

COMMUNITY BOARD OF CONTRIBUTORS

People connect when they take part in the Big Read

'Mockingbird' resonates at local law firm

MERLE WILBERDING
COMMENTARY



Years ago, Nancy Pearl, a Seattle librarian, woke up the reading public when she asked: "What if everyone read the same book?"

With that question, she started a national movement of community book reading (to say nothing of serving as the model for the first librarian action figure).

Last year, the Dayton community joined the Big Read and read *Nickel and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich.

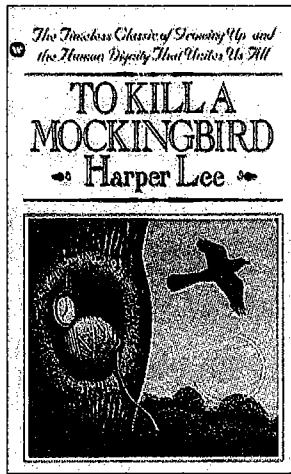
At our law firm, we organized our own reading group to discuss *Nickel & Dimed*. Fifteen people signed up to read and discuss the book during one of our "Lunch & Learn" noon breaks.

A mixture of senior partners, young associates, computer experts, paralegals and administrative assistants shared impressions and perspectives on the trials and tribulations encountered by Ehrenreich in her various jobs. The ongoing legacy of that discussion was the creation of our own book club, the Cool Book Club.

Last fall, we chose *Random Family* by Adrian Nicole LeBlanc as our "Cool Book."

This year, five counties in the Miami Valley (Montgomery, Miami, Clark, Greene and Clinton) joined the Big Read with its popular-vote selection of the classic novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee.

The Cool Book Club agreed that *To Kill a Mockingbird* was



a wonderful choice for a law firm. It gave us a chance to discuss how broad concepts of law and justice (with which we work every day) play out in the everyday lives of individuals.

We could all laugh when Scout said, "the usual crew had flunked the first grade." We had all lived that, one way or another. Our ability to identify with a young girl's observations on her schoolmates, neighbors and family prepared us to accept the lessons expounded through her father, Atticus: "You never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them," and "real courage is ... when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway, and you see it through, no matter what."

In our discussions we recognized the unique opportunities we have as a law firm, particularly in our pro bono work or court-appointed cases, to walk a few steps in the shoes of Atticus and try to give the less fortunate in our community access to justice. The problems encountered by the indigent often appear insurmountable because of the disparate knowledge and bargaining power of the other parties. It is in those times that we are reminded by Atticus that we must see the case through, no matter what.

That is the enduring legacy of Atticus Finch — his deep-seated respect for the dignity of his fellow man and his commitment to do his utmost for all he represented. He didn't just talk the talk. He walked the walk every day of his life.

What struck each of us was how much of life has changed since then, and how much of life has remained the same. The book was set in rural Alabama during the 1930s and exposed the harsh realities of racism and an economic caste system that lingers on, even as many of the more overt manifestations of racism have slowly faded.

Our discussion gave everyone the opportunity to connect to the book through experiences in their own lives and to connect with each other as we shared our experiences. This sharing of ideas and insights weaves a social fabric around the deadlines and demands of our business.

Reading and discussing *To Kill a Mockingbird* was a rewarding experience for our group, but it's only one part of a much larger story. Since groups throughout the Miami Valley are reading the same book, discussions generated by individual groups such as ours are spread and expanded upon by members who take threads of those discussions out to friends or family who have participated in their own groups.

With the Big Read, we're not just reading books. We're using our discussions to connect people, to interlock neighborhoods, and to build the community.

And that's what happens if everyone reads the same book.

Merle Wilberding is a longtime downtown lawyer and published legal historian. He lives in Dayton.

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