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Event Summary

On Tuesday, October 21, the University of Evansville was abuzz with activity, anticipating the arrival of Eliza Griswold, the author of the Honors First Year Seminar common read, *Circle of Hope*. At 6:00 P.M. in Shanklin Theater, Griswold gave a lecture regarding one of the major themes of her book, in response to the question, “What do we do when a community we are involved in starts to decline?” Should we exit the community, voice our dissent, or express loyalty by remaining quiet? This question has been floating among the honors students for the past several weeks, and is undoubtedly central to anyone who has read the heart-rending tale Griswold has to tell.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning author Eliza Griswold is an experienced and multi-talented journalist. Known for her intense immersive techniques, Griswold spent four years following the story and characters in her award-winning book, *Circle of Hope: A Reckoning With Love, Power and Justice in an American Church*. Griswold graduated from Princeton University in 1995, where she is now a professor and director of the Humanities Program in Journalism. A well-respected figure in modern poetry and journalism, she mainly writes about religion, human rights, and climate change, including several publications she’s written for *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, and *New York Times Magazine*. Her dedication to her craft helps shed light on the unheard stories of the world.

Griswold joined a small group of the honors freshmen and their FYS professors for lunch at Turoni’s Forget-Me-Not Inn before her lecture on Tuesday, and one could instantly perceive her gracious manner in interacting with the students. The intimate gathering was marked by profitable conversation, pleasant company, and of course, pizza. With the passion of a professor

and the curiosity of a journalist, Griswold discussed topics ranging from her own immersive journalistic techniques to the students' perspectives on social media. As Griswold later mentioned, "[The lunch] was fantastic. We had a lively exchange over many flavors of pizza. I got to meet with the honors students and I was really impressed with the questions they asked about the book, their ideas and thoughts about life on campus, what's important, and what effective dialogue looks like."

The Honors First Year Seminar students have been working all semester to prepare for Griswold's visit, first by diving deep into the common read, *Circle of Hope*. Late night study sessions found students once again exchanging thoughts about the latest chapters, and mealtimes saw the continuation of class discussions. In the weeks leading up to the lecture, the students collaborated to get the word out, both within the university and the Evansville community. Students reached out to high schools, churches, and local news, while holding down the fort on campus by tabling in the dining hall lobby, slapping flyers on anything that would stand still, infiltrating the newsletter and social media, and utilizing the time-honored form of advertisement, sidewalk chalk.

By the time 6:00 P.M. rolled around, Shanklin contained an audience consisting of honors freshmen, friends and fellow students, professors, and inquisitive community members. When Griswold queried who in the audience had read *Circle of Hope*, a sea of hands filled the air, resulting in a wide-eyed reaction from the author. The book had fulfilled its task as the "common read," drawing a large group together with a sense of commonality, to discuss just that: the nature of community.

Griswold began her lecture by asking the audience to reflect on how one should respond when a community they are involved in begins to decline and disappoint. She then described the

Circle of Hope, the counter-cultural Philadelphia church that lent its name to the book, and which aspired to “planting churches in the ruins and wreckage of empire” by following Jesus’ teachings literally, particularly, the Sermon on the Mount. *Circle of Hope*, told through the perspectives of its four pastors, follows the radical church as it faces the events of COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement, external crises which call them to assess the church’s internal issues, such as the inadvertent racism in their primarily white congregation, while simultaneously trying to navigate the disembodied online interactions of the pandemic. After an extended period of conflict without resolution, the church ultimately dissolves and the four pastors go their separate ways. Griswold elaborated that the unraveling of Circle of Hope was extremely painful to watch, and not the story she had hoped to tell when she first discovered the label-defying church.

The major themes of the book, including self-awareness, forgiveness, loyalty, and the inherent messiness of the human condition, prove insightful in the context of a college campus, as well as in society at large. In “Benediction,” the final chapter of *Circle of Hope*, Griswold writes, “Death and rebirth, death and rebirth: the cyclical nature goes nowhere, doomed to repeat itself.”¹ If a community as determined to be cohesive as Circle of Hope, sometimes described as the “amoeba of Christ,” was still torn by a struggle for power, suppressed internal issues, and poor conflict management, can any group escape the loop? However, Griswold’s interpretation of events allowed for a light at the end of the tunnel. The author does not claim to see the greater truth, but rather, asks the right questions and records the answers accurately; the story always has a meaning, even if that meaning is not evident at the time. Griswold says of her book, “I think hope comes in unexpected forms. Buckle up, because it’s a bumpy ride... As Chesterton says, Christianity is a religion with endless resurrection. The cycle of death and rebirth is beyond

¹ Griswold, Eliza. *Circle of Hope: A Reckoning with Love, Power, and Justice in an American Church*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024. Print.

human imagining, and I would say that's true of the lives and the communities within the book as well.”

The evening concluded with a book signing in the lobby, where Eliza engaged with the enthusiastic readers who attended, and her devotion to the curious minds which surrounded her was obvious in the post-event bustle. She bid the lingering students farewell with a hug and a kind of benediction, remarking that they each had bright futures ahead.

In a backstage moment before the lecture, when asked what she hoped readers would take away from *Circle of Hope*, Griswold offered this idea: “I think there's regret among some of the people involved—not regret that things went the way they did, because I think most people didn't feel it was sustainable. But I think there's regret in losing some of these relationships. Is it worth it to lose relationships at any cost?...Can you give grace to other people, that they are still evolving and changing and that you, too, may be evolving and changing still?”