



## CHANGING LIVES ONE BOOK AT A TIME

The Kimberly Cahill Reading Program

By Erika Breitfeld

“I get it!” a high-school student blurted out across the classroom. “I understand why the defense attorney in my case was making me look like a liar. He was just doing his job, just like the defense attorney in our book!”

“Your case?” I asked.

“Yes,” explained the student. “*My* case.”

Now if you’re thinking that I had a duty as a law professor and former prosecutor to correct the student and tell her that a defense attorney’s job isn’t to make anyone look like a liar, you are right. I probably should have. But I didn’t. Instead, I saw a life-changing moment happening, and I went for it.

“Tell me what you mean,” I said.

The student explained that something bad had happened to her—something too bad for me to disclose in this article, but let's just say she was a victim of a crime—and she had to take the witness stand during the defendant's trial. And during cross-examination, she felt like the defense lawyer was personally attacking her and trying to make her look like a liar. But after reading the book, she explained that she could now see that the lawyer was just doing his job. She understood the process of the justice system for the first time: the roles of the attorneys, the purpose of each witness, and the importance of the jury. She understood how it all worked, and she wasn't so angry anymore.

Welcome to the Kimberly Cahill Reading Program.

The Macomb County Bar Foundation, through the Kimberly Cahill Memorial Fund, sponsors a book club that meets weekly at Cousino High School and Lincoln High School, both located in Warren. The club is named in honor of Kimberly Cahill, who passed away on January 21, 2008, from cancer. Kim was a distin-

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guished lawyer, a dedicated leader, and the 2006–2007 president of the State Bar of Michigan. Kim's sister, Dana Warnez, created the book club to honor her sister's memory by merging two of Kim's favorite things: reading and the law.

The club brings local Macomb County attorneys and high-school students together to discuss a book they all read over the span of eight weeks. Past selections include *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, and club members are currently reading *The Fifth Witness*. After the eight-week discussion, the students write essays addressing one of the book's themes. The top essayist is awarded a \$500 scholarship, and the second-place essayist is awarded a \$250 scholarship; all students receive a certificate of participation.



Left to right: Julie Fershtman, former SBM president; Erika Breitfeld, Thomas M. Cooley Law School professor; Joseph Pius, Van Dyke Schools superintendent; Dana Warnez, Macomb County Bar Association president; Alena Zachery-Ross, assistant superintendent of instruction; Jacob Walker, Lincoln High School book club winner; Charles Lesser, former principal, Lincoln High School; Sharon Hyde, assistant principal, Lincoln High School; and Lori Smith, family law attorney.

You should get involved, and here is why.

While today's Facebook- and texting-addicted teenagers don't appear to want an adult's time, let alone a lawyer's time, the truth is, they do. And when a “real-life” lawyer walks into a high school to talk about a book they are all reading, they listen. But more importantly, they start to talk. Soon, those Facebook- and texting-addicted teenagers are reflective, thought-provoking, and gosh darn it, pretty wise for their years. That's the short story. The long story is in the making: it's the high-school student who lets go of anger about a process that she never really understood and finds peace and explanation in a legal-thriller novel. It's changing lives one book at a time.

Please consider helping the Kimberly Cahill Reading Program continue to change lives. For more information, contact Dana Warnez at [danawarnez@gmail.com](mailto:danawarnez@gmail.com) or Erika Breitfeld at [breitfee@cooley.edu](mailto:breitfee@cooley.edu). ■



*Erika Breitfeld is an assistant professor of law in the Research and Writing Department at Thomas M. Cooley Law School. Previously, she was an assistant prosecutor in the Macomb County Prosecutor's Office, where she was assigned to the Criminal Sexual Conduct Unit. Erika became involved with the Kimberly Cahill Reading Program in 2011 and has captained the Lincoln High School book club since 2012.*