

## **VACO 2022-Awards Application**

### **Arlington County, Libraries Department**

#### **Program: Arlington Reads**

Arlington Reads is an innovative community engagement project created with community partners to bring people together through literature. Like many city- or county-wide reading initiatives, it uses literature to build community. Unlike other initiatives, Arlington Reads asks *and answers* the question, “How might the library help be an effective catalyst for community action?” The 2022 Arlington Reads series is hosted in partnership with Offender Aid and Restoration (OAR), a nonprofit organization that helps individuals returning to the community from incarceration and confronts legacy structures that favor retribution over restoration. Arlington Reads was designed specifically for our county and our residents, yet the structure and presentation of the program are replicable elsewhere.

#### **Brief Overview**

Public libraries are among some of the most trusted institutions in our country. Libraries are both physical places and stewards of intellectual values and philosophy. Anyone can enter, and almost certainly find what they are looking for, and if not immediately, be put on the path towards what they seek. For the last couple of years during an historic pandemic, public libraries pivoted and acted as frontline community centers with employees serving in essential roles by distributing COVID-19 rapid test kits, providing free Internet while the world went virtual, supplying information on food assistance, all alongside their typical librarian services involving books and reading.

For nearly two decades Arlington Public Library’s signature program, Arlington Reads, has worked at this intersection of our community’s physical and intellectual needs. Through Arlington Reads, our library has fulfilled its promise to inspire and quench one’s thirst to know, to encourage users to ask questions of “why,” to embrace

inclusion and diverse points of view, to be a wellspring of ideas, for conversation, for disagreement, for enlightenment, and to create opportunities for increased understanding -- of our world, of our community and of each other. Taking to heart the responsibility placed in us as a trusted institution, Arlington Public Library has created a program that increases awareness and inspires concrete action. Finally, Arlington Reads is fully replicable, and based on our experience, should be.

### **Executive Summary**

Since 1937, Arlington Public Library has been the heart of a thoughtful, inclusive, and dynamic community where people and ideas connect. Nearly two decades ago when Library Director Diane Kresh joined Arlington Public Library she asked the question, "How might the library help be a better catalyst for positive community action?" In a world filled with divisions where people have increasingly embraced *not* talking about profound and difficult issues facing our society with those with whom they don't agree, how might we imagine using our space, our expertise, our resources, and our belief in the power of reading to bring people together while moving society forward? Out of this desire, Arlington Reads – a county-wide reading initiative – was born.

Under the leadership of Ms. Kresh and a dedicated team of programmers and librarians, Arlington Public Library built a program around the most popular and important authors of the day, and equally around timely themes needing attention and action. The Library was able to afford a range of authors because of the successful fundraising by the Friends of Arlington Library (FOAL). As the program developed over the years, themes continued to emerge around topics front and center in our community. The Library embraced its role as convener, gathering people together in its space, and increasingly shaped it as a place of ideas, a place to encourage civil conversation and civic duty. The stakeholders watched as the community came together, time and time again, and responded with sincere engagement. The Library responded as well, often working together with partnerships that arose out of these events. The framers of the program intentionally set out to develop programs with long shelf lives, one at a time, making course corrections, adapting, and adding others along the way.

Arlington Public Library's programs are replicable because they are scalable for any budget and any size library system. The Library has established itself as the convener and driver of change, a trusted space where

people can engage in good faith. The Arlington Reads program presents a model for other public library systems that is both replicable and powerfully personal to the communities they serve.

### **Problem Statement**

More than ever, communities need a place where doors are open wide for all who would like to enter. Since 1937, Arlington Public Library (APL) has been that space. While many people show up individually, APL, like all libraries, offers space for people to belong, to learn, to participate, to come together, and to be part of challenging conversations they may not find elsewhere.

Though covering a mere 26 square miles, Arlington County is home to 236,000 people living within its borders and is made up of distinct communities reflected within and across several neighborhoods. APL exists to serve everyone, all 236,000 residents, via one main Central Library and seven branch locations. The patrons, existing and potential, represent diverse backgrounds, nations of origin, races, religions, ethnicities, sexual orientations, gender identities, and abilities. We are committed to celebrating and welcoming the range of diversity and acting as a convener for Arlingtonians, as well as a resource provider. Our strength lies in our differences, in our learning to hear one another in a way to grow our own understanding. But coming together with others who have different experiences and hold different views also presents challenges. It takes courage to engage in conversations with people who have differing beliefs, perspectives, and points of view. And the more we practice respectful listening, as individuals and as a community, the better we become at understanding and accepting one another.

So, when the Library Director, Diane Kresh, began an Arlington-wide reading initiative nearly two decades ago, it was like many city- or county-wide reading initiatives, to use shared literature to build community. However, it was designed to be so much more – a program that increases awareness and inspires action.

According to our vision statement, APL is the heart of a thoughtful, inclusive, and dynamic community where people and ideas connect. Our mission is to champion the power of stories, information, and ideas, create space for culture and connection, and embrace inclusion and diverse points of view. In a world filled with divisions where people have increasingly embraced *not* talking about profound and difficult issues facing our society with those with whom they do not agree, how might we imagine using our space, our expertise, our resources, and our

belief in the power of reading to bring people together while moving society forward? We know most of us are talking about the same topics, and yet we avoid coming together to discuss them with others who might see them from a different vantage point. We watch our one news channel or listen to our narrow range of podcasts and radio stations, carefully aggregate journalists we will read, and become further entrenched. We can all observe housing shortages, changes in climate, need for prison reform, anti-trans violence, food scarcity, racism, and neighbors fearful of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The list goes on. We – as librarians -- are left with questions borne of our sense of responsibility as a treasured and trusted cornerstone of democracy. How do we help Arlingtonians dig out of their trenches and hear from one another, perhaps defining common values and using them as a launchpad for constructive, even if spirited, discussions? What kinds of actions can these author talks and book discussions spur? How might we help be a catalyst for such action? If not the library, then who? If not now, then when? Our director began asking those questions when she arrived in 2006 and began to shape an answer. These events were going to build on traditional author events centered on a community-wide reads. These events were going to offer a place to engage in civic dialogue and to get to know one's neighbors. These were going to be calls to action.

### **How Library Achieved the Goal**

To achieve the goal of using our space to convene, discuss new ideas, and drive positive change, the Library Director worked with library staff to launch the Arlington Reads initiative, where the community would come together as one, focused on one book at a time. While literature is not neutral and can most certainly stir strong reactions, it can also offer a shared experience, engaging all community members around issues that sometimes divide us, but often unite us too. We hoped to establish better communication among community members and between the library staff and the people we serve, and to build community spirit. What do we share in common? Where we differ, how can we grow a better understanding of one another? How can we work together to form a better Arlington and a better world?

We built the program around the most popular and important authors of the day, and equally around timely themes screaming for attention and action. We were able to afford a range of authors because of the successful fundraising by the FOAL. As the program developed over the years, themes continued to immerse

around topics front and center in our community. We embraced our role as convener, gathering people together in our space, and increasingly shaped it as a place of ideas, a place to encourage civil conversation and civic duty. We watched as the community came together, time and time again, and responded. The library responded as well, often working together with partnerships that arose out of these events. We intentionally set out to develop programs with long shelf lives, one at a time, making course corrections, adapting, and adding others along the way.

We sought an array of fiction and nonfiction authors, nonfiction for the reporting and historical record it presents, and fiction for the way it draws on the imagination to present difficult truths. Books use metaphors often to talk about real life and it is easier to open up for conversations which can be difficult and awkward. All the authors had direct experience with the universal themes we addressed. We saw research demonstrating that reading literature grows empathy play out in our lives and the lives of those in our audience ([Novel Finding: Reading Literary Fiction Improves Empathy - Scientific American](#)).

We intentionally drew on books that nurtured the mind, body, and spirit to help illustrate how the library can serve as a buttress against storms of life. We wanted people to walk away from the talks thinking, "I matter." We are complicated. Life is complicated. Authors and their subject matter exposed how, in our shared humanness, in our shared desire to be the best we can, reading helps, reading comforts, reading ignites, reading breathes life.

On top of the benefits to the community, we also saw the staff see a larger purpose to their work, a spirit that was particularly visible during the early days of the pandemic. In addition to seeing their roles as part of an institution serving as convener and activator, they participated in many of the after-event actions. For one example, after early discussions on food insecurity and the importance of access to healthy food, the Library Director served on a county-wide task force addressing these issues. Over the years, gardens at Central Library and two branches have added beauty to our grounds and provided fresh produce for Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC). Central Library also operates a tool lending shed, and during the pandemic added a small food pantry near the gardens, where people can donate and access food 24/7.

Prior to 2009, the Library had hosted book discussion groups around certain titles. Since then, we have invited authors to speak and gathered people together in person (or virtually during the pandemic) on themes such as:

- Immigration
- Housing inequities
- Black Lives Matter
- Health
- Violence against women
- Japanese internment
- Climate change
- Afghanistan War
- Substance abuse and the pharmaceutical industry
- Food sources and food insecurity
- Inclusive communities
- Democracy

Like most programs, we started small and have watched it grow over the years. Jeffrey Toobin was the inaugural author. He had just written *The Nine* and did a program for high school students during school hours and an evening program for APL, to a standing room only crowd.

The following year, the Library Director was asked to interview Wendell Berry and Novella Carpenter both authors important to the sustainability movement. Berry had published *Bringing it to the Table: On Farming and Food* in 2009, and Novella Carpenter, *Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer*, in May of 2010. The proposition of interviewing two such large voices in a movement, felt like a monumental task, but Ms. Kresh pulled it off, and those experiences have spurred the program and its impact on to great successes over the years. Out of that first experience, what would prove to be the successful formula for years to come, the conversation around the book continued in the community and among staff, and out of both, new library initiatives and partnerships were born. We still have gardens, we still donate to AFAC, we still operate the tool shed, and as mentioned, we still host the food pantry. Our partnerships with AFAC and Master Gardeners remain strong and continue to adapt to changing needs.

Positioning the Library as a hub of community conversation and action has yielded amazing results over the years. We've been able to sustain projects as we've nurtured new ones. All of what we've done is replicable because it is scalable for any budget and any size library system. Aside from the sustainability and gardening initiatives, here are some of ways we've taken ideas, built coalitions, and impacted the community:

- We support Arlington County Department of Human Services (DHS) and their desired health outcomes with outreach and support, moved by hearing Beth Macy, author of *Dopesick*, a journalistic accounting of the opioid crisis focusing on Southwestern Virginia as the epicenter. As

our awareness was raised, we asked how we could provide services that help care of our residents as we talked about books and ideas with them. We also began to work with patrons and staff to provide support for a local nonprofit, Doorways, which provides shelter and support for those in need.

- Operating from the core belief that everyone is entitled to a high quality of life, we consistently help patrons navigate all sorts of forms needed to apply for services, job searches, and other real-time needs. During the pandemic, we have provided free rapid tests, shared our parking lot with a company providing free PCR tests, and helped people register for vaccines.
- A business librarian and a college and career librarian started reaching out to engage more with businesses to offer support, and helped students prepare for college or navigate alternatives.
- During the David Brooks on his book, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* he discussed “the weavers,” the people in the community whose role is to knit community together. Before the talk, we identified three weavers in our community: a restaurant owner, a laughing yoga instructor, and the leader of a parent’s group who works to ensure Black kids aren’t left behind. We pre-recorded interviews with each “weaver” and shared these stories with Brooks for his comments and reflections during the talk.
- During his talk on *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, Matthew Desmond addressed housing inequities, and talked about the importance of high-quality affordable housing. We launched a partnership with Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing (APAH) and Arlington County Department of Community, Planning, and Housing (CPHD) to ensure we were doing our part to help people with low and moderate incomes to live in Arlington.
- Reginald Dwayne Betts shared some of his poetry from *Felon: Poems* and told the story of how he spent 17 years of incarceration reading classics. Twenty-three years after his release, he founded Freedom Reads, a nonprofit empowering “people through literature to confront what literature does to the spirit.” The presentation led to our working with the Sheriff’s office to reshape the way we serve and support the library located in the local detention center.

- Roxane Gay, a New York Times bestselling author, professor, and social commentator, talked about bringing other voices to the table, what it means to be Black in America today, the Trayvon Martin case, and just what kinds of things we in libraries can do in response to injustice. We have continued to ratchet up our efforts to fight injustice, including recently hosting a week-long series featuring books that are often banned based on stories by and about authors of color, LGBTQ authors, and others representing minority voices.
- Bina Venkataraman, climate advisor to President Obama and author of *The Optimist's Telescope: Thinking Ahead in a Reckless Age*, discussed our responsibility as stewards of the world's resources. We are planning to host another Human Library which will feature at least one person who is committed to climate change.
- In addition, the whole of the Fall of 2021's Arlington Reads author talks were focused on climate change, leading to a spinoff series of programs called "Our Environment, Our Future," which explored ways in which Arlingtonians could Imagine, Explore, and Act (three programs, three themes) to combat climate change in our community. The series is hosted in partnership with CPHD, Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), Department of Environmental Services (DES), and EcoAction Arlington. Many of the events were held at a variety of locations off library property.
- The Central Library hosted naturalization ceremonies in 2017 and 2018. The Library Director served as host, and inspired by several authors over the years, emphasized the library as a safe haven and underscored the value of citizenship.

We offer to each of our Arlington Reads authors an opportunity to do a Q&A with Marymount students and New Directions, where appropriate. The authors that accept the opportunity to speak with our patrons then visit with Marymount students during their stay here. Marymount English professors, who get the Arlington Reads authors/titles in advance, assign their English 101 students the author's work sometime during the semester, and they come for a one-hour Q&A with the author and a book signing to follow.



## Through the Years with Arlington Reads:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Theme</u>	<u>Author</u>
2009	Inside the Supreme Court	Jeffrey Toobin
2010	Know What You Eat	Wendell Berry Novella Carpenter
2011	The Soldier's Story	David Finkel Tim O'Brien
2012	Life, Love, Loss	Jennifer Egan
2013	Out of Bounds: The Immigrant Experience	Dinaw Mengestu Junot Diaz
2014	Dazed and Confused: Boomer Angst	
2015	Being Black in America	Ann Beattie Richard Ford Jesmyn Ward Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
2016	The Human Displacement of WWII	Anthony Doerr Julie Otsuka Richard Reeves
2017	Why Fiction Matters	Elizabeth Strout Viet Thanh Nguyen Lawrence Block
2018	Habitats for Inhumanity	Katherine Boo Richard Rothstein Matthew Desmond Zadie Smith
2019	Our Stories, Ourselves	Beth Macy
2020	We the People	Michael W. Twitty Wilma Jones Jacqueline Woodson Mary Karr Susan Orlean Tracy K. Smith Matt McCarthy  Roxane Gay Brooke Gladstone Rachel Snyder Elaine Weiss David Brooks

2021	Spring/Summer: Food for Thought Fall: Forces of Change	Colson Whitehead Masha Gessen Jenny Offill Rebecca Traister Laila Lalami Valeria Luiselli Joan E. Biren Catherine Coleman Flowers Bina Venkataraman Nathaniel Rich Imbolo Mbue
2022	Rebooting the Classics	Reginald Dwayne Betts Deb Olin Unferth Deesha Philyaw Parul Sehgal Kiese Laymon Marlon James George Saunders

Attendance varies from program to program and year to year. We have experienced setbacks including times when authors did not show up. We have also experienced crowds so large we have had to use the open area in our library and upstairs (and in one case, the staircase) in addition to the auditorium. We learned a lot about the limits of audiovisual equipment and other lessons of improvisation when these kinds of things would happen. Over the past three years, total attendance has been:

- 2019: 843 people attended Arlington Reads events
- 2020: 480 attended in-person; 1,400+ hours watched virtually via YouTube and Facebook
- 2021: 1,300+ hours watched virtually on YouTube and Facebook

### **Financing and Staffing**

Arlington Reads is a scalable program that could be tailored to any community and any budget. For Arlington Public Library, the estimated operating budget for FY 2022 Arlington Reads hybrid series was \$89,356. This amount includes author speaking fees; one-hour interviews in-person or virtual, with 30-day YouTube access available after the event; two author visits to Marymount University English 101 students (Reginald Dwayne Betts and Kiese Laymon); and LIB staff resources (not included in expense).

## Conclusion

Arlington Public Library makes the following promise to the community:

- Inspire and quench your thirst to know.
- Encourage you to ask why and why not?
- Embrace inclusion and diverse points of view.
- Be a wellspring of ideas, for conversation, for disagreement, for enlightenment.
- Create opportunities for an increased understanding: of our world, of our community and of each other.

The promise adds: We will do all of this with good will, humor, and kindness. Through books and community programs. Within our walls and outside the community.

Because the program has now spanned two decades, we have a structure in place that informs the integration of the author presentations with our services, programs, collections, and partnerships. We have established ourselves as the convener and driver of change, a trusted space people can engage in good faith.

We may not have solved all the problems we've addressed via reading books by these esteemed authors and asking them to join us to talk about their work, but attendance has been significant, and we brought people together. Steve Jobs is famously quoted for saying, "We're here to put a dent in the universe. Why else even be here?"

We've made a dent in our universe. And we believe all libraries can do the same. We are proud to have led the way and encourage libraries across the Commonwealth of Virginia to embrace the power of stories and leverage the power of libraries to do the same.

# ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS



## SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2022.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

### PROGRAM INFORMATION

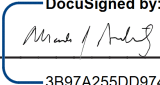
County: Arlington County  
Program Title: Arlington Reads  
Program Category: Communications; Health and Human Services

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### SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Mark Schwartz  
Title: County Manager

Signature:   
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