

# DAILY NEWS

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### Flat River Community Library brings readers together in silence with Silent Book Club

*By Cory Smith*

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From left, Veronica Johansen of Gowen, Flat River Community Library Marketing and Outreach Librarian Cass Vargo, Derek Stuhan of Casnovia, Library Adult Services and Programming Specialist Kristen Skinner and Michelle and Dave Seppala of Greenville sit together in silence while reading different books during the library's Silent Book Club event at Flat River Brewing Co. on Feb. 5. — DN Photo | Cory Smith

GREENVILLE — Sipping on locally crafted beverages, with their feet propped up sitting opposite each other in the comfort of a padded booth, friends Kathy Lehman and Therese Schrauben were perfectly content not speaking to each other as nearly an hour passed.

The two Belding residents were each deeply invested in the books they had brought with them to Flat River Brewing Co., intrigued by what attending their first Silent Book Club event hosted by the Flat River Community Library would have in store for them.



PHOTO GALLERY





For Lehman, the 45 minutes spent reading her book in silence among the dozen people participating proved to be everything she hoped it would be.

“I can’t stay home and do this, I get too distracted — the dishes need to be done, the laundry needs to be folded and Facebook calls for me,” she said. “I would rather do those things, but I love to read, so this way, I’m able to do that and I don’t feel guilty.”

While Schrauben participates as a member of the Belding Book Club, she admitted it can be difficult to find time, without distractions, to sit down and read the assigned material.

However, aside from taking the occasional break to sip her beverage, she found her time at Flat River Brewing Co. to be the perfect environment to catch up on her reading.

“This event forced me to crack the book open,” she said. “The library staff made us feel so welcome, and it was just so fun.”

Spearheaded by Library Marketing and Outreach Librarian Cass Vargo, the Silent Book Club is now in its second “season,” in which the venue for the monthly event changes every four months.

Held the first Monday of each month at 7 p.m., Vargo said the first season was held at Winter Inn, with the current second season settling in at Flat River Brewing Co.

The concept is simple — bring yourself and a book, take a seat, order food and beverages if you desire, and read in silence for 45 minutes.

The final 15 minutes of the hour-long event is then dedicated to an optional discussion time.

“This is really low pressure. It’s getting together with people, reading a book, and you don’t have to talk to anybody if you don’t want to,” Vargo said. “You can order some apps, a drink, read your book and leave. But we’ve found that we’ve made some really great friends in the community. We’ve met some patrons that we didn’t really know were our patrons.”

Inspired by silent book club events in Grand Rapids, Vargo was looking for a way to engage with library patrons outside of the walls of the library.

“What’s the fun in just always staying at the library? We live and work in this community, we’re a part of the community, so we want to be out in the community,” she said. “We want everyone to know that we are here for them. We’re going to share everything that we can, our resources and programming.”

“Personally, I think it’s just fun that everyone can get together and read whatever they want in a no-pressure environment,” she continued. “From fiction to nonfiction, there’s just a very wide variety of things to read. People at the library expressed interest in having a book club but didn’t necessarily want to all read the same book, or maybe weren’t interested in what book a club might pick. This event allows them to read without that pressure.”

After participating on her own in January, Otisco Township resident Sharon Boldt decided to make February’s event a family affair, and together, she and her husband, Eric, and their two children, Tad, 17, and Olivia, 13, sat together in silence, each reading a variety of different books.

“It’s nice because it feels like we’re coming together again, without any pressure,” Sharon said. “There’s no, ‘How was your day? What did you do?’ But we’re still all together, which is a nice feeling.”

Sharon added that had the family chosen to stay home and read together, there was little chance they’d all manage to read uninterrupted for 45 minutes.

“Being in a place like this, I think that helps because when I’m at home I’m more apt to be distracted,” she said. “Here, everyone’s doing the same thing, and that makes it normal.”

For Eric, sitting with his family and reading together without distractions was a perfect way to spend the evening.

“It’s a comfortable silence,” he said. “It’s an opportunity to be together and not have the stress of trying to come up with conversation or interact when maybe you don’t want to that day. Here, we’re all reading something that we’re interested in. We’re doing it together, but separate enough where we can have private enjoyment together.”

Despite an occasionally boisterous euchre tournament taking place on the other side of the brewery, Eric and his family welcomed the background noise.

“When I read, I shut off the world around me,” he said. “I just completely get immersed in what I am reading. We were able to completely disconnect for an hour. I love it. I’ve always been a reader. I like reading a physical book.

“It’s relaxing, it’s calming, and while my phone went off for work three or four times while we were here, I ignored it the whole time, all so I could enjoy disconnecting for a little while.”

For Tad, a Greenville High School senior enrolled in the Montcalm Community College Early College program, joining her family for the book club event meant a break from her college courses and daily social activities, such as communicating on a computer screen via her Minecraft server.

“I often hang out with my friends online, but I actually left that behind today to be here,” she said. “So it’s nice to have a moment to just sit down and read. I haven’t been able to do that as much recently, so it was nice to just take a moment to do that.”

Having recently lost her grip on dedicating time for reading, Tad said she enjoyed the fact her family was able to block out time for reading without any distractions, which allowed her to immerse herself in a teen fantasy novel.

“If I try to read at home alone, there’s so many other things I could be doing, I am easily distracted,” she said. “Sitting here, with everyone reading around me, you see that’s what we’re all doing and the distraction is removed. I do better in this environment. I can’t do headphones, I can’t do music. Having the ambient noise of other people around me, it keeps me focused.”

As the 45-minute reading period concluded, Olivia found herself stepping away from her family’s table to enjoy the 15 minutes of conversation with the other participants of the event.

Choosing to read “The Odyssey,” the Greenville Middle School eighth-grader explored her curiosity in asking other patrons what they were reading and why.

“I really enjoyed talking with other people about what they read, getting some different influences about what I might read next,” she said. “It was nice to have some comfort around me, with my family and other people. You can have different interests, but you always have some conclusion that you can come together on, even if you’re reading a hardcover, softcover, something on a kindle and the books are completely different from each other.”

For Gowen resident Veronica Johansen, attending her first silent book club meeting will not be her last time doing so.

“I’ll be back. I just enjoy going somewhere where people like to do what I do, which is reading and drinking,” she said with a laugh. “I get to know what other people are reading, what new books are coming out. Tonight, I found a new option for my husband to read.”

The next meeting of the library’s Silent Book Club will be 7 p.m. on March 5 at Flat River Brewing, and Vargo is hopeful even more patrons will attend than the dozen who did so this month.

“Even if somebody is just here at the bar, curious about what’s going on, we brought spare books for them to read. We just want people to read and be together — and all of our events are always free,” she said. “Technically, the event is geared toward adults, but obviously, we welcome teens, too. Everybody is welcome, always.

“I hope people can see that the library is not just librarians shushing you in a building. We also love to read, and we want everyone to enjoy the joy of reading.”

### **If you go ...**

**What:** The Flat River Community Library’s Silent Book Club

**Where:** Flat River Brewing Co. (Location will be announced on the library’s website events calendar and social media before each program.)

**When:** 7 p.m. on March 5 (the first Wednesday of each month.)

**Read:** There’s no assigned reading. Just bring a book to read for the first 45 minutes, and, if you would like, stay for the last optional 15 minutes to discuss your reading.

**Information:** Visit [flatriverlibrary.org](http://flatriverlibrary.org), call (616) 754-6359 or email [FlatRiver@flatriverlibrary.org](mailto:FlatRiver@flatriverlibrary.org)