

Mount Barker's living library

On Australia Day 2007 the Mount Barker Community Library invited residents to borrow a Living Book from South Australia's first Living Library.

The aims of a Living Library are to bring people into contact with someone they might not meet or associate with in their ordinary day-to-day life, to break down barriers and dissolve stereotypes.

Readers of the Living Library could check out a Living Book for a half-hour chat, and ask questions about that person's life.

Some of the 'Books' in the Living Library were people representing groups frequently confronted with prejudices and stereotypes. Others were South Australians with interesting life stories to share.

Against a global background of fear and division, in Mount Barker people from very different backgrounds had the opportunity to come together and talk, listen and learn and in so doing realise that we have actually got more in common with each other than our differences.

Living book titles at the Mount Barker Living Library included old people; hippies; a human rights activist; a human zoo participant and animal rights activist; an indigenous woman; a Jewish couple, a Muslim, a Catholic nun, a Chilean refugee, a Vietnam war orphan and a witch.

After a slow start, which gave the Books time to become comfortable with their surroundings and get to know Library staff and other books, a steady stream of Readers kept the Books almost constantly on loan.

All books got a good reading with at least seven loans per title. Best sellers were the Muslim (29 loans); indigenous woman (19 loans); witch (18 loans) refugee (15 loans) and Vietnamese war orphan (13 loans).

In total, the 16 Living Books received 152 loans from 58 registered readers during the five-hour duration of the Living Library.

Feedback from Readers and Books was all extremely positive and several parents used the opportunity to introduce their children (some as young as 5 years old) to people with different lifestyles, beliefs and cultures so that they may grow up to be more tolerant than many in today's society.

All Books said that they would happily participate in future Living Libraries. For those interested in other Living Library events, or curious about their history, Lismore was the first Australian library I



know of to hold one (November 2006). Bayside in Victoria have one planned for Library Week this year (Mount Barker's second one will also be held during Library Week 2007). A Living Library was held at the Malmo festival in 2005 and they have been operating at youth festivals in Denmark since 2000.

Ian Hildebrand

Manager Library Services

Mount Barker Community Library

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