

THE BIG READ

by Chris Schellenberg

Gatsby: Daisy, I made all this money for you, because I love you.

Daisy: I cannot reciprocate, because I represent the American Dream.

Gatsby: Now I must die, because I also represent the American Dream.

Nick: I hate New Yorkers.

(Book-A Minute Classics, Condensed by Annie Berke)

Have you dreamed of what your library programming could achieve if you had money? Have you sat in meetings where creativity soars like eagles only to have the “budget” shoot your eaglets out of the sky? *The Big Read* National Endowment of the Arts grant gives communities the chance to soar!

ONE GRANT BECAME THREE

In 2007 the Vigo County Public Library (VCPL), located in Terre Haute and serving 102,000 Vigo County residents, received a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Big Read grant to promote the reading and discussion of *The Great Gatsby*. This initiative is based on the results of *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*. This survey provides details about the decline of adult reading – “literary reading in America is not only declining among all groups, but the rate of decline has accelerated, especially among the young” (*Reading at Risk*, July 2004). The results of the survey also show a correlation between reading and participation in civic and cultural life. *The Big Read* is meant to reverse this trend.

Receiving the Big Read grant gave us the opportunity to apply for and receive a Community Foundation matching grant and this in turn led to a Kellogg Foundation matching grant. Both of these grants came to Vigo County Public Library effortlessly once the NEA grant was received. In fact, the information that the local Community Foundation would match the NEA grant came from their offices. Since the NEA grant was for \$10,000, the matching grants gave us a total budget of \$30,000. For those of you who have never had the experience of spending \$30,000 (I certainly hadn't

until this year), I will share with you that it is not hard to do! Take my word for it, you will enjoy it.

INTRODUCING... “THE BIG READ”

The NEA maintains a comprehensive website at www.neabigread.org. Book choices are limited but titles increase for each grant cycle. I found the grant, which is submitted both online and U.S. mail, to be about medium in terms of difficulty. However, their grant evaluation is truly challenging. There is a regional orientation that I was not able to attend that may have warned participants about the extent of requested evaluation information. A suggestion – count EVERYTHING and consider anything you can count as probably being of use so count that too! This is much broader than keeping track of audience numbers. It includes media impressions and book store sales figures. Just keep counting and counting...

THE SCOPE

Libraries are expected to reach all adults in the area and even address the issue of non-readers. This requires much creative thinking. Begin with the book choice – for us *The Great Gatsby*. Size does matter!



Mayor Burke and Gatsby car loaned by Kleptz Car Museum. Photo is courtesy of Program Planning Committee “Archivist” Gary Daily.

The book needs to appear as if it can be read in a reasonable amount of time. Your book selection criteria should include issues for discussion, accessibility, and dare I say “fun.” With fewer than 200 pages, *The Great Gatsby* combines American history, murder, love, romance, the American Dream, women’s issues, and more. There was something for everyone. The 1920’s decade with its bootlegging, the Charleston, bobbed hair, etc. is a period many adults enjoy visiting and this provided the “fun” aspect. The NEA grant also supplied teachers’ guides, readers’ guides, posters, banners, book marks, and CDs. These items were invaluable in promoting participation.

MULTI-CULTURAL

... I also read the book. I thought you were so generous giving us this free book. There were many words which I didn’t understand, so I had to pick up my dictionary to know the meaning of those words. I could understand more about each character’s background and personality by reading the book rather than watching the movie. Now, I am reading it again. Since you explained so well about the contents, I can understand the story much more than the first time. Thank you.
(from one of VCPL’s library patrons)

VCPL reached diverse audiences in several ways. The only one-to-one English as a Second Language program in Vigo County is coordinated through the Library. This made it easier to engage adults learning to speak English. The Tuesday Morning Women’s ESL Conversation Club spent three weeks discussing the book and comparing it to the movie. Discussions of American Culture in the 1920s preceded reading the book and viewing the movie. The American Dream was a topic that was very personal to many in this international audience.



ESL Tuesday Morning Conversation Club. Photo is courtesy of LeRaye Cameron.

I can’t stress too strongly the advantage of having the money to give individuals their own book. The quote from one of the ESL participants highlights this. The gift books added excitement and allowed participants plenty of time to read and reread, use the dictionary, and study and discuss without worrying about a due date.

MULTI-GENERATIONAL

AND ya know, I am loving that book—I never took the time to enjoy it and it has so much in it for the youth! Thanks, all the material will be useful, I appreciate it!!

The above quote is (from a local high school teacher). The NEA grant objectives included a strong outreach to youth at both the high school and college level. Although the Library works routinely with Indiana State University to include college students, a strong effort had not been made to encourage high school involvement. The additional funding allowed Vigo County Public Library to provide books to be given away as well as checked out. The ability to place large numbers of books throughout the community and into school systems made a huge difference. Not only did all the local high schools participate, but the Washington Alternative High School and the Holy Cross court-ordered high school also discussed the novel. This outreach to non-traditional high school students provided another example of attracting new audiences.

THE EVENTS

A great experience – reawakening part of our American heritage.

(Evaluation comment on kick-off)

The NEA Big Read grant requires a variety of programs including a kick-off, major keynote, special events, and book discussions. In planning the 6-week event, we began with the kick-off. I am lucky to work with a program planning committee where brainstorming and debating bring out the best ideas. Being chair did not guarantee me my own way...and often, I can see in retrospect, the group made a better decision than the one I had proposed. The scope of this grant also encourages getting help whenever possible. The program planning committee proved extremely valuable, and I would encourage everyone to take advantage of the collective creativity, experience, and passion such a group provides. After some discussion, the kick-off event became *The Big Party for the Big Read*. We chose the Elks Country Club on the banks of the Wabash after exploring costs for various rentals. This older building helped promote a 1920’s ambiance and was also the best in terms of price. After we had the name and place, it was time to look at entertainment. The committee decided to use local talent and

this proved very successful. Crossroads Brass, a musical ensemble, greeted guests with 1920's music and encouraged them to use the available dance floor. A caricaturist, dance lessons, and singing all helped to further provide a 1920's feeling. Even the appetizers were taken from the 1920s – and, to make sure guests knew the meatballs were linked to the period and not just ordinary meatballs, we included information about the food in the evening's program.

I loved having the age focused on; to put *The Great Gatsby* in perspective.

(Evaluation comment on kick-off)

Although we wanted the evening to be a "good time," we also wanted to keep the emphasis on *The Great Gatsby*. In literary humorist Elliot Engel, we found the perfect compromise. Engle discussed F. Scott Fitzgerald's life in a way that engaged and kept the audience's attention. As one patron put it, "Dr. Engel's presentation on the author was fascinating." Immersing patrons in the music, food, and culture of the 1920s, while giving them a good time, helped build a buzz around *Gatsby* that worked favorably in getting the word out to the community.

THE MAJOR KEYNOTE

Not to just look at the literature when talking about the book. The cultural analysis of the U. S., times, area (East/Midwest) is very engaging.

(Evaluation comment on major keynote)

The NEA Big Read grant requires that the major keynote centers on the book and suggests a lecture by a

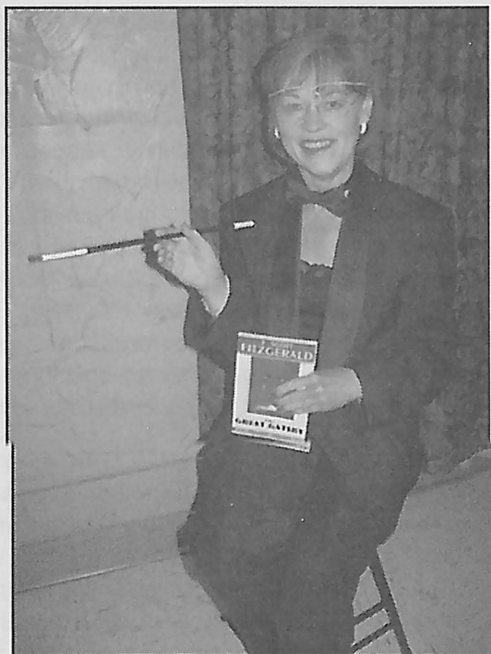
key biographer, panel discussion, or author reading. We chose to have a facilitated panel discussion with Mayor Kevin Burke and VCPL Director Nancy Dowell. The title of this event was *Gatsby: Then and Now*. Both presenters were given information, books, and questions ahead of time. The real focus of this discussion was on the societal values raised in *Gatsby* and whether they are still relevant in 2007. What is the American Dream? Has it changed? Is there still a contrast between East Coast and Midwest values? Having the mayor or other political figures actively involved was important since this fulfilled another grant requirement.

THE TIMELINE

I'd like to come to another one.

(Evaluation comment from major key note)

The Big Read requires programming to be completed in approximately one month. Due to local partnerships with prearranged program dates, our event lasted from February 21 to April 12, with the last public program on March 29. This time frame was very different from past years. Vigo County Public Library began holding community reading events six years ago using an *If All Vigo County Read the Same Book* theme. The book selected was announced in January and programming lasted until the author visit in the fall of that year. Programs were purposely placed months apart in the hopes that more people would attend. The fact that we planned three major programs within less than 24 hours this March was definitely a departure from previous initiatives. All three exceeded our expectations and attendees enjoyed being immersed in



Library Director Nancy Dowell dressed for the '20s. Photo is courtesy of Program Planning Committee "Archivist" Gary Daily.



Billboard promoting Big Read. Photo is courtesy of Program Planning Committee "Archivist" Gary Daily.

the book and the era. The one month instead of nine month format proved to be successful and was, perhaps, the biggest lesson I will take away from the experience.

THE BUZZ

Word-of-mouth and Library information proved to be the largest factors in event attendance. Although percentages varied between 83% and 52% for combined word-of-mouth/Library information totals for various programs, it is clear that the most successful promotion of this initiative was in our own hands and that of an excited community. The concentration of events in a relatively short time made it easier for the community to remember and spread the word. If you attend a noon program, it isn't hard to remember that there is another one that evening or the following morning! Although Vigo County Public Library has coordinated a community read for five years, this sixth year was the most successful and a real "buzz" was created.

It is hard to evaluate just what created the difference. Maybe it is as simple as money. Money for a kick-off party that started people talking; money for additional publicity to keep them interested; and finally money for books to place all over the community – books that served to invite discussion between family, friends, and community.

THE PARTNERSHIPS

You'll never know how thankful I am!

The above comes (from a teacher) in an outlying county. Vigo County Public Library used the NEA grant in a regional effort to promote reading and discussing

literature. One of our early grant partners was Clinton Public Library. The grant asks for library partners and such partnerships lead to a broader campaign and a better use of NEA funds. The NEA *Big Read* encourages partnerships, and if you are considering applying for this grant, think about other libraries, museums, schools, and local organizations you might include in your proposal. Local partnerships are highly encouraged.

Good time – I wish we could do this every year.
Great promotion of literacy and American culture.
(Evaluation comment on kick-off)

This event was one of the most successful programming initiatives it has been my pleasure to chair. The community enjoyed it and so did we. I would encourage anyone interested in pursuing this grant to give it a try. The additional funding turns a good effort into a great effort and adds a real sense of excitement. Hopefully this kind of response works in its small way to combat the concept that reading and literacy and culture can't also be a "good time."

REFERENCES

Reading at Risk. (July 2004). [Preface]. [Executive Summary].

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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