

CASE STUDY: CIVICS LAB AND A LISTENING STATION AT KINGS PARK LIBRARY



Overview

At Kings Park Library in Burke, Virginia, Sue Martin set out to create a series of civic programs that would help community members talk with one another about public life in a way that felt thoughtful and grounded. Located about thirty minutes from Washington, D.C., the library serves a community that is highly engaged in politics and local issues. Sue saw the library as a natural place for those conversations to happen, but she also knew that structure and care would matter.

Rather than offering a single event, Sue offered an ongoing series called Civics Lab. Over several months, she hosted guest speakers, facilitated discussions, and introduced a listening station, each designed to invite participation without requiring debate or consensus. Her goal was not to persuade, but to give people a place to listen, reflect, and speak with one another in a public setting.

Approach

Sue organized Civics Lab as a sequence of programs held between July and October 2025, with additional One Small Step Conversations scheduled for December 8, January 12, and February 2. Across the four completed events, she recorded a combined total of seventy six participants.

The series began on July 14, 2025, with a civic engagement event featuring Braddock District Supervisor James Walkinshaw. Kings Park Library shares a building with the Supervisor's office, and Sue saw an opportunity to connect civic leadership

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*Civic Engagement
with Braddock District
Supervisor Walkinshaw*

Monday, July 14 at 7 PM

Supervisor Walkinshaw will speak to the challenges and opportunities of working in government with so many competing groups with differing goals. Learn about the impact of civic engagement.

Upcoming Civics Lab Events
Aug 11 at 7 PM: Intro to One Small Step Conversations
Aug 25 at 7 PM: Exploring Assumptions

For Adults. Registration required.
Register at <https://librarycalendar.fairfaxcounty.gov>



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12000 Government Center Parkway
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Fairfax, VA 22035
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directly to the library. The event drew more than forty attendees and gave community members time to ask questions and hear about local government firsthand.



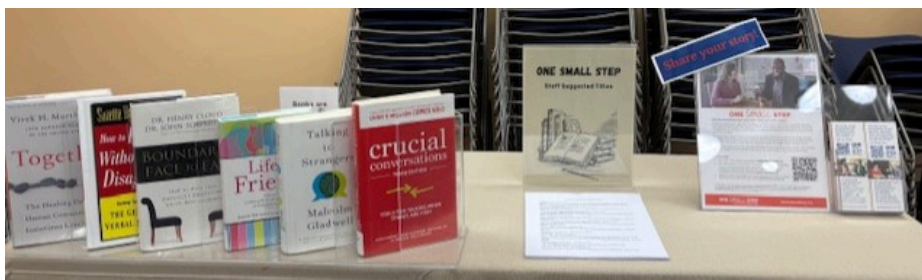
Following that kickoff, Sue hosted an Introduction to One Small Step Conversations on August 11 and an Exploring Assumptions discussion on August 25. Each brought together about fifteen participants and focused on small group discussion. Sue used structured prompts to help participants reflect on their own perspectives and listen to others around the table.

In October, Sue added a film screening of *Join or Die*, a documentary connected to Robert Putnam’s work on social connection. She facilitated conversation after the screening. Attendance was smaller, a reminder that timing and season can affect participation, but the program added another format to the Civics Lab series.

Throughout the series, Sue used consistent outreach methods. She promoted programs through library flyers, branch calendars, and the Fairfax County Library events page. The Braddock District Supervisor’s office included Civics Lab in its newsletter, and a community member writing a neighborhood Civics Association newsletter began highlighting the library’s civic programming. Sue also posted flyers at a local coffee shop and shared information through her own networks. Over time, she added reminder emails to registrants to help improve attendance.

Setting Clear Expectations for Civic Conversation

Sue did not assume that civic discussions would automatically feel constructive. She was aware that participants would bring strong opinions into the room. “It’s not knowing what to expect,” she said. “I was afraid that people would fight or yell or be awful.”



At the start of each program, Sue

explained how the conversation would work. She reminded participants that they could share as much or as little as they wished and that listening mattered as much as speaking. She emphasized respect without asking people to soften or change their views.



In practice, the tone that emerged surprised her. “Everyone has been lovely here at the library,” she said. She noticed that participants listened carefully and engaged thoughtfully, even when they disagreed. Feedback reflected that experience. “People are hungry for it,” Sue said. “People are very polite and respectful.” Several participants commented on the value of having time and structure for conversation. One response stayed with her: “I really appreciate this opportunity to have meaningful discussion.”

Sue also became more comfortable guiding discussion over time. She described learning how to stay focused on the role of facilitator when comments felt unexpected or

challenging. “As a host it’s different,” she said. “You still have to be in host mode.” Hosting Civics Lab helped her practice that role repeatedly in her own library setting.

The Listening Station

In November 2025, Sue added a telephone listening station to Civics Lab. Modeled after Amy’s Listening Station in Salt Lake City (see Case Studies page), the station included three phones that played short One Small Step audio clips. The station gave patrons a way to engage with the project on their own time, without attending a scheduled program.

The listening station drew a wide range of visitors. Adults stopped to listen, but so did families and children. “We had Girl Scouts in here,” Sue said.



“We had all sorts of children, all ages. Children are coming in to listen, although it’s meant for adults.” The phones became a point of curiosity inside the library and prompted informal conversation among visitors.

The station also brought unexpected visibility. Sue’s branch manager was contacted by county government, and a film crew visited to document the listening station for Fairfax County Channel 16.

What Emerged

Sue noticed that library leadership and colleagues began to associate her with civic programming. “The director knew that I’m the person to contact,” she said, after attending one of her discussions and seeing the work firsthand.

Participant feedback reinforced the role the library was playing. Comments highlighted the value of structured conversation and the opportunity to talk with people they might not otherwise meet. One participant wrote, “A library is about more than books, education, life skills. Hurrah!” For Sue, that reflected what she saw happening in the room. “Those people might not have otherwise talked to each other,” she said.

Project Links:

- [Civics Lab Feature in the King’s Park Gazette](#)
- [Al and Mani](#)
- [Tracy and Christopher](#)
- [Jessica and Katie](#)
- [Deborah and Larry](#)

This case study highlights programs adapted from One Small Step toolkits. Visit diy.takeonesmallstep.org to explore the tools.

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*One Small Step
Conversation:
A Civics Lab Event*

Monday, December 8 at 7 PM

Interested in helping bring your community together?
Kings Park Library is working with StoryCorps’ One Small Step to provide opportunities to engage constructively across differences to seek common ground.

Upcoming Civics Lab Events
Jan 12 at 7 PM: One Small Step Conversation
Feb 2 at 7 PM: One Small Step Conversation

For Adults. Registration required.
Register at <https://librarycalendar.fairfaxcounty.gov>

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