

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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Todd Stabelfeldt, a quadriplegic, speaks to a group of students at King's Junior High School in Shoreline on Wednesday. Stabelfeldt, who started a foundation to help people with spinal cord injuries, is one of the living "books" who can be checked out from the Bainbridge Island Library. (Mike Kane / P-I)

At this library, you can check out a person instead

Friday, October 24, 2008

Last updated 11:10 a.m. PT

By **JOHN IWASAKI**
P-I REPORTER

An eclectic collection of books will be on loan for a few hours Saturday at the Bainbridge Island Library, covering such diverse topics as life as a quadriplegic, a female police officer, a young gay man and an atheist.

The titles are thought-provoking for a reason: All represent people who have been stereotyped. In fact, the "books" *are* people -- local residents of different backgrounds who have volunteered to be "checked out" for 30-minute periods by "readers" for one-on-one discussions.

Called the Living Library, the project started in Denmark in 2000 and spread to 22 countries with the purpose of enlightening readers through promoting tolerance and understanding.

A U.S. campaign started Oct. 4 in California at the Santa Monica Public Library, with Bainbridge Island the second stop.

"You can expand your horizons by reading a book or by attending a program or by watching a film," said Rebecca Judd, Bainbridge Island Library manager.

IF YOU GO

The Living Library will be presented from 9 a.m. to noon Saturday at the Bainbridge Island Library, 1270 Madison Ave. N.

For information on the project, go to living-library.org.

"In this program, you're expanding your horizons by having conversations with (those whom) you would not normally be having a conversation."

The project complements the Kitsap Regional Library's One Book, One Community program, which encourages Kitsap County residents to read the same book -- "To Kill a Mockingbird" -- during October.

Since Harper Lee's classic novel deals with prejudice, the advisory council that planned Saturday's event wanted to delve deeper into that theme and found commonality with the Living Library.

The seeds of the international project were sown in 1993 when a friend of Danish teenager Ronni Abergel's was stabbed after a party in Copenhagen.

The friend survived. Abergel and four friends turned into anti-violence activists.

While "every human being has the potential for violence" when pushed to the brink, conflicts are less when would-be combatants have a relationship created through face-to-face discussion, said Abergel, 35.

"A better understanding makes us more tolerant, and we feel more at ease," he said by cell phone as he drove to Seattle this week after participating in the Santa Monica event.

The Living Library grew out of that concept, spreading across Europe and reaching Australia, with topics ranging from Muslims and overweight people to blond women and the deaf.

More than 100 people participated in the Santa Monica event, library analyst Rachel Foyt said. The 14 "books" included a former homeless woman, two Buddhists, a raw-food expert, a feminist and a nudist (clothed).

For Bainbridge Island, one challenge was finding residents who suffered from misperceptions to serve as volunteers. It recruited about 15 people, including a former Marine/FBI agent, a black single dad, a Libertarian and a member of the Bahai faith.

Just asking them to participate seemed akin to "assigning them a stereotype," said Kathleen Thorne, a library volunteer and committee member.

The advisory council -- made up of representatives from the city of Bainbridge Island and five community organizations -- also felt uneasy promoting the Living Library as a way of addressing prejudices.

"We don't want people to think that by showing up at our event that they were prejudiced," Thorne said.

Among the "books" will be Todd Stabelfeldt, 29, who has been paralyzed from the shoulders down after a childhood shooting accident.

He works as operations director for Cortex Medical Management Systems in Seattle, started a foundation to help people with spinal cord injuries, speaks to groups and makes wisecracks. (When he says, "Two quadriplegics walk into the bar," half his audiences usually miss the joke.)

Speaking to students Wednesday at King's Junior High School in Shoreline, youths crowded

around his motorized wheelchair, which he drives using a joystick that he controls with his chin.

Talking to young people about his situation is "very cool," said Stabelfeldt, because most adults "just sit there and stare."

Afterward, a boy said Stabelfeldt taught him it was OK to approach a person in a wheelchair. A girl was surprised that Stabelfeldt was not depressed.

Stabelfeldt said the comfort he receives from God is "tangible to me," though at times he thinks, "God is good, but I'm really pissed at Him right now."

Coping in difficult times is also the underlying theme of the "book" presented by Lilly Kodama, 74.

As a 7-year-old child, Kodama's family and other Japanese-Americans were removed from Bainbridge Island and taken to internment camps after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor.

Shortly after World War II, she remembers being denied service when she and her mom went shoe shopping in downtown Seattle. Even 10 years after the war, when Kodama and her new husband looked for their first apartment, a Seattle landlord told them, "We don't rent to Japs."

"Once you get to know someone, it's hard to criticize them," Kodama said. "You understand that people are people. Even if you worship different or wear different clothes, we're all human beings."

P-I reporter John Iwasaki can be reached at 206-448-8096 or johniwasaki@seattlepi.com.

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