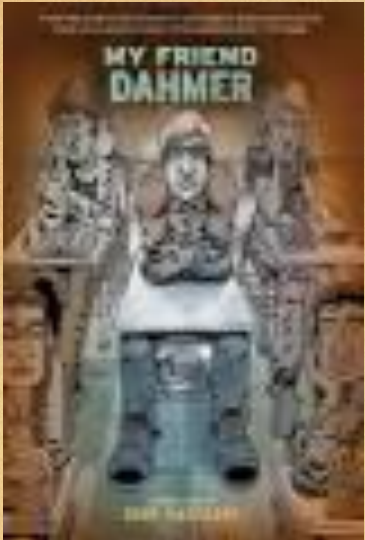


**Make Room for *My Friend Dahmer*.
Strategies for Teaching Young Adult Memoir
in Graphic Novel Form**



Dr. Kia Jane Richmond, Professor of English Education
Jenn Bell, English Education student
Northern Michigan University



My Friend Dahmer by Derf Backderf

- Published in 2012
- Graphic novel, nonfiction
- Memoir of Derf Backderf's experiences with Jeffrey Dahmer in high school

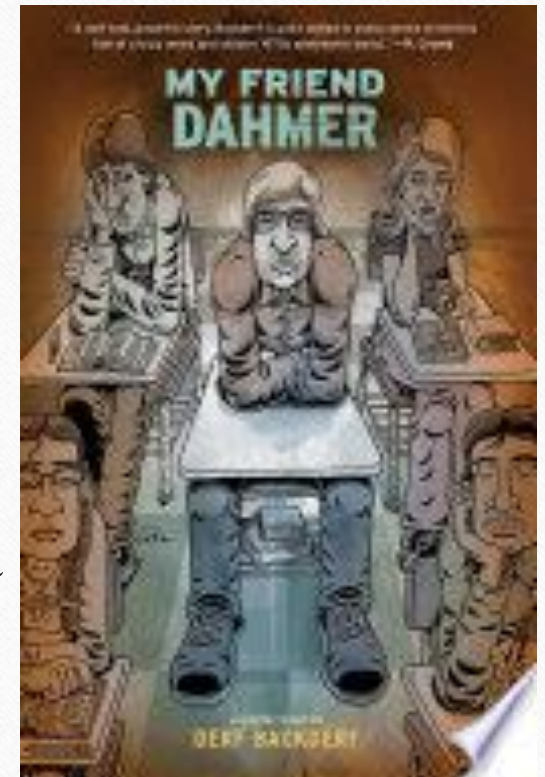
2013 ALA/YALSA Alex Award

2014 Revelation Award at Angoulême

2015 ALA/YALSA Alex Award (Excellence in Narrative Nonfiction)

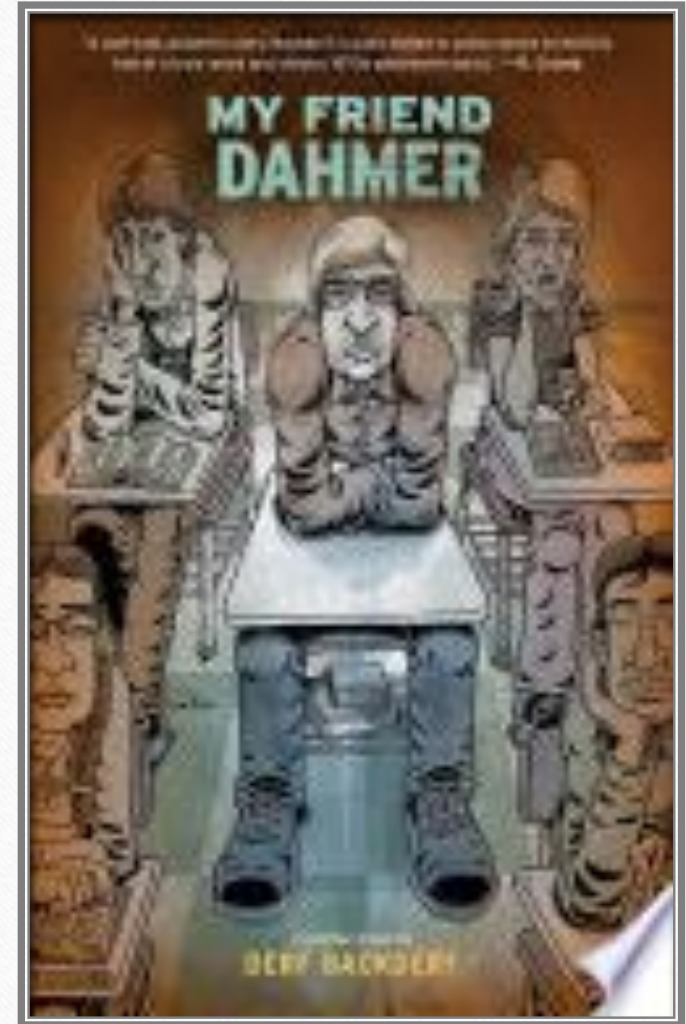
**A film adaptation starring Ross Lynch premiered in 2017 at the Tribeca film Festival.

(It is now available for purchase via Amazon, etc.)



Language and Stigma in *My Friend Dahmer*

Kia Jane Richmond



Kia's Research will appear in her forthcoming article in *the Alan Review* (fall 2018)

- Examining language used in *My Friend Dahmer* can help us understand Dahmer's behaviors, actions, emotions, and positioning within his community, as well as how stereotypes about mental illness might have mitigated Backderf's characterization of his "friend" Dahmer.
- I focus on how Backderf's language choices shape readers' understandings of Jeffrey Dahmer and whether the terms the author uses are stereotypical, authentic as defined by the *DSM-5*, a combination of these, or are something else.
- My goal is to build on the work of Rose et al. (2007), as well as Parsons (2016), Thaller (2015), and others, to bring readers' focus to **how language reflects and constructs reality**, even in a graphic novel where images are the emphasis.

Methodology

- Using a frame of critical content analysis fits with my intention to “transform conditions of inequity” (Short, 2017, p. 4).
- By scrutinizing how language is used by Backderf to describe Dahmer’s behaviors and emotions (and his interactions with peers, family, and others), I highlight how **the author’s positioning of Dahmer is consistent with bias and stereotyping** commonly associated with mental illness.
- My aim is to call attention to the ongoing problem of **stigmatization of those who have psychological disorders.**

Methodology

My analysis included

- examining the written language closely, creating a list of words used to describe Dahmer's behaviors, emotions, and actions, employing *in vivo* codes as Strauss (1987) recommends.
- attending especially to words used not only in the panels with images (e.g., speech bubbles and captions) but also in Backderf's commentary included in the "Preface" and "Notes."
- categorizing the codes as having negative connotations, positive connotations, or neutral connotations (informational purpose).
- classifying the terms in the negative category according to **three emergent themes**: *stereotypes of mental illness, alcohol use, and sexual urges (paraphilia/necrophilia)*.
- identifying several **subthemes**, including derogatory terms, Dahmer as outcast, Dahmer as non-human, Dahmer as obsessed with animal corpses.

Stereotypes in *My Friend Dahmer*

Backderf's use of pejorative terms in describing Dahmer's behaviors establishes his **stigmatizing stance** toward those with mental illness.

- When combined with his situating of Dahmer as someone who was considered an **outsider**, even by the marginal group of “band nerds and advanced-placement brains” in which Backderf maintained membership (p. 47), and as someone whose mother was known to have been sent to a “mental ward” (p. 64).
- Backderf's stereotyping of Dahmer is almost predictable if not for his positioning of Dahmer as “my friend” in the title of the book.

Derogatory Language

- References to Dahmer's behaviors (e.g., "struggling," [p. 10], "stalking strangers," [p. 162], "crazy spaz shtick," [p. 64], "cruel laugh," [p. 89]), labels meaning not of sound mind (e.g., "twisted," [p. 11], "depraved," [p. 37], "tortured," [p. 83], "crazy," [p. 64], "sick and twisted," [p. 81], "strange," [p. 47], "truly scary" [p. 132], movement (e.g., "plunged off the brink" and "descent", [p. 10]), or an alternate reality (e.g., "living hell," [p. 168], and "horror show" [p. 123]).
- Given that the author had access to authentic terminology in interview transcripts in which FBI agents and psychologists spoke with Dahmer (p. 200), **Backderf's choice to employ derogatory terms associated with stereotypes seems intentional.**

Dahmer as an OUTCAST/OTHER

- Backderf includes language throughout *My Friend Dahmer* that reproduces stereotypes and categorizes Dahmer as an *outcast* or *other*. Backderf includes the following phrases about Dahmer specifically:
 - “nobody,” (p. 30), “ignored,” (p. 84), “loneliest kid,” (p. 33), “shy geek,” (p. 51), “oddball,” (p. 10), “lost,” (p. 123), “alone,” (p. 165), “twisted wretch,” (p. 11), “creepy,” (p. 60), and several versions of “freak” (p. 26, 49, 51, 111, 198).
- Moreover, the author’s categorizing of individuals based on their mental illness status fits with what Parcesepe and Cabassa (2013) found in their research on **public stigma**:
 - “Children and adults endorsed stigmatizing beliefs of people with mental illness, especially the belief that such individuals are prone to violent behaviors, and stigmatizing actions, in the form of social distance” (p. 12).

Social Distancing

- Backderf didn't ask Dahmer to join him in joy-riding around town, despite the fact that Backderf "drove right past his house on the way to pick up some of the other guys" (p. 60). He states, "Some instinct warned me off. I was always wary of Dahmer" (p. 60).
- In making this statement, and others in which he **distances himself** from Jeffrey Dahmer, Backderf protects himself from being associated too closely with a person with mental illness.
- This action fits with Overton and Medina's (2008) explanation of "**avoidance**" as a form of social distancing which contributes to the maintenance of an "ideal identity" and allows the author and friends to exploit Dahmer as a member of a "subordinate" group (p. 145).

Dahmer as an Monster

- Twice in *My Friend Dahmer*, Backderf refers to Dahmer as **non-human**. In the “Preface,” Dahmer is called a “**monster**” (p. 11) because of his decision to murder. Later, in Part 3 (“The Dahmer Fan Club”), the author says Dahmer “didn’t register as a real person. He moved through the day unnoticed” (p. 119).
- Backderf’s descriptions reinforce the **stigma** historically associated with mental illness. Foucault (1988/1965) explains that until the 1800s, “**madmen remained monsters—that** is, etymologically, beings or things to be shown” (p. 70).
- Backderf tells readers that Dahmer was “more mascot than pal” in their group of friends (p. 56). As the **mascot** (of the “Dahmer Fan Club,” of which Backderf was self-appointed President, then Minister of Propaganda,” p. 205), Dahmer is a **caricature**.
- Backderf tells readers he frequently drew sketches of Dahmer as “a bag of groceries” or “a telephone pole” (p. 57). By labeling Dahmer a **monster**, as insane, and by associating him with inanimate objects (even under the pretense of a joke), Backderf succeeds in **stigmatizing Dahmer** as someone to be avoided.

Obsession with Animal Corpses

- In one set of panels in Part 1 (“The Strange Boy”), Backderf shows images of Dahmer stealing a preserved specimen of a fetal pig from school.
- In Part 1, Dahmer is carrying the **carcass** of a deceased cat, is confronted by some boys in the woods near his home. One says, “Hey! Why are you carrying around a ...EW! ... DEAD CAT!?!” (p. 20). After Dahmer shows them his collection of specimens of decomposing animals in his “hut,” explaining that he likes to “study ... the bones” (p. 23), the boys run away gagging before saying, “Gawd, Dahmer, you are such a **freak!**” (p. 26).
- Backderf, in choosing to highlight Dahmer’s obsession with corpses and the intention to kill and mutilate animals, **sets him up as a character with the capacity to murder human beings**. In fact, the author tells readers that letting the dog go without killing it was the “last time” that Dahmer would “show...mercy” (p. 106).

Other Findings: ALCOHOL USE DISORDER & PARAPHILIA/NECROPHILIA

- Backderf tells readers that Dahmer’s “solution” to having “constant thoughts of corpses and entrails [that] titillated him” and “filled him with revulsion and a growing sense of panic” was **alcohol** (p. 81).
- Dahmer used **alcohol** to make himself “numb” (p. 82). Backderf notes that other than one week of his junior year—when Dahmer “laid off the sauce” during a school trip to Washington, D. C. (p. 95)—Dahmer drank daily at school, sinking into an “**alcoholic fog**” (p. 98).
- Dahmer **drank increasingly** more alcohol, **hiding bottles at school** so that he could slip out to drink during “study hall, lunch period, or a class run by a teacher with a lax attendance policy” (p. 98).
- During their senior year, Backderf explains that Dahmer’s “need for **liquor** was now so great” that he carried a briefcase each day to have access to alcohol (p. 124).

Paraphilia/necrophilia

- Dahmer's **attraction to dead bodies** is included in several parts of Backderf's narrative. Readers are told that Dahmer had a "terrible secret": in his **fantasies**, "his lovers...were dead. Dead men. Corpses" (p. 54). Backderf asks readers what might have "spawned this perverse sexual hunger? What deep fetid part of his psyche gurgled up this miscreant desire, so powerfully voracious it immediately devoured him whole?" (p. 55).
- Dahmer was "obsessed" with a jogger who ran past his rural home each day; he had **fantasies** about lying next to the man's "unconscious body, about fondling him and having 'total control' over him" (p. 58).
- The language Backderf uses to describe Dahmer's tendencies and sexual attraction to corpses fits with the *DSM-5*'s definition of **necrophilia**.
- The author's use of terms such as "perverse," (p. 55), "depravity," (p. 11), and "bizarre desire" (p. 58) clearly denote the **stigma** generally associated with sexual attractions that are outside of the social norm.
- Note that to be a **paraphilic disorder**, the disorder must cause "marked distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning" (DSM-5, 2013, p. 686).

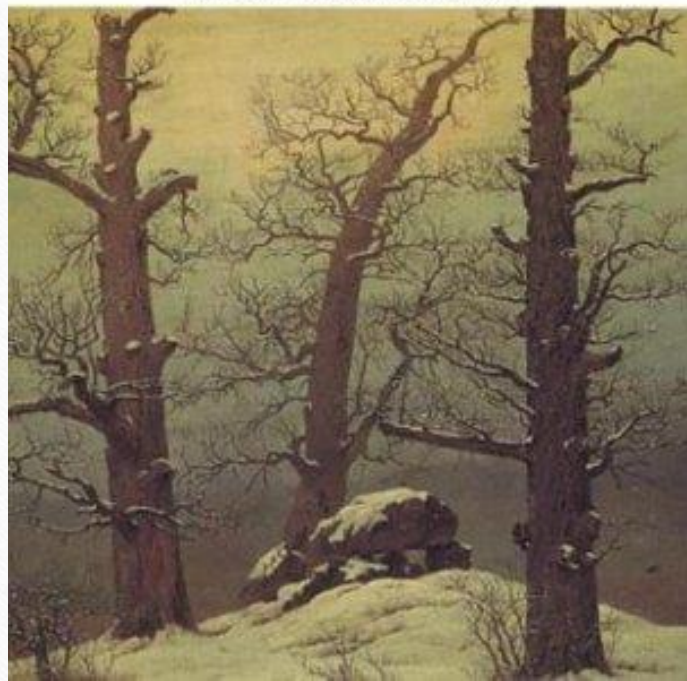
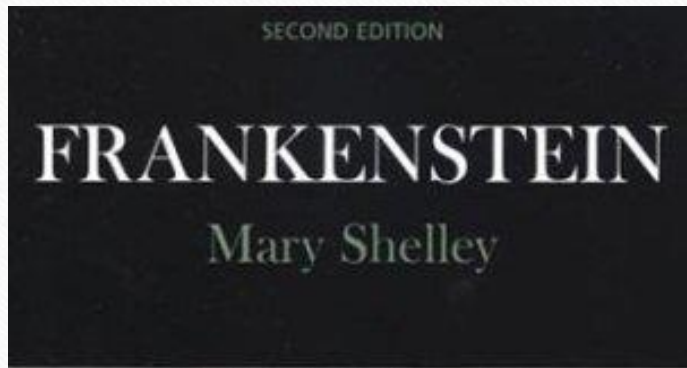
Conclusion

- In a systematic review of literature about public stigma toward mental illness in the US, Parcesepe and Cabassa (2013) found that stigmatizing beliefs about the dangerousness of individuals with mental illness have risen over time and that **beliefs of “shame, blame, incompetency, punishment, and criminality of people with mental illness are common.”**
- In this depiction of Jeffrey Dahmer, Backderf’s **assumptions about persons with mental illness are clearly tied to commonly held stereotypes**: these individuals are isolated and miserable, sedated and dependent on others, incapable of providing for their own basic needs.
- **The language used in *My Friend Dahmer* reflects these beliefs.** Even when he considers what might have happened to Dahmer if adults *had* intervened, Backderf says, “He probably would have spent the rest of his days doped up on antidepressants and living in his dad’s spare room. A sad, lonely life that Dahmer would have gladly accepted over the hellish future that awaited him” (p. 87).

Language Analysis Activity with an Excerpt from *My Friend Dahmer*

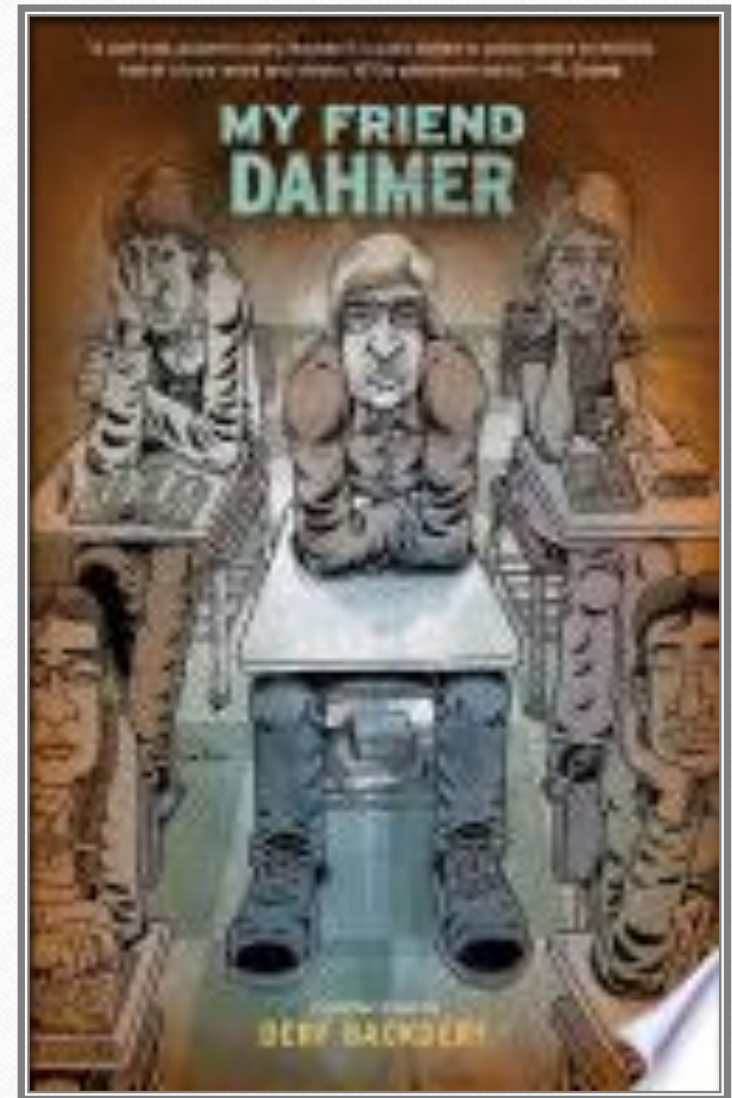
Close Reading of Passages – Mental Illness

- Read the passage, paying attention to how the characters are described (who speaks?)
 - Physical characteristics
 - Emotional characteristics
 - Social characteristics
- Language used (what do they say?)
 - What terms are used?
 - What do those terms mean? (denotation – definition; connotation – positive and negative associations with the words)
- Is the language formal or informal? Is jargon used?
- Consider the following aspects of language: pace, tone, structure (full sentences, fragments, run-ons); punctuation, spacing.
- Examine the assumptions underlying the language
- What positionings can you identify based on the words used? (social; political; cultural; personal)
- What beliefs can you identify based on the words used?
- What does doing this kind of analysis teach you about the characters, plot, and/or theme?



Connecting *My Friend Dahmer* and *Frankenstein*

Jenn Bell



Why pair a graphic novel with a canonical text?

- Strengthen students' visual literacy
- Cross-curriculum—explore art
 - In this case, also history with Jeffrey Dahmer's past
- Important topics that need to be discussed
 - Fiction v. non-fiction
- Help engage students
 - Get students interested in the classic novel
 - Easier to read for diverse learners, yet is still as complicated as a traditional novel
 - Interest artsy students & students who do not like to read a lot

My Friend Dahmer and Frankenstein

Common themes:

- Main characters “Monsters”
- Absent fathers
- Both alone and abandoned
- Feared by others
- Wanted to control urges
- Tried to appear normal (hide)
- Bullied
- Murder
- Treachery of science
- Gothic elements
 - Dark nature
 - Science

Other Ways to Teach *Frankenstein* and/or *My Friend Dahmer*



- Teach **in place** of Shelley's *Frankenstein*
- Teach **with** Shelley's *Frankenstein*
- Teach **with** one of the *Frankenstein* movies
- *My Friend Dahmer* **with** the movie *My Friend Dahmer*
- **With** other graphic memoirs

****There are many graphic versions of canonical texts**

Frankenstein Graphic Novel



Possible Activities for Your Students

- Create a one frame/panels/ or even a new cover to reflect a passage in *Frankenstein* and express their understanding of the importance of lightness, darkness, angle, etc. in art/graphics/*My Friend Dahmer*.
- Pick up from where Backderf ended his novel and research what happened in Dahmer's life from that point on.
- Write a letter from one character to another concerning an issue
 - Ex: the Monster to the blind man or Dahmer to Lloyd Figg
- Create a visual representation of the similarities between Frankenstein's Monster and Dahmer
 - Character analysis
 - Venn diagram
 - Collage of images, etc.

Now It's Your Turn!

- Choose a passage from *Frankenstein* to turn into a graphic frame/panels
 - Ideas:
 - Opening scene to the novel on the ship
 - Frankenstein's creation process
 - Monster coming alive
 - Monster and the blind man's interactions
- 5 minutes to draw
- 5 minutes to share

Excerpt

- How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips. --Chapter 5

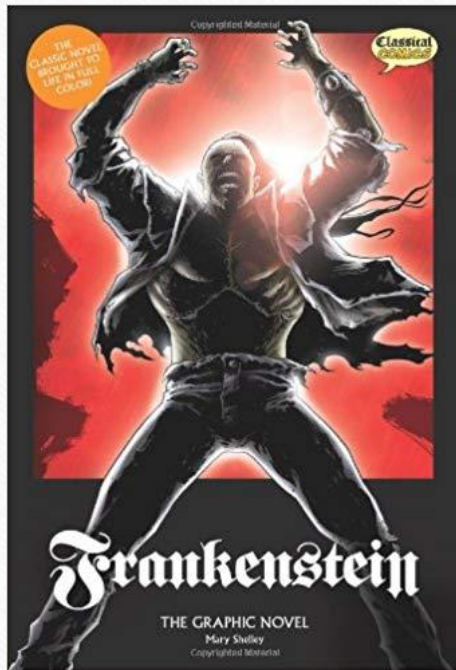
Other Graphic novel memoirs

- Bechdel, A. (2006). *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Fies, B. (2006). *Mom's Cancer*. New York: Abrams Image.
- Lewis, J., Aydin, A., & Powell, N. (2013). *March: Book One*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions.
- Satrapi, M. (2003). *Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Spiegelman, A. (1996). *The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. New York: Pantheon.

Professionals are Teaching *My Friend Dahmer* in schools across the country

- Mr. Pearce, Middletown High School, Middletown, Ohio
- LeAnn Smith, Charles City Middle School, Charles City, Iowa
- Jonatha Basye, Ralston High School) Ralston, Nebraska (librarian – uses in book club)
- Jeffrey Harr, Theodore Roosevelt High School, Kent, Ohio
- Dr. John Weaver, Williamsport Area High School, Williamsport, Pennsylvania
- Keira Dodd, North Olmsted High School in North Olmstead, Ohio.

Questions? Comments?



Thank you!
Kia Jane Richmond
krichmon@nmu.edu
Jenn Bell
jennbell@nmu.edu

