Participants reference Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates during a Let’s Talk About It session in Bath this year. Read more on page 4. PHOTO: DAN D’IPPOLITO
The Maine Humanities Council, a statewide non-profit organization, uses the humanities—literature, history, philosophy, and culture—as a tool for positive change in Maine communities.

Our programs and grants encourage critical thinking and conversations across social, economic, and cultural boundaries.

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CALL FOR NOMINATIONS
The Maine Humanities Council seeks to expand its list of potential nominees to fill future openings on its Board of Directors. The Council looks for a wide geographic representation and range of civic and/or academic experience. To notify the Council of your interest, please send a letter and a résumé to:
Governance Committee Chair
Maine Humanities Council
674 Brighton Avenue
Portland, ME 04102-1012

The Maine Humanities Council is an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.
Editor: Diane Magras
Design: Lori Harley
Holding Our Communities Together

We’re having a hard time talking to each other right now. You’ve seen the statistics: We Americans are increasingly likely today to live and work exclusively among people who look, talk, and think like we do. We are less likely to have social interactions across race, class, and educational divides. The news and information we consume is more likely than ever to reach us through a political and media echo chamber.

Right now it’s easy to feel pessimistic about our prospects for healthy civic life. But here in Maine, I think there’s good reason for optimism. Just one small example:

This fall, I’ve had the pleasure of facilitating the Council’s Let’s Talk About It reading and discussion program in Belfast. Our series theme is “Race and Justice in America.” In September, our group of 23 had its initial meeting at the Belfast Free Library to discuss the first of the books, which dealt with a lynching in turn-of-the-century Tennessee, the Supreme Court, and life in the Jim Crow South.

Our conversation was rich and spirited. At different moments, members of the group remarked upon the progress we’ve made as a country, but also how familiar many of the characters and situations feel, even now. At a time when it can seem impossible for neighbors to have meaningful conversations about difficult civic topics, it has been invigorating to join with the group in Belfast to try to have honest and open discussion about race in America, even when that discussion is uncomfortable.

Fostering honest and open discussion is an important part of the MHC’s work, and it’s a crucial part of our new strategic plan. In the coming months and years, we’ll be working harder than ever to bring Mainers into conversation on topics that matter to us as a state. We’ll be using the powerful tools of the humanities—literature, history, philosophy, and culture—to encourage meaningful dialogue across divides.

The book group at the Belfast library is just one example of how the humanities can bring neighbors together to talk about things that matter. We believe conversations like these can play an important part in improving the civic health of our state and in strengthening the bonds that hold our communities together. It’s important and exciting work, and I invite you to join us.

Hayden Anderson
Executive Director
On September 9, the Maine Humanities Council partnered with Maine-Wabanaki REACH and Railroad Square Cinema for a viewing and discussion of the film “Neither Wolf Nor Dog.” A crowd-funded film based on the best-selling book of the same title by Kent Nerburn, this story follows Nerburn, a non-Native white man, as he attempts to fulfill a request by Dan, a Lakota elder, to write Dan’s life story. Nerburn soon learns that what he sacrifices to do this and his good intentions are not enough. He can’t write the story without listening, learning about Dan’s history, and facing hard truths of his own. The figurative and literal road trip changes Kent’s life.

The film and the post-film panel prompted a powerful discussion. Speakers on the panel were Esther Anne, Passamaquoddy Tribal member, and Penthea Burns, a non-Native Mainer. Esther and Penthea helped to create and convene the Maine Wabanaki-State Child Welfare Truth & Reconciliation Commission, co-direct Maine Wabanaki REACH, and since 1999 have worked to improve Maine’s compliance with the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). They were joined by Jackie Crow Shoe, a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians in North Dakota, who works for the Capacity Building Center for Tribes, based out of the University of Southern Maine. Jackie enjoys a friendship with Kent Nerburn.

The question of understanding through listening and recognizing what we don’t know are themes of the film and book that came up in the discussion. Audience members were moved by the film and asked questions of the panelists, who discussed their experiences when non-Native people try to “help” Native people without being invited to do so and then expect instant appreciation. Respect is essential. But, as the panelists and the film pointed out, it goes far beyond that—to our seeking to disrupt what we have thought to be the truth.

“The idea of being Enlisted rather than offering help…”

It was clear that the film’s context had an impact on many in the audience. For some of the non-Native people, it seemed that it was their first exposure to the breadth of what white settlers
and the U.S. government did to Native people, from the founding through the westward expansion of this country—as told from a Native person’s perspective. There were quiet reactions throughout the film; “I can’t believe it,” was murmured more than once. This is a crucial first step in the non-Native person’s responsibility for self-education, understanding, and choosing to help write a different history.

One questioner asked if Nerburn and other non-Natives should be sharing Native stories, and if sharing what they had seen and learned was cultural appropriation. A Native member of the audience answered that: Yes, share, because it’s important, and there is a difference between taking on a story as your own versus sharing it to amplify others’ voices.

It was an eye-opening experience for the largely non-Native audience. This is the first program to come from a partnership between Maine Wabanaki REACH and the Maine Humanities Council.

“My heart is broken...I need to keep trying to see the world differently than my ancestors.”

“I am a college student at Colby, and I have taken a course on Native History after 1850....The film let the culture and lifestyle breathe...It allowed me to evaluate my role in this history, which my class didn’t do a lot.”
In 2016, Karen Eger of the South Berwick Public Library was a librarian consultant for “Violence & Belonging: The 14th Amendment and American Literature,” a new Let’s Talk About It reading and discussion series she helped to develop with MHC Program Officer Nicole Rancourt, Professor Eden Osucha of Bates College, and librarian Marcela Peres of Lewiston Public Library. That fall, Karen Eger piloted the series in South Berwick. The books in this series address issues of diversity and inequality and explore the ways in which promises of citizenship fall short of reality for many Americans. I spoke with Karen Eger after South Berwick’s series was done.

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Q You were involved in developing the Violence and Belonging series since the very beginning. How did it come about?

A A group of us in South Berwick were concerned about being somewhat out of the national discussion because we have such a heavily white town. So I mentioned it to one other person who was interested in discussing white privilege, and, after asking some other people, we started having a program called “Why Talk About Race in South Berwick?” Some time later, I got an email from Nicole at the MHC, who periodically sends out emails soliciting topic ideas for potential new Let’s Talk About It series. Because this was an issue we were exploring in our programming here, I thought ‘Oh let’s throw that out there, that would be great.’ Nicole called me later and asked if I’d like to help develop the idea into a new series. I was a little hesitant in saying yes because I think of myself as a slow reader, but I was very excited.
Q: What was it like to serve as a librarian consultant for a new Let’s Talk About It series?

A: I had such a great experience with the whole thing, but doing the reading was definitely a commitment. I started reading the selections that Eden Osucha from Bates gave us, which were wonderful. They were books I wanted to read but hadn’t ever gotten around to. I enjoyed all the books, but some didn’t end up in the series because they didn’t help make a cohesive group that would lead to richer discussion. It was a very interesting process to read an academic list and then think about how library patrons differ from a classroom, sorting out what would work and what wouldn’t. It was a new experience for me, and I loved that part of it.

Q: How did patrons in South Berwick respond to the series?

A: We’ve tried other successful Let’s Talk About It programs in my five years here, but because this one was so current in terms of our national issues, people came out of the woodwork to attend. It was one of the best things we’ve ever done. We started the program with Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates, and we had 28 people in the room for that first discussion. So many people had heard about that book. There were our regular book discussion people who are pretty dedicated and come to any program, people who were more involved in our race conversation programs, and then there were other people I’d never met before. The series was just so broadly appealing, and people worked really hard because they cared to be there.

Q: It seems like the community was eager to understand the topic.

A: Yes, that was definitely the case. Sometimes you hit these topics that are just right. And there were many people who showed an interest in the series who couldn’t come. The fact that many additional people in the community were aware that we were having this discussion was worth it.

Q: Are there any highlights from the program that stick out to you?

A: One person said that attending this series has made her start talking about these issues. She just said that she has found herself speaking up about things that she hasn’t before because she can say ‘I read this book, or I attended this discussion at the library’ and it sort of smoothed the conversation. It helps to just speak some words here and there so that when you get out in the real world you have some way to do it that you didn’t before. It gives you some tools or a starting place.

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

Visit mainehumanities.org to learn more about this program and the series “Violence & Belonging.” To bring it to your library, contact Program Officer Nicole Rancourt at nicole@mainehumanities.org

Tune in to a new audio story from Humanities on Demand (mainehumanities.org) and hear perspectives on Let’s Talk About It and “Violence & Belonging” from South Berwick Public Library and Norway Public Library, both of which have recently offered the series in their respective communities.
THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF THE HUMANITIES

BY LEAH KUEHN, MHC PROGRAM OFFICER

Part of what pushes humanities programming beyond being excellent and enriching and into being fundamentally necessary is the practice of collective engagement. The humanities provide a platform for multiple voices and experiences to enter a conversation in order to deepen it. This is so much of what the Maine Humanities Council does: creating platforms for people to come together to think through and discuss issues that matter to them.

Ours is an adaptable and expansive model, one that requires responsiveness and community partnerships.

The two primary programs that I work with are New Books, New Readers and Veterans Book Group, both of which are designed for specific audiences. There are many polarizing divisions in Maine’s landscape. Working to bridge these divisions can be productive and illuminating—and is in itself enormously powerful.

The common ground offered in both New Books, New Readers and Veterans Book Group allows conversations to be intimate and focused. The discussions that emerge from these programs can go deep in a short amount of time when participants are offered the opportunity to come to that table as they are, when the filters that may exist most of the time can be lowered safely. Experiences that don’t always get spoken about in daily life then have a chance to emerge and develop when they bump up against the stories of people who share some of the same ground.

This particularly matters when that shared ground is any kind of experience of isolation. I was fortunate to be welcomed into the final session.
of Veterans Book Group with Combat Veterans who had met once a week for 13 weeks to read Odyssey together. I was told in no uncertain terms and by more than one participant that such an experience was nothing short of transformative—that it was safe, and that its environment allowed for engagement with ideas that before that moment had not been possible, and certainly had not been conceivable in any kind of collaborative or collective way. One participant said, “I got the opportunity to interact and network with fellow Veterans, learning from them and creating invaluable connections and relationships that I will carry for the rest of my life…I learned that I am not alone in all of this.”

When social withdrawal and isolation are a documented part of Veteran experience, and when there is a critical lack of non-clinical support or opportunities outside of bureaucracy, a statement like this gets right at the heart of why we do our work.

When it comes to New Books, New Readers, that isolation takes a slightly different shape. Participants must navigate a world in which the ability to read is expected—such that to not be able to read either quickly or easily becomes something to hide. To be able to engage with a group of others who know what it’s like to navigate that world is valuable on its own, but to do so with books, which for some have always felt off-limits, is significant. A participant once told me that reading a certain chapter book felt, at first, impossible—and that once they did it, other things that had felt impossible suddenly seemed possible.

Those of us who have been in book groups have felt the intimacy that book groups can provide: Books allow a safe entry point into the personal; reading them with other people is a chance to voice the personal as it relates to the universal. Many of the participants in New Books, New Readers come back to read and talk again over a number of years. Participants and partners both cite this retention as one of the major benefits of the program.

Getting together around books does much more than provide stimulating conversation. It can be transformative in both subtle and obvious ways, opening and deepening the world outside. This, to me, is why the humanities are a non-negotiable part of the human experience. They connect us with each other at the same time as they connect us with ourselves.

“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there.”

-Rumi translation, Coleman Barks
The Maine Humanities Council’s grant program assists non-profit organizations in Maine develop public projects that incorporate one or more humanities disciplines. We’re particularly interested in supporting projects that are collaborative, stimulate meaningful community dialogue, attract diverse audiences, are participatory and engaging, and invite discovery of the humanities in interesting and exciting ways. These pages highlight some of our recent grants.

BANGOR

$3,000 “Exploring Human Origins” Smithsonian Exhibit

“Exploring Human Origins: What Does It Mean To Be Human?” is a Smithsonian Museum traveling exhibit (developed in partnership with the American Library Association) on display at 19 libraries across the U.S. The exhibit explores the science of human evolution and personal and societal perspectives of who we are as a species and why it matters.

Bangor Public Library
$1,000 | Naomi Shihab Nye, Keynote poet for Terry Plunkett Maine Poetry Festival

This grant allowed Naomi Shihab Nye, poet of international acclaim (above right, with poet Zoe FitzGerald-Beckett), to give a keynote at the 15th Terry Plunkett Maine Poetry Festival.

*University of Maine at Augusta*

$7,000 | Stories from the Forgotten Frontier: A Workshop and Lecture Series

The Old Berwick Historical Society conducted a summer workshop for history teachers grades 6–12 to provide them with a new cultural framework for understanding the founding history of the Piscataqua region and advanced methods for using primary documents and artifacts as research tools.

*Old Berwick Historical Society*

$1,550 | Voice from Maine’s Historical Quarries: Digitize, Preserve, Exhibit

This grant supported the digitization and preservation of interviews with workers from Maine’s historical quarries to be incorporated in museum exhibits.

*Maine Granite Industry Historical Society*

$5,000 | Compassion, Connection and Community

This grant helps Maine Wabanaki-REACH promote Wabanaki self-determination through reconnection with the land and using activities that educate, engage, and help mobilize intrinsic Wabanaki value systems based on compassion and connection.

*Maine Wabanaki-REACH*

$1,000 | Maine Coast Stone Symposium

The Boothbay Railway Village and Maine Stone Workers Guild partnered to develop a biennial program. The first month-long celebration of the history, art and culture of Maine’s stone industry took place in August and included educational programs, a history exhibit, and a 10-day sculpture symposium investigating the ties between technology, industry, and the creative world.

*Boothbay Railway Village*

$300 | Moose River Valley Historical Coloring Book

Local artist Gail McDougall created outlines of locations and artifacts of historical importance to the history of Jackman’s Moose River Valley in the basic format for a coloring book. The Historical Society plans to distribute the books free of charge to local elementary students as a way of preserving and sharing local history.

*Jackman-Moose River Historical Society*

$970 | Inspired by Nature

This project shares the stories of writers, musicians, visual artists, and others whose lives and work have been inspired by their connection to nature. This community program promotes the idea that connecting to nature provides a continuous source of inspiration and insight, fueling creativity and enlightening problem solving. Through presentations and a reading and discussion group, numerous writers, musicians, visual artists, and others will share stories of how their lives and work have been inspired by a connection to nature.

*Cathance River Education Alliance*
Veterans Book Group is exactly that—our book group for Veterans. Groups may focus on one longer text, like the Odyssey, or instead read selected short stories, novels, memoirs, essays, articles, and poems that relate to the experience of military service. Readings are both ancient and modern.

Each group meets 5–7 times, usually weekly, and is co-facilitated by a scholar and a Veteran. The book groups are free and readings are provided.

This fall, Veterans Book Group took place in Bangor, facilitated by Jeffrey Sychterz, U.S. Navy and UMA Assistant Professor of English, and Kirk Grant, U.S. Army; and in Sanford, facilitated by Rebecca Webb, MFA, and Amy Marcotte, U.S. Army.

Are you a Veteran, or do you know a Veteran who might be interested in this programming? Space is limited; please pre-register.

SPRING 2018 GROUPS: Lewiston, Portland, Thomaston
PRE-REGISTRATION: required
COST: free
FMI: visit mainehumanities.org, or call Leah at 773-5051

“The most valuable part of the book group was gaining new perspectives and getting alternative views from other former soldiers…I gained a sense of community.”

- VETERANS BOOK GROUP PARTICIPANT