Kate Schapira is unassuming. Should someone be tasked with picking the flashiest, most conspicuous person in a room, Shapira would not be that person. Yet, behind her cool-patterned sweater, heathered beige pants, messy bun, and rectangular, brushed nickel spectacles, she is extraordinary. Writer, professor, organizer, human; Shapira approaches all of her roles thoughtfully and purposefully.

In 2003, Schapira moved to Providence with her husband, a cartoonist, from the Hudson Valley. They picked Providence for the relatively affordable living, proximity to family, and the active comic-creating scene. At the suggestion of a professor, Schapira applied to the MFA program for literary arts at Brown, completed her degree, and subsequently started as an adjunct professor in 2007.

“I couldn’t get any other kind of work,” Schapira explained. “No one wanted to hire me as a private school teacher. I didn’t want to do the extra round of training necessary to become a
public school teacher.” Since none of her jobs during graduate school offered full-time employment when she graduated, adjunct teaching provided Schapira with enough wages to live.

Schapira entered her role as a senior lecturer in the English department, a full-time position, in 2012. She teaches numerous classes, all revolving around the practice of creative nonfiction writing. Schapira herself is an accomplished writer as the author of six books and thirteen chapbooks of poetry. But despite her work on College Hill, Schapira’s heart is in the surrounding community.

“I do a lot of ongoing creative and community work… where those things interact,” she said. One of those projects is a reading series called “Publicly Complex” at Ada Books (717 Westminster St.) that Schapira founded in Spring 2007. The project brings “innovative work by soon-to-be-famous writers” to the shop to read their pieces. Over the last eleven years of the series, Schapira has seen it evolve.

“Things that have changed since I started it: I no longer do all-white readings,” remarked Schapira, referring to the racial makeup of the events. “Attendance is much improved if we have three people, one of whom is local. So I try to always have one person from town.” This season, another big change is coming to the series: Christopher Lee, a poet and PhD student here at Brown, will be co-curating writers with her.

Another ongoing project for Schapira is Climate Anxiety Counseling. In 2014, Schapira’s biggest worry was climate change, so she created a forum for passerby to express their thoughts and fears on the subject. Every so often, Schapira sets up her booth in a public place, conjuring the image of Lucy from the Peanuts cartoons, complete with a sign reading “The Doctor is IN”.

She engages with strangers and documents her conversations with them, their fears and worries, as well as observations she makes about her environment and the creatures she sees. All of her experiences are posted to a blog (https://climateanxietycounseling.wordpress.com), where she also posts creative nonfiction and fiction works, or “Actual Facts” and “Alternate Facts”, and other writing and information.

“I thought that at least some people might recognize her and kind of come up out of curiosity or be amused by that, tickled by that,” said Schapira when asked about her choice to invoke Lucy’s set-up. “Talking about climate change for many people feels very serious and menacing, or very politically charged, or very boring, or all of the above.”

“The other thing that I was thinking of is that Lucy is completely unqualified to give anybody any kind of psychiatric help,” she continued. “Not only is she, like, seven or something, she’s also evil. She’s really a jerk. I was sort of tickled and touched by the idea of having as my kind of matron saint somebody who was really not any more fitted for the task than I was.”

This thoughtfulness about her presentation and the impact it will have on her audience, as well as the intricate symbolism of her actions, is a quality that Schapira seems to bring to every aspect of her life. Her experience with Climate Anxiety Counseling has impacted her written work as well as her social relationships.

“I don’t know what role I want or feel like the production of writing has in the work that I want to be doing right now and it’s something that I am thinking about a lot and trying to make a decision about,” said Schapira. “I haven't written any poems in about two years. At all…. I miss it, but working on writing hasn’t felt important to me and… the way that I learned how to be a
poet didn’t and doesn’t seem like the right tool for the ways that I want to use language right now in a world that is changing in this very total way.”

As she moves forward, Schapira is hopeful that she will be able to organize community members, especially in Providence, to both support each other in their anxieties and enact change as a single unit to help alleviate the causes of those worries and fears.

“I received a fellowship from National Art Strategies, which is an arts organization, to develop an in-community project which is a series of community conversations, writing workshops, and performances about the way that climate change interacts with their own concerns in their communities,” Schapira said. She plans to pilot the first of those events during PVDFest this coming summer and hopes that this fellowship will be a vessel to begin organizing people to work together.

When asked if she feels like she has enacted change already, Schapira is unsure. “I don’t know. I really don’t,” she admitted. Even with all of her efforts to help others and protect our environment, one thought rests heavily on Schapira’s mind. “One of the things that I am thinking about is, when you are trying to make things better… what does your forward look like after you fail?”