



WOLLONGONG LIVING LIBRARY 2008

An Initiative of Community, Cultural & Library Services, Wollongong City Council

“to celebrate diversity, to challenge stereotypes, to simply inform and enthrall us” *Sticks and Stones*



Living Books at Holy Spirit College, Bellambi, November 08

Introduction

The Wollongong Living Library is a community development project that brings to the community a collection of ‘books’ who are people. These living ‘books’ represent a diverse range of backgrounds and life experiences. Instead of reading a book, you talk to a person in the setting of a library or school. Readers are offered the chance to engage in informal half-hour conversations with the living ‘books’ about their lives and life choices. Questions and active participation in discussion is encouraged.

The concept of the Living Library originated in Denmark in 2000 and has since gained popularity around the world. Wollongong City Council piloted the Wollongong Living Library in June 2008 and is continuing to develop and resource the project.

Through conversation, the Living Library creates an opportunity to build understanding and share experiences between different groups in the community.

Living ‘Books’

The living ‘books’ are an extraordinary group of local volunteers who enjoy sharing their stories with others. Their backgrounds are diverse, in terms of culture, language and faith background, gender, sexuality, age, ability and occupation. The recruitment of the ‘books’ focused on finding people with stories that are not given a high profile in mainstream media.

All living ‘books’ are offered induction, training, support and debriefing, as well as subsidised transport for the events.

Living Library Catalogue 2008

- 1 *Sticks and Stones* – being a gay man
- 2 *Wellbeing in the Illawarra* - an Italian migrant’s story
- 3 *An Enlightened Life* – life as a blind woman
- 4 *The Last Blink of Innocence* – surviving child sexual assault
- 5 *I Have a Dream* – being an Aboriginal man
- 6 *Memoirs of a Muslim “Mate”* – a Muslim woman’s story
- 7 *Mother of a Suicide Child* - the grief process
- 8 *If Only You Knew* – poverty to media manager
- 9 *The Resilience Factor*– when someone you love has a disability
- 10 *Goddess in the Garden* – living the green dream
- 11 *The Jigsaw* - surviving an eating disorder and depression
- 12 *One Man In His Time* – growing up in Nazi Germany
- 13 *A Jester’s Tale* - a professional entertainer
- 14 *Second Spring, A New Phase of Life* – accountant to Buddhist nun
- 15 *Beyond the Veil* – a Muslim woman’s story
- 16 *Living in a Grey World* – surviving bipolar disorder
- 17 *It’s Not Black and White* – story of a Wiradjuri/Yorta Yorta woman
- 18 *From Liberia to Wollongong* – journey of a refugee
- 19 *From Congo to Wollongong* – a refugee’s story
- 20 *The “F” Word* – being a feminist, busting the myths
- 21 *M C Boo* – being a young hip hop artist
- 22 *Rainbow* – experimenting with image
- 23 *Life on Stage* – musician in a wheelchair
- 24 *I Will Survive* – surviving domestic violence
- 25 *Graffiti, the New Generation* – art with a difference
- 26 *ADHD: An Adult Story* – attention deficit disorder
- 27 *Celebration of a Life* - the story of a lesbian feminist



Library staff and readers at the Living Library launch, Wollongong Library

Snapshot of 2008 Events

Wollongong City Council's pilot Living Library project involved a launch event at the central library and two high school events. Due to their success and community demand, two further events followed. A further three are planned for the first half of 2009.

- Launch at the Wollongong Library, June; 19 'books', 80 readers.
- Bulli High School – Year 9, June; 13 'books', 110 student readers.
- Woonona High School – Year 9, June; 15 'books', 120 student readers.
- Dapto Library –September; 15 'books', 37 readers.
- Holy Spirit College, Bellambi – Year 11, November; 12 'books', 120 student readers.



Reverend You - *Second Spring*
From accountant to Buddhist nun
Wollongong Library



Richard Davis – *I Have a Dream*
An Aboriginal man's story
Welcome to Country, Wollongong Library



Hans Post – *One Man in His Time*
Growing up in a Nazi family; becoming a peace activist

Event Model

- Each book event ran for approximately three hours.
- A 'book' catalogue was available for 'readers'. It contained a one-page story synopsis for each 'book' available that day.
- For some events, 'readers' were able to reserve a 'book' before-hand. For others, bookings were done on the day. For school events, students were allocated 'books' before the event. The level of choice involved varied from school to school.
- 'Reading' sessions lasted 30-40 minutes.
- Each 'reader' was provided with a support services flyer to find follow up information and services relating to the topic areas covered by the 'books'.
- 'Books' were provided an orientation and debriefing session for each event.

Content

The 'books' reported that a wide variety of topics and questions were raised during individual reading sessions. Following is a sample:

- What was it like growing up and going to school? Racism and how I dealt with it.
- How long have I've been singing? What do I sing about?
- Personal life stories that illustrate Muslims living lives as ordinary Australians.
- Early days of feminism in Sydney, first Mardi Gras, women's peace camp at Pine Gap.
- Vision Impairment, Blindness, Accessibility, Emotions, Acceptance, Grieving.
- Rebuilding my life after domestic violence.
- What is sexual assault? Why it is never a child's fault. How to get help.
- Being bullied at school.
- Being forced to leave my homeland of Liberia.
- Overcoming depression.

Resources

Wollongong City Council's Community Development Team resourced the pilot project with a \$15,000 budget. An additional \$1500 was donated by Keddiess Lawyers. In-kind resources covered marketing and promotional materials, project management hours and event supervision hours.



Living 'book' Jill Darville (centre) talks with readers at Wollongong Library

Outcomes and Feedback

The feedback from 'books', 'readers' and staff has been overwhelmingly positive. The project team has been inundated with enquiries about the program and currently cannot meet the demand for requested events.

Eric Alexander, head of English, Woonona High School, commented:

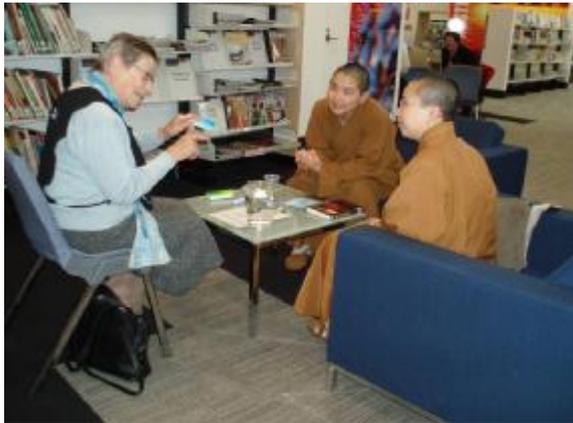
"I was on lunch time duty after the Living Library visit and was overwhelmed with students rushing up to me at lunch time to tell me how wonderful the Living Library was. In fact, one student who we have not been able to engage since Yr 7, said it was the best day of his life. All the students want it again, a great result."



Marlene Cooper – *An Enlightened Life* – at Woonona High School

Comments from Wollongong Library readers:

- *“I don’t belong to a regular library but I could have “read” all day.”*
- *“Being told things in person, makes you feel the emotion.”*
- *“Great variety and some courageous stories.”*
- *“Learning so much that is not spoken about normally.”*



**Giulia Bonacina (left) – *Wellbeing in the Illawarra* –
with readers at Wollongong Library
*An Italian woman’s story of migration***

Comments from Holy Spirit students:

- *“I liked the depth and variety of the living books.”*
- *“I liked talking to real people about their lives.”*
- *“Learning about other people’s mistakes and learning from them and seeing the world in a different context.”*
- *“Their ability to share personal Information in order to help others. It is very admirable.”*



Holy Spirit College, November



Bulli High School, June 08

Comments from Bulli High students:

- *“Hearing the other side of the story”*
- *“Finding out how people live with different disorders”.*
- *“That being different should be something we celebrate.”*
- *“The honesty in their stories.”*
- *“I learnt I can be myself and really enjoy it.”*



Diane – *The Jigsaw* – talks with reader Sara, who later became a book – *Rainbow* Wollongong Library, June



Kay O'Donnell - *It's Not Black and White* - shakes hand with a Campbelltown TAFE student

The project's outcomes reflect its many layers:

Outcomes for 'readers'

- Increased knowledge on a variety of topics and life experiences.
- First-hand contact and information from people outside of familiar social, work, or school circles.
- Support, ideas and for some, inspiration for personal issues, challenges or areas of interest.
- For students, a different and accessible mode of learning.
- Motivation to become a living 'book', eg TAFE students.
- Motivation to seek support and resources to start a Living Library project at Wollongong TAFE and Campbelltown TAFE.

Outcomes for 'books'

- Reward and satisfaction in sharing life stories with interested 'readers'.
- Therapeutic process in sharing life stories.
- New networks and friendships between 'books'. Genuine interest and connection with other 'books'.
- Work opportunities offered to performing artist 'books'.

Outcomes for partner organisations

- For libraries: new visitors and potential library members; a different and powerful way of providing information and knowledge to the community.
- For schools: a program that complements existing curriculum; a powerful tool of engagement for 'difficult to reach' students.
- New partnerships with Council.

Outcomes for Council

- Strengthened partnerships between different teams within Council.
- Building and strengthening partnerships between Council and schools.
- A community development project that works successfully across many target groups, thus meeting multiple Social and Corporate plan goals.



“Loads more fun than reading”

**Scott Radburn - *The Jester’s Tale* – life of an entertainer
Wollongong Library, June**



Luhinga Bagule – *From Congo to Wollongong* –at Wollongong Library with Sharralyn Robinson – *Why Is It So?*

Comments from the ‘books’:

“a fantastic buzz in the air”

“I learnt as much as the readers”

“It was tiring, physically and emotionally”

“I see this as a very practical way of bringing understanding and fostering PEACE in the community.

“It’s a good reconciliation process, part of the healing process.”



Kirsten Hort – *The Resilience Factor* – Wollongong Library

Key Success Factors

The success of Wollongong's Living Library can be attributed to three key aspects:

1 **Diverse range of committed volunteer 'books'**

As identified in the planning stage, the diversity of books (in terms of culture, language and faith backgrounds, gender and sexuality, age, ability and occupation) was critical to the project's success. All the 'books' are also extremely committed to the project's philosophy and all display a high level of personal commitment in meeting the emotional challenge of sharing their story.

2 **Providing excellent information, training and support for volunteer 'books'.**

To help 'books' meet the personal and emotional challenges of the project, it was essential that they felt supported and safe:

- to explore their story
- to decide which parts to tell and which, if any, not to tell
- to discuss any difficulties in telling their story
- to explore ways to overcome any difficulties
- to debrief after each event.

All books were offered a training session to clarify questions and concerns and to practise their stories. A storytelling workshop was held in August as a follow-up skills development opportunity.

A code of conduct and volunteer agreement were developed to help clarify roles and responsibilities.

The provision of lunch, travel reimbursements and a thank you event were an important part of volunteer recognition.

3 **Flexible Event Management**

Some 'books' committed to an event, but needed to withdraw at the last minute; one 'book' could commit to two sessions but not four. The event organisers accepted that 'books' have a challenging volunteer role and can be balancing many roles and responsibilities in their lives. Event bookings were adjusted as required and all events were still hugely successful.

Some 'readers' were seeking help with a personal experience and chose 'books' accordingly. The booking system allowed this kind of 'reader' access to the 'book' of their choice. Even if the session had already been pre-booked, we found a way to include determined 'readers' and found that the benefits were worth taking a flexible approach.

From the outset, 'books' were given the right to withdraw from a session if they felt uncomfortable or unable to continue; this helped to preserve their integrity and dignity in the face of difficult 'readers' and/or to manage an unexpectedly emotional response to a story. In practice, this only occurred once out of a total of 292 individual reading sessions. This demonstrates the good faith with which readers engage in this project.

Key Recommendations

- 1 Continue to run regular Living Library events at branch libraries in partnership with Library staff.
- 2 Continue to offer schools events, depending on resources.
- 3 Seek further funding for future events.
- 4 Seek further media promotion.
- 5 Write an event protocol for host organisations to ensure clarity around roles, responsibilities and process.
- 6 Write a specific event protocol for schools.
- 7 Continue to recruit new books to:
 - (i) Cover existing gaps eg men, young people.
 - (ii) To increase the volunteer pool to alleviate demand on existing 'books'.



**WCC Project Workers
Tracey Needham & Vimala Colless**



Living 'books' Maha Elhage-Hadaya and Hadijat Lawal
Holy Spirit College

“In the case of good books, the point is not how many you can get through, but rather, how many can get through to you.”

Mortimer Adler



Sara- Rainbow - engages students at Holy Spirit



The F* Word talks about feminism
at Wollongong Library

Wollongong City Council acknowledges the contribution and commitment of Wollongong Living Library's living 'books' and their families and friends.

We also wish to acknowledge the project's many supporters from community organisations and schools, including Woonona High School, Bulli High School, Holy Spirit College, Figtree High School, Wollongong TAFE, Campbelltown TAFE, ACON, SCARF and Beyond Empathy.

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November 2008