TAL Tales April 2012

Outside the book thinking

In many people’s minds, libraries are synonymous with books. Some Alberta libraries are working to change that stereotype by offering innovative lending initiatives that show there is more to libraries than books.

Although offering items that are outside the norm may stretch the boundaries of library acquisitions and cataloguing, they also present opportunities to build relationships with new library users and offer additional value to existing ones.

We continue our series showcasing innovative lending initiatives in libraries across the province by featuring three of the province’s human library programs.

Outside the book thinking: Human library

When it comes to lending items that are out of the ordinary, nothing tops lending out people.

The human library is a difficult concept to grasp at first, but once people understand it they see the potential.

At human library events people check out “human books” (volunteers who share their personal experiences). Instead of flipping or scrolling through the pages of a book, “readers” have the opportunity to hear the stories of the human books directly from them.

The goal of the human library is to challenge stereotypes, encourage understanding and promote tolerance by giving people opportunities to have conversations with those from different ethnic or religious backgrounds or with different life styles and life experiences.

The augustana human library “invites conversation on hard topics ... topics which we too often avoid in the guise of being polite and respecting someone’s privacy,” says Nancy Goebel, Head Librarian/Human Rights Advisor at the University of Alberta’s Augustana Campus. “The conversations are intimate, caring conversations where human books share their lived experiences of prejudice or discrimination or their stories of significant and unique life events.”

Augustana has hosted seven human library events since 2009 and their diverse catalogue includes a war vet, a Hutterite, a person living with AIDS, cancer survivors, trans-gendered, gay and lesbian individuals, people who have been adopted and parents who have experienced the death or disability of a child.

Calgary Public Library’s roster is also impressive with volunteers speaking about addictions, living without a car, culture shock, alternative healing, living with a range of disabilities and much more.

For Edmonton Public Library’s Ariel Zola, the selection of human books is important. “Finding stories that are provocative and edgy is the point of the human library. You want to encourage interactions that overcome preconceived notions.”

Nancy Goebel from Augustana says, “On the surface, the most provocative human books speak to issues of sexuality. People have a curiosity about those who might be different from them and this is an excellent way to understand the experience of others in that regard. However, there is not a single book that is not incredibly thought provoking and gives such incredible insight into people’s lives.”
Human library variations

The format of human library events varies. Some conversations take place one-on-one while others take place in a small group setting. Organizers of the augustana human library arrange for most of their conversations to take place in small groups because their undergraduate students are more comfortable with that.

Participants at the augustana human library.

For Edmonton Public Library’s 2010 and 2011 Human Library events readers signed up for one-on-one sessions with human books. Organizers found that the number of interactions was limited so next year they plan to schedule sessions with 20 readers per book. Ariel Zola says that “although it will reduce intimacy, a small group session will allow more people to interact with the book.”

Calgary Public Library’s Living Library has two additional elements. Besides hosting Living Library events with multiple books and readers, personal meetings between individual CPL customers and living books can be arranged at any library branch. Living books are also available to speak to groups outside of the library. Denise Justino of CPL explains, “As community interest in Living Library is gaining popularity, the demand for Living Books to attend events outside of the library has expanded. Living Library is an invaluable community resource.” CPL’s Living Books have spoken at a variety of events and venues including World Refugee Day, International Day for Persons with Disabilities, PovertyTALKS!, health centres and public schools.

Planning

There are many considerations when developing a human library program. One of the first steps is to recruit and vet volunteer books. EPL posted an open call for volunteers on their website while Augustana began by inviting people they knew had appropriate experiences to share.

The process can be time consuming but finding the right volunteers is crucial. Volunteer books should not only have great stories but also good communication skills so they can share their stories effectively. Providing an orientation for the books so they know what to expect is a good idea, says Ariel Zola of EPL.

Because the concept of the human library can be difficult to understand, marketing is essential. Denise Justino from CPL says, “Titles and descriptions of Living Books must be captivating and must explain the Living Books’ contents.”

Consider the process for checking out the books. Will readers be required to show their library card or some form of ID? Will all sessions be pre-booked in advance or will there be flexibility for walk-ins? Denise also suggests thinking about how to manage the flow of readers if you’re hosting a large event.

Benefits

Determining the success of human library initiatives can best be summed up by the comments of those who participate.

Reactions from readers typically highlight the courage of the speakers and the inspirational message. One participant of the most recent augustana human library commented, “I am humbled by the strength and generosity of the speakers who have agreed to cut and bleed for my education, and then sit there raw for our questions. Humbled and grateful.” Another said, “Awesome - this book is a reminder that we all can have the courage to be fully who we are.”
Volunteer books also report very positive experiences by sharing their stories. A CPL volunteer commented that, “Although I have volunteered for many organizations in many programs, being a Living Book has been the most satisfying. The Living Library program is intensely personal yet universal in scope. We all have a book in us.”

Human libraries promote learning and understanding. They build connections between people and enrich lives. They inspire and give people hope. This is the best possible result of "outside the book" thinking.