

LISMORE'S LIVING LIBRARY

Organisations Involved & Contact Details

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Aims & Target Group

Aim: The Living Library is a community-based initiative that aims to bring people together through one-to-one conversation and interaction and thereby encourage understanding, challenge negative stereotypes, and reduce prejudice. This way, it further aims to use the simple yet powerful strategy of Living Library to build social cohesion.

Target Group: The visitors to Lismore's Living Library are ordinary community members from all walks of life and different ethnic and cultural backgrounds who have the opportunity to "borrow" a "living book" for an informal, half-hour conversation.

Project Description & Components

Lismore's The Living Library is like a normal library, however, the books in the living library are people representing groups frequently confronted with prejudices and stereotypes and who are often victims of discrimination or social exclusion.

Living Library is based on the successful European model, which began in Denmark in 2000 and has spread to libraries and festivals across Europe. In Australia in New South Wales, it was initiated by a local community member, Sabina Baltruweit, and supported by Lismore City Council and Lismore City Library. State MP Thomas George agreed to be the Living Library's patron.

The Library creates a safe environment where people who would not normally meet, can engage in constructive dialogue. When diverse members of the community are brought together in this way, understanding is increased and social cohesion is built.

Process

An organising committee was formed in March 2006 with the aim of recruiting living books, promoting the project, designing the logo and planning the launch. After 6 months of planning Australia's first living library was ready to be launched.

On the day of the launch, over thirty living books were available in the catalogue. They represented a range of groups in Lismore including: multi-faith communities (Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Jewish), people with disability (intellectual, physical, mental health, visual impairment), the multicultural community (Italian, German, Sudanese refugees, Filipino),





Aboriginal people (Bundjalung Elder, community member, young people), young people, older people, gay men and lesbians, a farmer, an environmentalist, police officers, and a man living with HIV/AIDS.

A diverse range of readers attended including school students, general community members and high profile community leaders. The community leaders were invited as special guests and included Councillors, the Police Superintendent, Regional Directors of Government Departments, the Vice-Chancellor of Southern Cross University, and editors of local newspapers.

Lismore's Living Library was officially launched by Thomas George MP, with special guest, Marta Aquino, Northern Region Commissioner from the NSW Community Relation Commission. Around 120 people were present and the diverse range of community members in attendance made this a unique event in Lismore's cultural history. The level of excited conversation throughout the day indicated that something significant was occurring.

Outcomes

To assess the effectiveness of the Living Library an evaluation form was provided to living books and readers. 48 readers (60%) and 25 books (78%) completed the surveys for this evaluation. Responses indicated that the Living Library achieved its aims of challenging negative stereotypes and building social cohesion through one-to-one conversation.

One hundred and seventy people visited the Living Library launch between opening hours of 10am and 3pm. 80 people borrowed books and around 120 borrowings occurred.

Claims

Living books' survey responses indicated that they often challenged readers' assumptions. One living book remarked "some people come with preconceived ideas and [are] surprised at how 'normal' we are". Another found it "challenging that people's assumptions do not match the facts!!" With this in mind the Library appears to have provided a safe space for genuine conversation with one reader remarking, "I felt grateful for the gift [the book] gave me - their mind, their life, their honesty". Another said, "Speak[ing] to people openly and honestly enriches my life and draws me closer to them as human beings".

98% of readers stated that they learnt something by borrowing a book and there is evidence that negative stereotypes were altered. For example, in a candid comment a reader said that "[I] learned that not all Aboriginal people get drunk and violent". Another stated, "Many of my assumptions were wrong"; and yet another, "I learnt mostly how different, yet the same, gays are to the heterosexual community". Such experiences build social cohesion in a personal way. As one reader said, "There are many different types of people in Lismore that are very friendly".

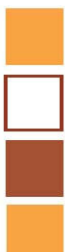
A key factor in the success of the Living Library is that it provides the unique opportunity for conversations to occur in a safe environment for books ("Everyone was friendly and open - good dialogue") and readers ("I felt very comfortable in this environment"). This feedback, along with the value of the experience for readers and books, are considered essential factors for ensuring Lismore's Living Library achieves its aim in the long term.

Service Continuity

Following the success of the launch, Lismore's Living Library will be open each month beginning December 2006. The high level of support from living books and readers, together with the success of the launch and the evidence outlined above has encouraged Lismore City Library to take on the coordination role for Lismore's Living Library in 2007.

Service Replicability

Word of the successful launch has spread across Australia and to date has included:





- two members of the Living Library being invited to speak at a Victorian arts forum on diversity in Dec 2006 and an invitation by Brisbane City Council to visit in Feb 07
- significant media interest -- reporting of the launch on NBN News and in Lismore's newspapers, interviews on ABC radio and TV, article in Sydney Morning Herald
- over 20 enquiries received from interested communities and Councils throughout Australia (NSW, VIC, SA, WA, Qld) and requests for the Living Library to attend local festivals, schools & events.

Challenges & Obstacles

Funding

A small investment of less than \$3000 was made by Lismore City Council for development of resources and program costs.

Images



**Patron
Thomas
George,
State MP
for
Lismore,
launching
Australia's
first Living
Library, 3
November
2006**

**Living Book being borrowed by
reader, Angela Pollard**

