Talking Books Project: Chronicle of a Personal Storytelling Event

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The first time I encountered a live storytelling event, I was working part-time as a circulation clerk at a community college in Michigan. I was only able to listen to a few of these stories, but in that short time I felt I had stumbled upon a program that would be beneficial to virtually any environment I would work within for the future. The stories were honest, revealing, raw and, above all, true to life, told by those who were living them, a collection of deep moments both too personal to be shared and too essential not to be heard.

This year, I finally saw an opportunity for this program to take place, and on November 7, 2019, IU East hosted the region’s first Talking Books Project, with seven community volunteers telling their stories to 25 listeners. IU East’s program hosted stories about surviving abuse and chronic illness, immigrating to the United States as a Muslim after 9/11, living as an asexual person, building a career after emerging from a coma that left her disabled, discovering how a family history of mental illness has affected her and two different takes on the Jewish experience.

Setting up a personal storytelling event is reasonably straightforward. While the Human Library is the best known of these types of events, I found their organization somewhat unresponsive and chose to avoid both their resources and branding. Instead, I was able to find reports and presentations about other successful similar events and modeled the IU East program on these and my own recollection. While my initial proposal was written only a few weeks after I’d begun my position at IU East in 2015, I had revised it over the years and, when I resubmitted it to the interim Chief Diversity Officer it was quickly approved.

Once I had institutional approval, I was able to begin work on the program’s fundamentals. First, I reserved two rooms – one for the event and one as a “green room” for books to congregate before and after the event. Next, I recruited speakers, beginning my process four months in advance. I recruited from personal contacts my library had made from other programs, using Facebook and email as a primary means of communication. This part of the program proved the most difficult - of my initial six book choices, only four volunteered. My final books were campus employees who volunteered within only a few weeks of the event date, and I am very grateful for their willingness to assist with little warning. Once my books were recruited, I hosted a one-hour training program, which included viewing a short video, using a worksheet to help guide the books’ stories and sharing rough ideas of what kinds of stories they would tell. Some of the stories were revelations; I’d believed I’d recruited a book for one narrative, only to have them tell a much larger, and much better, story that I could have envisioned. My preparation apart from the books included “library cards” where listeners would “sign out” books and keep track of what books they had heard, a one-sheet synopsis of each book, table identifiers, a white board which would keep count of how many listeners were assigned to a book and, of course, coffee. The Center for Service Learning kept the event staffed with runners and circulation clerks, which became crucial as I was unable to manage the entire event on my own.
The reactions from students were immediate and direct. “It opened up my eyes,” one student wrote in a reflection regarding the event. Another commented that, after some of the struggles that the books had endured, “I still have a reason to be happy and to always look for positive things.” Other outcomes proved important and wholly unexpected. One of the storytellers reported that, when she had concluded her story, the listener asked “Can I give you a hug?” When the book agreed, the listener explained that she had just lost her mother to a similar illness and that she was a first generation student who’d felt alone in her experience. That particular storyteller was an IU East employee who was able to connect this student to campus resources.

While an official exit survey is awaiting completion, most of the books stated that they would be willing to serve at this event again. The students who listened also agreed that the Talking Books Project was an important event that should be held on campus annually. With student and book approval, this Talking Books Project proved beneficial and successful, with hopes for a future program to be conducted.