ES, WE CAN SHOW YOU how to change the world, but what exactly do you want to change? If we are thoughtful and precise, the answer will of course differ from scientist, to philosopher, to policymaker. The question is both compelling and intuitive to all of us connected to USC College; it’s both professional and personal.

The mission of the USC Levan Institute for Humanities and Ethics is to help students acquire values of moral discernment, love of truth and beauty, understanding of self, and respect for and appreciation of others.

The institute’s theme this year — “Talking to Strangers: Engaging Disagreement” — explores moral discourse within our student body, our university, our political parties and nation, and our organs of global justice.

Our aim is to encourage discourse on how to talk to one another about our most controversial social issues, issues that we feel most passionate about. How can we be true to ourselves, and our most strongly held beliefs, while respecting those who vehemently disagree with us?

We were delighted to have our Levan Annual Distinguished Lecture, “Anonymous: Political Discourse and Civility in the Digital Age,” given in October by Danielle Allen of the Institute for Advanced Study. Allen is widely known for her work on justice and citizenship in both ancient Athens and modern America.

In September, USC College undergraduate Jayson Kellogg, who was deployed in Iraq from 2006 to 2008, provided glimpses into young soldiers, citizens and the war they share with his photography exhibition “Talking to Strangers: Children of War.”

We also organized Levan Coffeehouse events that mixed College faculty and staff expertise with insights from our colleagues in law, medicine, engineering, art, business, and communication. We began with a conversation we called “War of Words” that brought together a panel of experts on freedom of speech, hate speech and what we are calling “hateful speech.” Other topics included: What should we do about undocumented immigrants? Extra-terrestrial rights? Adversarial states like Iran and North Korea?

To establish a long-lasting commitment to talk to strangers and engage disagreement, this fall we launched the USC Annual Ethics Cup Competition and the Teaching Ethics Program (TEP).

The USC Annual Ethics Cup Competition is a debate-style competition we have organized in partnership with Writing 340 courses in USC College, the USC Marshall School of Business and the USC Viterbi School of Engineering. The goal is to provide student teams with an enjoyable way to engage ethical questions, develop critical thinking skills and compete with fellow students across the university.

The winning team will represent USC in the California Ethics Bowl, the gateway to the National Ethics Bowl Competition.

Our second new initiative, TEP, is an outreach program created in partnership with the School of International Relations’ Center for Active Learning in International Studies (CALIS). The Levan Institute will train undergraduate volunteers from a variety of majors in the College to team-teach active learning ethics to high school students in the greater Los Angeles community.

Yes, you can change the world. And the Levan Institute can help show you how. We collaborate with departments, professional schools and programs across the university to bring students and faculty together with authors and artists, philosophers and practitioners, and the ethical voices of our time. You are one of these voices.

Come share in our talks about the most pressing issues before us. Come with a spirit of generosity and a desire to talk to strangers and engage disagreement. It is the first small step toward changing the world.

Lyn Boyd-Judson is director of the USC Levan Institute for Humanities and Ethics.

For more information on the USC Levan Institute for Humanities and Ethics, visit college.usc.edu/levan.