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'Books' and 'readers' swap stories

by Will Weiss

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When you read a book, the experience is always uniquely your own. No matter the author, what you get is always your interpretation of the language on the page.

But at Santa Monica Public Library's Living Library event, when an individual "checks out" a "book," the circumstances are tremendously different.

Face-to-face with a human being who embodies and speaks proudly for a social category, one realizes quickly that the book has feelings too.

In these conditions, emotions and reactions are exchanged freely, but not impolitely.

And when discussing that which is seldom discussed, the topic that is on everybody's lips is language itself.

"I prefer the term 'short-statured,'" said Michael Gogin, president and producer at Mad Swede Records and president of the Los Angeles chapter of Little People of America.

Gogin, who has been a musician, actor and executive in the entertainment industry for decades, has been afflicted since birth by spondyloepiphyseal dysplasia.

"If you look up dwarf in the dictionary, you'll find a description that includes 'grotesque,' 'ugly,' 'misshapen.' Some little people identify with that term; I don't."

Many of the speakers at Saturday's event, which organizers expected would reach capacity at 120 or so attendees, were careful when selecting their words, and spoke openly about the impact of words and perceptions.

"I use the F-word because it lets people know that I feel politicized about my appearance," said Lesleigh Owen, a fat activist and president of the Los Angeles chapter of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance. "Here in L.A. we are bombarded every day with anti-fat messages. Cutting out chunks of your body is advocated as a path to happiness."

Owen, who recently finished her doctorate in sociology at UC Santa Cruz with a dissertation titled "Fat Experiences and Forming Fat Identities," elaborated on the different types of spatial discrimination and verbal violence which she has experienced as a fat person.

"Fat people are paid less than their thinner counterparts and have higher rates of depression and suicide," she said, attributing the latter statistics to the way fat people are treated by others. "This world is discriminatory, but that's what we need to change; we don't need to change our bodies."

But as potentially painful and serious as the topics of discussion were, most said they found the meetings positive and mutually informative.

"It's been all positive," said Rachel Foyt, an administrative analyst for the library who helped organize the event. "We give our speakers a small amount of training on how to diffuse tensions and keep conversations going, but most people come with thoughtful questions and are polite."

Some attendees said that the concept of the living library seemed intimidating at first, but proved to be a gratifying experience.

"Coming in, I had some reservations," said Mike Rich, a Santa Monica resident who checked out four of the stations. "I thought it would be awkward and exploitative — like a freak show."

But as the afternoon progressed, moods shifted.

"Everyone who is here is defining themselves as something, so you don't have to define them yourself. You can speak to them about personal things without taking the time to have to get to know them; all their stats are on the table," he said, adding that "it's really nice to speak with someone from a group you're not a part of."

Saturday's event was the second installment of the Living Library Project, which held its first outing in October of last year.

Less than a decade old, the format was first utilized in Denmark in 2000 and was picked up in Santa Monica after colleagues e-mailed some news articles about similar events taking place in Europe.

Last October's living library was the first ever held in the United States.

news@smdp.com