

Knowledge is power for youth readers in 'Read Woke'?

Knowledge is power, and youth readers in the community are finding plenty of sources of inspiration through Read Woke, a reading club that has been adopted by the Aurora Public Library.

The Library (APL) launched the program last year and it is designed to help readers 13+ connect with books on issues of racial and social injustice.

The word 'Woke' means different things to different people, but for APL's Jodi Marr, it is about raising awareness.

'The word comes from African-American vernacular English and is not really a word I can call my own,' says Ms. Marr, noting the program comes from Cecily Lewis, a librarian in Georgia, where book banning has become an issue. 'Programs named things like 'Read Woke' have been cancelled or asked to be renamed because of people's varying definitions of the word. For us, we like to go with what Lewis has set up because we're following her program.

'We go with the broader meaning of raising awareness, becoming more alert to racial prejudice, discrimination, the broader meaning of social inequities, sexism and things like that. The word was brought up when we launched the program; one of our staff members said there is a lot of controversy around that word, but I felt confident using the word as per Cecily's guidance and in alignment with the programs she's developed.'

The base idea, she says, is to encourage people in this diverse community to 'read as diversely as possible.'

'Diversity doesn't have to be about race, it can be about mental health awareness, body acceptance, cultural dating expectations and all kinds of different things,' says Ms. Marr. 'Not everyone worships or looks the same. Despite our differences, we're a lot alike. Reading is one of the best ways you can build empathy. Reading fiction helps build empathy and understanding towards a lot of other people because you hear and feel their stories in a different way when you read and take it in.'

Participating youth may do so through the online reading platform Beanstack, which the Library uses for all of its reading challenges and clubs. Through each book, readers can earn a variety of badges including: Black Voices; Diverse Abilities; First Nations, Metis and Inuit Voices; Immigration, LGBTQ+ Voices; Mental Health; Poverty and Homelessness; Social Injustice; Voices of People of Colour; and Women's Voices.

'266 books have been read on these topics and 280 badges have been earned, which are great statistics,' says Ms. Marr. 'A lot of our other reading programs don't have as much pickup as this one. It's not a high-pressure program and you can choose what speaks to you.

'We have a wonderful collection in the Library of diverse reads and our staff work diligently to ensure there are options for everyone to expand and read as diversely as possible. The fact that it is not a high-pressure program, you can read what you want, track it, and learn more on your own and that is a nice thing to do. This is a 'Start from the Foundation' program where you can learn as much as you can. Expand yourself and you will grow from there.'

For more information on Read Woke at the Aurora Public Library, visit aurorapl.beanstack.org.

By Brock Weir
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