Real Stories, Real People

PEOPLE WHO SHARE THEIR LIFE EXPERIENCES THROUGH CONVERSATION.
CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES, CONNECTING AND INSPIRING.

A program of Wollongong City Council since 2008
Wollongong City Council launched Wollongong Living Books in 2008, inspired by the Human Library movement which began in Denmark in 2000.

The program brings to the community a group of people from diverse backgrounds, known as ‘books’, who share their life experiences.

The program aligns with Council’s Community Strategic Plan: Wollongong 2022 objectives:

- The visibility of our cultural diversity is increased.
- Our residents feel an increased sense of community.
- There is an increase in the mental health and emotional wellbeing of all our residents.

How does it work?

‘Readers’ choose from a selection of living ‘books’

‘Readers’ participate in 30-40 minute conversations in small groups

Events are held in a safe and open environment

‘Readers’ are encouraged to ask questions

Events are held in a school library or community hall

Living ‘Book’: Shadow of the Black Dog
Why?

- An opportunity to challenge stereotypes and reduce prejudice
- Experiences that inspire, give hope and develop resilience
- A fresh view into the diversity of our community
- Encourages new ways of thinking
- An opportunity to talk to people you otherwise wouldn’t meet

What do ‘readers’ like about Living Books?

- Talking to real people
- Honesty and openness of the ‘books’
- Ability to ask questions of the ‘books’
- Learning something new
- Feeling inspired by the stories
Meet our ‘books’

BIRDS NOT BOMBS
- a refugee’s journey

SHADOW OF THE BLACK DOG
- one man’s story of depression and anxiety

RISING ABOVE
- overcoming child sexual abuse and domestic violence

I HAVE A DREAM
- being proud of your culture

THE ‘F’ WORD
- What feminism has done for me

WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS
- a successful high school dropout

MICK ON WHEELS
- a wheelchair musician: follow your passion

GONE SURFING
- life as a double amputee

OVERCOMING THE ODDS
- ice addiction and my rainbow journey; a rollercoaster ride to happiness

A KING’S TALE
- impact of addiction and domestic violence. Living with blindness

“Open, honest and personal”

“Fascinating and inspirational”

“Meaningful and from the heart”
EVERY CLOUD
- masking my sexuality, no one knew I was gay

“Real life experiences”

TRUST YOURSELF
- from Peru to gangs in LA, and the rich and famous in Beverly Hills

THINGS CAN CHANGE
- growing up in a family with mental illness: overcoming isolation and fear

“Able to ask questions without feeling awkward”

FIND YOUR CHEERLEADERS
- from Zimbabwe to Australia, the people that help you see things differently

“Storytelling... an effective learning strategy”

LIMBO SPACE
- depression and substance abuse

ELIZABETH’S STORY
- journey of a Sudanese refugee

“I HAVE ADHD
- An adult story

YOU CAN’T BEAT ME
- overcoming anxiety, bullying and an eating disorder

“Opened up my choices. expanded my mind”

FINDING THE STRAIGHT PATH
- being a Muslim woman in Australia

MY TRANSGENDER CHILD
- a mother’s story of love and strength

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What 'readers' think...
Summary of feedback from 67 Year 9 students, 2013
Event Summary

14 High Schools
- Bulli High
- Corrimal High
- Dapto High School
- Edmund Rice College
- Figtree High
- Kanahooka High
- Holy Spirit College
- Illawarra Sports High Berkeley
- Keira High
- Smith’s Hill High
- Woonona High
- St Mary’s College
- Warrawong High
- Wollongong High

Open Community Events
- Wollongong Library
- Dapto Library
- Corrimal Library
- Wollongong City Council
- Seniors Week Expo
- New Outlook

Disability Organisations
- Essential Personnel
- Vision Australia
- Northcott Disability Services
- New Outlook

Participation and Support

Youth Programs
- Wollongong Youth Services LGBTQI Support Group
- Wollongong Links to Learning: Kanahooka High, Dapto High, Illawarra Sports High; Bellambi Links to Learning, Illawarra Youth Housing, Southern Youth and Family Services, (SYFS)

Special Events
- Mental Health Month - New Outlook, Wollongong Art Gallery
- International Women’s Day
- Seniors Week 2009 - University of the Third Age
- World AIDS Day 2010 - Wollongong City Council

Corporate Training
- Wollongong housing and community services sector staff
- Dapto Careways staff
- Keira High teachers
- Wollongong City Council Social Support Services staff

Event Themes
- Refugee Cultural Awareness - Dapto High, Warrawong High, Woonona High, Wollongong Art Gallery
- Aboriginal Cultural Awareness - Lake Illawarra Police
- Year 11 Crossroads program - Bulli High, Woonona High
- Community & Family Studies - Illawarra Sports High
- Belonging, stories of growing up - Keira High
- Social Justice - Student Conference, Edmund Rice College
- Compassion - Smith’s Hill High, student development day
Impact of the Program

92% of students surveyed in 2017 said they had learned something new.

- “Be proud of who you are”. Student, Dapto High, 2017.
- “I learned to not take life for granted”. Student, Illawarra Sports High.
- “I learned what it was like living in poverty and war”. Student, Woonona High.
- “Failure means you’re trying something new. Don’t quit.” Student, Wollongong High School

In a 2015 focus group, 90% of students said that the conversations had changed their behaviour.

- “A really integral part of my education. Two years later our group of friends still talk about gay ‘book moments’.
- “It really helped me with challenges in Year 10’.
- “I learnt strategies to overcome anxiety and depression I still use them today”. (2 years after the conversation)
- “Sometimes I still judge people, but at least now I am aware I am doing it, I try not to”.
- “Living Books has left more of a mark on me than any other program”.

Wollongong High School Yrs 9-11
School Program

Schools use the program to complement existing school curriculum including topics that deal with identity and cultural diversity. It’s a powerful tool in promoting difference and inclusiveness and often successful in motivating and engaging ‘hard to reach’ students.

- “Today I did an analysis of last year’s student evaluation of the entire Crossroads Programme, the Living Books event was by far the most positively valued. 91% of those who returned the evaluation forms rated Living ‘Books’ as ‘Excellent’. I am very keen to make this happen again.”
  Bulli High School Teacher
- “One student we had not been able to engage said it was the best day of his life”.
  Woonona High Teacher
- “Cleared up so much about a Muslim woman’s life here in Australia particularly with what the media portrays”. Holy Spirit College Yrs 11-12

Organisational Training

Organisations use the program in their workplace training to raise awareness of specific community and social issues including disability awareness and Aboriginal issues.

- “Good to interact with (Aboriginal Living Books) and get their perspective on life in the Illawarra from an Aboriginal point of view”. Police Sergeant, Lake Illawarra
- “Valuable ‘life lessons’ to take beyond the classroom”. Illawarra Sports High Teacher

Organisational and community groups include the program as part of key events such as Refugee Week, Mental Health Month, International Day of People with Disability, International Women’s Day.

- “Hearing stories of diversity and adversity ...shed some light on managing difficult, challenging, unique and individual experiences”. Staff member New Outlook, Mental Health Month Event
- “This is the first time I had ever seen the girls engage in a positive way with each other. The topics were so relatable to the girls, they have all experienced similar experiences. It allowed them to open up and for the first time share information with other girls”.
  Youth Worker, Young Mums Event, International Women’s Day.
Get involved

Web: www.wollongong.nsw.gov.au
Phone: (02) 4227 7111
Email: livinglibrary@wollongong.nsw.gov.au

Please contact us if you would like to become a Living ‘Book.

We welcome enquiries from organisations and schools interested in hosting a Living Books event.

Wollongong City Council acknowledges the invaluable contribution of our living ‘book’ volunteers who make this program possible.