

FITCHBURG SPEAKS: The Road Less Traveled (part two of two)

Kevin McCarthy (narration):

[Fitchburg Speaks theme – spirited and bouncy like a road trip – fades in]

The following recording is a presentation of *Fitchburg Speaks: The Road Less Traveled*. This event was held at Fitchburg State University in April 2024, before a live audience in the Falcon Hub in the Hammond Campus Center.

Students, faculty, and community members were invited to share stories on the themes of the paths less taken in life and the obstacles we overcome along the way.

Fitchburg Speaks was the culminating event from a year of programming inspired by the 2023 Community read book, *White Mountains State*, a memoir about hiking and summiting New Hampshire's 48 highest peaks. Written by Keith Gentili, a 1993 Fitchburg State graduate. Julia Dufresne, a junior English studies major, hosted the event.

Fitchburg Speaks was organized by members of the Fitchburg community Read.

This is the second of a special two-part release. Thank you for listening and enjoy the stories.

[Fitchburg Speaks theme fades out]

[clapping]

Julia Dufresne (event host):

Next up, I'd like to welcome Zachary Bos. Zachary Bos is the owner of the Bonfire Bookshop coming to downtown Fitchburg, and operated with the Pen & Anvil Press. As a writer, he's an alum of the graduate poetry workshops at Boston University and has contributed to dozens of U.S. and international publications. He's a longtime community member for political, social justice, and artistic causes. Thank you. Welcome to the stage.

[Audience Applauds]

Zachary Bos

I grew up in inner city, New Jersey. It was rough. I loved going to the library. Could never go to the library. I couldn't walk there because of the crime up on Union Avenue. I had to walk to PS27. But I couldn't walk on the city streets because the corners were the sites of a lot of drug activity.

So I would hop fences and walk through yards. What I'm trying to get at is, when I grew up, it was a place where there wasn't a lot of hope, there wasn't a lot of direction, wasn't a lot of structure. We lived mostly in the day to day, just trying to keep up with things, trying to avoid law enforcement, trying to weather the troubles of households disrupted by criminality and substance abuse and violence.

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No one was asking the question, where do you want to go? What is your goal and how can I help you get there? That builds a little bit of context to explain why. Any time young Zach was invited to participate in anything with structure, I left at the chance, if it involved a uniform and if it involved hierarchy or advancement, I said, that sounds better than all of this mess. Boys scouting absolutely went out at heart. Junior ROTC in high school. Absolutely. Community service, youth group in church where I was a disbeliever. Absolutely smile on my face. Always the person on stage, always the person at the front of the line to volunteer for structure because I wanted to be part of something, not part of this squalid, chaotic, nothing.

So here I am at 17, I have won an Air Force scholarship to study physics at college. From being in a place without direction and without goals, I have adorned myself in someone else's uniform. I have taken a path forward, a path through life off the shelf, ready to wear, and it felt great to be moving in any direction at all. I came to Boston. I was working in a science lab. I was doing the military training. I was advancing in my classes. Things were going great.

And then I got sick. There's a whole fleet of auto immune symptoms that emerged at this time in my life. And it was ironic because it was the first time I was trying. It was the first time I was striving for something because it was the first time I had a goal. Now, this is a stress mediated kind of autoimmune disease. So the harder I tried, the worse it got. And just round and round in an appropriately military catch 22.

I could not make any progress getting ahead of these debilitating symptoms. So it was just a period of months after my freshman fall, freshman spring. Summer between freshman and sophomore year, I realized that was it. This path has come to an end. These goals that had been so desirable in my eyes are now forever out of reach because I have to resign my program, give up my commission, withdraw from ROTC, and quit school.

And that's what happened. Sounds like an obstacle, right? No. It turns out that that was something of an illusion. The real obstacle I have come to understand in the 20 years since was existential. The real obstacle was never having been asked, who are you? What do you want? What do you value? Where do you want to go? Was never having a goal, was never having a star that I wanted to steer by?

I had replaced that need to become my own person with someone else's conception. And it was a viable path forward. Right? It was a, it was a decent one in some ways. You could think of it as a noble one, but it wasn't one that I had chosen and earned.

And when I lost it, I was in disarray. But that was the best thing, frankly, that could have happened to me. Because now, for the first time, I have to ask those questions. I ask those questions. And I said, how can I turn any stumbling blocks in the mess around me? Here I am in Boston. No money, no school, no prospects. How can I turn these stumbling blocks into stepping stones? It was just effort.

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I was still sick. Right. Well, that's valuable because I'm a guinea pig. So I spent a decade in clinical trials, more than a dozen clinical trials, getting poked and prodded and beamed and scanned and scraped and shot. And I'm very proud to say one of them worked. One of them worked. I now take a monthly injection. And I was an infinitesimal part of this enormous scientific project to find a remedy for this particular kind of chronic condition. I took my monthly shot just this morning. You're welcome. I'm grateful. So that's part of it. Stumbling block into stepping stone.

Another stumbling block. I was no longer in a degree program. That was rough, but now I'm freed from the sometimes restrictive limits of a degree schedule.

I don't have to do requirements. Instead, I can pursue an education based on curiosity. I made the most use out of the university and the city libraries. The most use out of interlibrary loan of anyone I knew then, or have come to know since. I stayed on campus. I lived in the area around Boston University. I met faculty members and I began to learn over their shoulders.

I insinuated myself into their labs and into their offices. I became an assistant, sometimes paid, sometimes not paid. I learned the course material by preparing the slides and editing the lectures. I learned the academic material by working for academic journals as a low level assistant and gradually rising in the ranks. And once I was free from the limit of what someone else said, my goal needed to be, physics in the Air Force, I realized maybe bombs weren't the thing I actually really was driven by, and instead it was books.

So I leaned into the humanities. I became a writer, I wrote journalism, I did literary translation, I hosted workshops. Now, mind you, you can do all of these things without a degree, without an education, just by saying, come on over, I'll pour the wine and then I'll wash the wine glasses. Eventually I amassed, you know, a folder of writing credits.

Sufficient to grant me admission into the graduate creative writing program. So I was able to find my own path in that rather unconventional way.

I'll wrap it up. And this is the point. I thought that the obstacle was getting sick. Not at all. That was an illusion. As I said earlier, the obstacle was existential. Whether something around you or that happens to you is an obstacle or is a matter of perspective, right?

Either it's blocking you on the path you're on, or it's just a feature in the landscape. And it turns out, if that is challenging terrain, then maybe having to walk through is going to make you stronger. It's going to make you more experienced, and it's going to make you more able to help others cross that landscape behind you.

Anyway, I thought getting sick was bad, but, in the end I'm quite grateful for it.

[Audience Applauds]

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Julia Dufresne

Thank you. Zachary. Our next storyteller is Doctor Jescah Apamo-Gannon. Dr. Apamo-Gannon is an assistant professor in the education department. She is a mother, wife and grandmother. When she's not at work, she likes gardening and spending time with her grandson. Please welcome Jescah to the stage.

[21 min 04 sec]

Jescah Apamo-Gannon

Hey, my story begins when I was six years old, after I had taken a vacation that made a mark in my life that I cherish up to today. So I was born of a Kenyan father and a black British mother. They met in the British Air Force, where my mother and father were both cadets. I've had a lot of stories of cadets and I'm like, okay. So Kenya had just become independent and all the training had to happen in Britain. And so that's how my father was there.

I grew up in a very small town, rural town in the UK, and while I was there, it never occurred to me that there was people who looked like me because everybody didn't look like me apart from people in my family. So when I went to school, if I looked around, if I saw someone who looked like me, it had to be my sister or my brother.

When I was six years old, we took a vacation to Kenya and it was more than what I had read in books. I was able to play with my cousins who looked like me. I was able to see kids with hair like mine. I was able to just see people and wonder where all of these people were. And then after three weeks, we went back to the UK and I was very, very sad.

My life there was beautiful, everybody was friendly. But I just remember that nostalgic feeling of wanting to go back to my three weeks and enjoy that and live that way for the rest of my life. Well, my gift was granted when I was 13 years old. My parents decided to relocate to Kenya. I cannot tell you, for a month I didn't sleep, I just kept thinking how my life is going to be. The three weeks I had had when I was six years old.

So we landed in Kenya and after three weeks we go to school. That was me. Very excited. Now I'm finally going to school where all the kids look like me, where nobody is going to look at me and ask me, how did you do your hair? So we went to school very excited.

But then a week later, my dreams were shattered. What I didn't tell you. My story is titled My Confetti Moments. You know when you win something and there's confetti coming down and everybody's cheering and all the lights go down when everyone is still like we know. Enjoying the jubilation. That's what I kept envisioning when I go to Kenya. That's how it's going to be.

So after one week, I started realizing other kids did not want to be my friend. I did not sound like them. I looked like them. I did not carry lunch that like looked like them. My mother was black British, so she cooked the food she knows how. When I was at the lunch break, all the kids

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would look at my food and I would hide and I would feel embarrassed that I had sandwiches while other kids had rice and beans and other wonderful foods.

I remember having some resentment of my mother wondering why she couldn't cook like the other Kenyan mothers. And so I didn't have friends. And so I started saying, I really want to be Kenyan. I want to be so Kenyan. What can I do? Well, that dream was granted when I went to the university. I met this Kenyan man who had, who was just about to graduate. He loved me, I loved him and at 19 I got married. So that was me thinking, Now I'm going to be so Kenyan. I have a Kenyan husband. Not only was he just Kenyan, when I went to Kenya I realized there's tribes. So this man was in the same tribe as my father. So I had hit the jackpot. So I thought.

And so I remember wanting everyone to ask me, who is your husband? Without realizing I'm a teenager. I shouldn't be married, maybe, but I was happy that I finally had a Kenyan husband with a Kenyan name. Not through my father and not through my mother, who I had to always explain that she's not Kenyan. And so around that time, unfortunately, my mother passed away.

When we were in Kenya, it dawned on me that my mother looked like everybody, but nobody accepted her because she did not speak like them. She did not have a name like theirs. So while she looked like them, she was not Kenyan. So she was now the outsider. And so I started living this life of a married woman and wondering when this Kenyan confetti is going to come down.

And then I started hearing whispers about how my mother was not Kenyan, so I'm not Kenyan, and this man married a woman who's not Kenyan. I started hearing whispers about how thin I am. I'm not going to have children. I'm supposed to be curvy. I started wearing so many clothes and so that I looked like I was full, that I could have children.

And I just remember thinking, maybe when I have children I will be a real wife. Then, lo and behold, I got a son. You heard that I'm a grandmother. Yeah, I had my son before my 20th birthday. And so what happened was I remember thinking, wow, I have a son. So in the Kenyan, my father's tribe, if you were married and had a son, now that son solidifies your marriage.

Now you are a real wife and you are not going to be shaken because now you have an heir. So to speak, even though there's nothing to inherit. So two and two years later, I had another son and him, mother of two sons. Who else can shake me out of that? That confetti moment ended because three years later I was not Kenya enough, not wife material, and I was divorced because they needed to get him a Kenyan wife.

So the time after my mother passed, my siblings went back to the UK. I was married, I was Kenyan, I didn't go back with them. And so I started feeling so lost, so lonely. And Kenya is a very patriotic country. So my children, even though they were infants, they had to be with dad, not me. And so I found myself here when I was 22, and then I was on a college campus doing my master's degree.

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I divorced 22 year old, very rare. So every time people would introduce themselves in class and I would say, I'm divorced and I have children, they would look at me like, are you 70? And I would say, I hope I was then I don't have to leave this miserable, miserable life.

And so anyways, one day before going to class in my small studio apartment, I looked at a presentation that I was going to do, and I looked at it and I liked it. And I said, Jessica, you're going to get an A, and then a small whisper say to me, even if you don't get an A, give yourself an A because you worked so hard on this paper. And I stepped back and I said, oh my goodness, this is it. I have to find ways to enjoy myself and appreciate the little accomplishments, the little wins that I set for myself, as opposed to those wins that I was waiting for the wives to give me, the confetti stories, the confetti coming down.

So to close out, I want to tell you now I celebrate confetti moments almost every day. Even today, when I was coming here, I got a parking spot. When I was almost giving up and I said, yay, Jessica, you did it! So that is what I live by now. Every day I find small little moments where I can just enjoy and say, this is my moment. Thank you.

[Audience Applauds]

Julia Dufresne

Up next is Sally Cragin.

[Audience Applauds]

Sally serves as a counselor at large for the city of Fitchburg. She's a journalist and began her career at the Boston Phoenix, where she won two Penney-Missouri Awards for feature writing. She publishes books with Llewellyn Worldwide and is the director of the Be Positive Therapy Pets Community Education, which provides animal assisted therapy to Fitchburg Public School students. FPS is the leader in the state for pet therapy in classrooms. Please welcome Sally to the stage.

[Audience Applauds]

Sally Cragin

What wonderful stories. I love hearing about mountain climbing since I am unlikely to experience the Appalachian Trail, except maybe crossing it. My days of sleeping outdoors, I believe, are over. Unless they invent a mattress that can go from the size of a cigarette pack to full size. Sleeping on the ground.

So, boy, there's so many stories I thought about, I could tell you. I am actually fourth generation Fitchburg on my mother's side, and on April 24th will be the 107th observance of the, Armenian Genocide of 1915. And I am Armenian. My family is Armenian, and I have spent the last year at the historical society researching all kinds of topics, including the Civil War, but along the way,

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slowly working my way through the directories to identify the Armenian diaspora, how it came to Fitchburg, how people came to Fitchburg when they came.

And there's a very famous quote by Adolf Hitler before he invaded Poland in which he said, who, after all, remembers the plight of the Armenians. So that kind of gave him cover to do, you know what, what he did. But the Armenians of, according to my son, who's studied all of this right back to the Hittites, the Armenians have had all kinds of, you know, population declines through violence for centuries.

And in Fitchburg, the first two men who came that I have identified are, Garabed Muradyan and Marta Rose Suborgian. And they came in 1890. They are listed as laborers. Now 1890 is kind of early. The first Armenians came to Worcester in the 1860s. Before that, there's supposedly an Armenian man who did come to the settlement of Jamestown.

But, before that, you know, there's not that many, and just gives you some context. So at one point, Armenia stretched from the Caspian to the Black Sea, and right now it is about the size of the state of Maryland. There's a population of about 3 million. The worldwide diaspora is about 6 million. So the people outside of Armenia, who are Armenians, actually way outnumber the number of Armenians who are present in the country.

But why did they come to Fitchburg? My great grandfather came and I sort of thought, well, I'll center my search around his story. So 1890, we have two men. They disappear by 1891. Did they go to Worcester? Did they go somewhere else? We don't know. Then, we have Simon Shahinian and Sarkis Sahelian. And they came in 1892 and they started a confectionery shop on Main Street.

We actually renamed our numbers on Main Street after World War One. So they were at 191 Main Street, which is still lower Main. After a year, they too were gone. Where did they go? We do not know. 1893: there are three Armenian men. By 1895, my great grandfather arrives with not one, but two brothers. Now, we've always talked to my family about the one brother, Philip.

And you guys should know that I am related, I'm related to many Armenian people, and we've all been here for a length of time that I think we consider each other cousins. But my cousin Stephen, also known as Sonny, is, Sonny Keosan. So Keosan Brothers Shoe Repair is on route 2, a excellent cobbler, but the Armenian sort of took to doing, cobbler work early on.

If you go to Oriental Ispahan, which is Roberto Der Marderosian and his sister Paola. Their grandfather started that business more than a century ago. And he started it this way. Many of the Armenians ended up at Park Hill Mills, which was the largest textile mill in Fitchburg. And, you know, in the northeast. We were very successful at creating paper, but also woven goods.

So Roberto's great grandfather would gather up the threads that were on the factory floor at the end of the day, and he brought them home. And then he started repairing rugs. And he became

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very skilled at this, to the point where the Wallaces and the Croakers and the leading families of Fitchburg were, you know, he is the guy.

And then he started this rug company. Roberto has been retiring for the past decade, from what I can tell. He keeps saying he's shutting the store, but if you walk in, there's plenty of rugs and he won't retire until he sells every last rug.

By 1924, there were 77 adults and about 39 Armenian names. There's a lot fewer now, but that seems to be the peak. 1924 is about ten years after the genocide. I'm going to probably take a little bit more than another minute, because I just want to bring it back to a personal piece, which is we are, having a couple of events in the city of Fitchburg, to commemorate Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day. This is something that I've worked out with my family.

We've done this for a few years. The first is a week from Friday, April 19th, 11 a.m. come to the flag raising at City Hall. We're raising the Armenian flag. We will have, Armenian style refreshments at City Hall. Light refreshments. Which my son and I will bake. After right after that. And then on Sunday, April 21st at Leominster Library, where Anne Finch over there is a librarian, we will have Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day with stories, with memories and all of us. If you ever meet an Armenian person, we all have horrific family backgrounds and I'm not going to share that here in this public forum because it's just not the place, but it's all pretty, it's very rough stuff.

And I do not remember not knowing the story. And I know there are, you know, there's many other cultures. We heard another story about Puerto Rico and violence and the rest of it, and it's awful, you know, but my grandfather Krieger Maraganian was a real survivor. He expanded Star Cleaners. We all worked in the dry cleaning store.

What I can tell you about being Armenian is that, you know, hard work. And my cousin, who's 80, he's at that shoe. He's at his shoe repair store, you know, for more than 40 hours a week. Heavy machinery. So that sort of willingness to take on the heavy work it seems very tribal. And also the inability to say goodbye.

You stand at the door during winter with the screen door and the wind coming in, and you stand there half an hour saying goodbye. Which is why I'm still standing here. But the final little anecdote I want to share is something my brother Hal Craigan told me. Now, my brother Hal is an honest to god rock star, and he spent many years playing with Iggy Pop, and They Might Be Giants and lots of folks.

He's a brilliant bass player and he looks totally Armenian, even though our other half is Scottish. So Hal has like, you know, curly hair? He gets his car repaired in Glendale, which is kind of the Armenian diaspora, but it's the very moneyed and wealthy, and very different from the Watertown Armenians. I mean, very, you know, much... What can I say? I don't want to say much more successful. Much more modern.

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But the other thing is, I'd never heard of this before. I mean, there are Armenian gangs. And I laughed when my brother told me this. I'm like, you got to be kidding. We're like the most, hey, are you okay? Is everything good? Like, we're very agreeable people for the most part. And Hal said, yeah, he was at someone's house, and he ended up talking to the assistant district attorney for the city of Los Angeles.

And this woman said to him, they were talking because my brother, like I said, he looks very Armenian. And even though his our last name is Craigan, which is not ain ending. And the assistant district attorney said to Hal, you know, the one gang where they never turn on one another, we can never get any infiltration into the gang.

They are just tight. It's the Armenians. They never turn on each other. And I'm like, yeah, that's true. That's like totally true. So I do not live a life of crime here in, in Fitchburg. I am a city councilor at large. If you have an issue with the city, please reach out to me through the city website.

I want to thank DeMisty and everyone for inviting me. This is really fun. And I said to you guys, I can't write something down. I don't have the time on my way here. Two, two residents had issues they wanted to talk to me about. Literally as I was walking through the door. But I knew I wanted to talk about being Armenian. And I hope this is helpful to, you know, a little bit more. You know, there's not many of us, but we're, you know, we're here and we'll be here a thousand years from now to thank you.

[Audience Applauds]

Julia Dufresne

Thank you, Sally. Our final storyteller is, me, Julia Dufresne. I'm an English major at FSU currently and involved in the theater program. I'm currently also an intern reporter at the Harvard Press and the arts and entertainment editor for The Point student newspaper. I'm also acting in the semester's mainstage one acts. And I've had the pleasure of working with the amazing cast and crew on a student film being produced here, called Dream Girl.

I'm a Fitchburg native. I was born in Massachusetts, and I've lived here my whole life. I attended Lunenburg High School for my high school years, where I learned pretty quickly that academics was very difficult for me. I had a very difficult anxiety disorder that was intrusive on my daily life, especially in school.

It took me out of classes sometimes, just because anxious Julia would always tell me you're in danger, when I wasn't. My learning was also impacted by an executive dysfunction, as a result of ADHD, which was detrimental to memory and time management skills. I felt like... What happens after high school? You know, do I get to go to college? When I'm struggling with all these things?

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Long story short, wasn't a piece of cake. It took a lot of self-exploration to learn how to cope with my flaws outside of my academics. At my high school, I participated in drama club productions. And, it gave me a sense of control and community. I found a passion in telling stories through the medium of stage performances.

And one of my first performances, this little anxious girl. I played Lady Capulet in a contemporary retelling of Romeo and Juliet in the competitive class plays. And we won. It was a great memory and it started a fascination with stage productions. I ended up being a porter in Another Train Car, Hiawatha play. I tried to be extras and in all the productions they were doing, in my senior year when we did a production of The Great Gatsby, I played the leading role of Daisy Buchanan, the female lead, and had an amazing time.

And if you ask my mother, you might be able to see a photo of me playing a dog in our high school production of Annie. I made a lot of good memories, and I learned a lot from my mistakes. But there was, again, that big change on the horizon. What happens after high school? What am I going to do? Where am I going to go?

And then I was accepted into FSU. It gave me a path ahead. And while it was a shaky one, if people would always ask, well, what do you plan on? What do you want to be? I didn't know, I was just happy to get out of high school.

And honestly, I still don't know. But according to my mother, you never really know for sure what you want to be. You're always learning about yourself. You're always learning about the world. So you're always going to be growing and changing. Regardless, I knew I liked writing, so I decided to major in English and begin writing for the student newspaper as the arts and entertainment editor. And, I got an internship at the Harvard Press, and it seemed like I could pursue something with journalism.

But I always did have that passion for theater. And so I started doing productions here at Fitchburg State. I did Extremities, my freshman year, which was a very difficult play, took on a lot of challenging topics. But, I found a home in Fitchburg State theater program. I continue to pursue that, by doing, It's a Wonderful Life, last semester that you might have heard, I played Mary, the leading lady role. And, I found community. I found people that I want to start a club with. And I found a way to tell stories.

So you can imagine my surprise when I realized that journalism and theater are similar. It's all about sharing stories, all but telling truth. Whether it be a news story about a town meeting or printing Mary to life on stage. My goal has always been to tell stories, and it's only recently that I've realized it, that I'm doing it.

More recently, this semester, I also lost one of my best friends who was a passionate young storyteller, who passed away. There's not a day that I don't miss her, and I'm grateful to still be here and pursue my dreams. Remember the stories that she's told as well. So to wrap up my tale, I'd like to share a quote by Sue Monk Kidd.

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Stories have to be told where they die and when they die. We can't remember who we are or why we're here. So please, if you have a story short and when the story is told, there's no greater honor than being able to carry the torch by keeping it alive.

[Audience Applauds]

Julia Dufresne

Enough of that sappy stuff. Okay, we've heard some incredible stories, and I think we can all agree that our storytellers have all been wonderful. And before we, bring the schedule portion to close and also like to take a moment to thank our storytellers, your stories have moved us, inspired us, and challenged us to see our worlds in different ways. We are grateful for your courage and honesty and share your experiences with us.

I would like to also, welcome this year's community. Read co-chairs Jackie Kremer and Paula Stefanakos to share the title of next year's Community Read.

[Audience Applauds]

Jackie Kremer

Oh, my God, this has been so unbelievably amazing. Like, I'm just blown away by everyone's story and very appreciative of people sharing it.

We ran a vote for our next year's Community Read. So chosen as the best book of the year by NPR, the New York Public Library, Amazon, The Seattle Times, the Washington Independent Review of Books, the Minneapolis Star Tribune, The Spectator, and The Times of London. The 2025 Community Book Read will be a *Woman of No Importance* The Untold story of the American spy who helped World War, who helped bring World War Two.

[Audience Applauds]

[Fitchburg Speaks theme fades in]

Kevin McCarthy

You've been listening to Fitchburg Speaks, a special two part series

The Fitchburg Community Read is a collaboration between Fitchburg State University, local libraries, and the surrounding communities.

For more information about the programming around the 2024 selection, *A Woman of No Importance, The Untold Story of the American Spy Who Helped Win World War II* by Sonya Purnell visit www.fitchburgcommunityread.com.

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This production is a collaboration between the Fitchburg Community Read, Fitchburg State University, and Perseverantia, the Fitchburg State Podcast Network. Special thanks go to Jackie Kremer, Paula Stefanakos, DeMisty-Bellinger Delfeld, Wafa Unus, Kevin McCarthy, and members of the Fitchburg Community Read committee.

Tori Kiolbasa, a senior in the Communications Media Department, recorded this event and produced this series.

[Fitchburg Speaks theme fades out]

Thank you again for listening.

[clapping]

[Perseverantia theme fades in]

Logan Corrado

This is Logan, a junior at Fitchburg State University studying film and video. And you're listening to Perseverantia the Fitchburg State Podcast Network.

[Perseverantia theme ends]