

Enjoying the Voices and Witnessing the Power of African American Literature: Celebrating the AARI at Octorara High School



I teach at Octorara High School, Atglen, Pennsylvania, and [this past February] I hosted an evening African American Read-In event for students, faculty, parents, and staff. My administration was key in supporting my efforts, and many attended the evening. As word reached the larger community and more community members expressed interest, the audience truly became the community at large.

Our evening was very simple. I introduced each reader, and each reader read his or her piece by an African American writer of choice. We closed the evening with refreshments. My goals were that we enjoy voices that many of us enjoy in our own corners of the world, in the company of others, and to allow students to witness the power of African American literature and the conversations that they can partake in as they mature and expand their perspectives.

Among the books and authors we celebrated at our event were Robert Hayden, Lucille Clifton, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Frances E.W. Harper, Malcolm X, William Parker (firsthand testimony written about the Christiana Riot), Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Toni Morrison (text read from one of her children's books, and the elementary teacher/reader brought the recipe written by Morrison at the end of the book!), Amiri Baraka, Frederick Douglass, Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, a poem written by one of our African American high school students, and a piece by Alexander Crummell.

I was also blessed to meet a graduate of Octorara—Dr. Richard Cooper—who happened to read about our event in the Lancaster newspaper and contacted me. Dr. Cooper is the producer and host for the Philadelphia radio station WURD, and he was able to host an interview prior to the event, which included NCTE Deputy Executive Director Mila Fuller; AARI founder and national director Jerrie Cobb Scott; and me on his radio show. Dr. Cooper then attended the Read-In at Octorara and truly helped make the night a community success!

Participants of the African American Read-In at Octorara High School, Atglen, Pennsylvania, included (clockwise from top): Octorara Area School District Superintendent Thomas Newcombe; Octorara alumnus, WURD radio host/producer, and Widener University professor Dr. Richard Cooper; student Raven Reeves; parent and community member Mrs. Arjona; and teacher and organizer Jennifer Watson.

My favorite moment was meeting Dr. Cooper, and feeling the pride we both shared as our school celebrated literature—especially some literature that is so closely linked to our local community. My students' favorite moment was hearing one of their English teachers reading a poem by Langston Hughes in a booming, emotionally charged voice.

I strongly believe that the event increased the likelihood of attendees reading more African American literature. One of the middle school teachers who attended also brought along several books for display. As attendees were leaving for refreshments, they were stopping to discuss the displayed pieces he had and noting books or authors that they intended to go read. This middle school teacher, Pete DiMaio, has such a passion for literature that his explanations of the samples he brought along clearly fueled people to read more.

Next year, I intend to host our second annual African American Read-In, and I hope we can find continued ways to blend all of the voices of American literature and allow students to hear the beauty of all the conversations that make us who we are.

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