

ANGELA HENDERSON



If you had an unlimited supply of money and/or time to tackle one problem, what would it be, and what would you do?

I would design curricula for young people at varying levels of education (sixth grade, ninth grade, 12th grade, college) to help them develop the tools they need to actively participate in our representative democracy. Children in the U.S. are taught that our government is “by the people and for the people,” but they are not taught the skills necessary to enable them to affect change at the local, state, national and international level. I want the young people of the United States to know that the events in our country’s history of which we are most proud — the framing of the Constitution, the abolition of slavery, the ratification of the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote, the advent of the eight-hour workday, the successes of the civil rights movement, the passage of environmental laws — didn’t just happen. Each of those tremendous changes occurred because thousands of ordinary people spent thousands of hours over the course of many years organizing to create that change. I want every kid and adult in America to know that whoever they are, they have the capacity and the duty to make this country live up to its highest ideals.

Angela Henderson is the managing director of the Lord Leebrick Theatre Company. About her background, she explains:

My early childhood was spent in northern Idaho. I grew up in a log cabin that my parents built out in the woods. We had electricity, but no plumbing, and for most of the time no telephone. That means we had an outhouse and created back porch showers when the weather was good enough, and we had a CB radio for emergencies. When I moved to a suburban California town, it was a huge transition, learning to use a dishwasher and wearing shoes so my feet didn’t burn on the asphalt. I have a deep appreciation for what my parents were attempting, growing our food and living simply, and I also appreciate the opportunities I had in California. I can’t imagine I’d be working in theater if I had stayed in Idaho, and theater has been a major force in my life.

Tell me one or two things (people, historical movements or documents, etc.) that you admire in or about the United States.

A time in history that gets me excited is the time of the New Deal, specifically the arts programs like the Federal Theater Project. It seems like a dream that the government put artists to work to stimulate the economy, and,

at first, there was a surprising amount of artistic freedom. In the arts we are always trying to come up with new and creative ways to explain, or argue, the benefits of the arts. We have studies that show that youth participating in the arts will have better SAT scores and that the arts contribute to economic development in a variety of ways. It is much more difficult to describe the ways in which the arts fulfill something deeper, something about connecting with people. While the Federal Theater Project was scrapped because of politics, it was one example of the American government not needing to be convinced that the arts have value.

What makes you hopeful about the country right now?

It is certainly easier to recall the awful things happening on the national and international scene than to identify what makes me hopeful. That said, this week I was inspired by walking to the theater to see small groups of teenagers, huddled together in every corner completely focused on Shakespeare, learning their lines for the summer camp production of *The Tempest*. I am hopeful when I see groups of people working together, especially in the arts and especially young people. They are getting to know each other and relying on each other, despite whatever differences may exist. The act of creating together, collaborating, is a transformative experience that creates a lasting bond.

How are you participating in making the U.S. a better place to live?

After the last presidential election I gave up on politics, at least on any belief in national politics. Now I am trying to keep my focus and energy local. I am a CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) volunteer, looking out for kids in the foster care system. I’m also on the board of Sparkplug Dance, which delivers top-notch dance programs for kids with and without disabilities all over town. My job, at Lord Leebrick, is a terrific place to contribute to community. We bring people together, both artists and audiences, to experience theater that means something and stories that provoke conversation.

If you had an unlimited supply of money and/or time to tackle one problem, what would it be, and what would you do?

At the top of a long list of things that I would change with an unlimited supply of money and time is the American educational system. We have failed to create an active and engaged citizenry in our current system. In some places we are not even providing a basic education or a safe place to go to school. (Some might wonder if those in power want an educational system that inspires good citizens.) I truly believe if the average person understands the system and how to work for change, the rest of the things on my list would be resolved. Oh, and my educational system would include tons of theater, dance, visual art and music in the curriculum as a way of exploring the history and cultures of the world.

Yvonne Braun is an assistant professor in the UO’s Department of Sociology. Braun grew up in New York and has been interested in social and environmental justice since her late teens. She does research on communities impacted by a series of dams in Lesotho, Southern Africa, and her volunteer work in N.Y., California and India has included working with children and adults with special needs, hospice work with low income and homeless population, support groups and education on sexual violence and movements to protect low income housing.

Tell me one or two things (people, historical movements or documents, etc.) that you admire in or about the United States.

Fannie Lou Hamer, Mose Wright, Martin Luther King, Jr., Howard Zinn, Amy Goodman, Juan Gonzales, Cindy Sheehan, Michael Ratner, Mumia Abu-Jamal. These are all Americans that I admire greatly for their ability and courage to speak their truth in the face of some very difficult circumstances, often with great personal costs. But they believe or believed in working towards something larger than themselves, towards building a better and more humane society. They remind me of the potential in each of us.

What makes you hopeful about the country right now?

In the last year the climate in this country feels like it has shifted a bit and in a good way to me. More people seem to be recognizing the dangers of criminalizing dissent and the threats on civil liberties from the current administration. I see more collective action across issues, more open discussion about the war and empire, and a general sense of rising hopefulness about our ability to change the course of this country.



How are you participating in making the U.S. a better place to live?

Right now I feel I contribute most through teaching. At the UO, I teach sociology classes on social issues and social movements, gender and developing areas. In all of these I try to encourage critical thinking in my students and to internationalize their sociological imaginations, pushing them to see ourselves as part of a much larger global community. Much like the local communities in which we live, this global community is stratified in particular ways with often staggering inequalities. While we explore our participation and embeddedness in these global/local relationships, I try to have us as individuals recognize our own ability to develop a vision for ourselves and our communities and society, to be conscious of alternatives, to create change or work towards saving parts of our communities in danger of being lost. This spring term, students in one class “created” 10 social movement organizations around issues they felt passionate about and designed incredibly creative and realistic tactics and strategies to meet these goals — their energy, ideas, and enthusiasm make this a better place to live for me.

If you had an unlimited supply of money and/or time to tackle one problem, what would it be and what would you do?

Just one?! At this moment, I would focus on addressing domestic and sexual violence in our community and society. I think we need more education, awareness, and legislative action as well as more funding to adequately address the depth and invisibility of these issues of violence that permeate our families, community and larger society.

For a longer version of this story, head to www.eugeneweekly.com

COOL DOCUMENT LINKS

Read ‘em in the original! (Or in transcript form.)
It’s always good to know what these things actually say.

The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and other amendments (including our faves: the 13th, 14th, 15th and 19th) are all available in the National Archives at www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/charters.html

Some others we like:

The Gettysburg Address (1863)
www.loc.gov/exhibits/gadd/images/Gettysburg-2.jpg

The Port Huron Statement (1962)
www.tomhayden.com/porthuron.htm

The Civil Rights Act (1964)
usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/laws/majorlaw/civilr19.htm

The Voting Rights Act (1965)
www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=100&page=transcript

Title IX of the U.S. Education Amendments of 1972
www.usdoj.gov/crt/cor/coord/titleixstat.htm