

The Federation of State Humanities Councils
Schwartz Prize Nomination for Vermont Humanities

Vermont Reads 2019: *March: Book One* by Rep. John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell

Short project summary: Long known for our progressive politics and “live and let live” neighborliness, Vermont has struggled in recent years to reconcile image with reality – especially when it comes to racism. We are not the second whitest state in the nation by accident. In late 2018, Vermont Humanities made a radical choice: we chose a comic book for our prestigious Vermont Reads one book reading program. As it turns out, the narrative and artistic structure of the book was hardly the most radical choice behind choosing *March: Book One* by Rep. John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell. Rather, choosing this graphic history of the civil rights movement for our statewide reading program cemented a shift in our organizational perspective and turned Vermont Humanities into a statewide leader in conversations about racism and equity. The project engaged thousands of Vermonters and hundreds of organizations in all 14 counties of the state, from the largest arts presenters to the smallest town libraries. The culminating event, a visit by Congressman Lewis and his co-author Andrew Aydin, reached more people than any other single event in our organization’s history. Learning with great humility from both our successes and our mistakes, Vermont Humanities is now continuing the journey with *Vermont Reads 2020: The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. We make mistakes every day, but we stand up, dust ourselves off, and try again to make a difference. In the words of Congressman Lewis, we are committed to using the lens of the humanities to make “good trouble, necessary trouble.”

**The Federation of State Humanities Councils
Schwartz Prize Nomination for Vermont Humanities**

Vermont Reads 2019: *March: Book One* by Rep. John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell

Our Context – Why We Do This Work

Vermont is one of the whitest states in the nation. We have long enjoyed a comforting, if easily disproved, narrative that we do not have issues with racism and bias here. As a state, we often tout a mythological story that colonial era Vermonters did not engage in slavery and that our original constitution abolished slavery in 1777. Yet language that remains in our constitution today—plus the historical record—make it clear that the practices of indentured servitude and legal child bondage allowed for the institution of slavery to continue for decades after our constitution supposedly abolished the practice. Only in 2019 did the Vermont Legislature begin the process of approving a constitutional amendment to abolish slavery in all forms in Vermont.

Recent national incidents and multiple hate crimes in our state kickstarted a widespread conversation among Vermonters about addressing racism and our own implicit biases. Although we could point to many instances of systemic racism in Vermont, the racist harassment of our only Black, female legislator until [she dropped out of her re-election race in 2018](#) really drove the point home.

There is a growing desire in our communities to examine our beliefs and behavior by coming together to learn and talk about justice and reformation, and then take action. After the shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2012 a number of communities around Vermont read *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander. In more recent years, Black Lives Matter signs appeared in windows, on lawns and in the streets with well-intentioned white people trying to raise awareness about these issues. The books *White Fragility* by Robin Diangelo and *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson became increasingly popular in our state.

At the same time, questions of racial disparities in health care, policing, corrections, and education began to be raised at increasingly higher volumes. Efforts at stronger, race-disaggregated data collection showed that [Black Vermonters were more likely to be searched during traffic stops](#), [more likely to experience adverse health outcomes, including higher rates of HIV infection](#), and [Black youth were more likely to be suspended or expelled from school](#). Most worrisome, data shows that [Vermont incarcerates Black men at a higher rate than anywhere else in the nation](#). We have a problem.

In 2018, after several transitions at the staff and board level, Vermont Humanities made a firm commitment to addressing issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in our programming, and to take a much more active stance on addressing racism in our state. As with elsewhere in the United States, overt racism and hate crimes are both more visible and happening more often, so this work feels like an imperative that is no longer optional for Vermont Humanities.

Our Project: *Vermont Reads 2019: March: Book One*

While Vermont Humanities has always worked to present a more truthful and complex history of our local, statewide, and national story about racism, we began this new commitment to proactive anti-racist work by choosing Rep. John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell's seminal graphic history of the Civil Rights Movement, the *March* trilogy, for Vermont Reads, our signature one book statewide reading program. We chose to focus on *Book One* of the trilogy as it tells of Lewis's childhood in rural Alabama, his desire as a young man to be a preacher, his life-changing meeting with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the nonviolent sit-ins he joined at lunch counters in Nashville as a means of undermining segregation.



John Lewis later became chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and was considered one of the “Big Six” leaders of the civil rights movement. He served in the US Congress from 1987 until his death this past summer. He was awarded the Medal of Freedom by President Obama in 2011. One of his last public acts was to visit Black Lives Matter Plaza in Washington, D.C. to show support for those protesting the lynching of George Floyd.

Launched in 2003, Vermont Reads is a statewide community reading program that invites people of all ages across our state to read the same book together and participate in a wide variety of community activities related to the book's themes. Over 200 Vermont towns (out of a total of 251!) have participated in this program, involving schools, libraries, community organizations, and churches. The success of the Vermont Reads program lies in the variety of projects that these communities create to foster a deeper understanding of the written word.

Past picks include *First They Killed My Father* by Loung Ung, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* by Salman Rushdie, and *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson. In 2018, we chose *Bread and Roses, Too* by Katherine Paterson, a book that dealt with immigrant and ethnic identity, centering on the plight of two children during the Bread and Roses Strike in Lawrence, MA. The 1912 strike was a turning point in American history for workers' rights. Communities that read *Bread and Roses, Too* engaged in dramatic readings and reenactments, constructed protest signs and banners, and held discussions that related the strike and the conditions of the early 20th century to contemporary issues. However, only one other Vermont Reads choice was written by a Black author, Jacqueline Woodson, until we selected *March: Book One* for the program in 2019.

In choosing *March*, we knew that the graphic novel format might challenge some older readers. We would be asking them to take a chance on visual narrative storytelling. We also hoped to invite communities to examine their own ideas around race and equity through the historic events of the civil rights era.

In late 2018, we purchased 4,000 copies of *March: Book One* and 30 sets of the full trilogy and distributed them throughout Vermont. We didn't know that *Vermont Reads: March Book One* would become the most widely attended program ever offered by Vermont Humanities. It quickly became apparent that fears about choosing a “comic book” for our very serious program were unfounded.

We needn't have worried. As co-author Andrew Aydin has said repeatedly, John Lewis was the first to shut down the naysayers about telling the civil rights story in comic form by pointing out that there was a comic book distributed during the movement that was very influential indeed: [Martin Luther King Jr. and the Montgomery Story](#).



Building the Arc of *March: Book One* in Our Work

Shortly after copies of the book arrived at our office in Montpelier, we started to receive project applications in response to our promotion and the buzz it was creating. On our website, we featured a range of suggested activities from a wide variety of sources for communities to explore: movies, books, articles, art, music, and places to visit. We suggested our own programs as extension activities, including relevant Speakers Bureau scholars, book lists, and facilitators for book discussion groups. Middle school students who read *March: Book One* as part of our summertime Humanities Camps learned about activism, the principles of non-violence, and the “good trouble” that John Lewis recommended.

In our First Wednesdays series of free public humanities lectures we presented scholars, artists, and community leaders that could speak to and expand upon the themes of *March: Book One*. Our Vermont Cartoonist Laureate and MacArthur Fellow Alison Bechdel, the creator of *Fun Home*, spoke about the history of comics as a tool for activism, with a special focus on the activist characters she created in her

own comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For*. Memoirist Mitchell Jackson came to Rutland, Vermont to discuss his work and how he drew inspiration from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1967 speech "The Other America." Jackson reflected on his childhood in a struggling black community in Portland, Oregon—where he witnessed drug use, gang violence, and sexual exploitation—and how he transformed despair into hope.

Our Work in Communities

By the end of the year, 98 communities had participated in Vermont Reads 2019. They ranged from the very rural, economically challenged Northeast Kingdom on the Canadian border to Bennington, a town in the state's southwest corner that borders New York and Massachusetts. Every community held at least three Vermont reads events. Here are just a few stories of the community building work that happened during *Vermont Reads 2019: March: Book One*.

Waterbury is a crossroads town in central Vermont near to—but not considered a part of—either the capitol area around Montpelier nor the financial center of Burlington. The Waterbury Public Library partnered with a local bookstore on their journey with *March: Book One*. A group from the town attended the Vermont Youth Orchestra's Winter concert, a collaboration between the VYO and Vermont Humanities (see below). They held group readings of *March: Book One* and organized a cartoon/graphic novel workshop to help people learn more about the art form and try their hand at writing short comics about their own life experiences. Professor William Edelglass of Marlboro College delivered a talk titled "The History of the Concept of Race" that explored the social construction of racism. The Q&A portion of that lecture sparked such a lively and impassioned discussion about race and identity that audience members organized ongoing monthly sessions to talk about equity and systemic racism. The group still meets regularly over a year later (though now online because of the Covid-19 pandemic.)

Article and photos: [Vermont Reads in Waterbury](#)

Newbury is a small, geographically isolated town in a rural farming area with a population of about 2,000. Vermont Reads collaborated with a neighboring library, women's and seniors' clubs, and the local elementary school. They held reading and discussion events, showed films such as *Selma* and *Mississippi Burning*, and invited Penny Patch to speak to Vermont Reads groups. [Penny worked as an Organizer for SNCC](#) (student Non-Coordinating Committee) from 1962-65 in Georgia and Mississippi, leading and participating in demonstrations to desegregate public accommodations. She took part in sit-ins with some of the same young people that the community read about in *March: Book One*. She helped register voters and taught in Freedom Schools. Penny moved to Vermont in 1966 and has continued to work for racial justice in Vermont and elsewhere. After the project, when asked about her impressions of *March: Book One* as the Vermont Reads choice, Newbury librarian Mary Burnham replied, "I find many patrons, including a few trustees, are put off when they see the graphic novel format. As a former middle school English teacher, I was able to get a few to try the book. Most were captivated by it. Several said they were going to read the book again after Ms. Patch's presentation." Over and over, we saw history come alive for our communities.

Springfield is an old mill town on the Connecticut River with a storied history in the machine tool industry. Its manufacturing base has been in decline for several generations due to overseas competition and technological changes, but it is also a beautiful town that is working on its next chapter. Residents of the town have often engaged with Vermont Humanities to foster a sense of community and

bring people together. For Vermont Reads, the Springfield Town Library and Springfield Unitarian Universalist Congregation worked with local schools to read *March: Book One* together. Their high school's community action group helped facilitate a discussion related to the movie *The Hate U Give*, foreshadowing our 2020 Vermont Reads choice. The town participated in graphic novel writing sessions with artists from [the Center for Cartoon Studies](#), and held community sing-alongs of the songs of the Freedom Riders. Springfield Town Librarian Ponnice Derby noted, "The Vermont Reads program has encouraged collaboration between the school district and the town library. This collaboration, while challenging, is very rewarding and encourages youth participation in library and reading events. Through the variety of the programming we offered, new relationships were forged among our organizations and those attending."

Middlebury is a college town in the center of a deeply agricultural region. In November 2019, Middlebury's Ilsley Library (associated with the town, not the College) hosted American singer, playwright, university lecturer, [and longtime Vermonter Francois Clemmons, most widely known as the actor who portrayed "Officer Clemmons" on Mr. Rogers's Neighborhood](#) (and who Mr. Rogers invited to share his kiddie pool on national television in the 1970s.) Francois sang songs from the civil rights era and shared his own life experience. He spoke to how these songs began as spirituals, then became a way of communicating among slaves looking for freedom, and finally powered civil rights protests. The audience was transfixed by his beautiful voice and by the stories he shared of that era. Clemmons' appearance for Vermont Reads is yet another example of how Vermont communities worked to creatively integrate into their project local people from the civil rights movement.



Finally, we are delighted to share a lighter moment from the town of **Richmond**, outside of Burlington. Children from the Richmond schools produced a semi-comic book "trailer" for *Vermont Reads: March Book One* in collaboration with the Richmond Free Library, the local public access TV station, and the Burlington Peace and Justice Center as part of a winter break day camp built around the book. This kind

of community collaboration was both very thoughtful and clever. It taught the work across disciplines and provided opportunities for many children to participate in Vermont Reads. We hope they will continue collaborating on future projects.

Video: [Student-Produced Vermont Reads Promo](#)

These are just a few of the many stories from the communities that hosted *March: Book One* programs in 2019. Partnerships developed and grew over the life of the program, and communities began to look forward to the next Vermont Reads book and the challenges that it may present to them. We are encouraged by the evidence that so many communities large and small (some *very* small) were open to a graphic novel, especially one that might challenge their ideas and beliefs. Communities believe in this work. These projects prove that the humanities can do much to unite people in their own communities. In the next section we will report on some of the statewide collaborations initiated by *Vermont Reads: March*.

Developing New Partnerships through *Vermont Reads 2019: March Book One*

Vermont Youth Orchestra

In January, we launched Vermont Reads 2019 through a partnership with the Vermont Youth Orchestra (VYO) in celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 90th birthday. The first of many statewide partners in this project, the VYO is an ensemble of middle and high school students whose mission is to develop young people as artists, citizens, and leaders through the joyful shared pursuit of musical excellence. Dr. Benjamin Klemme, music director for the VYO, programmed a powerful concert of music connected to the African American experience, including Dvorak's Symphony for the New World, Ellington's Three Black Kings, and spirituals from the civil rights movement. VYO Executive Director Rosina Canizzaro was an unfailing champion of the project and continues to collaborate with Vermont Humanities today. Their in-kind contributions to the project made the experience rich and educational for everyone.

Thanks to the creativity and determination of Dr. Klemme, we were able to engage former Vermont Public Radio *Friday Night Jazz* host and Duke Ellington scholar Rueben Jackson to read selections from *March: Book One* while Nate Powell's moving images were projected on a giant screen over the orchestra. These animations, which Dr. Klemme traveled to Washington DC to record with Mr. Jackson, made the book an integral part of the concert experience. The VYO, Dr. Klemme, and Mr. Jackson donated their work to make these short videos, and we continued to use them throughout the year, including in our culminating event in October.

Video: [March: Book One Excerpt](#)

Video: [March: Book Two Excerpt](#)

Most important, all 80 members of the youth orchestra had the opportunity to read and respond to the book as part of their artistic and educational experience. While there is some overlap between the Vermont Youth Orchestra constituency and our own, many new people were introduced to our work through this wonderful launch event. In addition to the young people in the orchestra, hundreds of additional people learned about the civil rights movement at the live performance and by viewing the concert online.

Clemmons Family Farm

Vermont Reads 2019: March: Book One has also helped us build strong relationships with organizations led by members of the African American and African diaspora communities. The Clemmons Family Farm is one of the oldest African American owned farms in Vermont and is in the process of becoming a nonprofit cultural center supporting increased knowledge of African American history, culture, and art while continuing to be actively farmed.

Vermont Humanities worked with the Clemmons Family Farm on their “*March with the Arts*” project, in which nine affiliated artists from multiple disciplines worked with *Vermont Reads 2019: March: Book One*. The farm’s team of African American and African diaspora teaching artists led a total of 22 workshops with more than 600 middle school students during the Champlain Valley School District's Common Read Celebration Day, as well as a special program at Charlotte Central School. This work helped to cement our positive relationship with staff at the farm and with many Black activists around the state.



Vermont Humanities is grateful to the Clemmons Family Farm for their leadership and their collaborative approach to increasing literacy, supporting working artists, and promoting the public humanities. We deeply appreciate their willingness to work with a historically white organization to help us learn how we can move towards what John Lewis would call “the beloved community.”

The Flynn Center for the Performing Arts

Before our year with *March: Book One* even began, we dreamed of welcoming the co-authors to Vermont. And yet we truly had little idea how large a project it would become to welcome the last surviving member of the “Big Six” leaders of the civil rights movement to Vermont. It was complex from the start; simply coordinating a date for the Congressman to visit that worked with the congressional calendar was a challenge. After months of back and forth, we finally settled on an early October date for a two day visit with Congressman John Lewis and his co-author Andrew Aydin. This began our biggest collaboration ever, coordinated with Vermont’s largest arts organization, the Flynn Center. The historic 1400 seat Art Deco hall was the largest available indoor venue in Vermont. But more importantly, the Flynn agreed to present *Vermont Reads: March Book One* as the opening event of both their 2019-2020 adult series and their student matinee series. We cannot express how important this partnership was to the success of the project, not least because the Flynn agreed to cover half of all production expenses.

Over three performances, the Congressman and Mr. Aydin addressed capacity crowds that included almost 3000 middle and high school students and 1400 diverse community members, including representatives of partner organizations like the Clemmons Family Farm and the New Alpha Baptist Church (the only Black church in Vermont), and from activist organizations like Black Lives Matter and the Pride Center of Vermont. It may have been the most diverse large gathering in Vermont’s recent history. The book signing line after the evening presentation lasted over two hours and functioned as an after-party, with music, singing, dancing and conversation. The Congressman and Mr. Aydin stayed until the very last person got their book signed.

Following the Congressman’s explicit request, we focused on engaging young people with great success during two additional sold-out matinees. The students arrived in dozens of bright yellow school buses from all over Vermont, and the Congressman waited in front of the theater to greet them. The students treated him like a rock star. He posed for pictures, signed their shirts and their books, and offered many moments of connection. During the presentation, you could hear a pin drop – the 2800 young people had all read the book and they hung on every word. When it came time for Q&A in the hall, the line of students waiting to ask a question stretched for a hundred feet up each aisle. Afterwards, young readers rushed the stage to shake the authors’ hands and have one last moment with the Congressman and Mr. Aydin. For days afterwards, teachers gushed with joy at the reaction of their students towards meeting the iconic figure.

Teachers and others were also surprised and gratified at the powerful connection made with Mr. Aydin, whose passionate embrace of the comic book form was well appreciated by the young audiences and their teachers. After the performance, Mr. Aydin offered to continue the conversation on Twitter and spent many days responding to dozens of tweets coming at him from all over Vermont. As a bridge between Mr. Lewis’ generation and the young students, Mr. Aydin helped the audience make the connection to today’s world.

You Retweeted

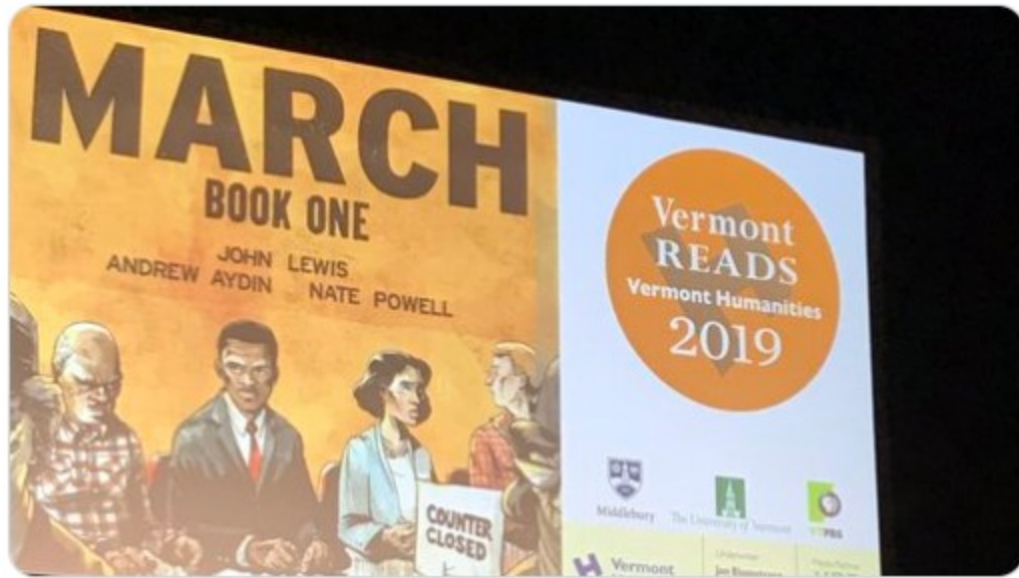


Ilyse R. Morgenstein Fuerst @ProfIRMF · Oct 7

Took my 6yo to see [@repjohnlewis](#) & [@andrewaydin](#) at [@flynnbtv](#). Me & [@KFMFvt](#) said since both our babies were just ideas that the goal was to raise good trouble makers.

GOOD TROUBLE MAKER is her sign at every protest.

She left energized way past bedtime. Thanks [@VtHumanities](#).



2

2

13



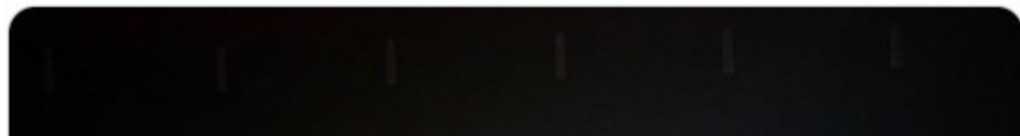
[Show this thread](#)

You Retweeted



Life LeGeros @lifelegeros · Oct 7

What an event tonight. It was like being immersed in history while seeing it unfold. Thank you [@VtHumanities](#) for making March the 2019 Vermont Reads book and bringing the living legend John Lewis to VT.





Christie Nold
@ChristieNold



Going to hear a living legend with a group of legends in the making was an incredible experience. I am SO deeply thankful to [@flynnbtv](#) & [@VtHumanities](#) for making this happen.

Also, I'm forever indebted to all those who bought books for our students!

6:29 PM · Oct 8, 2019 · [Twitter for Android](#)

16 Likes



Christie Nold @ChristieNold · Oct 8



Replying to [@ChristieNold](#)

I wish I had an audio file of the gasps & squeals of delight when [@repjohnlewis](#) took the stage.

Our students cheered, leaned ALL the way in & couldn't stop talking about it all day.

It was an experience I won't forget & I hope it has been the same for them!



4



32



Christie Nold @ChristieNold · Oct 8



Get ready [@andrewaydin](#) - we'll be coming at you with our questions over the next few days! ❤️👊



11

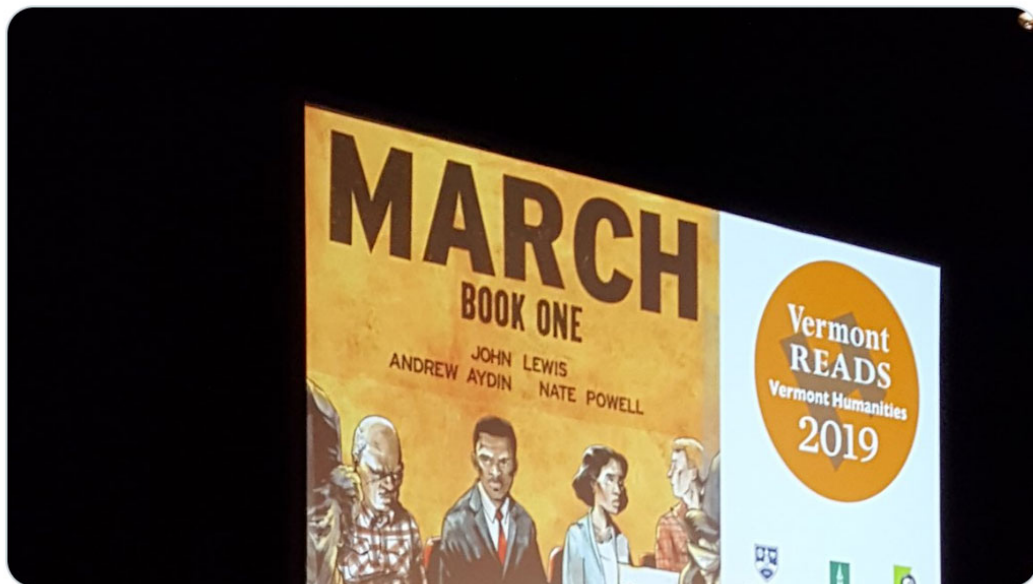


We want to also note that *Vermont Reads 2019: March Book One* cemented a new era in our relationship with many key leaders in Vermont. Senator Leahy and Congressman Welch joined us for the duration of Congressman Lewis' time in Vermont. Many other political leaders—or their representatives—were present for some of the events. Famed Vermont writers like Katherine Paterson, Will Alexander, Kekla Magoon, and graphic novelist Alison Bechdel participated in events during the Congressman's visit. Middlebury College and the University of Vermont both offered significant sponsorship support and encouraged their students to attend. The social capital created by this project continues to resonate today, exactly one year since their visit to Vermont.



Sen. Patrick Leahy  @SenatorLeahy · 1h

So proud to have intro'd @RepJohnLewis and co-author Andrew Aydin for 3 events at Burlington #VT's Flynn Center, drawing more than 4,200 Vermonters. Thanks to @VTHumanities and Flynn Center for making this happen. Missed it? @VermontPBS will rebroadcast Thursday at 8pm. @FlynnBTV



 6

 18



Vermont PBS and Vermont Public Radio

Video: [Vermont PBS: Vermont Reads: March Book One - Broadcast version](#)

Audio: [Vermont Public Radio: 'The Young People Will Save Our Country': Rep. John Lewis And 'March' Co-Author On Struggle And Hope](#)

Finally, Vermont Reads 2019 gave us a tremendous opportunity to work closely with two statewide media organizations that extended the reach on our project to thousands more in Vermont and hundreds of thousands of people across the nation.

Over the years, many Vermont Humanities programs have been captured on video by local public access TV stations. These archival recordings are viewed on our website and aired on local stations but have rarely garnered much attention. For the Congressman's visit, Middlebury College and the President's Office at the University of Vermont requested the ability to stream the Congressman's visit to their students on campus. With very limited previous live stream experience (primarily Facebook live from an iPad!) we approached our two statewide public media organizations for assistance – Vermont Public Radio and Vermont PBS. As with the Flynn Center, they both jumped at the chance to collaborate with Vermont Humanities, and they both livestreamed the evening event on their broadcast channels and on their websites, donating all production expenses. This allowed anyone to access the event, including the many people who could not be accommodated in the venue or could not travel to Burlington.

Vermont Public Radio also recorded a 15-minute interview with John Lewis and Andrew Aydin which aired several times after the event. A one-hour edited version of the full presentation was aired on their state-wide call-in show, *Vermont Edition*, two times the following day.

The connections we built through this project continue to serve us today, as Vermont Public Radio created a new, occasional series called [Vermont Edition Presents that has aired selected Vermont Humanities presentations](#) several times in the year since *Vermont Reads 2019: March Book One* premiered.

Vermont PBS, though, really pulled out all the stops for *Vermont Reads 2019: March Book One*, investing tens of thousands of dollars in production and post-production to create three different versions of the event for broadcast. In addition to livestreaming the entire evening event on October 7, they created a powerful and high quality documentary record of the evening that included introductions by Senator Patrick Leahy, Congressman Peter Welch, and Newbury Award winner Katherine Paterson, who chaired the jury that awarded *March: Book Three* the National Book Award. Vermont PBS later created a one-hour version of the program for rebroadcast several times on their own channels and as a ready-made streaming video for schools and community groups.

Several months after the event, with encouragement and connections made possible by Senator Patrick Leahy, Vermont PBS created a 22-minute version of the talk and offered it to PBS stations around the nation during Black History Month. This program was widely rebroadcast in the summer of 2020 after the Congressman's passing. It is our understanding that this is the first Vermont PBS program to ever be distributed for national broadcast. Andrew Aydin noted recently that the Vermont Humanities event in both the 60-minute version and the 22-minute version can now be accessed on PBS stations all over the country. These recordings are historically significant documents, as they show the last full public presentation about the *March* trilogy by the Congressman and Mr. Aydin.

Although we cannot know for certain how many people have watched these recordings, it almost certainly numbers in the hundreds of thousands. We are deeply grateful to Vermont PBS for the care and attention that their talented staff put into creating and distributing these recordings.

Endings and Beginnings - Looking Forward to Vermont Reads 2020: *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas

The Congressman and Mr. Aydin came to Vermont at the beginning of the fourth quarter of 2019, leaving three more months for communities to wrap up their projects and get ready to start Vermont Reads 2020. Their presence in Vermont created a burst of energy for the end of the year, but we were also excited to build a bridge, as the Congressman might put it, to the next steps in the struggle.

As we thanked them that October night in front of a capacity crowd of cheering (and crying) Vermonters, we handed each of them a copy of the next Vermont Reads choice – the award-winning debut novel by Black writer Angie Thomas, *The Hate U Give*. As *Vermont Reads 2019: March Book One* progressed it became clear that Vermonters were not done with books about civil rights. Our communities wanted to continue the conversation. We decided that perhaps the best way to do that was by bringing our work into the present moment. Although *The Hate U Give* is not the only YA novel inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, it is certainly the most well-known. And for us, it has become the bridge from the historical accomplishments of the “Big Six” to the more distributed leadership of the modern movement for civil rights – a model that John Lewis was deeply proud of supporting. Indeed, as we wrote earlier, one of his last public appearances, in early June after the murder of George Floyd, was [his visit to Black Lives Matter Plaza in Washington, DC](#) to support the young people of today’s movement. Just as he had done in Vermont and all over the country in his later years, [John Lewis supported the young people’s work first.](#)



And so we carry on. *The Hate U Give* runs headlong into the challenges faced by young Black kids in a world that doesn't value their bodies or respect their voices. Yet it's also a universal story about a young girl making the choice to speak out. Starr's struggle to find her voice resonates deeply with any kid who is facing down violence in their home, their neighborhood, or their country but it is also a story about family, about neighbors who look out for children, and about a community that is determined to survive. It is about love.

As we began our journey with *The Hate U Give* in 2020 we were quickly reminded by our partners that to go deeper into anti-racist work we need to look deeper into our own systems, our own behaviors, and our own culpability in enabling white supremacy. Partners expressed concern about teaching this contemporary novel in largely or wholly white settings, and so, as we need to do, [we continue on our own journey](#) and we [struggle with our own commitment](#) as the clarion call for justice sounds. But as the story of our work with *Vermont Reads 2019: March: Book One* tells us, this is not the work of a day, a month, or a year, but of a lifetime. At Vermont Humanities we will continue to strive towards John Lewis' beloved community, and we will always seek to make "good trouble, necessary trouble."



The Flynn Center marquee memorialized John Lewis after his death in July 2020, just nine months after his visit to Vermont.