



A Tapestry of Action: Athens Library's Path to Catalyzing Community-led Change

*An interview with Valerie Bell
Director, Athens-Clarke County Library*

by April Doner
April 29, 2022

As a member of the second cohort of the Institute of Museum and Library Services' (IMLS) Community Catalyst Initiative (CCI), the Athens-Clarke County Library drew upon a legacy of close collaboration as well as Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) methods to deepen their engagement with their communities. They have become an even more impactful supporter of community-led change efforts in Athens as well as a courageous convener of diverse collaboration around burning issues of social justice and antiracism.

From 2018 to 2022, the team's persistent spirit of adaptation and relationship-centeredness has helped them weather not only the inevitable twists and turns that tend to define any authentic community partnership efforts, but also a global pandemic and uprisings around racism and social justice. Their consistency and creativity has enabled them to catalyze fresh new local collective action around social justice, even in the face of major pushback among some community members against the idea of libraries actively raising the topic of racism on a local level.

The team has also produced a steady flow of abundant, game-changing resources and support to community-led initiatives that are applying innovative solutions. These initiatives include a peer leadership group for high school girls (developed by a high school girl) and an initiative using chess to cultivate leadership and critical thinking in youth.

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Below are excerpts from an interview between project leader and library system director Valerie Bell and April Doner, steward at the ABCD Institute and lead consultant of the ABCD Team, who worked with Community Catalyst grantees to support and strengthen their community-centered work. The interview was held near the conclusion of the Athens team’s grant activities on April 29, 2022.

Athens Library originally fashioned their grant focus around strengthening the work of both grassroots initiatives and more formal organizations from within their rich network of existing relationships in the community.

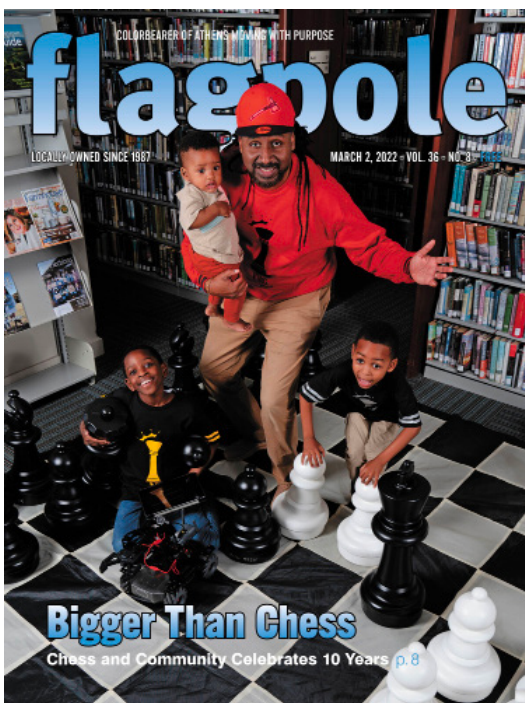
April Doner: *I know you started out [working] with a few community programs, and then there’s just been so many twists and turns along the way.*

Valerie Bell: That is exactly right. We started out with a few things that we were doing, connecting with our community. One was with [Athens Tutorial](#), buying them books for their after-school program.



**Valerie Bell, Director,
Athens-Clarke County
Library System**

And then we had a piece with Chess and Community, who’s downstairs right now. They’ve been working with us for years. And this was an opportunity for us to actually pay that service, so we also got them a lot of equipment. A lot of technology was purchased through this grant for [Chess and Community](#).



[Life](#) [the founder of Chess and Community] is amazing, and he cares and he’s done some amazing work with [the students]. It’s through IMLS and ABCD that they got some of this equipment—we got them 3D printers, we got them drones, we got them chess sets, we got them life-size chess sets. We got them Oculus VR so that the kids could experience this within Chess and Community, and they can also experience it at the library. He’s got his following, but Life always says something nice about the library.

We were working with Athens Alliance, but they wanted to end our contract early. We also had the bus trip [to the [Justice and Peace Museum and Memorial](#)] planned as an initial piece.

Our Social Worker in the Library program [[TILT – “Trauma-Informed Library Transformation”](#)] was going, and we were just really getting to the point where people could come in and actually meet with the social worker. There was a lot of background stuff that had to happen first. But we finally got to that point by December, November, or something like that. And by March we were closed.

The Athens team utilized the IMLS funding opportunity to flow resources to Chess and Community, a community-led program run by long-time local activist Lemuel “Life” LaRoche.

Source: www.Flagpole.com.

“Everything was going smoothly, and then, ‘Boom!’ Then the pandemic. And that threw everything.”



*The Trauma-Informed Library Transformation program at Athens-Clarke Libraries.
Source: Athens CCI Team*



The library also flowed IMLS grant funding and resources to the BEE Club, a peer leadership project that Akilah Blount (front right) developed as a high school student herself. The funds enabled Akilah to significantly solidify and expand her grassroots initiative. Source: Athens CCI Team

And there was the [BEE Club](#) too [a peer leadership group for high school girls, founded and led by Akilah Blount when she herself was in high school].

So that’s all stuff that was pre-pandemic. Everything was going smoothly... and then, “Boom!” Then the pandemic. And that threw everything.

As the COVID-19 pandemic and uprisings around social and racial justice erupted, Val’s team pivoted to take bold leadership as a convener of local collective action around the historic trauma of racism.

The pandemic hit, and then social justice went crazy as well, racial justice: George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, just one after the other after the other.

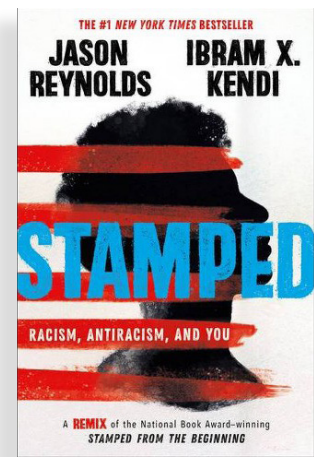
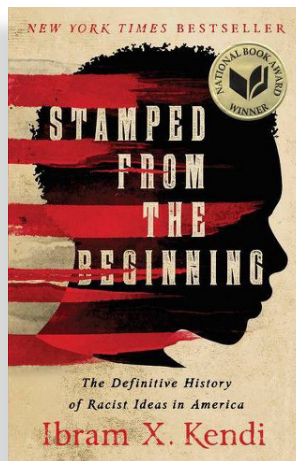
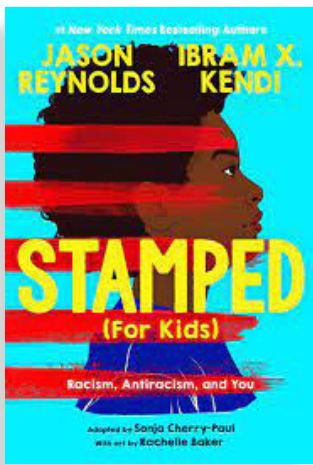
We wound up trying to do some work around that historical racism, that trauma that people have to deal with every day. We were trying to do an antiracist sort of thing. So using ABCD principles, I pulled together a coalition of community groups and leaders, community leaders, community groups. And we all came together and I said, “I have some money from an IMLS grant. What can we do for social justice and antiracism within our community?”

And you know, one of the hardest things that was like *pulling teeth*, trying to get people [to agree on things], and then the meetings were kind of like, you really have to be willing to go through that kind of difficult piece of the process—because I was going, “I’m not the leader. What do you all want to do? And then we can figure out how we’re going to do that.” And we did it. We managed it.

But there were a lot of people feeling like the library *should* be taking a role in this and saying, “Why weren’t we being leaders?” and that we couldn’t come up with anything. I was throwing out some ideas, but nothing that really stuck. And I couldn’t figure out why that was, if there was something that I wasn’t doing with these groups.

But finally, it just got to the point that a fraction, not the entire group, but a big fraction decided that we should do a One Book event for Athens. And I was like, “Alright, you know what? This is something that I know we can do! It’s in our wheelhouse. And let’s just work with *these* people.”

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Now, it was a large group, like 17 or 18 community groups and leaders that worked with us on *Stamped*, the young adult version, *Racism, Antiracism, and You* by Jason Reynolds. And that was really our flagship-type program. So we put that team together.

And we worked with an independent bookstore and people in the community—even the Chamber of Commerce participated—and other community groups and community leaders to host these discussion groups for the book *Stamped*.

Then we held several discussions, between six to eight activities getting people together intergenerationally to talk about the book and what we could do for antiracism throughout all of Athens, Clarke County. We had a really good turnout for all of the events and pretty positive feedback from everything.

That went off well, but what was really great about it is that the independent bookstore got all three authors of the three different versions of the book *Stamped*. There's the one by Ibram X. Kendi, the one by Jason Reynolds for elementary school kids and teenagers, and then Sonia Cherry-Paul wrote a book *Stamped* for elementary school kids. So it's adults, middle school, high school, middle high school, and elementary school.

So we purchased all of those books and just gave them away, hundreds and hundreds of this book so that people could read it and participate. That was actually the crowning jewel. And it wasn't planned. It just came up. And it was like, "We need to do something about this."

Val speaks to the composition of the group that they pulled together around antiracism and social justice.

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A: With the makeup of the group that you pulled together, would you say was it like a mixture of grassroots people and typical institutions? Was it more institutional people?

It was pretty much a mix. There were a lot of grassroots people, and there were organizations that are working with [the] grassroots. So actually one of them that we worked with, I wound up suggesting that she'd be on our user group for a new facility that we're building, because she's in charge of all the neighborhood leaders. So neighborhood leaders were represented. So the neighborhood leaders had something to say.

A: How did you get connected with [the neighborhood leaders]?

It was through their mother organization, Community Connections. We have a good relationship with Community Connections.

Val's motivation for working so hard to pull people together around racial justice ran even deeper than the clear and immediate need to respond to a global call for social justice.

One of the beautiful things that has come out of this—now nobody will ever say it was the library that started it—but the reason I wanted to do it is because I noticed in Athens, there's so many nonprofit organizations, and so many of them are duplicating efforts. So it was like, "Okay, let's get together and not duplicate. Let's do something together."

So now, actually, there's been four or five other things that have happened like that. Some of them, the library's been included. Others, we haven't been. But I think it started people realizing that all these nonprofits, if we work together, you can really make a dent. You can move the needle if you're working together, but working independently, we're really not moving the needle for change. I think that is one of the biggest and best takeaways that I have.

Right now I'm working with two different groups that are doing that, that have brought other people from around the area, and one of them is Athens government. Athens government, through their inclusion office, was very much involved with *Stamped*. Now they're involved and they're kind of leading the way for Juneteenth. It's called "19 Days of Juneteenth" and they pulled together nonprofits and people from around the county to do programs for Juneteenth.

Of all of the positive things that I think came out of it, that, for me, is one of the most positive.

I just saw that [one of the groups] is doing a community event that they're planning on doing annually. That's from a group that we invited to participate in ours, but they never did. And so they founded their own little group, and didn't ask us to play. But whatever! As long as the community is benefiting, it's good, right?

Before this, that didn't happen. I was involved in a lot of community stuff that was going on. And that was one of the things that I recognized to say, "Wow, there's all these groups doing similar things. Why don't we all get together and try and do something together?"

The team applied principles and practices she picked up from the coaching provided to CCI grantees in Asset-Based Community Development. One practice in particular proved especially useful: a classic organizing tool commonly known as Learning Conversations, which Val has named Walk-and-Talks. She also speaks to the challenges she faced bringing people together and gaining consensus.

A: You said that you used ABCD principles when pulling the group together. Do you mind mentioning what those were and how those took form?

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Well, at first I actually had the [Learning] Conversations, the Walk-and-Talks, with a number of [the individuals in] this group that I was pulling together, trying to explain that we had money, would be interested, and finding out what their groups were doing. And all of that was good.

You know, I still like doing the Walk-and-Talks. I think that's very valuable.

But this was just too big, I think. Maybe I invited too many people.

But that was one of the tools that I used, was the Walk-and-Talk, and then trying to bring people together.

I think I would have liked to have had a little more background or knowledge about how to bring these groups together and actually get them to talk and agree on something. I mean, there were ideas that I'd throw out there. And they were like, "No, we don't want to do that." "No, that's not good." And "Where's this?" And "Why aren't we doing this?"

And it's like, "Listen, we can do whatever you want. I'm not saying what we can or can't do. I just want us to come to some consensus and move forward."

And that [consensus] wound up happening, but it happened in a smaller group—that actually started getting bigger as we were rolling it out, and more people wanted to participate.

A: From my experience, that seems like the natural way that that goes. You don't know until people show who they are, and where they're at, and how well they work together. Then you winnow it down to who or who really wants to work together. So it sounds to me like you did a great job!

We did.

"I'm in the Deep South, you know, about to take students and adults on this bus trip, with all this Critical Race Theory going on, and we just did the Stamped events. So it's like, 'Oh, boy.' I'm keeping my fingers crossed that everything works out."

I made it as light and easy as it could be to come up with ideas, and it just didn't [happen]. So, we went with the one idea, the solid idea that I knew I could get through. Because we were meeting during the pandemic to talk about what it was that we were going to do. So you know, it was just a very stressful time for me, because I'm trying to deal with the library and everything.

Val and her team experienced severe pushback as they sought to spark collective and individual dialogue, learning, and action around racial justice.

A: I remember when you shared that even the word "social justice," people [in your group] were saying that was a problematic term.

Yep. It got so that I realized that, for my own mental health, honestly, I just couldn't listen to all of that negativity with COVID raging. I think we may have some fallout though, honestly, from some of the groups that don't think that the library should be [bringing up race].

You know, and where we are now as a country, we're like... oh, my goodness! I'm in Georgia. I'm in the Deep South, you know, about to take students and adults on this bus trip, with all this Critical Race Theory going on, and we just did the *Stamped* events. So it's like, "Oh, boy." I'm keeping my fingers crossed that everything works out.

“I see the outcome of that, probably the best thing for me—and we get no credit for it, and you know, I don’t want any credit—but I see a difference in the way this community is moving forward on big topics for change, and they’re moving forward with each other. And that’s an ABCD thing. It just is.”

On May 11, the team will conduct their long-awaited community trip to the Justice and Peace Museum and Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama.

We have one last thing planned. It was planned in 2020, and it’s a bus trip to the [Justice and Peace Museum and Memorial](#) [in Montgomery, Alabama].

We’re taking two luxury buses. One is for students. So we partnered with the Clarke County School District. And one of them is a busload of students and chaperones. So that’s 48 of them.

Through the many challenges she’s faced while “in the mix of it,” Val explains what she drew upon in order to stay sane and avoid getting discouraged.

I drew upon the fact that I thought that this was important work. And, you know, it’s *beside* me, you know. It’s like, take yourself out of this equation and try not to take things personally. That kind of work. Luckily, when I had one of the worst meetings, a friend of mine was here. So, they got to give me a hug afterwards. Some of them were pretty, you know, people can be mean.

So we’re doing all of this other stuff and I gotta tell you, I am a little scared because the community, like everybody else, it’s fractioned. Even ALA [the American Library Association] was fractioned on some of these issues.

Val reflects on her greatest Aha’s, or learnings, from her Community Catalyst journey.

A: *Is there anything that you’re stepping away with, like, “I feel like I really strengthened this muscle or got a new perspective”? Any other Aha’s?*

You know, the Aha’s I have is that if people are given the opportunity, then they will work together and work pretty well together. You know, I’m still in the Deep South, and I’m Black, and I’m from the north. And so there’s a lot that I had to and have to continually overcome. It’s just, that’s just how it is, you know?

But what I’ve learned is that ABCD works. I think it works. I think it’s important to bring people together like that. It’s how I plan to move forward when working with community groups.

Some of these other things that have me tired are things that are outside of... I guess they’re beyond anyone’s control. That’s just how the life is, you know, for a Black female northerner in Georgia. And so I’m looking at this like, “Oh my god, do I really want to do this bus trip?” It’s almost like I’m scared. I am scared. It’s like putting a target on my back. So we’ll see. Yeah, our fingers are crossed.

“And that’s what we got from it. And we showed how it could be. And now these other groups are taking it to a whole ‘nother level, where they’re actually working within the community and with community leaders and to make something bigger happen.”

Below, Val shares what stands out to her as the accomplishment within this grant about which she feels most proud and best exemplifies the impact of their work.

A: *If you had to tell one story that captured what you feel is the impact of this work, what story would it be?*

Well, we still haven't gone to the museum, so I'm hoping that's going to be a really good story.

But honestly, I would have to say, I was really, really, *really* proud of the work we did with *Stamped*. I am really proud of that. Because we got so many disparate groups together to publicize—I mean, *we were publicizing each other's events*. So we were getting nonprofits to publicize other nonprofits, and other community leaders' events, and even the, you know, even the government was promoting that through their inclusion office, the events, and University of Georgia was promoting the events.

And we managed to get all three authors on a Zoom call. I don't think it's happened since. But that was certainly the first time that all three *Stamped* authors were in one place at one time talking about antiracism and how to deal with it. So for me, that was one of the proudest moments. And I was really happy with it. I just hope that we haven't gone overboard with the social justice side of it for this community.

A: *What do you think it was about that particular story that strikes you so deeply?*

Well, it struck me because it was intergenerational.

Even outside of the structured events that we had, we had book discussion groups talking about it that weren't involved in the actual forming of this. So there were just a lot of people involved.

And I see the outcome of that, probably the best thing for me—and we get no credit for it, and you know, I don't want any credit—but I see a difference in the way this community is moving forward on big topics for change, and they're moving forward with each other. And that's an ABCD thing. It just is.

And that's what we got from it. And we showed how it could be. And now these other groups are taking it to a whole nother level, where they're actually working within the community and *with* community leaders and to make something bigger happen. Yeah.

So that's my biggest takeaway. I was very pleased with how we did *Stamped*.

From the highly visible success of the Stamped initiative that resulted from the Athens Library's efforts to convene and catalyze local action, new opportunities have emerged for the library to provide a platform and space for community-led and racial justice initiatives.

This includes a book-centered discussion inspired by the Stamped initiative on Linnentown, an African American neighborhood that was erased by University of Georgia. Val also reflects here on her newfound ability to foster action "from a distance," acting as a connector and a catalyst for others to drive their own efforts, despite her natural urge to "get in there and do it."

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A: The word “catalyst” just kept coming to me as you’re talking. Like, you drop something in, you help pull it together, you help steward it, and now it really has a life of its own.

It has a life of its own. And it’s not just with the ones that I’m looking at are social justice ones, but it’s also given the library a space for people to come and connect.

And from that, there’s plenty of authors that are independent, independently published that want to come and do things at the library. So I had one this morning come and say, “Oh, we want to do this.” And I’m like, “Okay, but you know, I’m not doing it, you know, right?”

A: That’s a perfect ABCD response!

I sent them off to the Friends [of the Library] group. If they want to do something like that, they can!

And I don’t know if you’ve heard about Linnentown. But that is a neighborhood that was erased when University of Georgia wanted to build. It was an African American middle-class neighborhood that they used eminent domain and just took people’s houses.

So one of the surviving people from Linnentown is doing a lot of work around that, and she wrote a book and we did her book launch. And I’m meeting with her and another team member because they want to do something like *Stamped*, and they want to do it with Linnentown.

And some parts of me are jealous, like, “Oh, I want to get in there and do it.” But it’s like, “No. Let it go, girl, let it go” [laughing].

A: I completely identify with that! I’m like, “Oh, I just want to be in there, in the mix.”

But then once you’re in there, it’s like, “Why did I stay?” [laughing].

A: Yeah! If only there was like a middle way, to be right in there and then also on the outside.

Well, they’re going to come and talk to me about what it was that we did. I have a meeting with them on Wednesday morning. And, you know, I think that’ll be great. And we did the thing with Linnentown.

Val looks ahead to continued work with groups and partners in the community.

So, we continue to do things with the community. That’s always been a draw for me. And that’s why I think ABCD was so important to what it was that I was trying to do, as the director of this organization. Before, *long before* we got involved in this, our slogan for the library has been “Engaging Communities, Exceeding Expectations.” So I’ve always been trying to get this library into the community.

And I always say, “We are the community, the community is us.” This is who we are.

Things are starting to break open now. We’re getting a great response from the school district, which is good, with other community groups. I’ve gotten calls, you know, to go to different things. And sometimes I show up to things, but sometimes it’s like, “You know what? That’s my day off!” [laughing].

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“There were so many things that we did with ABCD, and they were all really terrific. My biggest takeaway was Walk-and-Talk. Before you embark, walk and talk. Especially if you want to have community involvement and engagement.”

Here, Val explores what it was that shifted, bringing their engagement with and of the community to new levels during their CCI work.

A: Knowing that you’ve been doing this for so long, what would you say it was that helped bring things to another level, through this initiative, in how you all have been able to engage with the community and engage the community? If you could drill down to what were the ingredients or the forces that helped it be different, what would you say they were?

For the *Stamped* project, it was drilling with the community, and independent people who sometimes were just community leaders that said, “This is the activity that I want to do. And this

is how I’m going to plan it.” And that’s what I wanted, for them to plan the events.

And so it got to that point, eventually [laughs]. And it was a beautiful thing.

And I am so pleased with that particular event. Because it started during the pandemic and it sort of continued out from that, in teaching or being an example of how to move the needle, how to be that catalyst for change to move the needle in our community.

But as far as an ownership thing that the library did, because I let go of all of this, it wasn’t about the library owning anything. It was about how we can feed the community, with their needs and the things that *they* want to do. How can we go behind them and, in this case, *financially* support some of the things that they were trying to do as community people?

What advice would Val give to any library leader, staff person, or anyone looking to take their engagement to the next level with their community?

The first step—and I think librarians tend to know this, but we really have to own it—is to have those Walk-and-Talks *before* you plan. That’s the planning. *That’s the planning.* And going alongside the community groups with what it is that they’re trying to do, and how that aligns with the library.

A: And how would you recommend finding those groups to people who don’t really have those relationships?

The Walk-and-Talk. That is *rich*. It’s rich in making connections. You know one person, and then you’re talking to them and they’re like, “Oh, well, [you should talk to] so-and-so and so-and-so and so-and-so,” you know.

And that’s the main thing, I think my biggest takeaway. There were so many things that we did with ABCD, and they were all really terrific. My biggest takeaway was Walk-and-Talk. Before you embark, walk and talk. Especially if you want to have community involvement and engagement.

A: Did you start your Walk-and-Talks with people who were within the library system, or from the beginning did you try to start outside [the library]?

“You start with who you know, and they’ll lead you to people you don’t know.”

I started outside. It was a small group of us that got to go to different things. But, you know, I’ve tried to be involved in the community. So I had some ideas of where to start. So, you start with who you know, and they’ll lead you to people you *don’t* know. (Of course, the Walk-and-Talk sometimes was lunch and talk.)

Moving forward, Athens Library will continue nurturing their fruitful community partnerships and connections, along with the trauma-informed Social Worker in the Library program the IMLS funding helped them grow.

The other thing that came out of this is the Athens Alliance; they were working with teens. [The leader] has moved from working with teens to working with people experiencing homelessness and Tent City. So, from ABCD, I have that connection. I know who he is. And I see us working together again. I don’t see that ending.

Now, [the trauma-informed Social Worker in the Library program] is all big. We’re still doing that. We hired a social worker part time. We’re hoping to get her full time in the new fiscal year. And we’ll continue working with Chess and Community and we’ll continue working with the BEE Club.

With whatever money we have leftover, I’m going to see if [Life from Chess and Community] wants any more technology, to be perfectly honest. He puts it to really good work with his students, with the kids. And I think it’s raised what Chess and Community has been able to do in the community, through the partnership with the library and this grant.

The BEE Club is up and running. They’re kind of on their own now. And Akilah is doing great things with them. She’s got her own board. They’re looking for grants and things like that to help them with the work that they’re doing. I saw [the founder, Akilah] Saturday and she asked me to write a recommendation for the BEE Club so that she can get into the Athens school system next year. So, I said I would do that.

So, I’ll be spending IMLS money right up until the end. If there’s something else we can do, I’m gonna do it.

Prepared by the ABCD Evaluation Team with the Athens Library Community Catalyst Grantee Team for the IMLS Community Catalyst Initiative.

For more information, visit:

[One Book Athens webpage](#)

[Webinar: “Forms of Black Power in ‘Stamped’” \(UGA School of Social Work\)](#)

[Student journalist video story on Oct. 3, 2021 Walk and Talk](#)

[Athens News Matters Special: One Book Athens](#)

[ABCD Tool: Learning Conversations](#)

[IMLS Community Catalyst Initiative](#)

[The Asset-Based Community Development Institute](#)

