NEA Grant Brings "The Big Read" to Kansas

by Diana Friend, Public Information Manager, Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library

The Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library has received a grant of $25,000 to participate in "The Big Read," a national initiative in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and Arts Midwest. The program encourages literary reading by asking communities to come together to read and discuss one book. During February and March, the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library has promoted *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston and programs relating to the book, Black History month and the Harlem Renaissance.

The Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library was one of ten organizations selected from a pool of 45 applicants to receive grants ranging from $15,000 to $40,000 to promote and carry out four- to six-week, community-based programs to encourage reading by teens and adults. The NEA's "Big Read" initiative is modeled on previous successful "one book" reading programs. Pilot communities, ranging in population from 7,000 to more than 4 million people, will read one of four classic novels: *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury; *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald; *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston; or *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee.

"The NEA's landmark 2004 study, *Reading at Risk*, showed that literary reading in the U.S. is in steep decline," said NEA Chairman Dana Gioia. "No single program can entirely reverse this trend. But if cities nationally unite to adopt The Big Read, our community-wide reading program, together we can restore reading to its essential place in American culture. Call me naïve, but I can actually envision an America in which average people talk about *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Great Gatsby* with the same enthusiasm as they bring to *Lost or Desperate Housewives*."

At the end of the project's pilot phase, the NEA will evaluate each of the ten pilot programs with a goal of inviting 100 U.S. cities to participate in 2007.

For its part in The Big Read, Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library has developed a program of activities in collaboration with Brown v. Board National Historic Site, Brown Foundation, Kansas State Historical Society, USD 501, USD 437, USD 345, USD 350, Topeka Chapter of Links, African American Book Discussion group, and the University of Kansas. Upcoming events include the African American Read In, Zora Neale Hurston biographer Dr. Robert Hemen way, Chancellor the University of Kansas and the Harlem Renaissance characterization by Dr. Carmaletta Williams. For more information about The Big Read in Topeka, please visit our web site http://www.tscpl.org/thebigread.htm.

Community Partners Supporting The Big Read include: ABWA Career Chapter • African-American Writers Book Discussion Group • Barnes and Noble Booksellers • Brewster Place Retirement Center • Cumulus Broadcasting KMAJ and US103 • ERC Resource and Referral • Friends of the Library • Greater Topeka Chamber of Commerce • ILC of Topeka and Lawrence, LLC • Jersey Mike's Subs • Jostens • Junior League of Topeka • Kansas State Historical Society • Metropolitan Topeka Airport Authority • Mize Houser & Company, PA • Plaza West Apartments • State Library of Kansas • KTWU TV Channel 11 • Lamar Advertising • Security Benefit • State of Kansas • The Library Foundation • Topeka Capital-Journal • Topeka Chapter of LINKS • Topeka Civic Theatre & Academy • Topeka Turn Around Team • University of Kansas • United Way of Greater Topeka • USD 345 • USD 437 • USD 450 • USD 501 • Washburn University • WIBW TV Channel 13 • YWCA of Topeka.