

Authors share inspiring story of unity and reconciliation

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NORTH EAST — Phoebe Kilby discovered that her family once owned slaves thanks to a Google search, which set her on a path to meeting Betty Kilby Baldwin — whose ancestors Kilby’s had once enslaved — and writing a book with her.

On Tuesday, the North East branch of the Cecil County Public Libraries hosted an event in which Kilby and Betty Kilby Baldwin, co-authors of the new book “Cousins,” discussed how they met and how that led them to writing a book together.

Kilby grew up in Baltimore mostly unaware of America’s history of racial tensions. During a long career as an urban and environmental planner, Kilby became increasingly interested in peace and justice.

A major factor in Kilby and Baldwin’s eventual meeting stemmed from Kilby discovering an organization called Coming To The Table.

In 2006, while Kilby was working at a small school in Virginia, a group of students who were calling themselves descendants of slaves or slaveholders. It was here that Kilby found out about Coming To The Table.

According to Kilby and Baldwin, Coming To The Table’s mission is “focused on racial reconciliation, honest truth telling, genuine forgiveness, and sincere actions to make amends for the harms of slavery and its legacies.”

After joining Coming To The Table, Kilby was inspired to check her family history.

“I looked at the US Census and picked out a great- great-grandfather. There it was, he owned in 1840. He owned two slaves,” Kilby said.

Then, out of the courage she gained from her new group, Kilby Googled her last name for the first time. The search led Kilby to Baldwin for the first time.

After finding Baldwin and reading “Wit, Will and Walls,” Baldwin’s book about her work to aid compliance with Brown v. Board of Education in her community, Kilby found out that both of their ancestors lived less than a mile away from each other. This, along with the inspiration she gained from reading Baldwin’s book, caused Kilby to send a letter to Baldwin.

“Hello cousin,” Baldwin wrote back.

The incorporation of God is very important in Kilby and Baldwin’s story.

“For me by all means. Ever since I was a youngster I depended heavily on God,” Baldwin said.

“She went through a lot of traumatic experiences, and without her strong Christian faith, she would not have been able to really get through that,” Kilby said.

Coming To The Table’s focus on racial reconciliation and coming together as a people has been reinforced and strengthened throughout Kilby and Baldwin’s lives.

According to both authors, the unity of Kilby, a white woman who has ancestors that enslaved Baldwin’s family, and Baldwin, a black woman who is a descendent of slaves that were owned by Kilby’s family, shows that racial reconciliation in our society is possible.

“I think when people look at our story, and they look at my journey alone, they almost have to say to themselves, if you can then we can,” Baldwin emphasized.