

LISMORE'S LIVING LIBRARY

Don't judge a book by its cover

Australia's first Living Library was launched at Lismore City Library, on the 3rd of November 2006. Sabina Baltruweit, a member of the Lismore community, presented the idea of starting a Living Library to Lismore City Council's Community Development Officer, Shauna McIntyre and to the Lismore Area Librarian, Lucy Kinsley.

The project was developed over a period of more than 12 months by a dedicated team of volunteers, community organisations and both Lismore City Council and Lismore City Library. Originally designed as a one-off, the Living Library has since evolved into a monthly event due to the interest shown by the Lismore community. Sabina Baltruweit was nominated this year for an Australia Day Award and also the Lismore Electorate Woman of the Year Award for her efforts.

IN THE BEGINNING...

The idea of a Living Library was developed in the year 2000 by the Danish youth Non-Government Organisation "Stop the Violence." The activity was offered to visitors at Denmark's largest annual music event, the Roskilde Music Festival. This festival runs over a 4-day period and features up to 150 bands from all over the world. With so many people from varying backgrounds together, organisers wanted to ensure a harmonious environment and prevent outbreaks of violence. Concert-goers were invited to be Books and sit down with a Reader who could

ask them about aspects of their life – where they come from, how they see society etc. “Stop the Violence” was a peer-led youth initiative aimed at educating young people to be active in preventing violence.

The success of the Living Library showed potential beyond all expectations. European libraries soon established that the activity could transcend borders and ages to be adapted to different societies and began to set up their own programs. Living Dictionaries were also developed to accompany Books and work as interpreters between the Book and the Reader.

WHAT IS A LIVING LIBRARY?

What IS a Living Library? You may have watched “Enough Rope” with Andrew Denton on ABC TV late last year when a Danish Living Library Book and Reader were featured. The Living Library works exactly like a normal library where readers come to borrow a Book, return the Book to the library and then borrow another Book if they choose. There is only one difference...the Books in the Living Library are human beings and the Books and Readers enter into a personal dialogue.

The Living Library idea itself is a simple one: Meet your own prejudice! Instead of *talking* about it, simply *meet* it. Books in the Living Library are people from groups often confronted with prejudices and stereotypes and who are at times victims of discrimination or social exclusion. The Reader can be anybody who is ready to talk to and learn about the Book. Both Book and Reader go beyond their own familiar circles of reference yet feel safe in a comfortable and non-threatening library environment.

This photo was taken on the 3rd of November 2006 at our first Living Library session. Books wear a Book jacket during the session to clearly show they are available for loan to Readers.

STEP-BY-STEP

Hosting a Living Library requires great attention to detail. Each Living Library will be unique as each will have its own issues to deal with and community expectations to be met.

- There needs to be sufficient space for sessions;
- there must be time and resources available for staff to prepare each session;
- local community needs and involvement must be established;
- the number of Books available for loan and time limits have to be decided;
- an ongoing budget needs to be at hand;
- there must be full commitment from library staff in ensuring mutual respect between all people involved in the Living Library and
- monthly follow-up meetings are essential to discuss progress and successes or failures of the project and to plan future key dates or make any changes to sessions.

BECOMING A BOOK

A Living Library session takes place on the ground floor of Lismore City Library and operates with approximately 15 Books available for loan. The catalogue currently contains over 60 Books who are all volunteers.

Some Books are Multi-Books as they represent more than one group, for example, one Book is a Gay man and he is also an Adoptee. He offers his time depending on which group the Lismore Area Librarian chooses to offer for loan at each particular session.

There have been occasions where Books from our catalogue have gone out into the community. A 20 year-old Book who is a member of the Straight Edge community visited Evans River K12 School in an outreach session to talk to young teenagers.

I have photocopied some articles from local newspapers which you are welcome to take from the table if you wish to read more about some of the Books that have been on loan in our Living Library sessions. One Book is featured each month in an article in the Northern Rivers Echo newspaper.

(Photocopies "Walking with a straight edge" Bob; "Swedish slant" Sussi; Rodney Kendall "Adoptee" NR Echo)

WHAT MAKES A GOOD BOOK?

A Book in the Living Library catalogue needs to be:

- Reliable
- Willing to answer questions from readers honestly
- Able to respond appropriately to stereotypes and prejudices
- Willing to help people learn
- Clear about their lifestyle but not preach about it
- Willing to talk with a range of different readers
- Reflective and mature in attitude
- A good listener and not too talkative
- Confident to talk with people they don't know

BORROWING BOOKS

Books are given a Book Pack containing a Registration Form and other necessary paperwork as well as an orientation session before participating in a Living Library day. The Library is open on the first Friday of the month from 11am to 2pm. Loan periods are for 30 minutes on a 1 to 1 basis. Books nominate the monthly Friday that suits them to be available for loan and are then added to a list. From this list the Lismore Area Librarian selects a total of 15 Books to be on offer for the next Living Library session and arranges for the chosen Books to come in on that day.

Just like joining a normal library, Readers must fill out a Reader Registration Form. The librarian introduces Reader and Book who then go to one of the reading booths to have their conversation. Reader and Book may also make themselves a cup of tea or coffee to take with them to the booth.

When on loan, the Book pocket on the display stand will have an ON LOAN sign inside it. Readers may either choose to wait 30 minutes for the Book to become available or borrow another Book.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD READER?

A Reader in the Living Library is asked to be themselves and ask questions that are of interest to them about the Book's life. The Reader should be:

Genuine and sincere

Confident to ask questions of people they don't know. This may include questions about the Book's experiences of living in the

Northern Rivers area, whether they have been the victim of prejudice or perhaps how they meet life's challenges.

Readers also need to be:

Able to listen appropriately to experiences that differ from their own without being judgemental

Willing to learn about different lifestyles

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Willing to answer questions about their own lifestyle

Open to take a risk to talk with someone they don't know

Reflective and mature in attitude

A good listener and not too talkative

SUCCESS

The Living Library concept has been a huge success in Lismore City Library and has received local and national media coverage. ABC radio, JTV, The Sydney Morning Herald and other interstate media sources have featured Lismore's Living Library on radio, on television, online and in newspapers.

Many libraries from around Australia have contacted the Lismore Area Librarian to find out how to start their own Living Library.

EVALUATION

To assess how successful the Living Library has been, an evaluation form was provided to Books and Readers. 78% of Books and 60% of Readers completed the surveys and their responses were very positive. The surveys revealed that the sessions helped challenge and breakdown assumptions and stereotypes. It was overwhelmingly clear both parties felt that,

through talking, they had gained an awareness of their mutual responsibility to social cohesion and community belonging.

The Living Library Committee intends to have Southern Cross University also conduct an independent evaluation of the project during the next 12 months.

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**RICHMOND-TWEED REGIONAL LIBRARY and
LISMORE CITY COUNCIL WEBSITES**

Lismore City Library is a branch of Richmond-Tweed Regional Library. This is our website which you may like to visit at www.rtrl.nsw.gov.au.

This is the Lismore City Council website at www.lismore.nsw.gov.au.

Thank you.