

 CASE STUDY

Wright Memorial Library



Location

Oakwood, Ohio

Staff Size

4 FTE

Service Area

9500

With funding from the American Library Association's **Libraries Transforming Communities: Focus on Small and Rural Libraries** initiative, Wright Memorial Public Library in Ohio planned events focused around a book about supporting native plants and wildlife local to the community.

IMPORTANT COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS IN ATTENDANCE

Elizabeth Schmidt, adult services coordinator at the Wright Memorial Public Library in Oakwood, Ohio, is an experienced LTC participant who has been holding community conversations at her library since 2018. Prior to applying for the Focus on Small and Rural Libraries grant, she had

completed the LTC: Models for Change series of webinars and attended the Conversation Café workshop at ALA's 2018 annual conference. She also participated in the series of facilitation coaching calls LTC hosted in 2020.

Oakwood is an affluent suburb of Dayton, Ohio with a population of around 9,500. As part of this year's grant, Schmidt organized

several events focused around the book *Nature's Best Hope* by Douglas Tallamy, which explains how homeowners can support native plants and wildlife in their yards. Activities included a book discussion and a presentation by the author (both virtual) and an outdoor falconry event (peregrine falcons are native to the region). The library promoted these events extensively through both social

media and local newspapers and radio, and formed a partnership with the regional park system, which also provided publicity.

While attendance at the book discussion itself was lower than expected (12), the attendees included community stakeholders such as a representative of Green Oakwood, a large sustainability-focused Facebook group, several homeowners eager to put what they had learned from the book into practice, and a member of Oakwood's Beautification Committee, which gives awards to the city's most beautiful yards. Schmidt reflected that *who* showed up is a more important way to measure the event's value than simply counting the number of attendees.

Attendance at the virtual author visit later in the month was much higher, with 140 Zoom participants, and the outdoor falconry event was even more popular. The copies of the book Schmidt had purchased for the library were being checked out

frequently, and the topic was being discussed in the community. She recalled two instances where members of the public—unprompted—brought up the work of the library related to Nature's Best Hope in casual conversation (in non-library settings), indicating community awareness. Indeed, promoting the event (and thereby raising awareness) was one of the library's main expenditures with grant funds. This awareness then contributes to a changing perception of the library. For example, Schmidt says of their Let's Talk webpage with information about all of the conversation events, *"You can look at that list and say, 'Wow! That's pretty cool that the library is doing that!' ... we have had people come to us and say, 'Yeah, I think this issue is important.'"*

Schmidt and the library continue to plan events around sustainable gardening. One of the people who attended the book discussion was already growing native plants and agreed to host a "yard tour" event with the library. A

"native plant social" in September brought together 20 local plant experts and 60 drop-in visitors. Schmidt has already seen libraries' potential to lead change in the community through the Let's Talk series she began after attending ALA's Conversation Café workshop in 2018. Many of these conversations centered around race, and had such an impact on the community that an anti-racism citizens' group formed in fall 2019 reached out to the library for help. Wright Library is now part of the Oakwood Inclusion Coalition, along with this citizens' group, the city, and Oakwood schools.

GETTING SUPPORT FROM LIBRARY LEADERSHIP

Schmidt says she is *"super happy to be a part of a team"* at her library, working with people

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Elizabeth Schmidt, Adult Services Coordinator
Wright Memorial Public Library (Ohio)

who have different skills that complement her own. In particular, she sees the strong support from her library's director as essential to the success of these engagement efforts. When asked what advice she might have for library workers who do not have such enthusiastic support from library leadership, she shared the following strategies (but ultimately said it would be hard to do truly transformative work if a director is not on board):

- ▶ Working with community partners is especially important—their influence could, in turn, influence a library's director;
- ▶ Sharing data with your director about engagement, community comments, etc. to demonstrate value; and
- ▶ Forgoing a focus on controversial political topics if they are a stumbling block; instead find conversation topics that promote engagement without divisiveness.

Participating in ALA's Conversation Café was **"extremely formative"** for Schmidt and her thinking about community engagement. About the in-person training, Schmidt says, **"It gave me a confidence that I did not have [previously]. I felt like, 'Oh, I can do this!'"** Schmidt

said that the preparation and facilitation strategies she learned at the one-day Conversation Café training were **"totally new"** to her and that when the workshop ended she **"wanted to use [the techniques] right away."**

Soon afterwards, Schmidt reached out to an organization holding conversations on race to partner with the library for a discussion around the film *White Like Me*. She trained colleagues at the library in the Conversation Café model and hosted a successful event with over 50 attendees. Seeing how much members of the (predominantly white) community wanted a chance to discuss equity and race, Schmidt and the Library continued to host events in what became the Let's Talk series, including book and film discussions, invited speakers, and an income inequality workshop.

Due to her enthusiasm for LTC and how valuable the Conversation Café training had been, Schmidt was eager to participate in the facilitation training offered in 2020. While the training was intended to end with an in-person workshop, the pandemic meant that it was limited to Zoom convenings instead. Schmidt described the training as **"doable"** virtually and of value since many libraries continue to host community events online, but was much less enthusiastic about

it than the **"amazingly helpful"** Conversation Café workshop. She felt that practicing conversation techniques in person was important, and suggested that people who only had access to the eCourse modules practice with colleagues at the library or with friends and family.

Schmidt indicated that key skills for effective community engagement included confidence (gained through training and experience), support from library directors and staff, and a



“willingness to try” new things. She emphasized that not every event would be well-attended, and that it was important not to see a less popular conversation as a failure and to collect feedback from participants. She recognizes that while she has significant experience leading conversations, she is not an expert and is open to learning more. She suggested that ALA host sessions where LTC grantees could share their libraries’ experiences and

strategies to address challenges such as ensuring people with opposed viewpoints feel comfortable attending and participating in conversations. *“It’s really great to hear what other libraries are doing because people are so creative....Just a meeting, like, ‘tell us about your conversation.’ Or talking about challenges... or just an opportunity to communicate with people that are doing [similar community engagement work].”*

During her interview, Schmidt expressed appreciation for ALA and the grant opportunity, saying, *“I appreciate this initiative so much and all the training that they have offered. I think is amazing because I don’t think we would be doing this; I KNOW we wouldn’t be doing this without that training.”* ■



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