

One Book, One New Hanover: Bringing Community Members Together for *Blood Done Sign My Name*

by Joseph Thomas

“One Book, One Community” (OBOC) programs have mushroomed since 1998, when the Washington Center for the Book and the Seattle Public Library inaugurated this latest incarnation of book clubs. The American Library Association provides “One Book, One Community” Guides for “Community-Wide Reads” through its Public Programs Office. The Library of Congress provides links to nearly 400 programs in all states, the District of Columbia, and other multi-state, regional, and national events, including programs in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom.¹



The Program

According to the Library of Congress Web page, there are a dozen or so community-wide reading projects in North Carolina; they range across the state, from mountains to coast, with many cities and counties in the Piedmont

represented. In its second year, New Hanover County’s program is impressive. The mission of “One Book, One Community” in New Hanover County is “to promote literacy and a love for reading, celebrate diversity, and foster a community of readers by providing opportunities to explore and discuss a common text.” Goals and objectives for the program include creating activities to promote access to and reading of the selected text, connecting to other community members and to the author, and bringing community members together for shared cultural events that are related to the selected texts. The committee planning and guiding activities consists of 16 members representing Cape Fear Community College’s English Department and Learning Resource Center, New Hanover County Public Library, New Hanover High School Lyceum Academy, University of North Carolina at Wilmington’s English Department and Randall Library, and area booksellers.²

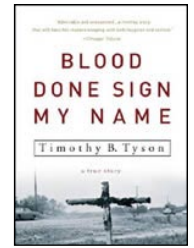
Several community partners provided support to the One Book committee and OBOC activities. They include the Barnes & Noble book stores, Cape Fear Community College’s English Department and Learning Resource Center, New Hanover County Public Library, New Hanover County High School Lyceum Academy, the *Star-News*, Wilmington’s daily newspaper, the UNCW, and UNCW’s Department of English, Randall Library, and Upperman African American Cultural Center. Sponsors included the Cape Fear Community College Foundation, the Friends of the New Hanover County Public Library, the North Carolina Humanities Council, the UNCW Department of Film Studies, and the UNCW Honors Scholars Program. North Carolina Humanities Council support was the result of a grant awarded to Randall Library. This large grant was authored by Beth Kaylor, Business Librarian; Rebecca Kemp, Serials Librarian; and Liza Palmer, Fine Arts Librarian, all of Randall Library.



“One Book, One Community” was born in New Hanover County in 2004, and brought community members together in 2005 around Dana Sachs’ *The House on Dream Street: Memoir of an American Woman in Vietnam*. Resident of Wilmington, Sachs is an author and UNCW faculty member. *The House on Dream Street* recounts her experience as a journalist who moved to a country long closed to Americans. To learn about Vietnam “from the inside out,” Sachs lived with a Vietnamese family and learned the language.³ Book discussions, signings, and panel discussions opened the text to the community, and film screenings and exhibits introduced Vietnamese culture to community members.⁴ Randall Library exhibits related to the “One Book, One Community” events were among the topics of a poster session at the 56th Biennial Conference of the North Carolina Library Association in September 2005. Committee members were poised to build on their success.

The Book

Blood Done Sign My Name, by Timothy Tyson, was the 2006 selection for the New Hanover County “One Book, One Community” program. The winning book was chosen from among four finalists: *Safe Passage* by Ellyn Bache, *Rescuing Patty Hearst* by Virginia Holman, and *Blood Horses: Notes of a Sportswriter’s Son* by John Jeremiah Sullivan were the other choices. Residents and students voted at ballot boxes in New Hanover County Public Library locations, Randall Library at UNCW, and the Learning Resource Center at Cape Fear Community College.⁵ The winner was announced in late August 2005.⁶



Blood Done Sign My Name, published in 2004 by Crown, examines the aftermath of the 1970 murder of Henry Marrow, an African American Army veteran in Oxford, NC. Author Timothy Tyson was a child in Oxford at the time, and son of a Methodist minister who acted to heal the torn community. Tyson follows the events of the murder and trial, and subsequent violence when the all-white jury acquitted the accused men of murder. According to the *North Carolina Libraries* review, *Blood Done Sign My Name* “makes the reader aware of the more subtle forms of racism that exist today” in accessible language through realistic, next-door neighbor characters.⁷ This book has also been chosen as the One Book selection for “Wake County Reads Together” 2006, and for UNC-CH students during the 2005 summer reading program.

Coming Together

From late January through early March 2006, “One Book, One Community” organizers orchestrated book discussions and signings, panels, related film and storytelling activities, and more events designed to bring the community together. The kick-off event was a film screening for Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* in the King Hall Auditorium on the campus of UNCW. Tyson led a book discussion and signing prior to the film. Further book discussions were held on the campus of UNCW and at St. Luke African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Wilmington. Book signings also took place at local book stores.⁸



Cape Fear Community College (CFCC) hosted a panel discussion titled “Human Geographies: Building Communities, Past, Present, and Future” on February 10, and two days later, the New Hanover High School Lyceum Academy hosted “Desegregation and New Hanover County Schools,” a panel discussion bringing together local scholars. Tyson moderated both panels.

Several workshops provided community members opportunities to sharpen their own creativity: Randall Library hosted workshops featuring African folk tales and art. The resulting artwork became part of a month-long exhibit in the library. One Book founder and committee member Liza Palmer calls these workshops “a definite highlight of the program.” Event planners partnered with a local storyteller, Keith Boyd, as well as art instructors Donzella Johnson (Myrtle Grove Middle School) and Joanna Catalfo (UNCW, Art), who provided age-appropriate art instruction to the attendees based on the content of the folktales. Palmer points out, “this event was a wonderful model for finding a way to involve children in OBOC programming—even if the chosen OBOC title is more geared toward an adult audience.”⁹



New Hanover County Public Library hosted a poetry reading and workshop with Tyson and poet Phillip Shabazz, encouraging participants to write about their own experiences and feelings, and offering anyone who wanted to share an open mic. The impact of the One Book activities could be seen in people’s immediate responses. OBOC committee member Dorothy Hodder says, “All of the programs ran past ending time, because people wanted to keep talking. In *Blood Done Sign My Name*, Tim Tyson touches everyone who has ever suffered on any side of a color line. The honesty and the lack of finger-pointing in his style make it possible for an audience to respond with questions and comments they may never before have felt able to articulate in a group.”¹⁰



Liza Palmer agrees with Hodder’s support of Tyson and the event participants who helped lead community members into the issues Tyson’s work treats: “In addition to the dynamism of Tim Tyson at most events, we were fortunate to work with a number of talented scholars and artists, like Dr. Glen Harris (UNCW, History), Thomas Massey (CFCC, History), Dr. Amy Kirschke (UNCW, Art History), Jason McCoy (CFCC, Psychology), Dr. Liz Hines (UNCW, Geography), Mary Williams (gospel singer), Gene Cheek (author), Phillip Shabazz (poet), and Sherish Galloway (performance artist, a.k.a. ‘The Rage’), among others. Thanks to the contributions and perspectives of these participants, each event was unique, shedding new light on *Blood Done Sign My Name* and the issues that it interrogates.”¹¹

“In fact,” Palmer continues, “one of our scholars was an area high school student, Makeba Robinson. Makeba participated on the ‘Desegregation and New Hanover County Schools’ panel discussion at New Hanover High School Lyceum Academy, discussing her senior project research on the riots of 1898. Her contribution was so valuable and vital, especially when she talked about her own frustrations as a high school student not being able to learn about important historical moments like 1898 in a classroom setting. What started out as a simple research project to educate herself turned into a very powerful and persuasive questioning of high school curriculum.”¹²

Six weeks of activities to champion the power of reading together. Multiple opportunities to gather in a community around shared texts and the memories, discussions, and creative expressions that those opportunities offer. New Hanover County’s “One Book, One Community” program offers a wonderful example of academic, public, and school libraries working together with local partners to redefine community. “Ultimately,” Palmer writes, “I think New Hanover County’s 2006 ‘One Book, One Community’ was a success on many levels—we were so pleased with audience turnout and participation. But it represents a challenge for next year. We mustn’t lose the momentum that we are gaining by tackling complicated and complex issues via a common text and in a group environment. The committee, I believe, is excited to build upon this year’s progress and to continue to grow the program so that we reach the largest and most diverse audience as possible.”¹³ From 2005’s *The House on Dream Street* to 2006’s *Blood Done Sign My Name*, One Book planners should look forward to a wonderful 2007 program.

Many thanks to Liza Palmer and Dorothy Hodder for their help preparing this article.

References

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