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## Read across the County: Connecting Communities through Reading

In Wilmington, North Carolina, the New Hanover County Public Library (NHCPL) has developed Read across the County (RaC), a county-wide reading initiative designed to foster meaningful connections within our community. Inspired by national programs like One Book One Community, RaC aims to bring people of different backgrounds and ages together for a shared summer of reading. In June 2021, the NHC Public Library launched this initiative in collaboration with the NHC Office of Diversity and Equity and the Friends of the Library. This initiative was inspired by a suggestion from a community member for a community book discussion.

Under the guidance of the library director the library team began by establishing clear goals that effectively convey the program's vision to supporters, peers, collaborators, and the wider community. We focused on defining what the initiative should achieve, how the library stands to benefit, and the feasibility of maintaining the initiative over time. Our collaborative efforts involved identifying the target audience's interests and needs, outlining the benefits to both the library and the community. Key components of the program include an annual theme guiding book selections and programming for diverse age groups, as well as partnerships that extend beyond the library's traditional audience.

In 2021, due to the challenges of COVID-19, our focus was on reconnecting people with nature while adhering to necessary social distancing measures. Each year's theme has been thoughtfully chosen to resonate with our community. For instance, in 2021, we celebrated nature, diversity, family, and New Hanover County's unique outdoor

environment. The following year, we united our community through art and expression, followed in 2023 by fostering connections through music. In 2024, we honored Native American heritage and the importance of connecting with one's roots.

Each RaC initiative includes a central adult book and companion titles catering to various age groups. Our selection process involves the RaC committee choosing the adult title, while staff recommendations inform the selection of companion reads. We prioritize criteria such as accessibility and programming opportunities when making our selections. Our focus is on ensuring diversity, relevance to community issues, and accessibility across various formats and languages. Additionally, we assess the potential for regional significance and opportunities such as author visits to enrich community engagement.

To effectively promote the event, we developed a unique logo that appears on all promotional materials, including bookmarks and social media templates. QR codes on these items lead directly to the RaC website. We further enhance visibility through outreach via local television, radio, newsletters, and word of mouth.

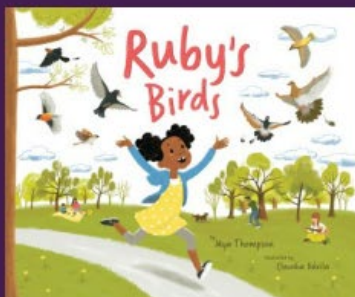
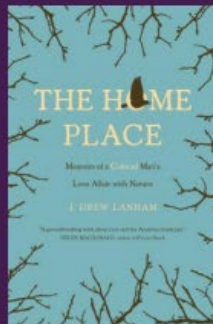
Budgeting for RaC involves collaboration with the library director, and the Friends of the Library to allocate funds for book purchases and potential author visits, whether in-person or virtual. We prioritize cost considerations up front to inform major decisions. We also consider what support community partners may provide in terms of programming.

To help identify potential partners for community-wide reading programs, the American Library Association recommends "identifying groups that might mutually benefit from the collaboration.

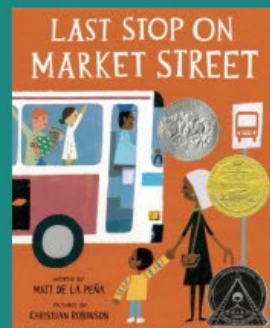
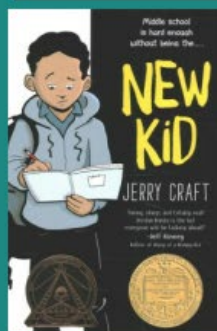
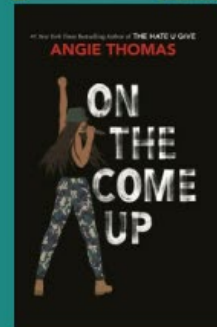
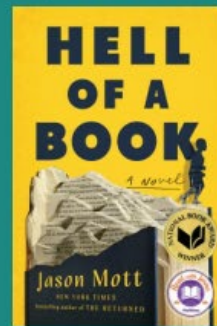


*Read across the County aspires to bring people of different backgrounds and ages together for a community-wide summer of reading.*

## 2021 Nature & Families



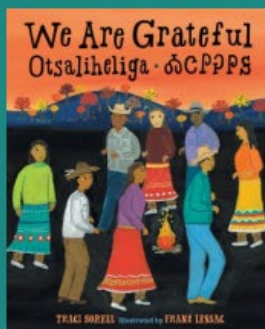
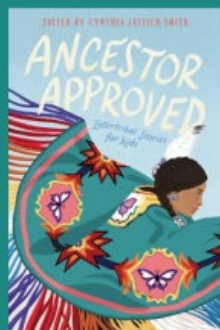
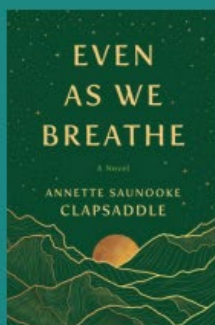
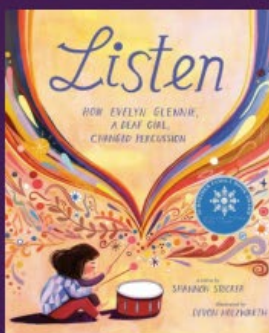
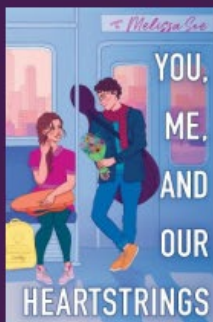
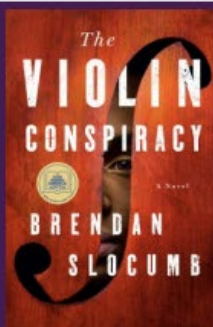
## 2022 Art & Expression



2023  
**Music**

2024  
**Native American Heritage**

2025  
**?**



Will there be a possibility of an author visit?

Is there a regional significance?

How do the themes relate to our community?

Are the titles available in different formats or languages?

Is the needed quantity available?

Are the books reasonably priced?

Consider partnerships that your library already has as well as those that your library is interested in establishing, perhaps those from a new potential user group”<sup>11</sup>. For NHCPL, we worked with long-time partners University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW), DC Virgo Preparatory Academy, and City of Wilmington. We also established new relationships with the Wilmington Symphony Orchestra, WAVE Transit, and the NC Department of Health and Human Services (NC DHSS), which resulted in positive outcomes for all involved. All of these groups helped distribute books throughout the community.

For years, the library had been interested in partnering with WAVE Transit Authority but wasn’t sure how to make it happen. Read Across the County provided the perfect opportunity! In 2022, the

community about the local symphony and participated in their community arts fair for children.

One of the most impactful connections made in 2023 was with the DHHS. The picture book, *Listen: How Evelyn Glennie, a Deaf Girl, Changed Percussion*, inspired library staff to collaborate with NC DHHS’s Deaf and Hard of Hearing team to host a deaf-blind awareness event and storytime for children and their families. The program was led by members of the deaf-blind community, allowing participants to engage in deaf-blind simulations. Sign language interpreters and tactile interpreters were present to facilitate communication. This partnership has opened lines of communication between the library and NC DHHS, and efforts are now underway to enhance accessibility for patrons with hearing and vision impairments.

 <p><b>Storytime</b></p> <p>Read aloud of Last Stop on Market Street to 2nd graders</p>	 <p><b>Craft Time</b></p> <p>Collage Art with 2nd graders inspired by Last Stop on Market Street.</p>	 <p><b>Music Time</b></p> <p>Wilmington Symphony Orchestra musician joined us for a music presentation with 3rd &amp; 6th graders.</p>	 <p><b>Give Away Time</b></p> <p>All students took a book home!</p>
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featured picture book, *Last Stop on Market Street*, which is set on a city bus, inspired the library to host a special bilingual storytime aboard the bus. Families gathered at the library, boarded the bus, and enjoyed a delightful 15-minute ride through the downtown streets. During this time, bus staff took the chance to engage with families who don’t typically use the bus and explained how the transit system works.

We formed an exciting partnership with the Wilmington Symphony Orchestra in 2023. They provided us with music based storytimes at all of our libraries and at DC Virgo, and helped distribute books. In turn, we provided information to the com-

These collaborations have included hosting author visits, facilitating book clubs, organizing panel discussions, conducting storytimes, coordinating art activities, and more. We extend our outreach efforts to schools and summer camps, encouraging participation and utilizing these venues as lending libraries for RaC titles. Table 1 below includes the titles selected each year and sample programming offered by NHCPL and our partners.

During our community read events, we distributed surveys to gather feedback from event attendees. This process helped us and our partners make sure that our goals were met and helped identify needs

1 American Library Association. "One Book, One Community, Planning Your Community Wide Read." Last modified December 19, 2011. <http://www.ala.org/tools/programming/onebook>.

for future programs. For example, the author visits were the highlight of Read Across the County from a majority of the respondents. Therefore, author availability is a high priority for future selections. Here are some other feedback quotes:

- “My girls loved riding the city bus and hearing *Last Stop on Market Street* read. What a great idea!”
- “I just learned about this program this summer and look forward to reading Jason Mott’s book. I loved the bus reading for children and hope you continue all these amazing efforts to grow, heal, and diversify our community. Thank you!”
- “I liked the idea of participating in the project, so the actual book and theme were secondary to that. I started with *The Violin Conspiracy* since that’s the adult selection. However, now that I’ve learned about the theme, I’ve checked out the other selections and I plan on reading those books too.”

- “I loved the story from a Cherokee author. She opened all our eyes to the similarities of us all---our fears, our worries, our goals etc. Would love to read more from her.”

Over the years, we have learned valuable lessons, such as the importance of involving a small group in selecting the adult title, preparing a list of suitable authors for invitations, and ensuring inclusivity across all age groups. Integrating RaC into summer reading plans, even when the theme does not align, and leveraging platforms like READSquared or Beanstack for missions further enhance engagement and accessibility. RaC continues to evolve as an initiative of community engagement through reading. Each year, we make changes and improvements to align better with our library’s goals and those of our partners. We encourage other libraries to learn from our experiences and explore opportunities for offering a community-wide reading program.

**Table 1**

Year	Theme	Titles	Additional Programming
2021	Nature & Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Ruby’s Birds</i> by Mya Thompson</li> <li>• <i>The Home Place</i> by J. Drew Lanham</li> <li>• <i>The Someday Birds</i> by Sally J. Pla</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Birding 101</li> <li>• Outsider Art</li> <li>• Virtual Author visits by both Mya Thompson and Sally J. Pla</li> <li>• Bird crafting contest</li> </ul>
2022	Art & Expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Hell of a Book</i> by Jason Mott</li> <li>• <i>On the Come Up</i> by Angie Thompson</li> <li>• <i>New Kid</i> by Jerry Craft</li> <li>• <i>Last Stop on Market Street</i> by Matt de la Peña</li> <li>• <i>Última Parada de la Calle Market</i> by Matt de la Peña</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bilingual Storytime in the library and on a city bus</li> <li>• Author visit with Jason Mott</li> <li>• Collage art contest</li> </ul>
2023	Music	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Violin Conspiracy</i> by Brendan Slocumb</li> <li>• <i>You, Me, and Our Heart Strings</i> by Melissa See</li> <li>• <i>A Duet for Home</i> by Karina Yan Glaser</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violin class</li> <li>• Wilmington Symphony Orchestra Music Storytime series</li> <li>• Author visit with Brendan Slocumb</li> <li>• Deaf Awareness Storytelling and presentation</li> <li>• Making noise at the library</li> </ul>
2024	Native American Heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Even As We Breathe</i> by Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle,</li> <li>• <i>Ancestor Approved; Intertribal Stories for Kids</i> by Cynthia Leitich Smith,</li> <li>• <i>We are Grateful: Otsalibeliga</i> by Traci Sorell</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Film screenings of <i>We Will Speak</i> by Schon Duncan &amp; Michael McDermit and <i>The Start Preservation Project: Waccamaw Siouan History</i> by Meredith Freeman</li> <li>• Cherokee 101 Conversations (Museum of the Cherokee People)</li> <li>• <i>My Powerful Hair</i> by Carole Lindstrom Read Aloud</li> <li>• Storytelling with Ryan Dial (Lumbee Tribe)</li> </ul>