Veterans: Learn from history, don't censor it

Festival born after books banned in Madison County

BY EMILY OAKS
Foothills Forum

Booklovers gathered Sunday afternoon at Revalation Vineyards in Madison County for "No Book Left Behind: Celebrating Our Freedom to Read," a community festival triggered by the banning in Madison schools of some books or excerpts, including ones about the Vietnam War.

In January 2023, the Madison County School Board banned 22 books from local public schools. Subsequently 12 passages in a few textbooks used by the public schools were banned from educational use by teachers.

The bans "went viral," event organizer Cynthia Taylor said during the festival. "It's not something we wanted to be known for — as a county that banned books."

Taylor said well-known authors such as Stephen King and Margaret Atwood, among others, had spoken out against the book banning, and a piece aired on NPR as the bans became a national story.

Three school board members still in office who voted in favor of the banning — Charlie Sheads, Nita Collier and Christopher Wingate — are not seeking reelection.

"We organized this festival in response to these events — to promote literacy and ensure that everyone has access to a diverse range of books and ideas," Taylor said.

The festival included a reading of "Ambush," an autobiographical sketch by Vietnam veteran Tim O'Brien which was among the banned passages. Culpeper resident Charles Jameson read the story, himself a Vietnam veteran who served in 1970-71 with the 11th Armored Cavalry Artillery, 5th Infantry Division, and with the 101st Airborne on the Laotian border.

Clifford W. Haury, a University of Virginia adjunct professor who served in the U.S. Army in 1970-71, read excerpts from a speech in which Martin Luther King Jr. protested the Vietnam War, which also had been banned by the school board.

A personal account of his Marine Corps unit's participation in what became known as the Cam Ne incident was read by Clark B. Hall, a member of Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines in 1965. The Marines had followed orders to burn the homes of civilians. Hall's commanding officer ordered the then 18-year-old to represent the Marine Corps and be interviewed by CBS news correspondent Morley Safer, a controversial broadcast that also was used in a Ken Burns documentary on the war.

Answering questions from the festival audience, the veterans discussed how young people should be taught about the Vietnam War, and the difficult moral and ethical dilemmas they had encountered.

Several area authors also were highlighted during the festival, including Andi Cumbo, Jeffrey Dale Lofton, Nashae Jones, and Jen Poteet. In addition, Andrew Evans, author of "The Black Penguin" and a travel writer for National Geographic, discussed his work.

PHOTOS BY CINDY TAYLOR
Top: Clark Hall, Charles Jamerson and Clifford Haury speak about the Vietnam War and how students should be taught about it. Bottom: A banner contains titles of favorite books written by event attendees.

Featured community organizations and vendors included the Madison County Library, Madison Literacy Council, MADSafe, NAACP Culpeper, and Hundred Acre Books, a Culpeper book store. Food was provided by Cuba Mex Food Truck.

Emily Oaks is the executive director of Foothills Forum, a nonprofit organization that supports local news in Rappahannock County.

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"High school softball is only four years, but the impact Coach Jenkins has on players will last a lifetime," she added. "He teaches qualities that will last long beyond the field."

Former MCHS player and current Eastern Mennonite University player Meaghan Dean said she wouldn't be where she is today without Jenkins.

"He pushed me to work harder, not just on the field, but in life," she said. "He built more than a softball team, he built a family."

Dean said a better foundation needs to be built at the junior varsity level, saying Jenkins often receives players who don't know how to throw or catch properly.

"It's a program issue," she said. "How can you expect to win games when so much time has to be spent teaching basics?"

Shaun Currie also pointed to issues with the junior varsity program, saying his daughter didn't learn anything but how to make Tiktoks.

"I think there's a greater root issue that needs to be handled and John needs to be given his job back," he said.

School board member Charlie Sheads also voiced his support for Jenkins.

"In four years, I've never had so many come up and speak positively about [a person]," he said. "Thank you John for all that you've done and I hope we can make it continue."

School board member Greg Martz agreed.

"Coach Jenkins, it's admirable the amount of people who speak about your impact and character," he said. "It's tremendous to see the impact you've had in this community and I hope you continue to do so."

School board member Christopher Wingate suggested creating an athletics advisory committee.

"We've seen the goodness of [advisory committees] in other areas," he said. "Madison County cares about sports. How do we build the programs? I watch baseball; some of the most talented players play travel, they don't play on the high school team. We need to respond to that and reach down into fifth grade and build a pipeline."

It remains to be seen what will happen with the varsity softball coach position. Superintendent Anna Graham said coaching recommendations and reappointments are brought to the school board for approval based on the athletic director's recommendation. She said the head softball coach position will be open for applications soon.