

Embracing diversity

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a being read at first living library event

One of them is a homosexual female, another is Turkish Cypriot male. I've got half an hour at Starbucks with each one and it's probably the strangest cup of coffee and chat I've had in a very long while. We may just be just sipping on our drinks and engaging in normal banter but it's what happened before I met them that's the really interesting part. Asked which characters I'd specifically like to take out on loan, I'm really very lucky to have this opportunity because the two people who sit before me are not usually allowed to be taken out for a conversation outside the confines of their library.

What they both have in common, is that they sometimes become 'books' for the day as people flick through the pages of their lives for a quick half hour read. Confused? So was I when I first tried to get my head round the idea but it turns out to be one of the most innovative approaches to learning I've heard about in a long time.

All part of a whole new concept for Cyprus that goes by the name of Living Library, people island-wide can now turn to other compatriots for information rather than wading their way through endless pages of text. Other books up for loan include the atheist book, the elderly book, the blind book, the physical disability book, the cancer patient book and many more interesting reads.

Started off on a local level by 28-year-old primary school teacher Constantinos Papageorgiou, the idea for this kind of human library was initiated by a group of idealistic youngsters in 2000 in Denmark's Copenhagen.

Their philosophy was that information should be free for all and that once individuals are placed within a given space, they can sometimes learn a lot more from each other than trying to get through countless books on a given subject. Having caught on in Denmark, the young group then tried to promote Living Library events worldwide as the idea went on to win the support of the Council of Europe.

The main point is that Living Library has an undeniable advantage - it's not very expensive and can be organised with the smallest of budgets. The biggest resource needed to fund such an event is time. Almost 30 countries are now part of the system, with Cyprus added to the circle just a few months back.

The first local event of its kind took place at Limassol's Intercollege in April with the support of the 'Youth Exchange and Understanding of Cyprus.' It was in fact a youth meeting in Portugal that first inspired Constantinos to bring the concept of the Living Library to Cyprus. "It was the first I'd ever heard of it and I thought it was a really innovative idea," he explains. "When people have prejudices or stereotypes, speaking to a 'book' is so straight to the point, it can really break down barriers."

With a second successful event having recently taken place in Nicosia, it was all about bringing together individuals from all walks of life. You can take out as many books on "loan" as you like in one day, talking to each person for half an hour and asking as many questions as you want.

"In the beginning people tend to feel a bit uncomfortable speaking to the books but once the conversation starts things just seem to flow," says Constantinos. "The books have been chosen very carefully and we did even have to reject a few cases before finding the best ones." So what exactly makes a good one? "Feeling comfortable talking about your personal life as certain stereotypes break down. You have to give off a good energy. I met some people who were too aggressive, who had obviously internalised anger due to the discrimination they feel against them."

And what exactly happens when there's no common language between the book and reader? "There's a human dictionary!" says Constantinos. That's not to forget that the co-organiser of the events, Polimnia Tomasidou, acts as the librarian who deals with the list of available literature.

As I speak to my first book sans the library set up, 24-year-old Elena Loizou explains that she's "generally not the kind of person who hides anything." In fact, everything about her screams confidence. Elena's red hair is cropped and spiky, her face is adorned with a number of piercings, and an intricate colourful tattoo covers her left arm.

Through teenagehood however she felt forced to hide something that not only made her depressed, but also extremely withdrawn and introverted. "I knew I liked girls ever since I was really young but as I grew up I just followed the lifestyle that I felt I should follow. No one knew how I felt inside and I casually dated boys just to go along with the norm," she says.

But after years of keeping things inside Elena felt that she just had to believe in herself and open up to how she truly felt. "I had to come out and say 'this is me'. First I opened up to a psychologist, then to my cousins and close friends. I suddenly felt so much better and so much freer." Most friends were supportive, others stayed away, but the point was that Elena was happy to be her real self.

The next big step was talking to her family about her sexual preferences; hardly an easy task. "They could always see I was different and they supported me through really hard times when I was younger," she recalls. As she slowly began to feel a lot happier, she felt that her parents deserved to know the truth. While the initial shock reaction was expected, they went on to show her support for her own personal choices.

But why did Elena decide to take part in Living Library? "I wanted to see if people would approach me and talk about being gay. It's not really about me so much, I feel I'm representing gay people and giving the general public the chance to get rid of stereotypes and ask questions they might rarely have the chance to." She goes on to explain that she may also be interesting to talk to for someone who is coming to terms with being gay. "In both Living Library events I was a book that was read so many times that I hardly got up from the chair all day. It's something people obviously want to find out more about."

