



Photos: Sho Wakejima

Patron Thomas George, State MP for Lismore, launching Australia's first Living Library

3 November 2006

Lismore's Living Library Evaluation Report

January 2007

Lismore's Living Library: Evaluation of launch – 3 November 2006



Introduction

Australia's first Living Library was launched in Lismore, New South Wales on 3 November 2006. The Living Library is a community based initiative which aims to bring people together, and through conversation, to encourage understanding. It is a simple and powerful strategy for building social cohesion. The Living Library aims to challenge negative stereotypes and reduce prejudice through bringing people together in conversation.

The Living Library is like a normal library with one key difference: the books in the Living Library are people. These living books represent groups in the community who frequently experience prejudice and negative stereotyping. Visitors to the Living Library are ordinary community members who have the opportunity to borrow a living book for an informal, half-hour conversation. Through this simple act of dialogue diverse members of the community are brought closer together, understanding is increased, and social cohesion is built.

Lismore's Living Library is based on the successful European model, which began in Denmark in 2000 and has spread to libraries and festivals across Europe.

Project overview

Lismore's Living Library was initiated by a local community member and supported by Lismore City Council and Lismore City Library. State MP Thomas George agreed to be the Living Library's patron. An organising committee was formed in March 2006 with the aim of recruiting "living books", promoting the project, designing the logo and planning the launch. A small budget of \$5000 was provided by Lismore City Council for development of resources and program costs.

On the day of the launch, over thirty living book were recruited. They represented a range of groups including: multi-faith communities (Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Jewish), people with disability (intellectual, physical, mental health, visual impairment), multicultural (Italian, German, Sudanese refugees, Filipino), Aboriginal (Bundjalung elder, community member, young people), young people, older people, gay men and lesbians, a farmer, an environmentalist, police officers, and a man living with HIV.

A diverse range of readers attended the launch including school students, general community members and high profile community leaders. The community leaders were invited as special guests and included Councillors, Police Superintendent, Regional Directors of Government Departments, the Vice-Chancellor of Southern Cross University, and editors of local newspapers.

Lismore's Living Library was officially launched on November 3, 2006 by Thomas George MP, with special guest, Marta Aquino, Northern Region Commissioner from the NSW Community Relation Commission. Around 120 people were present and the diverse range of community

members in attendance made this a unique event in Lismore's cultural history, and the level of excited conversation throughout the day indicated that something significant was occurring.



Committee members Sabina Baltruweit (left) and Shauna McIntyre (right) with Auslan translator Amelia White (centre) at the launch of Lismore's Living Library

Evaluation of Lismore's Living Library launch

170 people visited the Living Library between opening hours of 10am and 3pm. 80 people borrowed books and around 120 borrowings occurred.

To assess the effectiveness of the Living Library an evaluation form was provided to living books and readers. 48 readers (60%) and 25 books (78%) completed the surveys for this evaluation. Their responses indicated that the Living Library achieved its aims and objectives of building social cohesion and challenging negative stereotypes through one-to-one conversation.

It is clear from the evaluation of the launch, that Lismore's Living Library was overwhelmingly successful in creating positive relations between diverse community members. The understanding of others that flows from these relationships is at the heart of any cohesive community. Moreover, that the first Australian Living Library was being launched in Lismore was clearly a point of pride for people because they so clearly felt part of a genuinely positive investment in their community.

Evidence

It is clear from living books' survey responses that they often challenged readers' assumptions. One living book remarked that "some people come with preconceived ideas and [are] surprised at how 'normal' we are". Another found it "challenging that people's assumptions do not match the facts!!" With this in mind the Library appears to have provided a safe space for genuine conversation with one reader remarking, "I felt grateful for the gift [the book] gave me - their mind, their life, their honesty". Another said, "Speak[ing] to people openly and honestly enriches my life and draws me closer to them as human beings".

98% of readers stated that they learnt something by borrowing a book and there is evidence that negative stereotypes were altered. For example, in a candid comment a reader said that "[I] learned that not all Aboriginal people get drunk and violent". Another stated, "Many of my assumptions were wrong"; and yet another, "I learnt mostly how different, yet the same, gays are to the heterosexual community". Such experiences build social cohesion in a personal way. As one reader said, "There are many different types of people in Lismore that are very friendly".

A key factor in the success of the Living Library is that it provides the unique opportunity for conversations to occur in a safe environment for books ("Everyone was friendly and open - good dialogue") and readers ("I felt very comfortable in this environment"). This feedback, along with

the value of the experience for readers and books, are considered essential factors for ensuring Lismore's Living Library achieves its aims in the long term. Evidence from the launch indicates that this long-term viability can be achieved with 100% of readers surveyed saying that they would visit the Library again and that they would recommend the experience to a friend, and 92% of living books indicating that they were willing to be involved with Lismore's Living Library in 2007.

Perhaps most importantly, from a living book's perspective, the viability of Lismore's Living Library comes from the belief that ongoing involvement in this project is worthwhile. It is, as one book said, a "fantastic community building project". Another said that "what was notable was the sound, the babble, the conversation and talk which was going on between people ... haven't heard this at an event before. I would like to have this happen on a regular basis at the library". And another, "I'm thrilled to be part of such a brilliant project!"

Future directions for Lismore's Living Library

Following the success of the launch and in response to popular demand the organising committee agreed that the Living Library be held monthly, beginning in December 2006. The high level of support from living books and readers, together with the success of the launch and the evidence outlined above has encouraged Lismore City Library to take on the coordination role for Lismore's Living Library in 2007. It is also intended to have Southern Cross University conduct an independent evaluation of the project in 2007.

The future of Living Libraries in Australia

Word of the successful launch has spread across Australia and to date has included:

- two members of the Living Library invited to speak at a Victorian arts forum on diversity in December 2006
- significant media interest including reporting of the launch on NBN News and in Lismore's two newspapers, interviews on ABC North Coast and ABC NSW
- over 20 enquiries received from interested communities throughout Australia (NSW, Vic, SA, WA, Qld) and requests for the Living Library to attend local festivals and events.

This interest, together with evidence that this social cohesion initiative achieves its aims and is cost effective will ensure that Australia's first Living Library in Lismore will not be the last.



Living Book being borrowed by reader, Angela Pollard

For further information on Lismore's Living Library please contact Shauna McIntyre at Lismore City Council on (02) 6625 0500 or email shauna.mcintyre@lismore.nsw.gov.au