



Book Report

Race Project KC More Important than Ever

Since 2014, Johnson County Library has coordinated Race Project KC, bringing together educators, high school students and others to learn about racism and social justice activism, locally and nationally.

The program continues with virtual events for the 2020-21 school year, when it has never been more essential to promote awareness and positive relationships during a time of renewed social and racial reckoning.

Over the years, the program has impacted over 5,000 individuals across Johnson, Wyandotte and Jackson counties. It connects students from urban and suburban high schools; fosters heartfelt discussions with authors like Tanner Colby, Ta-Nehisi Coates and Jacqueline Woodson; and sends participants on a racial discovery journey.

“They learn about each other,” said Angel Tucker, Johnson County Library youth services manager, who has been involved since its inception. “They talk about empathy and the importance of being able to connect with people that are different than you. It’s just been one of the most incredible rides that I’ve been a part of as a public library.”

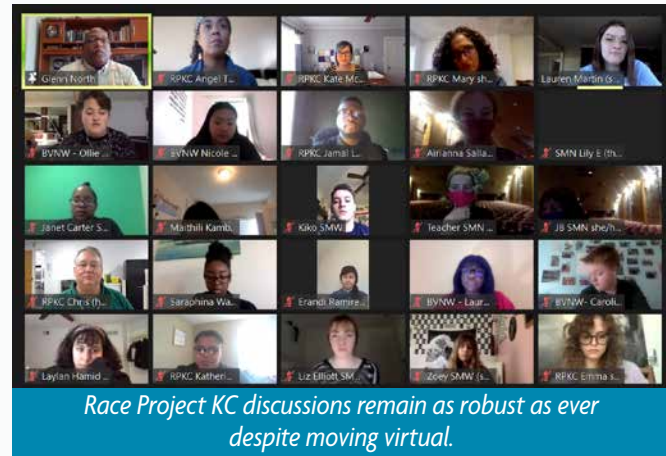
For the public, there’s a superb audio tour app, plus numerous other resources.

It began after the Library hosted a 2014 educators’ event that featured Colby’s book, “Some of My Best Friends are Black,” which included chapters about deliberate racial segregation in the Kansas City area. Shawnee Mission East English teacher Samantha Feinberg recalls how teachers wanted to delve deeper into the subject with their students. The Library agreed to provide a more extensive program.

“What the Library does is we’re basically curating experiences for these students and teachers,” Tucker explained.

Every year, Shawnee Mission East pairs about 15 students with those from a different school. This year it’s J.C. Harmon High School in Kansas City, Kan.

“As a teacher I find the program so exciting,” Feinberg said. “I feel more connected to the Kansas City community, having had a chance to meet with Library staff and colleagues from other schools and believe my students feel much the same way about their opportunity to engage. At the end of a Race Project gathering I feel a renewed sense of positivity and energy about what our students are capable of.”



Race Project KC discussions remain as robust as ever despite moving virtual.

Feinberg said the November Zoom event was “outstanding,” featuring Kansas City poet Glenn North and DJ James “SugEasy” Singleton. More virtual events are planned in 2021, including a Nelson-Atkins Museum activity in January.

Jason Zimmerman, math and debate teacher at the Kauffman School in Kansas City, said the program encourages honest, eye-opening conversations that give him hope for the future.

“This is truly a sacred yearly pilgrimage for us,” Zimmerman said. “I don’t know of any other program in the city teaching such a localized history about our space. They are providing a whole different curriculum of history that you can’t get in your classic high school textbooks.”

At a 2019 gathering, Clarice Rodriguez of Blue Valley North summarized what many students were saying: “It’s just an opportunity for us to define the biases we have in our life and just to move past the racial barriers and change the world.”

At the same gathering, author Colby said it’s a unique bi-state program that educates young people and “illuminates the world for them in a remarkable way, in ways I didn’t realize and learn until I was in my mid-30s.”

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BRANCHING OUT

Central's Upgrades Benefit Staff, Public

After several years of planning, the much-anticipated work on Central Resource Library's Phase 2 is poised to begin. Construction is slated to start in February and should be largely completed by year's end.

The \$11.1 million renovation builds on improvements to the public spaces in 2015 and is expected to complete the building's modernization. Much of the Phase 2 back-office work is intended to help staff operate more efficiently and collaboratively, while providing a wonderful space for the Library of the future.

"A few years ago we redesigned Central with the public in mind. This upgrade is with the staff in mind," explained Jared Harper, branch manager for Central and Oak Park. "Making the space better for staff, creating spaces to draw in various elements that have been in other buildings."

Youth services staffers from Antioch frequently work with information specialists from Central but they've been based in different buildings. The improvements will allow these employees to work in closer proximity. Additional office reconfigurations will help the Central branch staffers to work more closely as a team. Refreshed space will place the

Interlibrary Loan, tech services, collections staff and couriers in closer proximity.

"We're trying to have the right people in the right places," said Harper. The design was done by Clark Enersen Partners.

Library Project Coordinator Scott Sime also touts some features that will specifically benefit the public, including a new drive-thru on the building's east side, an additional public meeting space, and a bright new children's area with windows, where administrative offices are currently located.

"We'll be creating a colorful and inviting space for parents and kids to come," Harper said.

A county facilities assessment recommended some plumbing and other aging infrastructure fixes that will also be accomplished during this time. Staff will have a more comfortable breakroom, and a new space will be provided for the Development Department.

"The design process has gone well, and these are really needed upgrades to the building that are going to benefit the whole system," Sime said.

While construction is underway, most of the building will be off limits

to the public. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, no programming was scheduled anyway and the building hasn't been as intensely used as normal.

But the public will have access to what's been dubbed "Little Central," in the front lobby area. Browsing will not be allowed but patrons can still place holds and pick them up inside the building. Some computers and printers will also be available.

Staff members have been doing a lot of cleaning out of closets, desks and offices to prepare for construction. Most, including Harper, will work a lot from home although some employees will be on site. Some Central staffers will also assist other branches.

The goal is to have most of the building back open before the end of 2021.

Harper is excited to see the planning come to fruition, to enhance the hub of the Library system. "Our goal is to create a space that will be a benefit to our branch staff, that streamlines the purpose of what Central is. It is a branch," he said, "but it's also our location for administration, for materials handling and it is our central location for a lot of the services we provide."

TOP HOLDS

DECEMBER 2020

- o **A Time for Mercy** - John Grisham
- o **The Midnight Library** - Matt Haig
- o **A Promised Land** - Barack Obama
- o **Anxious People** - Fredrik Backman
- o **Leave the World Behind** - Rumaan Alam
- o **Greenlights** - Matthew McConaughey
- o **The Searcher** - Tana French
- o **The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue** - Victoria Schwab
- o **The Law of Innocence** - Michael Connelly
- o **Daylight** - David Baldacci



An architectural rendering of Central Resource Library's remodeled exterior.

Patron Appreciates Library for Tackling Issues of Race



Local educator Lauren Gladish stands in front of Central Resource Library.

As a teacher at the Johnson County Jewish Community Center's child development center, Lauren Gladish has sometimes observed how children's questions about race can be awkward and difficult to answer.

What do you say when a child asks about other people's skin color? How do you discuss race?

"We have some diversity. I'd like to have more, but we have some," Gladish said about the school where she teaches, which serves children from ages 1 to 5. "It does raise questions."

Gladish had worked previously at Borders Books with Michelle Ranney, a Johnson County Library youth information specialist, and they had remained friends. So Gladish was glad when Ranney posted something on Facebook about the Library's program, "Talking to Preschoolers about Race," offered in two November online workshops. It's part of the Library's

emphasis on building positive race relations in the community.

The facilitators, from New York-based Raising Race-Conscious Children, offered strategies for talking about race in age-appropriate ways. Participants also met virtually, in groups of two, for brief conversations during the first workshop.

Gladish admits those conversations felt odd, talking about race with a stranger. But she said it was a useful exercise. She also enjoyed the advice from presenters Sachi Feris and Myra Hernandez.

"I thought it was very informative," she said. "All these years, we've been taught to be color blind when you can't be color blind."

It also raised her awareness about how media and literature are often white-washed. She realized how there's not much diversity in children's books and said that's something for teachers and curriculum directors to address.

"It's changed, but not enough," she said.

Gladish thought the program would be geared to teachers but found it more oriented to parents and public scenarios, which she also found helpful. She looks forward to future Library programming geared to elementary children and teenagers.

A lifelong Johnson County resident, Gladish has been a devoted Library patron since she was a child who loved going to the Corinth branch.

Now, a self-described "bookaholic," she and her 11-year-old daughter, Bella, are big users of the Library, mostly for books, audio books and ebooks. Gladish loves science fiction and her daughter enjoys books and graphic novels by Dav Pilkey, especially the Captain Underpants and Dog Man series.

They mostly patronize the Central Resource and Leawood branches, and Gladish appreciates Leawood's curbside pickup service, launched during the pandemic.

"I drive up and just text them, and they bring the books out," Gladish said. "I love it."

Over the years, she has also taken advantage of some of the Library's career exploration and resume writing offerings and found those very useful.

She praises the Library for taking on race relations as a priority, especially in this time of civic unrest, but also because of Johnson County's past and its continued divide from Kansas City. She recalled visiting a Brookside ice cream parlor years ago with a Johnson County friend in high school. The friend said not to tell her parents, because they wouldn't want her "crossing the border."

"I think it's good the Library has taken on this topic," she said. "Because it needs to be talked about. I feel it's too hush hush....No one knows how to talk about it, and it's become uncomfortable."

STAFF SPOTLIGHT

A Voice for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Johnson County government formed a new task group in August with about 15 people from different departments and agencies, devoted to making diversity and inclusion a high priority throughout county government and the community.

Johnson County Library's representative on that team is Megan Mascorro-Jackson, the assistant branch manager for adult information services at Lenexa City Center. She is an important voice for diversity, equity and inclusion in the Library system and will be a key liaison now to county government.

"I have a lot of diverse perspectives and it's a value button for me," said Mascorro-Jackson. "It's work I think needs to be done and needs to be prioritized -- not only for our staff but also for the citizens that we serve."

The group meets via Zoom twice per month. Mascorro-Jackson is excited about what they are learning and the opportunities to recommend policies, procedures and practices for improvement going forward.

Mascorro-Jackson's father is Mexican and her mother is of Irish and German heritage. She grew up in Hutchinson, Kansas and attended Kansas State University, living in a 4-H scholarship house with a group of farm girls. She has also lived in New York and Los Angeles. She now lives in Lenexa with her husband, a screenwriter who is African American, and their 13-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son.

So Mascorro-Jackson brings a wealth of perspectives from her urban and rural experiences and from her multi-racial background and relationships.

She also has wide knowledge and experience at Johnson County Library. She was hired as a page at Lackman in February 2013. Over the years, she has worked as a clerk, youth information specialist and in both circulation and



Megan Mascorro-Jackson participating in a recent DEI virtual roundtable.

adult services. She worked at Antioch, Central, Gardner, Edgerton, Spring Hill and Corinth branches before landing at Lenexa City Center in January. She and her team at Lenexa specialize in providing services to the adult population.

"This year, my focus has been to adapt to the new role and the new location," she said. "I like to say I manage the 'grown-up Library' at the branch."

During the pandemic her team has worked to creatively assist people both in-person and virtually, including those in nursing homes and otherwise isolated.

"We're constantly looking for how we can expand access, how we can get materials to the people. That's been a focus of 2020," she explained.

She loves the Lenexa branch's contemporary design and beauty, but the pandemic has restricted public

access, so she looks forward to the day when it's fully operational again.

Mascorro-Jackson agrees with a foundational Library goal: to embrace the diversity of thought and not shy away from controversy. She praises Johnson County Library's collection development policy for emphasizing inclusion and diversity. She hopes to see even more progress on those goals in hiring practices, programming and patron services, and says now is an exciting time to be part of the county's initiative.

"I have never been with an organization that values learning and growth in a way that Johnson County and the Library does," she said. "The fact that we are willing to take a look at our internal policies and really take a hard look at ourselves illustrates that. We are looking for ways we can be better."

EVENTS SPOTLIGHT

Media Discussion Group Explores Race and the Suburbs

Johnson County Library’s civic engagement team is intent on providing opportunities for patrons to talk about important local issues, to develop deeper connections and understanding.

On Dec. 9, a Media Discussion Group event brought together seven women for a thoughtful 90-minute conversation about how race-based policies and practices helped create the suburbs and restricted access to the American Dream of home ownership.

“We’re choosing big ideas that have a lot of meat to them and that touch a lot of value buttons,” said Civic Engagement Librarian Melissa Horak-Hern. The next event, in spring 2021, is about Untangling Class and Race.

To enhance the Dec. 9 discussion, participants ahead of time reviewed instructional materials: The “Land of Opportunity” Kansas City PBS video about the Santa Fe Place historic neighborhood; the Nice Try! podcast

“Utopia in the Backyard,” about Levittown and Concord Park, two post-World War II suburbs in Pennsylvania; and an interactive website that mapped inequality.

Information Specialist Amanda Williams facilitated the Dec. 9 Zoom discussion, while Information Specialist Katherine Fuller provided links to extra resources prompted by the discussion. Horak-Hern also shared thoughts along with four other participants.

“We want to have a safe place for our patrons to be able to take a deeper dive into current events and topics,” Williams told the group.

The video and podcast provided a fascinating history about post-war segregated and integrated suburbs in Pennsylvania, plus a riveting account of how Kansas City Blacks fought for their rights to live in the Santa Fe neighborhood.

One participant said Johnson County residents must grapple with their own county’s segregationist past. The county’s namesake is Thomas Johnson, a missionary and slave owner.

“During the entire time, he was advocating for Kansas to be a slave state, so Johnson County doesn’t have a pretty history,” the participant noted.

Another white participant said her father benefited from the GI Bill after World War II, which enabled him to get an education, buy a home and build family wealth. She

lamented that people of color often faced severe barriers and lacked those advantages.

Her family moved to Johnson County when she was in seventh grade. In ninth grade she was deeply moved by the book “Black Like Me,” about racial segregation in the Deep South. It raised her awareness about stark segregation here, although she sees that gradually changing.

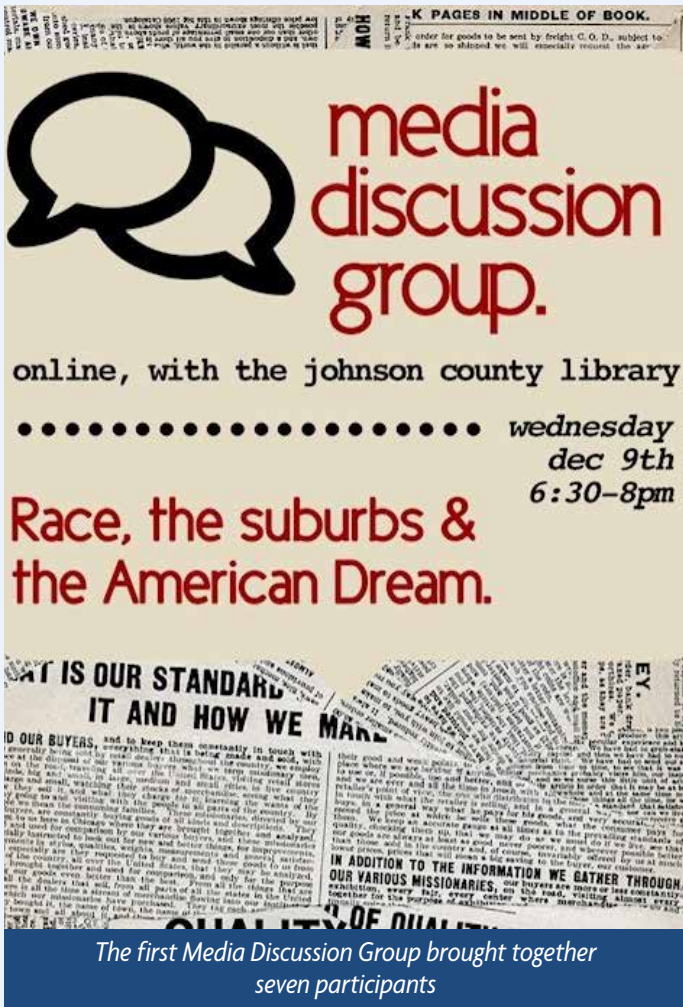
“Now I live in Overland Park and it’s way more diverse than when I was growing up,” she said. “My daughter goes to the Shawnee Mission School District, and it’s so much better than when I was [young].”

Participants shared other book and podcast suggestions, including those by Brene Brown. Horak-Hern recommended her favorite book about Kansas City history: “A City Divided,” by Sherry Lamb Schirmer.

One participant said her father’s family came from Mexico while her mother’s family is Caucasian. Genealogy research has opened her eyes to racial and economic disparities within her own family. She now lives in northern Overland Park and wishes it were more diverse.

Still, she said discussions like the ones the Library is hosting give her hope.

“It’s better to go ahead and have those conversations because you can walk out on the other side of it, understanding each other better,” she said. “It’s not easy work, but it’s worth it.”



media discussion group.

online, with the johnson county library

wednesday
dec 9th
6:30-8pm

Race, the suburbs & the American Dream.


The first Media Discussion Group brought together seven participants

TAKING A CLOSER LOOK

Social Media Highlights

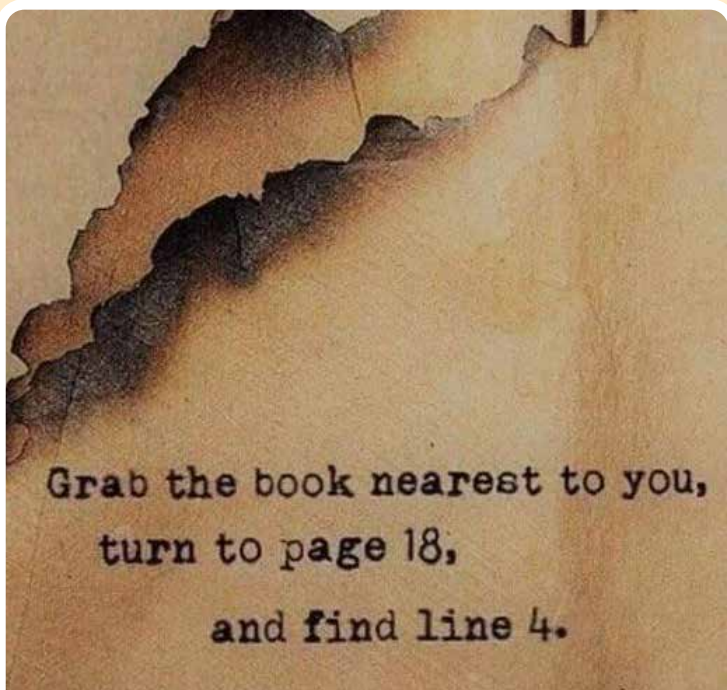
As you can see by the posts below, the Johnson County library system continues to thrive even in these difficult times! Thank you for your support! *Click the captions to view full posts online!*




 Our new Tabletop Games series has received a lot of reactions and great comments!




 128 engagements on Twitter for this great story of a special Curbside Christmas gift!



 This meme received over 1,000 Facebook engagements.



 Almost 70 likes on our visual history of the Central Resource branch.



Month in Review December 2020



Patrons discussed the book *Mexican Gothic* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia on Dec. 9. Patrons could register and receive a free book to pick up at the library and join a staff-led discussion.



In 2019, County Librarian Sean Casserley commissioned a work from the Poet Laureate of Kansas Emerita, Wyatt Townley, to celebrate the opening of the Lenexa City Center Library. Townley's poem "The Library" was etched onto a steel plate and was installed on the market level of the Library on Dec. 11.



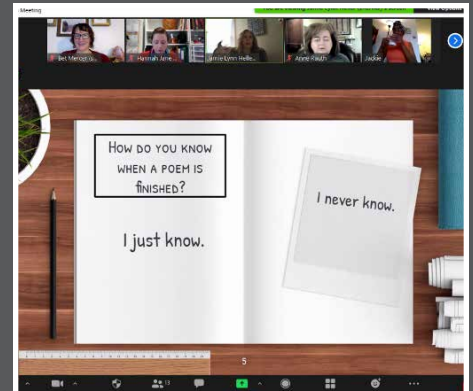
Marketing Specialist Ben Oglesby was interviewed by KSHB on Dec. 17 about the Library's Digital Navigators Project, which was funded through the Federal CARES Act and helps County residents find tech help and resources.



On Dec. 18, County Librarian Sean Casserley (R) met with City of Merriam Mayor Ken Sissom (L) for a photo op in front of the newly-installed "Future Home of Johnson County Library" sign on the Merriam Community Center campus.



JoCo Writers were invited to participate in a choose-your-own-story contest through the months of November and December. At the end of December the Writers Committee chose three random winners to receive either a professional coaching session, twenty pages of free professional editing, or a prose or poetry editing session with author Polly Alice McCann.



During the Dec. 19 session of *Revising Poetry*, local writer Jamie Heller asked questions like "How do you know when a poem is finished?" and "What are some last steps you can take to make sure your writing is strong and clear?"

NEXT ISSUE

- Cover Story:** AARP Tax Help returns in 2021

- Branching Out:** Oak Park gets a refresh

- Patron Of The Month:** Maria Tamayo-Gonzalez, ESL student

- Staff Spotlight:** Local History Librarian Amanda Wahlmeier



JOHNSON COUNTY KANSAS

Library

BOOK REPORT

A monthly publication for government officials and residents of Johnson County

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