

Michigan Campus Compact Member Spotlight

Jackson County's Big Read

“When you read you think, and when you think you grow.” This was the slogan of an event called The Big Read, Jackson County’s most recent accomplishment. Spearheaded by Michigan Campus Compact VISTA, Marcia Cole, Jackson Community College (JCC) and the Jackson Coalition for Literacy collaborated to bring the written word to life for the Jackson community through this event.

The Big Read challenged Jackson to read the classic novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, written by Harper Lee, and lead discussions around the issues it presents. What started as a small idea grew into something bigger than anyone could have expected, and in the end The Big Read handed the Jackson community a lesson in tolerance.

Marcia Cole, while participating in a year of national service at JCC, showed true vision when she applied for a Big Read Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. “To promote reading, unite the community, and help take the book and book discussions to the next level were three goals that we wanted to accomplish through The Big Read,” she explained. “The response from Jackson was astonishing, as community members found creative ways to incorporate the book and its messages into various activities and events.”

The Big Read quickly reached far beyond reading the book. Sermons in the churches of Jackson began to reflect messages of social responsibility, college lectures addressed the issues, a mock trial was held by students in the county courtroom, and numerous book and movie discussions were hosted. Local restaurants offered menus of southern food, art displays prompted reflection, deep community discussions were hosted and guest speakers gave strategies to teach youngsters courage against bullying.

Through these and many other events, *To Kill a Mockingbird* jumped from the pages and onto the streets of Jackson, waking up the community and chartering their mission of self-discovery.

“The project reached deeper than a ‘reading is fun’ message,” said Cole. “Discussions targeted the beliefs of Jackson residents, and moved them toward challenging those beliefs.”

Jackson Community College participated by incorporating this book in several of their classes. A jazz ensemble from the college also performed at an event designed to celebrate the southern heritage found in this novel’s inner pages.

JCC and the Jackson Literacy Coalition helped to expand awareness around the difficult issues of this book. Courage amidst brutality, personal growth while defining individual values, as well as tolerance of differences were all explored as Jackson embraced the reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

