

**A UNITING FORCE:
THE ONE BOOK, ONE CITY
PROGRAM IN INDIANAPOLIS**

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ne Book, One City is a nation-wide program in which everyone in a community reads the same book. Typically an annual event, the program is intended to foster a sense of community, promote reading among adults, and celebrate literature. This paper evaluates the implementation of Indianapolis's version of this program—One Book, One City: Indy Reads. In order to do this, the paper analyzes Indianapolis's reaction to the program through book circulation, community involvement, and patron response.

According to the Library of Congress's Web site on one-book reading promotion projects, there are forty-eight states (excluding only New Mexico and West Virginia) that are involved in these programs. In the state of Indiana alone, there are nineteen communities that host One Book, One City reading projects. The program is also spreading to Canada, Great Britain, and Australia.

This renewed interest in the book began in 1996 when Oprah Winfrey's staff suggested that she host a book club. In the *Read Aloud Handbook*, Jim Trelease writes: "Oprah's book club was successful because she called it a "book club" not a "book class" and she speaks sincerely and passionately about books she has selected for the program."¹ Not only did Oprah's selected books become instant best sellers, but the number of book clubs in the United States also rose drastically from 250,000 in 1996 to 500,000 in 1999.²

Two years later, in 1998, the Seattle Public Library's Washington Center for the Book initiated "If All of Seattle Read One Book," which has since been renamed "Seattle Reads." This was the first One Book, One City program and sparked the adoption of this theme in communities across the country. The first book chosen was Russell Bank's *The Sweet Hereafter*. Nancy Pearl, the founder of the program, discussed the two main criteria for selection in an interview for *Poets and Writers* magazine:

We look for books that are suitable for discussion, meaning that they are driven by well-developed

characters rather than plot and that they leave room for interpretation. We also look for authors who are comfortable talking about their books with an audience. You'd be surprised how many books get eliminated because the authors don't want to participate.³

The library system developed study guides, started and encouraged participation in discussion groups, held screenings of the film version of the book, broadcast a reading of the book on public radio, and set up promotional spots at local radio stations. In addition to the programs it promoted, the Seattle Public Library also encouraged participation in independent reading and discussion groups. One way in which they did this was to include on their Web site a section on how to conduct one's own book discussion. Some of their tips include "come prepared with ten to fifteen open ended questions" and "don't be afraid to criticize the book."⁴

Two New York Cities, Buffalo and Rochester, were the next cities to implement a One Book, One City program, but the city to take the program to the next level was Chicago. In the fall of 2001, their first book was *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Along with book discussions and study guides, they also provided an online resource guide containing a biography of the author, information on the historical context of the novel, recommended resources, and a "Chicago's Talking" message to get people involved without having to physically attend a book discussion. Chicago also upped the ante by making the program twice a year, once in the spring and once in the fall, and DePaul University hosts a ten-week, graduate-level course on One Book, One Chicago. This allows interested members of the community to attend a more in-depth study of the book that reaches beyond the limitations of a book discussion group.

According to Melanie Wissel, it was an editorial in the *Indianapolis Star* challenging Indianapolis to follow Chicago's lead by reading one book together that prompted the city's adoption of its own One Book, One City program. Tim Swarens's article, written in August 2001, was met with enthusiasm from Deputy Mayor Jane Henegar and the Indianapolis Marion County

Public Library; together, the library and the mayor's office began organizing a program for Indianapolis, and One Book, One City: Indy's Choice was launched a year later in the fall of 2002.

The primary objectives of this paper are to explore One Book, One City and to illustrate the program's successes and setbacks. Specifically, it is intended to explore the questions: How was the One Book, One City program implemented in Indianapolis? How is the Indianapolis program unique against the backdrop of other well-known programs around the county? and, What were the corporate, media, and general public's responses to the program?

On Wednesday, October 13, 2004, the researchers interviewed Melanie Wissel, Manager of Program and Product Development for the Indianapolis Marion County Public Library (IMCPL); Cory O'Dell of Project Development Services Area; Marilyn Martin of Program Development Services Section; and Raylene Jordan of Community Libraries Services Areas. The interview took place in the IMCPL Library Services Center and lasted approximately two hours. The questions postulated can be found in Appendix A. Following this interview, additional information was sought from various sources, such as newspaper articles and editorials, Web sites, magazines, and journal articles. Each of these sources has been important in ascertaining the success of the program.

The uniqueness of Indianapolis's program—its focus on consensus and inclusion—is evident from the program's inception. The words of Swarsens's editorial convey the idea that a One Book, One City program in Indianapolis should be a tool for bringing the community together:

For a city trying to promote its creative community to the world, 'One Book, One Indy' would be a great addition, one that says the arts can still unite rather than divide people, as so often occurs now ... So what do you say, Indianapolis? Can we read and reason together? Do you want to discuss *Season on the Brink* or *War and Peace*? Dostoyevsky or Grisham? Or perhaps (let's pray) something in between that could bring us all together?⁵

The fate of any One Book, One City program, Wissel says, hinges on the community's ability to adapt the program to fit its needs, and it is the incorporation of this community-building mindset into the One Book, One City idea that has made Indy's Choice a success.

An awareness of the importance of making the program fit Indianapolis prompted the Indianapolis Marion County Public Library and the Mayor's Office to plan One Book, One City: Indy's Choice without consulting any other city's One Book, One City model.

Likewise, Wissel says she advises librarians from other cities who call requesting a blueprint for Indianapolis's program to do the same. This, Wissel says, is the only way to make the program a success.

The two main ways that Indy's Choice is tailored to fit the community are in the program's highly developed Web pages and in the community's involvement in choosing the book. When a board chooses a book for the city to read, there can be conflict surrounding which book is chosen, and this is something that the creators of the program in Indianapolis very much wanted to avoid. In New York City, an extreme example, a large group splintered off from the main program in protest of the chosen book, so the city actually reads two books. The name of the program is also debated, with some calling it "One Book, One City: New York" and others calling it "New York Reads!"⁶ In order to prevent a similar problem in Indianapolis, IMCPL and the mayor's office decided to involve the public in the selection process.

In Indianapolis, the community has a partial role in choosing its book. "We want the focus to be on bringing the community together around the book," says Wissel. The Indianapolis Marion County Public Library takes nominations for books from the public. Next, a board consisting of librarians and representatives from the mayor's office obtains a copy of each book; reads book reviews; divides the books according to genre; talks about and reads the books; and narrows the nominations to a list of the twenty-five top books based on a pre-established set of criteria. This process has been popular with the public. As one *Indianapolis Star* editorial reads:

The beauty of having twenty-five finalists is that no one need wait for the final selection to begin reading. Browse the list, find an intriguing title, and dive in. You might find that you surface with a whole new appreciation of the joy of reading.⁷

Publishing this list also allows people to comment on the books before the final selection is made. The board does not base its selection solely on the number of votes for each book because the anonymous voting process allows for lobbying, but they do consider the community's votes and suggestions when selecting the final book, and every book considered begins as a recommendation from a member of the community.

The Indianapolis Marion County Public Library's Web site is an important catalyst for involving the community in the book-choosing process. People can view all of the titles that have been recommended, as well as others' comments and reviews of the books; comment on or review titles already nominated; and nominate books via the Web.

As mentioned before, the first Indy's Choice program met an ambitious timeline. In addition to the

slight year taken to plan it, the program also required quick turnaround with its October 9 launch date, November 15 deadline for nominations, and December 11 book announcement. This short timeframe was successful in sparking intrigue and holding the public's interest in the selection process but also caused some complications for bookstores struggling to keep up with the demand for the book.⁸

In the first year of the program, the city welcomed recommendations of books on any topic. "It can be anything," Heneger said in 2002. "We have no preconceived notions."⁹ Over 800 books were nominated through IMCPL's Web site and in ballot boxes around the city.¹⁰ The inaugural book, Indiana-born Jessamyn West's *The Friendly Persuasion*, was a story focusing on a Quaker family in northern Indiana. It was determined by IMCPL and the mayor's office to be an overwhelming success. In December and January alone, general circulation jumped 11 percent, more than 2,300 copies of the book were sold, and 25 discussion programs were attended by more than 560 people; according to Mayor Bart Peterson, "The program brought together diverse groups of people to discuss issues of complexity found in *The Friendly Persuasion*. It also exposed residents to a less familiar Indiana author and got people reading again."¹¹ In addition, over 75 community partners participated in the program by hosting book discussions, movie showings, or community programs.

With the success of the first volume of the Indianapolis Marion County Library's One Book, One City Program, IMCPL had to switch gears to get things rolling for the next year's addition. *The Friendly Persuasion* had the appeal and emotion of "sweetness," and those behind the One Book, One City project decided to change the genre of the book selected for the 2003 program.

With change in mind, the program set its sights on the high road of adventure and the spirit of survival. The selected book needed to be one that many have not yet read. The reason is obvious: if people have already read the book, then they will not participate; if they do not participate, then the goal of using a book to unite and involve a city has already failed.

The choice for the second book was *Endurance: Shackleton's Incredible Voyage* by Alfred Lansing. A factual adventure story set in Antarctica. *Endurance* brought to the scene a rugged approach of real events and a nugget of history, making it appealing to history buffs, businesspersons, and lovers of the human spirit alike.

IMCPL was also more prepared this time around. The first year's book *The Friendly Persuasion* had not been bar-coded, meaning that the many city library

branches could not track the process of the number of times the book was checked out by library patrons. *Endurance* was processed with a barcode to defeat this mishap. This not only allowed IMCPL to count circulation numbers, but it also allowed them to count how many hits they received at their Web address.

Another advantage with the second book was that IMCPL was prepared to get to work to get the number of copies of the books they would need for distribution. With *The Friendly Persuasion* there were difficulties in getting the involvement IMCPL needed for bringing the books to the potential readers. The book had been out of print, and the library ordered the enormous amount of 5,000 copies with the cooperation of the publisher. The second time around, IMCPL was able to give a warning to the printer that mass quantities of books were to be needed.

Another problem that arose during the first One Book, One City program was getting the local bookstores to get onboard with the library program and sell the book. With the start of the program people naturally went to their bookstores to obtain the book, but the book was often not in stock. This was a major problem since the announcement of the now annual One City book takes place in December, making it an excellent choice for a holiday stocking stuffer.

With year two of the program the bookstores did decide to purchase copies of the book for their stores. Local Borders Book Stores bought around 900 copies, and a partnership was established between B. Dalton Book Store and IMCPL, with ballot boxes were placed in stores. There were disadvantages at purchasing the book at the local bookstore, for the flat price to obtain the book at the library was ten dollars, to buy it at the bookstore cost the reader almost two dollars extra. In addition the books purchased from the libraries had the One Book, One City logos printed on them.

As IMCPL gears up for the third volume of its One Book, One City program they prepare to alter it once again to prevent the program from stagnating. By changing things up the hard workers behind the program hope to continue to gain local media coverage and set examples to other cities wishing to start their own program. For the third year IMCPL has decided to use the theme of the election year to help with the decision of the book. Rather than the sweet community of *The Friendly Persuasion* or the adventurous *Endurance*, the path of the book has been decided to follow two courses.

The choices stem from the overall theme of the Spirit of America, one being the country's finest hour, the other the country's darkest hour. The selections will be limited to 25 choices, with twelve representing each viewpoint, and one mixing the two together. When the

selections are refined down to two, then the election is to commence by ballot and vote.

Another characteristic of Indy's Choice that has been critical to its success in uniting Indianapolis around the chosen book is that it has not been limited to the confines of the libraries in Indianapolis. Many different people and organizations joined together to start a ripple effect into all parts of the city, contributing to the project's success and allowing those who may not have otherwise heard about the program to get involved. First, the last two years of the programs would not have been possible without the interest of the Indianapolis Power and Light Company and the Netherleigh Fund, a fund of the Indianapolis Foundation. This year the Netherleigh Fund has again taken part in the program. They have provided much of the needed funds to hold One Book, One City.

The strong support of Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson and Deputy Mayor Jane Henegar has given the program a huge buzz and aided the program's philosophy that Indy's Choice is a city-wide program for all to share. With their support, many other institutions joined in to extend the books beyond their pages. During the volume one season, for example, Conner Prairie, a local open-air historical museum about life in nineteenth century America, opened its doors to people interested in the lives presented in *The Friendly Persuasion*.

The Indiana State Museum also provides support through its IMAX theatre. The theatre has headlined the movie for each year's chosen book. In 2004 they showed *Shackleton's Antarctic Adventure* to coincide with the *Endurance* book choice, and in 2003 they ended the program with a free screening of *The Friendly Persuasion*. The IMAX cooperation is very important to the One Book, One City program in Indianapolis because it provides the story to many who would not otherwise read the book. It gets more people talking about the concepts and plots, generating more of the key goal: to give everyone something in common to share and come together about. The participation of the museums is important because it brings the books to life in unique and concrete ways.

Other organizations that have been involved in Indy's Choice, whether through special exhibits or by holding book discussions, include the Historic Landmarks of Indiana, the Indianapolis Historical Society, the Indiana War Memorials, Martin University, the Peace Learning Center, the Indiana Women's Prison, and the WFYI radio station. Many hospitals, schools, churches, and private book clubs also joined in the One Book, One City program by holding discussion groups.

This list shows that the program has gotten many people interested. It takes the books out of the libraries and into something the whole city can be a part of. A great example of how the books have taken off beyond the libraries can be seen in the second year, when the book *Endurance* was chosen. The book, with its themes on history, adventure, leadership, and survival, caught the eye of the *Indiana Business Journal*. They published an article about the book, generating more interest in the program in the business sector within the city. Cooperation with the libraries has rippled into a life of its own.

The Indianapolis Marion County Public Library has also worked very hard to create good relationships with the publishers involved. When the top twenty-five books are chosen, a letter is written to each of the publishers to see if the numbers of copies that will be needed are available. The working relationship between the Library and the publishing houses has been very positive because of the graciousness and communication that the Library tries to establish before the books are received. The Library has also set up relationships with the bookstores in town, notifying them of the chosen title so that they can stock the item more heavily on their shelves. The first year of the program, the bookstores did not believe that the program was going to be as successful as it turned out to be. They were unprepared for the quantities of books that their customers desired. The next year was different; the bookstores maintained better communication with the IMCPL and were able to provide better service as a result.

The One Book, One City program would not be as successful without this cooperation among people and organizations in the community. Their involvement and cooperation has made it possible for many people to hear about the program and has spurred many to participate. The cooperation with publishers and bookstores, the involvement of museums and other city organizations, and the number of people involved in the program show that the One Book, One City: Indy's Choice is a uniting force in Indianapolis.

In addition to its success in Indianapolis, the One Book, One City program has become an integral part of the library system throughout the United States. To further investigate its impact, one could look at the circulation records, community involvement, and patron response at the national level and could compare the effectiveness of the program in different communities. This would demonstrate the general strengths and weaknesses of the program and illustrate the most effective ways for a community to implement it.

APPENDIX

1. When did the library system decide to do the program?
2. What were the expectations of the program? Did the first two years meet the expectations?
3. What areas of town (or branches) were the most successful in selling or loaning the one city books?
4. What sources were used for funding? Did the project receive what it needed to present the program successfully?
5. What difference was there in success between the first and second years? Did the program do better in either year, or were they similarly received?
6. Who had the idea to do this program? Did this program in Indianapolis work as well as the ones in other cities?
7. Are there other things you would like to change or modify but cannot for certain reasons? Are there things you have modified for the upcoming third book?
8. What type of success do you expect for the third year of the program?
9. What do you do with the extra books that are not sold? Are they sent to the book sale?
10. a) Who comprises the selection committee?
b) What were the criteria for selecting the titles?
11. Did you use any other city as a model?
12. Did you take any measures prior to the beginning of the program, such as ordering extra books?
13. Did you or do you have any way to tell if circulation increased?
14. What did you learn from the first two programs that you have wanted to implement in the current selection process for the third program?
15. What kind of response have you had from the public in terms of comments, letters, etc.?
16. Have there been any problems with people challenging the process/program/book/etc.?
17. Is there any coordination with bookstores for the project? Do you have any knowledge of their success or failure with the program?
18. How did One Book, One City get started in Indianapolis?
19. How has the response been from the library, the patrons, and the citizens who maybe don't use the library?
20. How much time does the program take to plan? The amount of people and resources needed?
21. How do you choose the theme for the books to be picked? How is the book then decided upon? Who designs the discussion questions?
22. Is there an archive with the documentation, data, media, and other information that we could have access to?
23. Do you have a circulation record of how many of the books were checked out or bought during the program?
24. Did library attendance increase?
25. How did you get the IMAX and museums to coordinate with the program? Is it part of the plan to incorporate as much of Indy as possible into the program?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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FOOTNOTES

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¹¹ Indianapolis Marion County Public Library. "One Book, One City – Indy's Choice Volume 1 was deemed a success in inaugural year (2002-2003) with an 11 percent jump in circulation and more than 2,300 copies sold." <http://onebook.imcpl.org/vol1>