

'Evicted' spurs discussion on poverty, homelessness

Duke Behnke, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin 3:09 p.m. CT Feb. 7, 2017



(Photo: Danny Damiani/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

APPLETON - John Wiley buys copies of the book "Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City" in bundles of 65.

In the past year, Wiley has purchased more than 700 copies of Matthew Desmond's acclaimed bestseller. He hands them out for free to mayors, judges, ministers, school superintendents, health and safety officers, housing agencies and civic groups.

"The object is to start a community conversation on poverty and the effects of poverty," said Wiley, a community activist from Fox Crossing.

Wiley's mission will get a boost this month because the Appleton Public Library selected "Evicted" for its Books Build Community program. The library bought 100 copies for checkout, and it will sponsor discussions on the book at 5:30 p.m. on Feb. 16 and 23 at the library, 225 N. Oneida St.

"Evicted" also will be discussed at 10 a.m. Feb. 14 at the Kaukauna Public Library, 207 Thilmany Road.

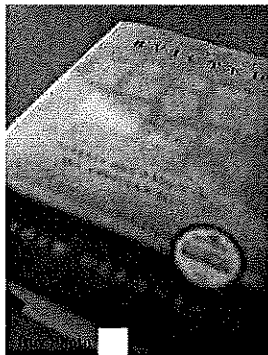
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Desmond's book takes readers into two of Milwaukee's poorest neighborhoods to tell the stories of eight families who struggle to pay their rent and are evicted. Desmond lived in the neighborhoods in 2008 and 2009.

Adriana McCleer, the Appleton library's community partnerships supervisor, said "Evicted" has created a buzz in the Fox Cities, not only among professionals working on poverty and housing issues, but also among nonprofessionals who have read the book and been moved by it.



"Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City" by Matthew Desmond was selected as one of the 10 best books of 2016 by the *The New York Times*. (Photo: Danny Damiani/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

"It's a nonfiction book, which means everything in it is true, but it reads like a novel," she said. "The stories are so richly written and described in such detail that you really feel like you're getting to know these people and understanding their experiences."

The book is that much more powerful being set in Milwaukee.

"Because this is in our back yard," McCleer said, "it makes you think about the connections to our own community and what people may be facing here in our neighborhoods."

Joe Mauthe, president of the Fox Cities Housing Coalition, said "Evicted" changes one's thought process.

"Most of us think that being evicted or losing your housing is a consequence of poverty," he said. "When you go through the book, you realize a lot of housing instability issues are really an ongoing cause of poverty, not just a consequence of it."

According to [Project RUSH \(http://www.fchc.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Summary-Booklet-Project-RUSH.pdf\)](http://www.fchc.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Summary-Booklet-Project-RUSH.pdf) (Research to Understand and Solve Homelessness), housing costs — rent or mortgage plus utilities — should require 30 percent or less of household income to be considered affordable.

"Once housing costs rise above this level, the household will need to make significant trade-offs with other necessities like food, health care and transportation," the study said.

Using the 30 percent standard, Project RUSH found a shortage of nearly 4,400 units of rental housing for lower income households in the Fox Cities.

Wiley is convinced that the Fox Cities can solve the complex problem of poverty, housing instability and homelessness. The key, he said, is that the solutions must be driven by residents.

"I think the community needs to figure out what they're offended by and what they can tolerate," he said. "It's us as a community that tolerates the

poverty, that tolerates the unrepaired houses, that tolerates the out-of-town landlords who don't keep their houses in good repair. It's a citizens' problem. It's not the problem of Washington. It's not really the problem of Madison. We need to take care of ourselves."

Project RUSH highlighted the connections between finding affordable housing and a host of other issues — education, employment, physical health, mental health, trauma, etc. Wiley said children who move from school to school because of rent issues are less likely to develop long-term friendships and are vulnerable to bullying, gang influence and drug and alcohol abuse.

Understanding of the complexity of the problem is the first step toward finding long-term solutions.

"The more awareness we have in the community," Mauthe said, "the more we can effectively engage and work on this issue together."

McCleer said the book discussions are designed to spark conversations and get people involved.

"The library works to connect people and create opportunities for dialogue, but we don't necessarily move a specific agenda forward," she said.

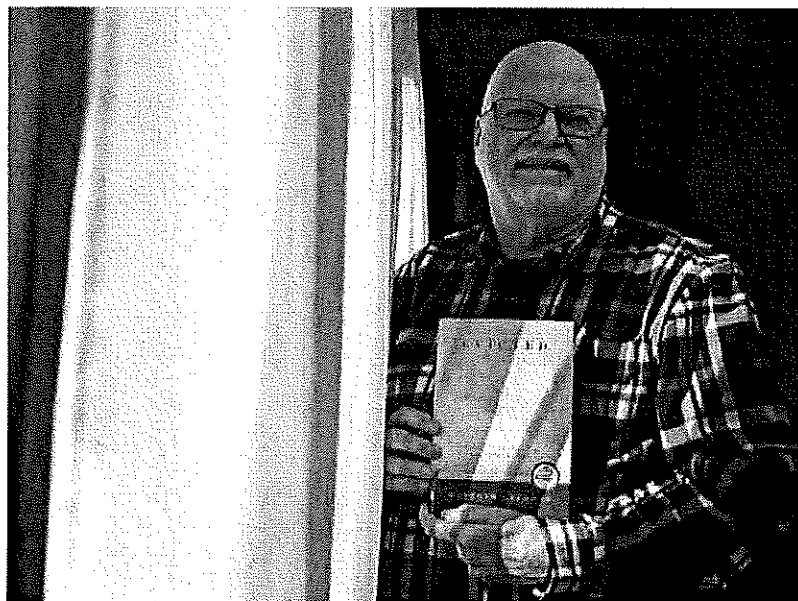
McCleer has been working with officials from Project RUSH, Goodwill NCW, Habitat for Humanity and East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission to create an online forum to continue the discussion.

There also is an effort underway to bring Desmond to the Fox Cities, though nothing has been confirmed.

"Evicted" is the third title selected for the Books Build Community program. The first selection was "I Didn't Know There Were Latinos in Wisconsin: Three Decades of Hispanic Writing" by Oscar Mireles. The second selection was "Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine and the Foundations of a Movement" by Angela Davis.

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Buy Photo



John Wiley holds a copy of "Evicted" by Matthew Desmond. Wiley is distributing copies of the book in an effort to spur conversation on poverty and the shortage of affordable housing in the Fox Cities. (Photo: Danny Damiani/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

"Evicted" book discussions

Daytime Book Discussion Group (<http://kaukaunalibrary.org/event/daytime-book-discussion-group>): 10 a.m. Feb. 14 at the Kaukauna Public Library, 207 Thilmany Road

Books Build Community (part one): (<http://www.apl.org/content/books-build-community-evicted>) 5:30 p.m. Feb. 16 at the Appleton Public Library, 225 N. Oneida St.

Books Build Community (part two): (<http://www.apl.org/content/books-build-community-evicted>) 5:30 p.m. Feb. 23 at the Appleton Public Library, 225 N. Oneida St.