

EPL hosts *LIVING* Library

As part of Canadian Multiculturalism Day on Sunday, June 27, the Edmonton Public Library hosted its very first *LIVING* Library and what a great day it was! On a wonderfully sunny day, EPL hosted the inaugural event in Centennial Plaza (behind Stanley A. Milner Library) inside the *LIVING* Library tent.

EPL was fortunate enough to have 12 “living books” participate in the event – real people with real stories to tell about the problems and prejudices they have faced because of their race, gender, sexual orientation, job, lifestyle or cultural background.

Some of the “living books” included a survivor of the Rwandan Tutsi Genocide, a City of Edmonton police officer from India who freed herself from an abusive marriage, a woman from China who lived through the Tiananmen Square Massacre and the daughter of a residential school survivor. Their experiences and stories were told with passion, much to the delight and appreciation of their “readers”. In total, the 11 “living books” were checked out by 76 “readers” a half-hour at a time, in a short four hour lending period.

Some of the comments that were shared with us about the event:

- *“I was honoured to hear the stories of four “books.” I hope you will do this again in the future. We all have interesting stories and this is a wonderful way to share them.”*
- *“Wow! Living Library was amazing! I hope you do this again & again...I felt honoured to have the opportunity to talk with these speakers about their lives and learn about their life experiences.”*
- *“Fantastic, Super, Wonderful, Fabulous, Stupendous, etc...”*
- *“I tried to attend many of them and was here all day!”*



EPL LIVING Library seen from the other side

*Tatiana Usova, Manager
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On June 27, 2010, Canadian Multiculturalism Day, Edmonton Public Library (EPL) hosted their first LIVING Library event in the center of Edmonton. The LIVING library is a fresh and innovative way of engaging readers. It works like a normal library with one exception – the books are real people.

The concept was developed in 2000 by the Danish youth NGO “Stop the Violence”. Since then, it has been implemented by numerous organizations, including libraries across Europe and in North America. LIVING books are typically people who face stereotyping and prejudices, people who agree to talk about the problems they are facing related to their ethnic and cultural background, gender, sexual orientation, job or lifestyle. Visitors check out “books” in order to engage them in conversation. These very personal interactions help readers to see their biased perceptions and confront them.

The EPL event had 12 LIVING Books available for loan. Not all of the books were people experiencing prejudice and discrimination. There were some participants with fascinating life experiences and an interesting story to tell. Canada greets and hosts people with broad cultural differences from around the world and the event illustrated this very well. Among the recruited volunteers there was a survivor of the Rwandan Tutsi Genocide, a woman from India who had survived an abusive marriage and then became a police officer, a Malaysian former gang member, a refugee from Ghana, a Muslim mother of triplets, a Chinese writer in exile, an aboriginal gay man, and a woman from the Canadian Forces. It was quite a blend of different backgrounds and exceptional stories. I was one of them and my book cover said “Perestroika is a Style of Life”. As a native of Belarus, I talked about my life in the former USSR before, during and after Perestroika, as well as about my experience immigrating to Canada, and settling in a new homeland.

All volunteers prepared their own title and a descriptive blurb. The themes proposed were appealing, so almost all of the books were reserved several days in advance. Loans were for 30 minutes, and each book could be borrowed 4 times. On June 27th EPL’s LIVING Library team set up a tent in Centennial Plaza (behind Stanley A. Milner Library) with tables and chairs that allowed for comfortable conversations. The organization of the event was impeccable. Large dry-mounted black and white posters of each book were arranged outside the tent to pique the interest of passers-by. Free snacks and beverages were offered to books and readers on a special table inside. This tent became the place where many informal conversations occurred, including dynamic exchanges between the books themselves.

Seventy-six people attended the event. There was a great range of people who borrowed books. Some of the LIVING Books also chose to be readers. I had borrowers of different ages and backgrounds: two youths with a mentor, a fellow-librarian, two retired friends and an immigrant from Congo. All of the conversations took on a different tone, depending on the readers’ interests and background knowledge of the subject. For example, for the youths, the conversation was mostly a presentation about another country, its culture and traditions. An interaction with an immigrant woman turned out to be an exchange of memories on moving to Canada, on the pains and joys of adjusting to a new life. I brought some pictures and some traditional art objects. These added a visual dimension to the conversations, and led to more questions from my readers.

All the readers I observed were thrilled to talk to their “books,” to ask questions and to uncover fascinating life stories. From the books I could see a great commitment to share. The event was designed to promote dialogue and social connection. It encouraged conversations that otherwise might not happen, and provided opportunities for deep personal reflection.

Contemporary dictionaries give many definitions of the word “Book”. None of them suits the LIVING library’s new concept. For me a book is a window to the world, a door that opens to other cultures, ideas and lifestyles. It’s a tool for learning, no matter if it is printed, digital or human. The LIVING Library gave readers a chance to access books that

are not easy to find, and to talk to people that are not easy to meet. The organizers' intention was to break down barriers and erase the prejudices that separate people. The event succeeded in engaging participants in thinking and promoted a better understanding between them. It turned out to be a fabulous way to forge bonds and strengthen the community.

The LIVING Library was a great learning opportunity for everyone. Visitors felt enlightened after reading a book. I liked one rule in the EPL guidelines for readers: "Make sure that you leave the book in a better state than before you borrowed it." Even though this is difficult to achieve in a physical library, it was definitely the case with the LIVING Library. Looking at the "covers" of other "books", I noticed sparkles in their eyes after each interaction.

It was rewarding to be part of this amazing event. Connecting with readers and other books had a great impact on me. There are some lessons I learned that I feel are worth sharing. If your library plans to organize a similar event, here are some pieces of advice that I would like to pass to your future "books":

- There is no need to talk quickly and try to tell your entire story. The goal is to have an enjoyable conversation with your readers and give them enough time to digest information.
- Be interactive, ask questions. It will help to move the conversation in the area of your reader's interests.
- Let people express their opinion on a subject. Pay attention to what they say, perceive your readers as "books" too. You can learn a lot from others and it will enrich the story of your own "book".
- Encourage readers to talk, it will give you time to relax your facial muscles!
- Bring some props related to the topic such as pictures, food samples and other tangible objects like crafts. It will create a greater impact. Readers like visuals. They will be more engaged in your story and will retain more from it if you show them some pictures or interesting objects. Maps can be very useful too.
- Be aware of the time limit.
- Bring water and tissues. Some talks can get emotional.

The first EPL LIVING Library event was a success. It was a delightful experience for everyone: organizers, books and readers. The demand for knowledge and social interaction is there, and the supply of LIVING books with interesting stories to tell is tremendous in Edmonton. There is a potential for EPL's LIVING Library to become an annual event.

"Everything in the world exists to end up in a book." (Stéphane Mallarmé)



Tatiana Usova with some of her readers