

2015 Achievement Awards Virginia Association of Counties

APPLICATION FORM

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 1, 2015.** Please include this application form with electronic entry.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

Locality: _____

Program Title: _____

Program Category: _____

CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: _____

Title: _____

Department: _____

Complete Mailing Address: _____

Telephone # _____ Fax # _____

E-mail: _____

SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

Name: _____

Title: _____

Signature: _____

Overview

In its 2015 strategic plan, Chesterfield County Public Library (CCPL) made a commitment to community engagement and to “helping people transform information into knowledge.” By embracing the role of “town square,” CCPL is emerging as a leader in facilitating dialogue and discussion within the community about topics and issues that are important to our citizens. In 2014, Chesterfield County participated in a grant-funded program called *Created Equal*, which was designed to encourage communities to join in dialogue about the meanings of freedom and equality. The library worked with the school system, local media and university professors from two separate state institutions to offer three programs, highlighting the three documentary films—*The Abolitionists*, *Freedom Riders* and *The Loving Story*. Participants watched film clips highlighting historical events and followed up with a group table discussion. Attendees indicated the sessions were valuable learning experiences and expressed a desire to learn even more about the topic. Our program locations – university, school and library – reflected a commitment to learning from each other and to furthering our collective knowledge by engaging with each other. This series helped CCPL form a model of a “community conversation,” which we are using during other special events to engage people on important community topics.

Problem or Need for the Program

CCPL recognized the need for higher levels of citizen engagement in the development and participation of community programming. Since the library is a sort of “town square”, we needed to begin to approach our programs and services through a more collaborative process, such as co-creation of some programs and services. According to the ICMA, “Engaging residents and other stakeholders can increase understanding, create better and sustainable decisions, and build trust.” We have seen the value of community-based conversation programs through our experience with the 2012 series *Building Common Ground: Discussions of Community, Civility and Compassion*, which was a discussion about aging in Chesterfield County. In the same way, the *Created Equal* film and discussion series opened the door to conversations that might otherwise be difficult, but are vitally important. We knew that there is room for real conversation about equality and freedom in Chesterfield County. The history of the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement are not dispassionate topics for conversation; there are still strong feelings, unresolved issues and the need for dialogue in many communities. In 2014, the county celebrated its 25th year of hosting Black History Month programming for the community – one of many ways that diversity is celebrated and fostered in Chesterfield County. The celebrations always contain a variety of programs that are entertaining and educational – but the library’s community engagement series brought another dimension to the annual observance. The chance for people to “walk through history together” can lead to greater awareness, understanding and even healing. Expected impacts from this series were informed young people, changed opinions, reconsidered attitudes, and stronger and more respectful relationships between different groups in the community.

Description of the Program

The *Created Equal* program series was produced in partnership with multiple county and community agencies, including: the Chesterfield County Black History Month Committee, the

Chesterfield County Sesquicentennial Committee, Virginia State University, Chesterfield County Public Schools, the Chesterfield County Public Library, the Friends of the Library and the Chesterfield Historical Society of Virginia. All organizations pledged to participate through supply of a venue, provision of refreshments, payment of a speaker's honorarium, or promotional support. Each partner brought multiple connections to the community, providing a wealth of opportunities for creating an open dialogue. County schools, both secondary and post-secondary, drew upon their sizable student population and some even offered extra credit for attendance as an incentive. Our target audiences were chosen from those who have shown interest in civic engagement programs in the past: older residents, families with older children, college students and African-American residents.

Chesterfield County Public Library's *Created Equal* program series focused on community engagement. Attendees were seated in groups at small tables. Each program began with an introduction of the evening's presenter and an overview of the series and its purpose- the ability to talk, as peers, about sensitive topics related to race and civil rights. The introduction discussed the need for civil discourse and the ability to listen, but not necessarily to agree, while engaging in a kitchen table style discussion. A handout entitled *The Difference between Debate and Dialogue* was given to all attendees. It provided examples of how debate differs from dialogue and set some ground rules for the conversation (there are no "right" answers, keep an open mind, etc.). At each event, individuals were selected to be table moderators. It was the moderator's responsibility to ensure the discussion stayed on track and maintained a civil and open tone. After the introduction, the presenter gave a short overview of the film and the historical event being documented in the film. That led to the presentation of a short clip from a film. After the clip was viewed, a discussion question was introduced. Table groups discussed the question while the presenter roamed the room, contributing to the discussions. At the end of the discussion period, a representative from each table presented highlights from that table's discussion. The presenter then wrapped up that discussion point and introduced the second film clip.

The same procedure was followed with the second clip. At the end of the program, the presenter concluded the session with a few remarks. Attendees were asked to fill out an evaluation of the program and were given a list of agencies whose missions meshed with the topics being addressed throughout the discussion series. This allowed attendees easy access to organizations, should they decide they were spurred to action by the evening's discussions.

The targeted audiences for each program varied, but ultimately the goal was to bring together people who were interested in learning something new, engaging in a non-confrontational conversation about topics that are sometimes uncomfortable or painful (yet productive), and being willing to take what they have learned to try to improve themselves and their community because of their experience.

Jack Gravely, former Director of the Virginia NAACP, formerly with the national NAACP and currently a local radio personality served as the presenter for our first program which was entitled *Freedom Riders*. The program was a discussion of the movement that finally led to the desegregation of interstate buses. The library arranged for an appearance by Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker. He and his wife were Freedom Riders themselves. Dr. Walker was able to provide commentary on his own experiences as a Freedom Rider. Additionally, Dr. Walker served as Chief of Staff for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The Freedom Riders program was held at James River High School and was presented in partnership with the Chesterfield County Public Schools. Because the Freedom Riders themselves were teenagers at the time of the protests, it was important to us to involve the high schools in this program. Student members of the James River High School Leadership Program acted as table moderators for this event. There was significant student and teacher participation at this program. Several people attended specifically to hear Dr. Walker describe his involvement. After an introduction by Mr. Gravely, a film clip was shown and follow up comments were made by Mr. Gravely. He then introduced a topic and table groups were given the opportunity to discuss the topic. After the discussion period, a representative from each

group summarized the discussion. This was repeated a second time with a second clip and final comments were made by Mr. Gravely. Several teachers and school and administrators attended this event. The discussion among students about whether or not they would act so bravely in similar circumstances was one that would continue in the classroom.

The second program was entitled *The Loving Story with* Dr. Peter Wallenstein , a history professor at Virginia Tech and the author of several books, including *Tell the Court I Love My Wife: Race, Marriage, and Law--An American History* (2004) and *Race, Sex, and the Freedom to Marry: Loving v. Virginia* (Landmark Law Cases & American Society) (Oct. 2014). The Loving Story program was held at the Meadowdale Library on a Friday evening after the library was closed. We believed a Friday evening program would generate more attendance than a weeknight program when work and school schedules tend to have priority. Dr. Wallenstein introduced the film and then showed a clip. Before the clip, he assigned each table a character who would be portrayed in the clip. The attendees were to reflect on their character and discuss what they thought their character was thinking. After the discussions, a representative from each table addressed the group and gave a summary of their table's discussion. One attendee was so moved by her experience at this event, she wrote a poem which is included with this submission.

The third program, entitled *The Abolitionists*, was held at Virginia State University. The intent was to draw in college students, a key group often missing from these types of discussion outside the classroom. Dr. Lucious Edwards, the recently retired inaugural archivist and adjunct history professor at Virginia State University, introduced the topic then showed a film clip from *The Abolitionists* documentary. After the clip, he introduced a question to be discussed amongst the groups. After the discussion, a representative from each group summarized the discussions that took place their table. This was repeated with a second film clip.

Each program saw a capacity turn-out. Many who attended the first program also attended the second and third event. Mr. Jim Holland, former Chairman of the Chesterfield County Board of Supervisors and the county's first elected African American board chairman, attended and participated in all three programs.

Financing and Staffing

This series of programs involved speaker's fees, staff time and printing/publicity support. All costs were covered by a grant awarded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, as part of its *Bridging Cultures* initiative, in partnership with the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

- \$1250 in speaker's fees and refreshments
- \$200 in print publicity
- approximately \$1000 in staff for program coordination, marketing and communications

Results of the Program

We are learning that community forum-style programs are valued by all stakeholders. Participants in the *Created Equal* series were surveyed after programs and many rated the experience as having "significantly changed, shifted, or challenged their opinions." Local government administrators reported that the issues brought up in these sessions were of real importance to the community. A total of 183 residents attended the three programs.

Some comments from the attendees:

- Civil Rights is not just a THEN issue, it's also a NOW issue and I pray that it has inspired people to get involved and make a difference.

- What made this program great was all of the opinions expressed by the different generations.
- This experience opened my eyes to history and I wish it was taught in schools today.
- I'm very grateful for this opportunity and am upset that this topic is not discussed more in schools.
- This was definitely an eye opening experience.
- Provided a platform for race relations
- Good to have an opportunity to stretch one's mind with other thoughtful people.

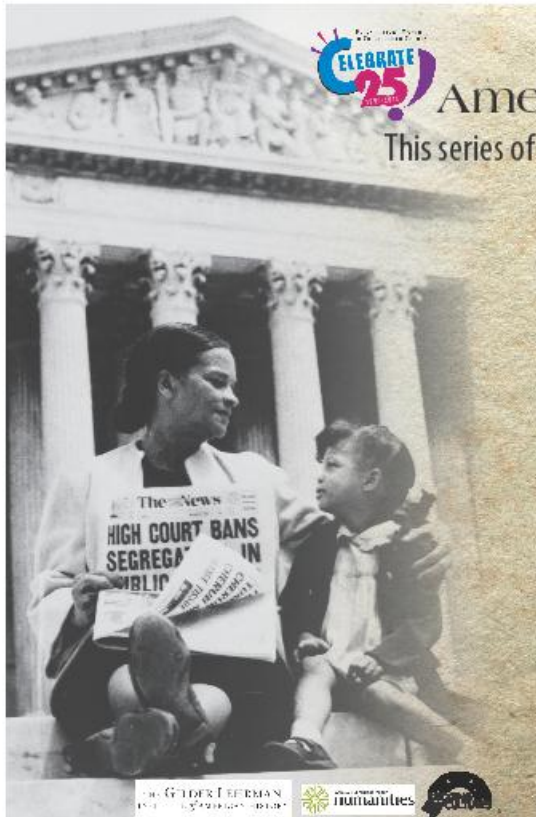
While several people attended all three programs, one in particular stands out and his comments seem to reflect what made these programs so important to those in attendance. A hate crime was committed against his high school-aged son a few years ago. He stated he had been carrying around the anger and frustration from that day for several years. Attending these programs gave him the feeling that the county is willing to put itself in a place where these types of open discussions can take place. He was so moved by the programs that he attended a Chesterfield County Board of Supervisors meeting to talk about his experience (video of the meeting can be viewed here http://chesterfieldva.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=6&clip_id=1031, start time 3:49, end time 6:53, introduction to the topic provided by Mr. Jim Holland, Board Chair and the county's first elected African American board chair). During his comments, he mentions that many of the topics addressed in the Created Equal discussion are not taught in the schools. He expressed his belief that if there were more opportunities to learn about these topics, then the problems his son experienced would not have happened.

From an institutional perspective, this program series has allowed CCPL to position itself as an organization that can coordinate open, civil discussions on topics that are of importance to the

community. In April of 2015, we put our experience into practice when CCPL hosted a Smithsonian exhibit on human evolution, called “Exploring Human Origins: What Does it Mean to Be Human?” We knew that our community holds a wide variety of personal beliefs on this topic. To that end, we hosted another community conversation, titled “What Does Evolution Mean to You?” Members of the Smithsonian Institute’s Broader Social Impacts Committee (BSIC) led an open discussion on how scientific research can fit in with our understanding of the world and our place in it. About 20 attendees participated in the discussion, and demonstrated the success of community engagement through discussion. We plan to include these community conversations as part of our programming on a continuing basis.

Award Criteria

The *Created Equal* series marked the beginning of an innovative approach to community engagement. The program reflects a continued commitment by the library and Chesterfield County to pursue new ways to engage our citizens. The subject matter of this installment of community conversations is one that has the potential to be controversial, yet the county still created an opportunity for civil, open dialogue where citizens could learn from each other. The quality of the programs themselves and the formats they chose all drew in large, diverse audiences. The tone created by moderators and organizers ensured an experience where all attendees could learn more about themselves and their neighbors in a respectful, responsible manner. These kinds of discussions change attitudes, change communities and change lives. They also build citizens’ trust and confidence in local government. The library will continue to facilitate future community discussions and will serve as the place where individuals and groups are invited to engage respectfully with each other, whatever the topic may be.



CELEBRATE 25
50th Anniversary

Created Equal: America's Civil Rights Struggle

This series of film clips and discussions encourages communities to revisit the history of civil rights in America.

Freedom Riders
Tuesday, Feb. 18 • 7-9 p.m.
James River High School

The Loving Story
Friday, Feb. 21 • 6-8 p.m.
Meadowdale Library

The Abolitionists
Tuesday, Feb. 25 • 6-8 p.m.
Virginia State University

Registration is recommended for all programs.
Please call 804-796-7018 to register.

CHESTERFIELD COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY
Check our events magazine, Loud & Clear, for details • library.chesterfield.gov • 804-751-CCPL
Providing a FIRST CHOICE community through excellence in public service

facebook.com/ChesterfieldVALibrary

Created Equal Program Poster



James River High School students meet Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker, Freedom Rider.



Community members watching *The Loving Story* at Meadowdale Library.



Dr. Lucious Edwards facilitates small group discussion at Virginia State University.