his past year, we got people talking. To each other, no less. And talking about big things like: Solutions, civic engagement, and social change. In this day and age of divided party lines, stomp-my-feet and cold shoulder politics, we think this is what passes for radical civic change and is a testament to the idea that is The Citizen.

In April, we launched our Citizen Speaks series, with sponsorship from Comcast NBCUniversal, FS Investments, Campus Apartments and Dilworth Paxson. We kicked things off by getting five university presidents from campuses across Philly in the same room—for the first time ever—to answer questions before an audience of nearly 300 guests. The takeaway was that they’re all gunning for the same
problem-solving ideals, like us, and maybe should end up in the same room as collaborators more often.

Then, in November, we gathered up some top chefs—and one actual Top Chef—and asked them to think critically about their role as social change leaders in the industry. Jose Garces and Marc Vetri shared thoughts about food access and fair wages, Valerie Erwin and New York’s Matthew Weingarten shared thoughts about the nexus of social impact and food, and it was all moderated by acclaimed national food writer Jane Black.

In addition to our big gatherings, we hosted local disruptor happy hours and political debates, all drawing diverse and energetic crowds. And young, too. It turns out the most wired generation in history craves the most old-fashioned kind of social networking: Actually meeting in person to work on making our city better together. At our events, as on thephiladelphiacitizen.org, our goal is to explore ideas that make you think and that can lead to constructive change. When, after all, was the last time you read a newspaper and said to yourself: Huh. What an interesting idea? That’s what we’re after.

And that’s what you’ve gotten when, for example, a day after the Parkland, FL school shooting, Roxanne Patel Shepelavy, executive editor, zeroed in on the four states with Extreme Risk Protection Orders on the books—something that ought to be a non-partisan first step in the gun wars. Or when board member, Diana Lind, suggested ways that the city’s HQ2 bid could be the catalyst for equitable economic development across Philly. Or when contributor Quinn O’Callaghan highlighted the radical idea by Upper Darby Police Chief Michael Chitwood to train his officers in empathy as a way to improve relations with the community.

In September, we turned two and my initial instinct was: Who cares? Media too often tends toward self-congratulation. But we decided to throw a different kind of birthday bash. In keeping with our founding ethos, we took the opportunity to shine a light on the innovators and instigators we’ve written about, the doers among us who were the reason why we started this whole thing in the first place.

We honored people like Justine Haemmerli who founded Make It Right PHL, an online compendium of ways average citizens can take local civic action; Sylvester Mobley, the Iraqi war vet and founder of Coded By Kids, on a mission to provide tech education to inner-city youth; and Nick Bayer, the founder and CEO of Saxbys, whose headquarters hosted our event and who is a committed social impact driver. The night was full of people like them connecting and engaging—something that felt like bringing our stories to life. At the event, we also kicked off our “Wall of Action,” an old-school strategy to connect citizens with organizations and people working on the topics they care about.

The experiment worked: By the end of the three-hour event, we had connected 61 volunteers to 22 local organizations. Now, we want to take that success to scale and turn a wall of yarn into a web of citywide civic action.

As you read on, you’ll see all the work we’ve accomplished in the past year, but I like to think of ourselves as forward-thinking, looking ahead to the next problem and who’s going to solve it.

So, here’s to 2018, where we’ll keep tackling the issues Philly throws our way and get more people talking about the solutions. At the end of the day, we believe media ought to be more than a dispensary of information; it ought to provide more than the stenography of who yelled at whom yesterday. Media ought to bring citizens together and make it a little easier for them to be part of a greater whole. We’ll keep working to do that, and we hope you tag along for the ride.

Sincerely,

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