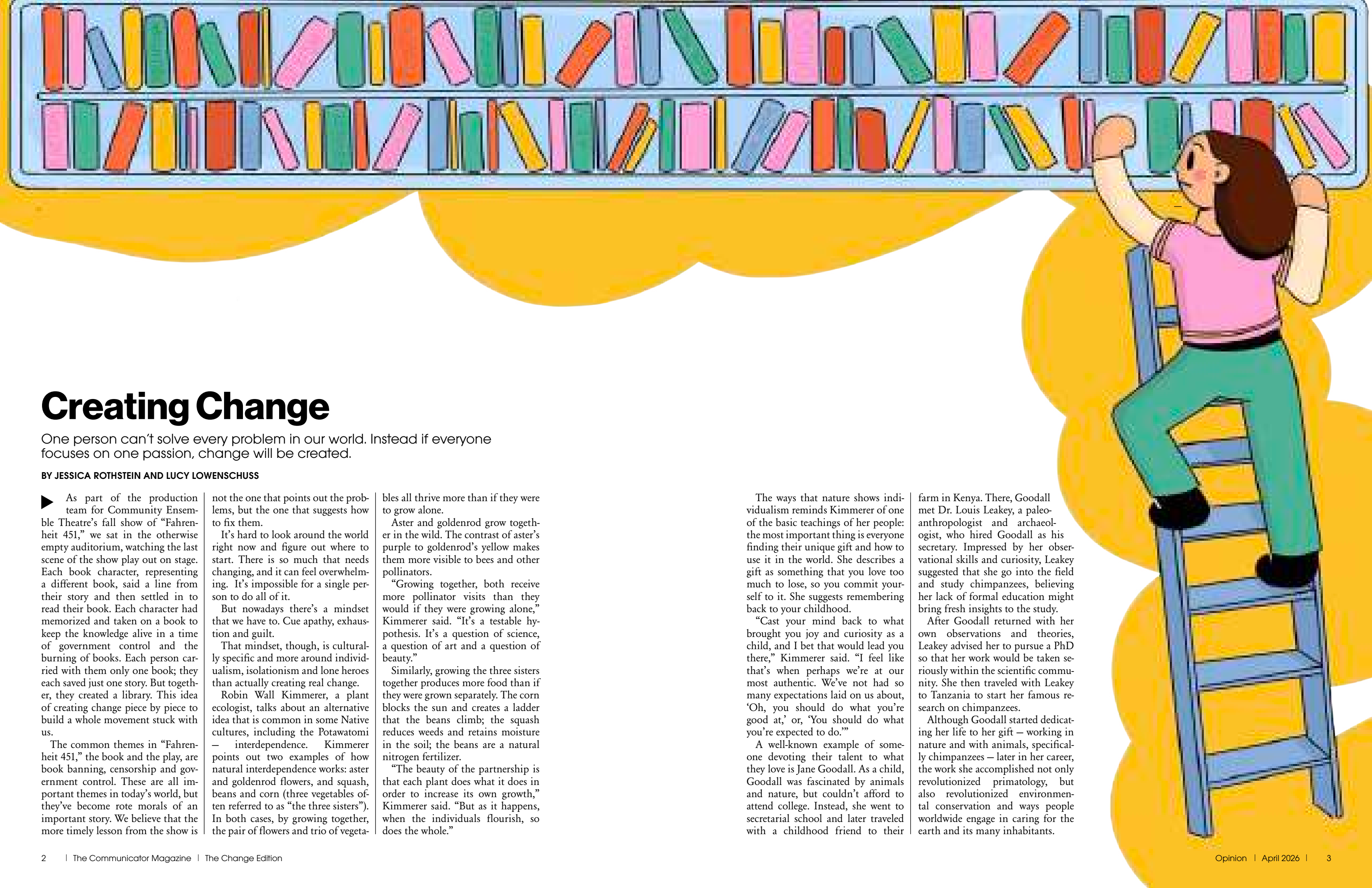
"Cast your mind back to what brought you joy and curiosity as a child, and I bet that would lead you there," Kimmerer said. "I feel like that's when perhaps we're at our most authentic. We've not had so many expectations laid on us about, 'Oh, you should do what you're good at,' or, 'You should do what you're expected to do.'"

A well-known example of someone devoting their talent to what they love is Jane Goodall. As a child, Goodall was fascinated by animals and nature, but couldn't afford to attend college. Instead, she went to secretarial school and later traveled with a childhood friend to their

farm in Kenya. There, Goodall met Dr. Louis Leakey, a paleo-anthropologist and archaeologist, who hired Goodall as his secretary. Impressed by her observational skills and curiosity, Leakey suggested that she go into the field and study chimpanzees, believing her lack of formal education might bring fresh insights to the study.

After Goodall returned with her own observations and theories, Leakey advised her to pursue a PhD so that her work would be taken seriously within the scientific community. She then traveled with Leakey to Tanzania to start her famous research on chimpanzees.

Although Goodall started dedicating her life to her gift — working in nature and with animals, specifically chimpanzees — later in her career, the work she accomplished not only revolutionized primatology, but also revolutionized environmental conservation and ways people worldwide engage in caring for the earth and its many inhabitants.



"When I was young, I wanted to live with animals, preferably in Africa, and write books about them," Goodall said. "I wouldn't have dreamed of studying chimpanzees because they seemed so absolutely exotic and how would I ever be able to do something as amazing as that?"

Goodall is a famous example of using her gift, but your gift doesn't have to be based on research, nor does it have to have Goodall's level

of global impact.

A close-to-home example of dedicating your gift is CET director Emily Wilson-Tobin. She has participated in musical theatre and plays since she was young, and she still acts in many productions. Wilson-Tobin bases her life work on this early love and, as director of CET, she plays a key part in its productions. Last year, CET put on "A Midsummer Night's Dream" using inspiration from Chappell Roan's "Pink Pony Club" to create a celebration of queer identities. In preparation for the show, the production members learned about drag and even saw a live drag performance because Wilson-Tobin wanted to encourage us as a group to think about diversity, identity and freedom of expression.

This year's play, "Fahrenheit 451" — a commentary on authoritarianism — created a different opportunity for discussing important topics. Wilson-Tobin encouraged students to be aware

of current events in our world and work to be agents for change. In these small and localized ways, Wilson-Tobin has inspired student engagement with important contemporary issues. This is how dedicating your gift of something you love can affect and help others and the world.

Your gift may be big or small. Jane Goodall is an example of high-level work. Emily Wilson-Tobin has reached hundreds of students. But small actions also create big change.

Writer Andrew Aydin worked as a Digital Director and Policy Advisor in the Washington, D.C., office of civil rights activist and U.S. Congressman from Georgia, John Lewis. When the 2016 Republican presidential nominee openly stated he would implement a national database to track Muslims, Aydin took a stand.

"I grew my beard out because I work on Capitol Hill, and I want every one of my colleagues and every one of the members of Congress who sympathizes and empathizes with that position to know who they're talking about and what it is they really are saying to America," Aydin said. "We have to use nonviolence not just as a tool and tactic, but as a way of life and a way of living."

You never know where your gift will lead. Like-

ly, though, it will not be a linear path. John Lewis, a prominent figure in the Civil Right movement, wanted to participate in creating change from a young age. When Lewis was 15 years old he met with Martin Luther King Jr., hoping to desegregate Troy State and be the first black student to attend. King told Lewis that his parents would have to give their permission because of the risks.

His parents decided not to allow Lewis to move ahead.

"They wanted to be supportive, but they were afraid — not just for themselves, but for those around us, our friends and neighbors," Lewis said. "I was heartbroken, but it was their decision."

In June of 1963, Lewis was 23 years old and chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Ahead of the landmark March on Washington, a SNCC representative was invited to the White House. No one else wanted to go, so, as SNCC chair, Lewis was assigned the trip. Little did he know this trip to the White House would lead to him speaking at the 1963 March on Washington — and would jumpstart decades of equal rights activism.

There is a library of possibilities. Your gift could lead you to be a kitten lover, trash-picker-upper, photographer, basketball player or a community builder. Your gift might change and

grow as you change and grow as a person. As long as you can identify your passion, you can dedicate yourself to your gift. A lot is going on in the world, but you don't have to worry about changing or fixing everything. You can trust others also to find and contribute with their gifts.

At the end of "Fahrenheit 451," the main character, Guy Montag, joins the books as Edgar Allen Poe. Every book person has their book memorized. By themselves, they are their singular book, but together they create a library.

If everyone devotes themselves to their personal gift and brings that gift to the world, change will be created. The combination of individual passion and interdependence is such an important and remarkably relevant take-away.

"The most important thing each of us can know is our unique gift and how to use it in the world," Kimmerer said. "Individuality is cherished and nurtured because, in order for the whole to flourish, each of us has to be strong in who we are and carry our gifts with conviction, so they can be shared with others."

