

Southern Cayuga Anne Frank Tree Project's October Community Read Final Community Report, Elaine Meyers, November 23, 2020

Background: Every Fall, the Southern Cayuga Anne Frank Tree Project brings neighbors and friends together to discuss a book that has local relevance while exploring timeless themes related to justice, freedom, and equity. This year, following the lead of the SCCS honors English students, we read *The Hate U Give*, by Angie Thomas.

Due to COVID-19, the 2020 Community Read consisted of small discussion groups, not a central meeting at the school. Between September 26 and October 11, 2020, ten community groups met, 4 in Zoom Sessions and 6 in small group settings. The in-person groups followed COVID-19 safety protocols using masks, social distancing and participants bringing any beverages they required. We had fifty community members and nine moderators—a number that doubled participation compared to previous years. Complimentary copies of the book were available at the Aurora Free Library and the Hazard Library.

Groups were formed in one of two ways:

- Existing Groups: Friends, neighbors, coworkers who would like to form a community read group. We will provide a moderator and meeting area or zoom link.
- Individuals: We will create small groups based on your meeting preference (either in-person or via zoom)

After the sessions were completed, Eight of the nine moderators attended a Zoom meeting on October 15 at 7 p.m. The following recommendations resulted from the moderators' meeting.

Book Choice: There was universal praise for the selection of the book. All readers reported on their involvement in the lives of the characters and the timely nature of the topic. The committee is sending a letter of thanks to Elisha Hoatland the Honors English teacher.

Small Meeting Format: Limiting group size to under 10 allowed for richer conversations. This finding was shared by those meeting in person as well as on Zoom. It was a universal recommendation that we continue the smaller format in future activities and discussions. The moderators reported the same richness of conversation among groups that already knew each other (neighbors, church members, mother's groups, food pantry) and those that met for the first time (both Zoom meetings.) All our moderators have agreed to serve as moderators for any additional meetings.

Additional Community Reads: The rich discussions prompted many groups to suggest additional community read choices. Suggestions were additional books on racism:

- Ibram Kendi's *How to be an Antiracist*
- Kendi and Jason Reynolds *Stamped*
- Resmaa Menakem's *My Grandmother's Hands*
- Ijeoma Oluo's *So You Want to Talk about Race*
- Wes Moore's *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates*

Community Film Nights: It was suggested that a virtual showing of a community film be followed by small discussion groups (in person and Zoom) to discuss the film. Suggestions were:

- *The Hate U Give*
- *The 13th documentary* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krfcq5pF8u8>

Community Conversations Expanding Racial Limitations: A reoccurring theme in all the group conversations was the limitations of our community in providing racial diversity and conversations that promote understanding and friendships. Rebecca Ruggles and Elaine Meyers are working with Jazzmyne Williams at Wells College to coordinate conversations with Wells students with diverse backgrounds and community groups and Elisha Hoatland's students. It was suggested that the committee work with Lou Lombardo and the Harriet Tubman Center for Justice and Peace <https://htcjp.org/> and <https://www.facebook.com/htcjpauburn/> to provide additional conversations. Another suggestion was working with the Auburn Police to provide insight into best practices in law enforcement. Working with migrant populations in our community could provide additional insights.

SCCSD Programs and Resources: It was suggested that elementary school classrooms be provided grade level teams in diverse schools in Auburn or Syracuse. Another suggestion was working to make sure that classroom and library collections provided opportunities for students to learn more about racial and ethnic backgrounds not represented in the community.

Attachment: Moderator Reports: 10 session with group size ranging from 9 to 4 attendees

Group 1: Most of us had a personal experience of learning from a person of color and/or having reflected on our own past prejudices or those of our parents. The book brought those reflections and experiences top of mind. Many said, "I would never have read this book if not for the Community Read." All said the book widened and deepened their understanding of Black experience in the US today. A lot of appreciation for the author's skill in creating non-stereotypical characters (Starr's parents, the police officer uncle, her student friends, etc.), a compelling plot, a vivid portrayal of how exhausting it is to live in two worlds, and the trauma of being a witness to violence.

Discussion around Brian Stevenson and his Equal Justice Initiative, the museum and national memorial to lynchings that he started in Montgomery AL. Interest in visiting there - the equivalent for Black Americans of the Holocaust museum in DC. Several people reflected on analogies or ways in which awareness of the Holocaust shapes their awareness of Black experience in the US.

Ideas for next steps: all interested in meeting with Wells students. And a suggestion for further reading and discussion: My Grandmother's Hands by Resmaa Menakem, a workbook. <https://www.resmaa.com/about> There was a lot of interest in this. Let's look into it!

Another simple next step: awareness that older people bear a responsibility to be welcoming to younger people, and whites to people of color. Say hello on the sidewalk in Aurora, make eye contact. Something this simple says, "You are safe here." Can we educate others to do this as well? All participants said this was a tough but rewarding read and they expressed gratitude for the program. I advised my participants to keep their books and pass them on to a friend, to keep the conversation going.

Group 2: After lively, serious, thoughtful, heart-felt discussion prompted by Questions 1-4, the group found it hard to know what to say in response to this one. This is the "action step," and what the "something" to do in the community might be left us groping for actions to take in our Southern Cayuga community. *The Hate U Give* moved us all, in various ways. A few thoughts emerged. We can pass the book along to someone who might like to read it and/or might benefit from reading it. Others are recommending the book to young people they know. Everyone thought the book was strong and worthwhile—reading it would be valuable to people of various ages and perspectives.

Another person suggested that it is important to support social policy and programs that help financially disadvantaged communities, and that help promote equality and justice on all levels. In the world of the novel, this means urban communities. One of our group members asked, "How can we fix Syracuse?" Policy and priority changes in the larger political framework was the response. Advocating for such changes, in communication with our elected officials and with people we know, is something we can do—though it may be a slow and frustrating process.

We can also support the faculty and administration of our school district(s) in offering this book, and others that might be controversial but which deal with important issues, both social and psychological, to students. We are gratified to know that the choice of this book for a Community Read grew out of its inclusion in our local curriculum.

Group 3: We all agreed the read was an excellent choice and that we as white women learned at a much deeper level the difference in our experiences contrasted with Starr and her family. We all identified with someone in the book and had a lively discussion about the role of the police in the novel and personal experiences with being stopped by a police officer while in our car. The group thanked the Southern Cayuga Anne Frank Tree Project for the books and leadership in beginning our community conversation.

Our suggestions for possible community action was developing protocols and opportunities for a more dialogue with peers of all ages to promote a real understanding of the differences created by racism, classism and other beliefs that strip our fellow human beings of their dignity and opportunity. One suggestion was to create school buddies with students from SCCS Emily Howland and a community that is more urban and racially different. After this system was set up, field trips could be planned.

Group 4: The main topic of our discussion was how well the book showcased systemic racism through the character's thoughts and actions. The characters were so developed that you could truly understand how and why they made the decisions that they did.

We discussed how horrified we are every time we hear about a shooting of a black person; however, the systems are not being changed. Without change, we can't be surprised that the same things continue to happen time and again. We talked about needing to change systems in our community i.e. schools, law enforcement in order to really make a difference. We ran out of time but said we would all try to think of concrete action items. We are meeting again in a couple of weeks and hope to continue the discussion.

Group 5 and 6: My first Zoom group wanted to know what the students said about the book. They wanted to provide support for Black Lives Matter in some way and find a process for opening conversation with people who refuse to discuss BLM. They wanted to encourage everyone to vote. They wanted to know how much history about the black experience is taught in school—as well as history of Native Americans.

The second Zoom group wanted to open the conversation to those who do not share their views. They wondered if people choose to live here because of the lack of diversity in the community. They wanted to acknowledge and accept difference among people and learn from history as we move forward promoting racial equality. They were worried that they could be racist without even realizing it.

Group 7: My group wanted to show the film *The Hate You Give*. They hoped for further conversations. One idea was to follow-up with Wells students of color (Barb B. had mentioned some) who had read the book and could share personal stories and answer questions as students of color. One participant said- wondering what they may do differently when they hear someone use the N word or someone says something racist. They wanted to host another book discussion and wondered how to get this book to others who may disagree with issues in it? Racial politics in Auburn were discussed- might be something to investigate. Watch *13th* Movie

Group 8 and 9: Two discussion groups – one in person with 4 people and one ZOOM with 3 participants. We had more questions than anything. The group described our community as a conservative rural community. Since there is little diversity here, we acknowledged that the situation is different in Auburn and Ithaca than here. “We live in a bubble”. We decided that we should define our community as the Southern Cayuga School district since we know that area.

We agreed that Auburn’s discussions with the local Justice Groups is a great start. Themes we developed centered on our police forces. Ideas included: Do not defund the police, more police with training, demilitarize the police, add Social Worker, psychological specialist on calls with mental health issues, increase sensitivity/antibias training, increase de-escalation training, if a criminal is running away from police – holster your gun and chase them (do not shoot in the back)

A second discussion focused on the school. Our questions included: School is where students who need services are identified, How do we identify needs? How are referrals made? What are

the resources available? Counseling, Guidance? What community resources are available? Catholic Charities? What is the role of the School Board? Are the principal and the teachers engaged in the community? What messages are the teachers portraying? What is the school teaching? Is SCCS designated as a poverty school? What are the graduation rates? Math, English Language test scores?