

Community conversation

One Book/One New Paltz initiative takes on the prison system with this year's community read of "Orange is the New Black"



LAUREN THOMAS

Pictured are some of the members of the One Book/One New Paltz Committee (L-R): Linda Welles, Abby Chance, Darlene Davis, Charlene Martoni, Shelley Sherman, John Giralico, Sue Books and Myra Sorin. This year's book is "Orange is the New Black" by Piper Kerman.

by Sharyn Flanagan

BOOK CLUBS ARE a great way for people to get together to talk about ideas. But usually the clubs are made up of people who are already friends, or at least already know one another, and therefore probably have somewhat similar backgrounds. But what if a book club could encompass an entire community; a diverse range

of people of all ages, ethnic backgrounds and economic levels who could stimulate each other's ideas through the common ground of a shared reading experience?

That's the premise behind the "One Book, One City" concept that began in 1998 when Nancy Pearl, executive director of the Washington Center for the Book in the Seattle Public Library, initiated a project called, "If All Seattle Read the Same Book." She obtained funding to bring an author to the area and invited members of the public to read his book and discuss it in a series of free public programs.

Since then, "One Book, One City" projects have been adopted nationwide. People in New Paltz have had the opportunity to participate in One Book/One New Paltz since 2005, when Dr. Gerald Benjamin, director of The Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz, founded a committee to organize the annual project as a way to build community between the college and the greater New Paltz population.

The initiative also promotes reading and literacy,

says Charlene Martoni, who recently became chairperson of the One Book/One New Paltz Committee. "It's really all about bringing people together and getting them talking and getting them thinking, so that we can start a conversation about current ideas going on in the world," she says. "We present these ideas without any bias on our part, through the book, and through program speakers who offer their own take on the book."

With minor exception, the programs are free of charge to attend. With 15 offered this year during the week of November 15-22, there are ample opportunities for people to attend one or more of the book discussions, film screenings and presentations that will be offered at different locations throughout the town. "The whole point of having so many programs is to give everybody the opportunity to be a part of the experience," explains Martoni. "We encourage people from all backgrounds to participate; the more diverse, the better."

The book selected by the One Book/One New Paltz Committee for this year's community read is *Orange is the New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison*, a memoir by Piper Kerman. (It should be noted that the discussions in New Paltz will concentrate on the book by Kerman and not the Netflix TV series that it inspired, which changes names and takes creative license with the facts.)

In her memoir, the author recounts how her decision to help a woman she was romantically involved with led to her indictment years later on charges of drug trafficking and money laundering. Despite the fact she'd left that period of her life behind and moved on to graduate from Smith College and live an upright life, Kerman was convicted and spent 13 months in the federal correctional facility in Danbury, Conn. She later wrote *Orange is the New Black* about that period in her life. Kerman now serves on the board of the Women's Prison Association and frequently speaks to students and judicial groups

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ONE BOOK | ONE NEW PALTZ

The program schedule

by Sharyn Flanagan

THERE ARE TWO programs a day beginning Sunday, November 15 with a culminating event on Sunday, November 22. All events are free of charge to attend except the film and dance presentation at Unison on Wednesday, November 18, which has an admission fee of \$7.

The schedule is as follows:

Sunday, November 15 at noon. Jewish Community Center, 30 North Chestnut Street. Book discussion and bagel brunch with Rabbi Bill Strongin, Jewish Congregation of New Paltz. Attendees are asked to bring a vegetarian dish to share.

Sunday, November 15 at 7 p.m. United Methodist Church, 1 Grove Street. Book discussion with Pastor Bette J. Sohm. Refreshments will be served.

Monday, November 16 at 2 p.m. SUNY New Paltz, Student Union Room 62/63. Discussion panel with SUNY New Paltz students and professor of sociology Alexandra Cox, who together participated in an "Inside Out" course at a local juvenile facility. Leaders of Students Against Mass Incarceration will give a short presentation about their work with inmates in educational and advocacy contexts.

Monday, November 16 at 4:30 p.m. SUNY New Paltz, Student Union Room 62/63. Academic panel moderated by Dr. Gerald Benjamin, director of the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz. Panelists will include Shelly Wright of the president's office, interim associate provost Lee Bernstein and a third panelist to be determined.

Tuesday, November 17 at 3 p.m. Woodland Pond, 100 Woodland Pond Circle. Book discussion with local writer Sharon Roth, who volunteered in women's prisons for two years and then wrote *New Confidence: Witnessing the Transformation of Incarcerated Women*. Roth will talk about the inmates, programs and supervisors she encountered, comparing and contrasting them with the book and the Netflix series. Q&A will follow.

Tuesday, November 17 at 7:30 p.m. Elting Memorial Library, 93 Main Street. "Perspectives on the Prison Experience" presentation by David Miller, former superintendent of Eastern Correctional Facility and author of *Punishment Enough*. Lou Mortillaro, former inmate at the facility, and prison volunteer Nancy Owen will speak about their experiences. Q&A will follow.

Wednesday, November 18 at 3 p.m. Inquiring Minds Bookstore, 6 Church Street. Book discussion of *Orange is the New Black* led by Tom Olsen, professor of English at SUNY New Paltz.

Wednesday, November 18 at 7 p.m. Unison Performing Arts Center, 68 Mountain Rest Road. Local dancer and educator Susan Slotnick will present her award-winning documentary film *The Game Changer*, which chronicles her work teaching modern dance to prisoners at the Woodbourne Men's Cor-

rectional Facility. Two of her students will perform. A discussion will follow. Admission fee of \$7.

Thursday, November 19 at 4 p.m. Elting Memorial Library, 93 Main Street. "School to Prison Pipeline" presentation by Jamie Levato, local educator and community organizer and Kortnee Simmons, community organizer with Citizen Action. They will discuss the ways in which schools' disciplinary methods push students out of educational settings and into the criminal justice system. They will also talk about the advocacy work being done in New York to change disciplinary policies around the state.

Thursday, November 19 at 7:30 p.m. Elting Memorial Library, 93 Main Street. Talk and Q&A with Bernetta Calderone, technical advisor to the Netflix TV series and former corrections officer in a New York State prison. She will talk of her experiences and compare the book to life in prison and the series. Space is limited.

Friday, November 20 at 4 p.m. Woodland Pond, 100 Woodland Pond Circle. Book discussion with local writer Tana Miller and Jan Schmidt, distinguished teaching professor at SUNY New Paltz. Miller led a book group at Danbury Correctional Institute for ten years and Schmidt will lead the discussion.

Friday, November 20 at 7:30 p.m. Elting Memorial Library, 93 Main Street. A screening of "I Wasn't Ready," the first episode of the Netflix series depicting the day that Piper Kerman leaves her supportive fiancé, Larry, for her new home: a women's prison. Q&A will follow.

Saturday, November 21 at 4 p.m. SUNY New Paltz, Jacobson Faculty Tower Room 1010. Book discussion with Lauren Marcus, director of the library at Shawangunk Correctional Facility, and Molly Shanley, who taught a college course with a mixed classroom that included inmates and Vassar college students at Taconic State Prison, a women's medium security prison. Q&A will follow.

Saturday, November 21 at 7 p.m. SUNY New Paltz, Studley Theatre. Presentation and Q&A with actress Barbara Rosenblat, who plays "Miss Rosa" in the Netflix series. She will speak about the development of her character on the series and discuss the book, and read from *Out of Orange*, a memoir by Cleary Wolters, the woman who engaged Piper Kerman in the drug smuggling ring. Space is limited.

Sunday, November 22 at 1 p.m. Elting Memorial Library, 93 Main Street. Wrap-up event with One Book/One New Paltz committee members and Chris Watkins, civil rights attorney. The event will be an interactive discussion about community members' experience with the One Book/One New Paltz program and attorney Watkins available to inform people how they can do something about prison reform with the knowledge they've gained. Light refreshments will be served.

More information is available at www.onebookonenewpaltz.org. ++

about prison reform. The One Book/One New Paltz program will use Kerman's story as a jumping off point to look at issues relating to our nation's flawed criminal justice system.

The book was selected for the community read because it fits the criteria the committee uses each year in its selection process. The book chosen needs to encompass many different issues that can be talked about in the various programs and has to be relatable to different parts of the population, says Martoni. Suggestions are taken during the first months of each year and after books are read by several members of the committee, a final five are voted on with one selected by spring.

In addition to editing VISITVortex Hudson Valley magazine and doing graduate studies on library and information science, Martoni works at the Sojourner Truth Library on the SUNY New Paltz campus as the

evening and weekend circulation supervisor. One of her goals for One Book/One New Paltz, she says, is to increase the student turnout for the programs and the college's involvement with the project, noting that a student panel discussion will take place in the Student Union Room 62/63 on Monday, November 16 at 2 p.m. – in which SUNY New Paltz students and professor of sociology Alexandra Cox will speak about their work with inmates in educational and advocacy contexts – and an academic panel led by Dr. Gerald Benjamin will follow at the same location at 4:30 p.m.

Benjamin still serves on the One Book/One New Paltz Committee he founded a decade ago.

In addition to chair Charlene Martoni, who also serves as webmaster, the group includes Mick Adams, professor emeritus of mathematics at SUNY New Paltz; Joanna Arkans, New Paltz High School

librarian; Gerald Benjamin, committee founder and director of The Benjamin Center at the college; Sue Books, secondary education for SUNY New Paltz; Abby Chance, Barner Books; Mark Colvson, Sojourner Truth Library; Jacqueline Denu, SUNY New Paltz; John Giralico, director of Elting Memorial Library; Robin Jacobowitz, The Benjamin Center; Linda Welles, Elting Memorial Library trustee; and New Paltz residents Darlene Davis, Shaylene Meyers, Shelley Sherman and Myra Sorin.

More information is available at www.onebookonenewpaltz.org. ++

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