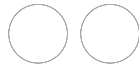
Silicon Valley's Hottest Date: Laurene Powell J

She's inventing a new brand of philanthropic power. What is her vision and where is it takin

Story by David Montgomery Photos by Nigel Parry

JUNE 11, 2018



Laurene Powell Jobs — like the inventors and disrupters who were all around her — was thinking big. It was 2004, and she was an East Coast transplant — sprung from a cage in West Milford, N.J., as her musical idol Bruce Springsteen might put it — acclimating to the audacious sense of possibility suffusing the laboratories, garages and office parks of Silicon Valley. She could often be found at a desk in a rented office in Palo Alto, Calif., working a phone and an Apple computer. There, her own creation was beginning to take shape. It would involve philanthropy … technology … social change — she was charting the destination as she made the journey.

She eventually named the project Emerson Collective after Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of her favorite writers. In time it would become perhaps the most influential product of Silicon Valley that you've never heard of. Yet at first, growth was slow. The work took a back seat to raising her three children and managing the care of her husband, Steve Jobs, as he battled the cancer that killed him in 2011 at age 56, followed by a period of working through family grief.

She inherited his fortune, now worth something like $20 billion, and became the sixth-richest woman on the planet. By 2014, Emerson Collective was up to 10 employees. "For the first few years I worked here, there would be people who would say, 'Who?' " says the eighth hire, Anne Marie Burgoyne, director of grants. " 'Is there someone in the Valley who's famous

whose last name is Emerson?' That seemed like a fair question. The Valley is a place of reputation, so it's logical to ask whose last name is Emerson. Nobody knew who we were."

Powell Jobs, now 54, wanted it that way, and she wished she could stay out of the spotlight. She wrote a short essay on the sublimity of anonymous giving that she handed out to employees. One of her staff recently gave it to me to read but not to quote: Her policy on anonymity is anonymous. She was frequently seen but not heard — seated with Michelle Obama during the State of the Union address in 2012, vacationing with former D.C. mayor Adrian Fenty, whom she dated a few years ago after he moved to California. When she did speak, she seemed most comfortable having wonkishly impersonal conversations at forums with, say, a Stanford entrepreneurship professor on the subject of "Injecting Innovation Into Intractable Systems," or with musician Will.I.Am on "Art, Activism and Impact."

All the while, she tended to Emerson Collective, quietly assembling a kind of Justice League of practical progressives: Arne Duncan, education secretary in the Obama administration, came on board to tackle gun violence in Chicago. Russlynn Ali, assistant education secretary for civil rights in the Obama administration, co-founded Emerson's affiliate for education reform, the XQ Institute, where none other than storied urban fashion entrepreneur Marc Ecko has landed as chief creative and strategy officer. ("I feel like everything I've done up until this moment was for this reason," the former T-shirt designer for Spike Lee and Chuck D told me.) Andy Karsner, assistant energy secretary for renewable energy in the George W. Bush administration, runs environmental programs. Jennifer Palmieri, communications director for Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign, consults on communications strategy. Dan Tangherlini, head of the General Services Administration under Obama (and D.C. city administrator under Fenty) is the chief financial officer. Peter Lattman, former deputy business editor of the New York Times, oversees media investments and grants. Marshall Fitz, former vice president of immigration policy at the Center for American Progress, runs immigration reform efforts.

Then, last year, Powell Jobs unleashed a series of dramatic moves across a three-dimensional chessboard of American culture. In July, Emerson Collective purchased a majority stake in the Atlantic, a 161-year-old pillar of the journalistic establishment. In September, an arm of the collective and Hollywood's Entertainment Industry Foundation co-opted the four major networks in prime time to simultaneously present an hour of live television, featuring dozens of celebrities inviting the nation to reconceive high school. Over the following weeks, the collective partnered with the French artist JR to create two monumental pieces of guerrilla art on either side of the U.S.-Mexico border that went viral on social media as satirical critiques of the border wall. In October, she bought the second-largest stake — about 20

percent — in the estimated $2.5 billion holding company that owns the NBA's Wizards, the NHL's Capitals, Capital One Arena and several other sports ventures.

The pace continued this year. In February, Golden State Warriors star Kevin Durant announced he was committing $10 million to help create a Washington-area branch of a program that Powell Jobs had co-founded, which supports students to and through college in nine cities. In March, Emerson Collective helped bring director Alejandro Iñárritu's shattering virtual-reality installation"Carne y Arena" — an immersive experience that simulates what it's like for an immigrant to cross the border — to an abandoned church in Northeast Washington.

She had our attention now — but what was she doing? Emerson Collective did not appear to conform to traditional models of philanthropy. Its worldview seemed more or less clear — center-left politics with a dash of techie libertarianism — but its grand plan was unstated while its methods of spurring social change implied that simply funding good works is no longer enough. The engine Powell Jobs had designed was equal parts think tank, foundation, venture capital fund, media baron, arts patron and activist hive. Certainly, it was an original creation — and potentially a powerful one. "I'd like us to be a place where great leaders want to come and try to do difficult things," Powell Jobs told me recently. "I think we bring a lot more to the table than money. ... If you want to just be a check writer, you'd run out of money and not solve anything."

Philanthropist Laurene Powell Jobs meets with colleagues at the XQ Institute, an education reform organization supported by Collective, in Oakland, Calif. (Noah Berger for The Washington Post)

Laurene Powell made her first foray into philanthropy near the beginning of high school in West Milford. She learned of the work of the Southern Poverty Law Center and dipped into her savings to send a cashier's check of about $20. She got a form thank-you letter back from civil rights crusader Morris Dees. "They would reliably write to me a couple of times a year," she says. "I would read them over and over, and they told really beautiful stories. I was always animated by the notion of who gets the opportunity and who doesn't."

Her father was a Marine Corps pilot who was killed in an airborne collision when she was 3. Her mother was left with four children under the age of 6 and not much money. She scrambled for ways to make ends meet, setting an example of "work ethic and commitment to focusing on what you need to do to be successful or, in her case, to survive," Laurene's older brother Brad told me. Laurene and her three brothers — two older, one younger — always had jobs. The local paper route was passed down from one sibling to the next. There was no money for the family to travel, so Laurene collected stamps of countries she would like to visit

someday. (Their mother later married a school guidance counselor, and Powell Jobs has a younger sister and three stepsiblings from that marriage.)

“School was the thing that really worked for me,” she says. “I did well in school, and so it was a nice, positive, rewarding cycle for me to want to spend as much time there and to excel.” Fewer than half the students at her high school went on to college, according to Powell Jobs, but she and her brothers were determined. With student loans, multiple jobs, work-study and a small family commitment, she paid for enrollment in the University of Pennsylvania, where she studied economics, political science and French. “I know it in my core that, without that, I never would have had the opportunities that I have in my life,” she says. Education would become Emerson Collective’s seminal issue. “For the students who I work with, I understand that school is their way out,” she says. “It’s really their portal to anything larger than what they see around them. That was true for me.”

After Penn, she landed a job as a quantitative analyst with the fixed-income trading department at Goldman Sachs. “She was one of those people who interfaced between the super geniuses and the guys like me who were more normal,” Jon Corzine, who ran the fixed-income division before going on to become governor of New Jersey, told me. In other words, she translated esoteric research into strategies that traders and clients could use. “She was just a strong personality on the floor, because of her intelligence and her ability to relate to people.” At a time when there weren’t many women on the trading floor, Corzine says, she was one of a few “pioneers ... who were prepared to deal courageously with a world that wasn’t always trying to assess people on the quality of their minds and performance.”

She loved the work but left within a few years; wanting to be an entrepreneur, she applied to the Stanford Graduate School of Business. One evening in October 1989, she and a fellow business school student arrived late for a guest lecture where nearly all the seats were taken. They sat in the aisle, then grabbed seats in the front row. The guest lecturer was led to the seat beside her. “I looked to my right, and there was a beautiful girl there, so we started chatting while I was waiting to be introduced,” Steve Jobs told biographer Walter Isaacson.

It had been Laurene’s friend’s idea to come to the lecture in the first place. “I knew that Steve Jobs was the speaker, but the face I thought of was that of Bill Gates,” she told Isaacson. “I had them mixed up.” After the lecture, Jobs invited her to dinner. They walked to a vegetarian restaurant in Palo Alto and stayed for four hours. In March 1991, when he was 36 and she was 27, they were married in a historic lodge in Yosemite National Park. “Steve and I were together for 22 years starting from the day we met and never apart,” she told me. “And it’s the greatest blessing of my life.”

From left: Powell Jobs with husband Steve Jobs in 2007. He died in 2011. Powell Jobs and son Reed meet Hillary Clinton after a Clinton at Stanford University in 2016. (Paul Sakuma/Associated Press; Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

Emerson Collective's headquarters occupies three floors of a building on a corner in Palo Alto. The walls carry prints such as Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother," plus edgier fare such as Adam Pendleton's room-length collage mural inspired by Malcolm X's "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech. On a recent Monday, employees had flown in from across the country for a periodic day of all-hands meetings, when grants, investments, campaigns and strategies would be reviewed. The hushed hum of exam day prevailed.

Powell Jobs and I talked the next day in a conference room, where she explained how the collective, which has about 130 employees, works. "Really important is to be very, very close to the individuals, families and communities that we're hoping to serve," she said. "If we're not listening to them, if we're not thinking of how do we equip them with the tools to solve their own problems, if we don't understand that actually the wisdom of the community far surpasses our own, then we're in the wrong business. If people are in this building for more than a few days in a row and not out in the field, then we need to check each other."

"There's a sense here that failure is not the death knell, that it actually can be a badge of honor and a learning experience," she continued. "All of our country would benefit from having that attitude towards failure."

She set up the collective as a limited liability company rather than a foundation, not unlike the three-year-old Chan Zuckerberg Initiative established by Priscilla Chan and Mark Zuckerberg. This gives flexibility to do more than just make grants to nonprofit groups. "When philanthropists are engaged in the type of system change that Laurene is," Laura Arrillaga-Andreessen, a venture philanthropy expert at Stanford and a friend of Powell Jobs's, told me later, "you have to be as nimble as possible because ecosystems are constantly shifting, stakeholders are developing new positions on particular issues, political contexts change, economic forces evolve."

Emerson invests in private companies, Powell Jobs said, not because the goal is to make money but because Silicon Valley has shown her that "amazing entrepreneurs who … are 100 percent aligned with our mission" can find solutions that might not occur to a nonprofit. Emerson is also able to back advocacy groups, launch its own activist campaigns and contribute to political organizations. It has given $2.6 million at the federal level since 2013, primarily to Emerge America, dedicated to recruiting Democratic women candidates, and to Priorities USA, a Democratic super PAC. Powell Jobs herself is a registered independent and

has made about $4 million in federal campaign contributions since 1997, mainly to Democratic candidates and organizations in line with issues of concern to Emerson.

The LLC structure also means Emerson need not disclose details of its assets and spending. “The majority of her philanthropy, no one knows about,” Arrillaga-Andreessen said. However, a tax filing Powell Jobs signed last fall offers a clue to the scale, showing that a related entity called the Emerson Collective Foundation began 2017 with $1.2 billion available, largely from Disney stocks and bonds, a fruit of Steve Jobs’s sale of Pixar to Disney in 2006.

For the crew Powell Jobs has assembled, being tapped to join the collective was like being called to a mission. In early 2016, shortly after he had left the Obama administration, Arne Duncan mentioned to Powell Jobs his idea for a novel experiment to confront the gun carnage in his home town of Chicago. “I said that I can’t guarantee you that I’ll be successful — I may fail,” Duncan recalled to me. “She said basically, ‘I want to take on some of society’s most intractable problems for the next 25 years and then pass the torch to someone else. So why don’t I support you in that work?’ … I think she was actually attracted to the level of difficulty.”

From his think tank perch in the immigration reform movement, Marshall Fitz watched Emerson coming over the horizon with surprise. “The common kind of question that is asked out in Silicon Valley and certainly asked at Emerson is, ‘What if?’ ” he told me. “As a D.C. policy-wonk guy, we never asked that question because, one, we rarely had the resources or the time and space to ask the question. Because of the culture, rarely do you have the creativity to think fully outside the box in a way that she was clearly already bringing to the table.”

To make sure Emerson is thinking as audaciously as the entrepreneurs all around it, Powell Jobs will go on “tech tours” with her friend Ron Conway, the legendary Silicon Valley angel investor. They visit the next big things in the area, as they did Pinterest, Facebook and Airbnb before they were all that. “What’s fascinating is that by listening to all these founders, she has basically put founders at the head of each of the sectors of Emerson Collective, so that she’s really funding entrepreneurs inside the collective who want to disrupt their spaces,” Conway told me. “She wants people to innovate in their sector — education reform, getting the Dream Act passed. So Emerson has become like an accelerator for causes around social change.”

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In the mid-1990s, Powell Jobs began tutoring 12th-graders in a nearby high school. Many of them would be the first in their families to go to college — if they could get there. Filled with racial, ethnic and class tension, the school happened to have been the setting for "Dangerous Minds," the 1995 film starring Michelle Pfeiffer. "We found such a failed system," Powell Jobs explained later to a lecture hall full of Stanford students, where this time *she* was the honored speaker. "It needed the type of entrepreneurship and problem solving that I was doing in the for-profit space and that I thought was a higher and better use of my life to do in the social sector."

She and her friend and fellow tutor, Carlos Watson, who would go on to co-create OZY Media, co-founded College Track in the struggling community of East Palo Alto in 1997. Their central insight, which might seem obvious now but wasn't then, is that students without resources or a family tradition of higher education need support that other families take for granted: how to believe in yourself, how to find your voice and tap your passion, how to write an application essay, how to assemble loans and scholarships.

Now in nine cities — Durant's branch in Prince George's will be the 10th, and two are planned for the District — the program follows students for 10 years, starting in ninth grade and for six years after high school, if needed to graduate from college. Powell Jobs continues to personally mentor students during the transition from high school to college. To her students, she was and is "Laurene," not the wife or widow of someone big. "I didn't learn who Laurene really was until I was about to graduate from college, six years after I met her," one of Powell Jobs's mentees named Mayra told me. Now 32, she is an undocumented immigrant brought from Mexico as a child, and she asked that her last name not be published because President Trump has ordered the cancellation of the program that protects her and other "dreamers" from deportation. She went on to graduate school and now works in public health in the Bay Area.

Mayra's immigration status is an important detail in this story. She entered College Track in 2001. The first time she ever disclosed her status was in the college application essay she worked on with Powell Jobs. This was around when Powell Jobs discovered the issue of undocumented immigrants, as the first class of College Track kids was applying to college.

Despite knowing no other country but America, they could be denied financial aid and the ability to work. Powell Jobs naively thought it was just an absurd glitch in the system that would be quickly fixed once politicians heard about it. “I didn’t know that there was another side to the argument,” she told me. “I still do not think there is.”

She became an advocate for immigration reform and began seeking ways to influence that debate. This is how the moving parts in her machine for making change became more intricate, with one issue leading to another. “If we actually want to be helpful to the individual and their family, we can’t just focus on education, we have to focus on the whole ecosystem so that they can live much more healthy, productive lives where they are,” she says. “Every single community that we work with in College Track is dealing with some issue on the spectrum of serious, poisonous, toxic environmental issues in their air, water and soil. I thought for a long time we’d like to have a practice around that, but it wasn’t until I found the right people that we started building it out.”

This period in the late 1990s and early 2000s coincided with Steve Jobs driving Apple toward a series of innovations, including the Apple Store, iTunes and the iPod. And he supported his wife’s own innovations. “He loved the work of College Track,” Powell Jobs says. “And he was as offended by the dreamers’ situation as I was. He felt like these things were no-brainers. … And he was equally frustrated that the schools deliver very different education across the country.” Their own children biked to the public schools in Palo Alto. The family lived in a house like all the others on a regular street, not in a gated community.

Steve Jobs’s cancer was diagnosed in 2003. Powell Jobs is frank about the pain of “losing my husband and life partner — seeing him through a terrible illness, then losing him and raising my kids as a single mom. And in doing it, dealing with the public in that way. Having to grieve but also manage the public grieving, and buttress my kids as they managed the same thing.” She told me the experience may well inform her in her current efforts: “There are a lot of people who have experienced loss and suffering, but sometimes they haven’t done the work to allow them to connect to someone else’s loss and suffering.”

Even when the couple knew there would soon come a time when Laurene would have a whole lot of money to spend as she saw fit, they didn’t talk much about how she would go about it. Steve left it to her to design that future. “He had a lot of faith in me, and he definitely believed I could figure out many things,” she says.

She remains in close touch with Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple. “She deeply understands Apple,” Cook told me. “She’s one of my most trusted advisers,” on subjects such as privacy, immigration and education. “She takes on these fairly multidimensional, complex issues and

sort of unpeels them layer by layer, and I think has positioned Emerson really well to make a huge difference in the world."

The recent dramatic pickup of Emerson's activity coincides with Powell Jobs's youngest child having left for college. "The ambition has been there for a long time," she says, "and only now it's more and more possible to work in this way."

"I'm very aware of the fact that we're all just passing through here," she adds. "I feel like I'm hitting my stride now. … Change doesn't happen quickly. It happens slowly, slowly, and then all at once. Sometimes that's 10 years, sometimes it's 20 years, and sometimes you don't live to see it. … It is my goal to effectively deploy resources. If there's nothing left when I die, that's just fine."

Powell Jobs visits the Oakland, Calif., branch of College Track, a college preparatory program she co-founded. Flanking her are left, College Track's regional executive director for Northern California, and high school student Armon Matthews. (Noah Berg Washington Post)

In 2013 Powell Jobs commissioned documentarian Davis Guggenheim ("An Inconvenient Truth," "He Named Me Malala") to make a film called "The Dream Is Now" about dreamers hoping to build lives in this country. She wanted it done in a matter of months to have a timely influence on the political debate. It was typical of Emerson Collective's approach to issues. Alongside the usual tools of polling and policy advocacy, it will create, say, an "immigration innovation incubator" to foster tech solutions, and it will enlist artists and storytellers to appeal to the public on alternative channels.

"She was very involved in helping us pick who we should follow, how we should frame the issue," Guggenheim told me. "We talk a lot about changing hearts and minds, about engaging people and telling stories that break through. … She is very focused on *how* do we tell stories that can change hearts and minds."

Immigration is perhaps the most partisan fight into which she is pushing a stack of her billions of chips, on behalf of those who see the issue the way she does. On the other side is a countervailing apparatus of funders, thinkers and advocates pushing for tighter borders, fewer legal immigrants and more deportations. Since she entered the fray in 2001, her opponents have won nearly every battle in Washington, so she is turning her tactics away from the capital. "We're looking for ways to activate people around the country, so that they can understand what's at stake," she says. "So that they can start building a chorus that Congress can't ignore."

Her strategy on education policy has been similarly novel. The long list of storytellers in acting and song who participated in last fall's prime-time education reform special — from Tom Hanks and Viola Davis to Lin-Manuel Miranda and Andra Day — did a good job of selling Emerson's approach to reimagining high school. The XQ Institute, Emerson's independent education arm, has pledged $115 million to 18 schools across the country pursuing their own innovative approaches, including Washington Leadership Academy, a tech-focused public charter in the District. Without prescribing exact models, the group wants schools to focus on the competence a student achieves in a given subject more than the number of hours she sits in that class. There's an emphasis on knowledge relevant to employers of the future.

However, some reviews of the televised special were skeptical: "Encouraging such tinkering is a fine use of philanthropic dollars," Jack Schneider, assistant professor of education at College of the Holy Cross, wrote in The Washington Post. "But that isn't what the XQ project is promoting. Instead, it is publicizing a historically uninformed message that today's technologies demand something new of us as human beings and that our unchanging high schools are failing at the task."

Either way, the dollars will continue to flow toward Powell Jobs's vision of immigration and education reform. On all her issues, as she masters the eclectic levers of influence she is fashioning to her ends, she has the resources to sway the debate in a way that some might question — but few can match.

> The most effective way to create change in this country is to build a grass-roots movement, a national outcry that is so loud and so powerful that our leaders cannot ignore it.
>
> Laurene Powell Jobs

And yet, Powell Jobs herself is content to melt into the background. One night at the Inner-City Muslim Action Network on the South Side of Chicago, for the benefit of some visitors including the Chicago-raised rapper Common and me, young men told stories of why they joined Emerson's anti-violence program called Chicago CRED. Deontae Allison, 22, who would receive his high school equivalency diploma the next day, said he has been shot 13 times. "I went through the negative life. I'm trying to see what a positive life is now." Old associates on the streets can't believe that, at CRED, Allison consorts with men from bitterly rival neighborhoods. "Now we look at each other as brothers," he told me later. A young man in a White Sox hat training to be an electrician said: "Last month I lost my father to gun violence. I lost a lot of friends to gun violence, close friends, people I used to run with, three of them died. This program makes you want to wake up the next day."

Run by Arne Duncan, CRED stands for Creating Real Economic Destiny. It starts with the market-based belief that young men will enter the productive legal economy from the drug trade and other criminal street commerce if they have a chance at a decent job and wage. Half a dozen cohorts of up to 30 men in different sections of the city report every day to centers where they learn trades while being paid up to $12.50 an hour. Even more important, they can study for high school equivalency diplomas, receive counseling for emotional trauma, get mentoring from life coaches and write illustrated memoirs that are published as books. It's not giving them a "second chance," Duncan says. "For a lot of guys, we're giving them a first chance they've never had." There's a waiting list of more than 100 to enroll.

That night at the Muslim action network, after several of the young men told their stories, case manager Billy Moore spoke up. He was responsible for a notorious killing in Chicago. In 1984, at the age of 16, he shot and killed high school basketball hero Ben Wilson and served nearly 20 years in prison. Now he uses his example as a lesson to the young men. "You can't measure the success of a conversation," he said. Recently Moore's own son was shot to death. "I'm so committed to my mission in life right now that if the young man who killed my son walked through the doors and asked to be a part of this program," he said, "then I would sign up to be his case worker, so I could change his life."

Afterward Powell Jobs exchanged small talk with the men, some of whom have gotten to know her, but she made no formal remarks on this evening nor the next day at the graduation ceremony where, in contrast, a corporate co-sponsor took the opportunity to make a speech. Neither she nor Emerson were mentioned from the podium or in the program. "She blends in with the crowd, yet she's probably the most powerful woman in the world," Moore said. "My father told me a long time ago you can know a man's true character when you give him unquestioned power. She has power. You can see her true character is being a humble woman. She don't use her power to steal attention from what's going on."

Rami Nashashibi, executive director of the Muslim network, told me he has seen too many "great-white-hope-syndrome programs with this idea of we're going to, quote unquote, save some black and brown kids, feel good about ourselves, and the money may or may not be here in three years." Rarely do they acknowledge the bigger picture of structural racism and systemic oppression layered into the history of every block where these young men come from. Powell Jobs "believes in a bigger picture and was able to connect dots," Nashashibi said. "A philanthropist on her level can really just do a lot of that from a comfortable distance and not want to come and have a whole bunch of conversations, and not dictate and drive. She's willing and eager just to be an active participant in the space."

From left: Ted Leonsis has the largest share in the holding company that owns the Capitals and Wizards sports teams; David B chairman of Atlantic Media. (André Chung for The Washington Post; Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

Ted Leonsis, who has the largest share in the holding company that owns the Capitals and Wizards, stood at the window of his office looking down at the red sea of fans making their way to the arena to watch the Capitals play the opening game of the playoffs. He was speaking to me by phone, and he mentioned the sight of so much activity in what was once a desolate part of downtown to make a point about his new partner. He had taken Powell Jobs twice across the Anacostia River to economically struggling Congress Heights, where the city's sports and conventions agency is building a practice facility and arena for the Wizards and Mystics, the women's basketball team. Emerson Collective is studying the possibility of other projects in that community.

"I just felt I needed somebody who saw the world the way I did," Leonsis told me. "We talked about the importance of sports and how a ball can change someone's life. She had been thinking those kinds of big thoughts for a long time. … There are pockets of our community that need a great outstretched hand and hug." Recently Powell Jobs invited him to Benning Road NE — to a neglected neighborhood he knew — and the virtual-reality immersion into crossing the border as an immigrant that Emerson had sponsored in an abandoned church. "If you can do a pop-up building in a week and deliver an experience like that — it gives you goose bumps!" Leonsis told me. "Our community is deserving of that, and we needed Emerson and people like Laurene who will spend the time and the effort and their resources to make the community great."

For her part, Powell Jobs told me she considers sports another way to access the culture and some heroes of our national narratives. She had considered other sports investments before meeting with Leonsis. "Sport is one of the great, and some would say last, remaining opportunities for us to come together and leave everything else behind," she says. She's also a basketball fan. And Brad Powell, her brother who oversees Emerson's socially conscious

investing, acknowledged that co-owning sports teams, for all the potential social utility, is a blast. “There’s zero chance we could work as hard as we do for the next several decades if we had not figured out how to have fun and enjoy doing it along the way,” he told me.

Across town from the basketball arena, I visited Atlantic Media Chairman David Bradley at the headquarters of the Atlantic in one of the Watergate buildings. (Disclosure: The editor of the Post Magazine used to work for Atlantic Media, before Emerson Collective invested in the company.) Bradley is 65 and in his 20th year of ownership, having made the Atlantic profitable after sinking about $100 million into it over the years. When he quietly began considering potential buyers for the company, Powell Jobs always was No. 1 on the list, he told me. His two criteria were sufficient funds, of course, but also an elusive quality he called “character.” He got an idea of hers by knowing people who work at Emerson — people who possess “what we call extreme talent and fineness of nature. … That’s the group she’s built, and that’s where I wanted to put this enterprise.”

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Powell Jobs agreed to buy a majority share of the magazine but insisted that Bradley continue in his current role for a number of years. When she met the magazine’s journalists after the deal was announced, she vowed to stay out of editorial decisions with words to the effect of: *There’s a door between Emerson and the Atlantic, but it only swings from the Atlantic into Emerson; it doesn’t open in the other direction*. “That went over really well,” Bradley told me. “That’s what our staff was talking about: ‘Will the Atlantic have a party line on … her issues?’ ”

Still, she is taking a deep interest in the ambition and position of the enterprise in an ever more digital media landscape. Lattman, the former Times editor who is in charge of Emerson’s media investments, now serves as vice chairman of the Atlantic. Powell Jobs told me his responsibilities are mostly on the business side. Earlier this year, the magazine decided to hire some 100 employees in the coming 12 to 18 months, a 30 percent increase, half in the newsroom, to augment coverage of Washington, Hollywood, technology and other subjects.

“She runs really deep,” Bradley said. “She will do a six-hour meeting and really get into the detail. And in those sessions, you hear not just social-justice kinds of ambitions, but, ‘Where are we taking this? What can we do with it?’ … There’s a fantastic competition setting in right now … to be the English-language journalism enterprise for the world. I think there will be more than one winner. … The Atlantic is really interested in doing that run, and she’s very interested in doing that run.” He continued, “She’s also interested in technologies that we’ve begun in, but we’re not as serious as she would have us be and as we will be. Podcasting would be a good example. Video. … And while we have real technology talent, you won’t be

surprised that the Atlantic's principal gift isn't to operate on the frontiers of technology. And she said, no, it should be."

By cosmic coincidence, the Atlantic was co-founded in 1857 by none other than Ralph Waldo Emerson. But the Atlantic isn't the collective's only media investment. It has given grants to organizations including ProPublica, the Marshall Project and the Texas Observer, and invested in companies like Axios, OZY Media and Gimlet Media (a narrative podcasting company). While some of those outlets might be more likely to cover issues that animate Emerson, some also represent new story forms or new solutions to old media challenges that fascinate Powell Jobs. The collective has also invested in Hollywood production companies such as Macro ("Mudbound" and "Fences") and Anonymous Content ("Spotlight"), where Powell Jobs's support led to the creation of a position called executive producer for activism. Taken together, the media portfolio shows her insight that bolstering an innovative and progressive media climate is another play Emerson must make in order to spur the kind of change she is after.

Bradley told me about the time not long ago when Powell Jobs took him and some others from the Atlantic to see Springsteen's Broadway show. They sat close to the stage, then went backstage to chat for 20 minutes with Springsteen and his wife, who both seemed well acquainted with Powell Jobs. "What I observed was these two kids out of New Jersey for whom life turned out so much differently than they ever could have thought, but who still have that about them," Bradley said. "Still preoccupied with the people left behind."

Powell Jobs during her visit to College Track in Oakland in April. (Noah Berger for The Washington Post)

Powell Jobs surfaced recently in her black and crimson Stanford robes on a stage at Miami Dade College, where she gave the commencement address. The speech was a rousing call for the students to be activists and "angelic troublemakers," in the phrase of civil rights leader Bayard Rustin. It was also, perhaps unconsciously, a summation of her theories of power and change.

"I've learned an important lesson," she said. "Change rarely originates at the top. When you want change, lobbying Congress is important, but it can't be your whole strategy. Power is stubborn. It has to be moved. And it can only be moved by us. The most effective way to create change in this country is to build a grass-roots movement, a national outcry that is so loud and so powerful that our leaders cannot ignore it."

She went on to tell the students, "It took me a little while to realize this, but for you, grass-roots organizing is a way of life. You grew up using tools that could connect and consolidate people on a scale that was once unimaginable. This connectivity is a democratic dream."

She didn’t say it, but I couldn’t help thinking what those tools consisted of: smartphones pioneered by her late husband and the apps and networks that Silicon Valley start-ups created to run on them. And I recalled the number of times I’d heard her use that same word — “tools” — in reference to the work of Emerson Collective. Just as Steve Jobs gave us tools to change our lives, Laurene Powell Jobs is, in her own way, trying to do the same. She is convinced that her tools and the immeasurable transformations they might bring will prove to be good for society.

It all has to do with democratizing access and opportunity for voices she thinks have been shut out. “I don’t like that money and wealth equates with power, and then that power can be used for good or for ill,” she told me. “I actually think that the power base should be distributed and there should be other reasons that individuals have power, and I’d like to see much more edifying reasons rise to the top. And so as a philanthropist and as someone who actually now has the ability to create a different type of organization to do a certain type of work, I don’t mind modeling what I think is a better way to do things, a better way to solve problems.”

The paradox is obvious. She is using her money and power to try to make sure the money and power of people like her will matter a little bit less, because those who don’t have it now will have access to a little bit more. There is something undemocratic about her mission to democratize the ability to pursue one’s potential. And yet, it has ever been so for liberal reformers. Ralph Waldo Emerson and his fellow New England transcendentalists weren’t rich at this scale, but they were privileged white men, for the most part. Through their abolitionism, their pacifism and their recognition of genius in every soul, they advocated for a world of more broad-based privilege.

“It *is* a paradox,” Powell Jobs says. “Martin Luther King spoke about that paradox himself, absolutely, where he said philanthropy is a very useful and good tool, but it should not ignore the conditions that created the philanthropy, that the philanthropy is trying to address. Now even more so, the way that wealth is accumulating at such a fast pace to the top 0.1 percent, 0.5 percent of the population, that wealth accumulation has to be used to correct the system that created it. … As a philanthropist, I think the most important thing is to be awake and cognizant of that, and honest about how that wealth accumulation happened, and to be smart about how you’re trying to go about changing things.”