

## **Book Clubs Foster Community**

*The week of April 17 is National Volunteer Week.*

Arden Hamer learned early on that the happiest people spend their lives helping others. She carried that service ethos through her career teaching young people how to navigate college, and maintains it in her volunteer work with the Murrysville Community Library. In 2002, then Library Director, Denise Sticha, asked Hamer to lead a book club for library patrons. Murrysville residents joined the group in droves, so Hamer started a second club. Twenty years and hundreds of books later, Hamer still brings two groups of ten to fifteen people into the library every month to discuss a work of fiction. Conservatively, Hamer's pursuit of happiness has directly prompted over 12,000 hours of reading.

Members invest all this time because their participation in these clubs makes them happier, better connected neighbors. Over the past five years, book clubs have surged in popularity as celebrities like Reese Witherspoon and *The Today Show's* Jenna Bush Hager turn newly published novels into bestsellers. Part of the appeal comes from the challenge. Finishing a book every month gives readers a sense of accomplishment and trains their ability to focus in an increasingly distracted world. But a potentially greater appeal comes from the connection. Book clubs make the solitary social. Even at the height of the pandemic, members of Hamer's book groups so valued the opportunity to come together that they readily adapted to video conferencing technologies to keep the conversation going.

As these groups bring people into the same room, they also improve each participant's capacity to understand any person in any room. Book clubs offer members a two-pronged empathy benefit. Reading fiction requires people to invest deeply in the problems and thought processes of a wide range of characters, thereby enhancing people's abilities to understand different points of view. Discussing fiction requires readers to listen to different interpretations of and reactions to the same story, thereby fine-tuning their appreciation of the varied conclusions people can draw from the same set of facts. Hamer notes that her clubs work because each participant comes willing to talk. That willingness stays strong over time because each participant also cultivates the ability to listen.

Hamer finds that many of the best discussions come from the books people like the least. While club members may find reading a particular novel dull or frustrating, their strong responses generate lively conversation, and all that time reading turns out well spent.

Club members consistently express gratitude for the ways that Hamer helps them enjoy their leisure hours. But every time anyone credits her with serving the community, Hamer insists instead that the community has served her. She responds to each compliment with the same refrain: "The person who gets the most out of these groups is me."

Evan Hrobak

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