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Broward County Joins Big Read: Local Libraries Fight Decline in Literary Reading

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla.--(BUSINESS WIRE)--For centuries, reading has been one of mankind's favorite hobbies. In 21st century America, however, fewer than half of adults read literature, according to the most recent data from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). That number includes a decline of 10 percentage points, or 20 million readers, in the last two decades alone. And while that number is only shrinking further as the popularity of electronic media grows, Broward County announced plans today to help reverse the trend.

The county is one of 200 communities nationwide that is participating in The Big Read, a NEA program to promote literary reading. As part of local efforts, its Florida Center for the Book at Broward County Library is hosting reading programs and distributing more than 3,500 free books at dozens of county libraries throughout the month of November.

"Our goal is to help restore reading to its essential place in American culture," said Eileen McNally, executive director of the Florida Center for the Book. "Reversing the existing trend is not going to be easy; we first must place books in the hands of all age groups."

Broward County's Big Read kickoff will attempt to do just that. Taking place at 2 p.m. on Nov. 3 at the North Regional/Broward Community College Library in Coconut Creek, it will include performers, artists, speakers and refreshments.

The first 50 people who arrive at the event will receive a free copy of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, which is at the center of Broward County's Big Read festivities. Those festivities will include book and film discussions, cultural programs, panel presentations and Mah Jong games, all focusing on Tan's best-selling book.

Broward County's Big Read debut will also be the launching point for its children's initiative, The Big Read For Little Readers. Co-located with the main event on Nov. 3, children's programming will include a special story time, activities, refreshments and free copies of *Sagwa, the Chinese Siamese Cat*, which will be distributed in limited numbers to participating children.

According to the NEA's oft-cited "Reading at Risk" survey, the decline in literary reading correlates closely with increased Internet usage, video game playing and television watching, especially among young adults. In the study, electronic spending accounted for 24 percent of total recreational spending, while spending on books accounted for just 5.6 percent.

"Of course, a decline in reading has significant implications for society," McNally said. "It translates into poor performance in both the classroom and the workplace and impacts civic participation in everything from voting and volunteer work to cultural events and athletics."

The sense of urgency by reading advocates and Big Read participants is in response to feedback from both the business community as well as educational organizations, which have noted a decline not only in reading, but also in writing.

For more information on Broward County's Big Read, visit www.broward.org/library/bigread.htm or call 1-954-357-7386. Meanwhile, to learn more about the national Big Read effort, visit www.neabigread.org.

About Florida Center for the Book

Florida Center for the Book, an affiliate of the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress, brings readers and writers together; promotes books, reading and libraries; and celebrates the literary heritage of Florida.

About Broward County Library

Founded in 1974, the award-winning Broward County Libraries Division, www.broward.org/library, provides essential quality-of-life community service, as well as outstanding customer service, throughout Broward County. The library consists of 37 branches that are home to more than 3 million items for public use and 970 permanent staff, not to mention 114 part-time staff. Broward County Library serves 10 million customers annually and is the ninth largest library system in the United States.

About the NEA

The National Endowment for the Arts is a public agency dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts. Bringing the arts — both new and established — to all Americans, it provides leadership in arts education. Established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government, the NEA is the nation's largest annual funder of the arts, bringing great art to all 50 states, including rural areas, inner cities and military bases. For more information, please visit www.arts.gov.

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