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'Great Gatsby' could turn the page for literacy

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Residents across Spartanburg County live in different neighborhoods, attend different churches and schools, and have different goals in life.

But one common goal that community leaders hope can be shared is a passion for reading, and they hope that can be achieved through an upcoming program.

The Spartanburg County public library system recently received nearly \$92,000 in grants to present The Big Read. It's a countywide initiative from Sept. 30 to Nov. 10, where all high school freshmen through adults read, "The Great Gatsby."

"It's a literary program that has a variety of dimensions that engages ninth-graders through adults," County Librarian Todd Stephens said.

The Big Read is a national program by the National Endowment of the Arts, started after a study indicated fewer Americans are reading for pleasure. This year, Spartanburg's library system is among 117 participating agencies.

The library received six matching grants to make the local initiative possible, including ones from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Kellogg Foundation, the Spartanburg County Foundation, the Herald-Journal's Celebrate Community Foundation, and Friends of the Libraries.

Although the program does not begin until this fall, a few community leaders gathered Monday to announce the initiative and spark early interest.

Spartanburg Mayor Bill Barnet and Spartanburg County Council Chairman Jeff Horton are honorary chairmen of The Big Read. Horton said he vaguely remembers reading "The Great Gatsby" as a sophomore at Boiling Springs High School, and he's excited to join other adults by reading it again - this time for pleasure, not for work.

"Reading should play a major role in everyone's life, especially adults," Horton said. "Reading keeps your mind sharp, and it helps expand the mind."

U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis dropped by the downtown library Monday to pick up his hardback copy of "Gatsby," and said he, too, remembers reading it in high school. He hopes The Big Read can be

replicated in other counties.

"This idea creates positive pressure for reading and gives you a sense that everybody's doing it," Inglis said. "It'd be more helpful for all of us to turn off the tube and read more."

More than 40 organizations will be partners in the program. For instance: local college professors will share their expertise on Fitzgerald and the American history of the 1920s; about 30 organized book discussions will be held; and theater and music groups will perform pieces from the Jazz Era. The Big Read also will incorporate artwork to be showcased at the Chapman Cultural Center, which will be newly opened by autumn.

Local public high schools, in addition to Spartanburg Day School and Oakbrook Preparatory, will receive a few copies of the book to place in their libraries, and 4,000 books will be given away to the public, which includes book giveaways at 15 restaurants across the county. Each branch of the county library system also will have copies of "The Great Gatsby" available for checkout.

"This is huge for us and it's a first," said Mary Speed Lynch, chairman of the Spartanburg County Library's Board of Trustees. "The scope of community partners has a wider reach than we've ever had, and it's exciting because it's all about the decline of reading for pleasure."

The book takes place in 1922, and describes the high level of prosperity many Americans attained during the 1920s. Much of the book's theme is based on greed, materialism and a lack of morality. So Spartanburg's Big Read organizers have designed an essay contest, where the winner gets \$1,000. The twist, however, is that the winner has to give the money to a charity of his or her choice.

"One book unites us as a community to really focus on literacy as a shared value in our community," said Mary Thomas, executive vice president of the Spartanburg County Foundation. She called The Big Read a shift in priority. "Let's pull back from everything that distracts us and read. We can talk about 'Desperate Housewives,' so now let's talk about 'The Great Gatsby.' "

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