Living Library comes to Augustana campus

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Jonathan Taves

They may not be found using the Dewey Decimal System, but the "books" that University of Alberta students on the Augustana campus can check out from now until 27 March are more engaging than any others they're likely to find.

The campus is currently playing host to a "Living Library," where patrons can book real people who share their themed life experiences through conversation.

“Our hope is to encourage people to be not just tolerant, but have very accepting views of people they perceive as different, and to accept the experiences of other people as valid and important,” said Nancy Goebel, the head librarian and human rights adviser at Augustana, who took the lead on organizing the event.

“It gives an opportunity for people to step out of their knowledge and comfort zone and hear the life experiences of other people in an environment we believe to be respectful and caring,” she said.

The idea stemmed from the Living Library program that began in Denmark in the year 2000, and has since made its way to many locations around the globe, including a number of European countries and more recently Canada and the US.

“[Augustana’s organizers] are doing this quite a bit differently than [the original organizers] would have. Their model originates more at music folk festivals,” Goebel explained.

"Instead of reserving a single book [...] we're inviting whoever to show up when the book is available because we want as many people to be part of the experience as possible."

For example, Dr Kim Fordham, an associate professor of German at Augustana Faculty, will share her story, “Healing from Sexual Abuse as a Child.”

“I do a lot of presentations on sexual abuse issues. Therefore, I've had lots to do with students who have similar histories,” she said.

All of the “books” available for rental are part of the Augustana community.

“When we thought about how we could approach this, we thought we had a lot of people on this campus with interesting stories to share,” Goebel noted.
According to some of the “books,” the personal aspect of the exchange goes beyond what traditional texts can accomplish.

“[Living Library is] probably the most effective format. When you read a printed book or watch a TV show, there’s still a certain detachment to it. It’s very different when you get the story from a live person,” said Feisal Kirumira, a sessional instructor at Augustana who can be “checked out” as a book titled “Demystifying racism in Uganda, Germany, and Canada.”

Despite the serious subject matter, Kirumira feels the difficulty of sharing the stories will be offset by the rewards.

“Ever since I left my home country [Uganda], I’ve always been confronted with racism. My experience was that not just of a victim, but we are all perpetrators of racism whenever we start to think in racial categories,” he said.

“If you keep a good story to yourself, it’s like never writing the book, or writing it, but keeping the manuscript in your drawer and never telling anyone. You’ve got to get it out.”