



(Ray, 2019)

# Inspiration Report: The Human Library

Tech & Trends

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## Executive Summary

As human beings, we each possess a story which is wholly unique to us. Sharing this story with other members of our community can provide them with insight into our personal experiences and worldview, and this is something which holding a human library event can help make possible. Human library events suit the values of public libraries incredibly well, and have been found to have a number of positive effects on libraries, communities, and individuals alike. Hosting one would no doubt improve the lives of Puyallup Public Library patrons, employees, and citizens of the city of Puyallup.

## Introduction

Every human being has a story behind them, and everyone's personal story is unique. Our stories give us each a unique perspective on life, and being able to trade stories with other people lets us mutually expand our respective knowledge and worldview. Human library events can help make this possible; they allow real human beings to be checked out just like books for a short amount of time and share their personal stories with other members of their community. The volume of information contained in these personal stories cannot be understated; just imagine how much more you could learn about an event or phenomenon by talking to someone who witnessed it directly instead of simply reading a book or watching a movie about it. Participating in a human library event can also give us a better idea of the kinds of people that live in our respective communities, people you might otherwise have never known about. It would be to the benefit of both the Puyallup Public Library and our local Puyallup community to look into the possibility of hosting a human library event at the library.

## Origins of the Human Library



(Human Library Organization, n.d.)

The first human library event took place in Copenhagen, Denmark in the year 2000 by brothers Ronni and Dany Abergel with the assistance of Asma Mouna and Christoffer Erichsen. It lasted for four days straight, being open eight hours each day, and had over 50 different human “books” available to check out by over a thousand participants (Human Library Organization, n.d.). The first American human library events were hosted in 2008 by the Bainbridge Public Library in Bainbridge Island, WA and the Santa Monica Public Library in Santa Monica, CA. Both locations saw great success with their events, with Bainbridge eventually having to let small groups check out books instead of individuals in order to let more people participate in the program (Wentz, 2013).

## Human Library Terminology

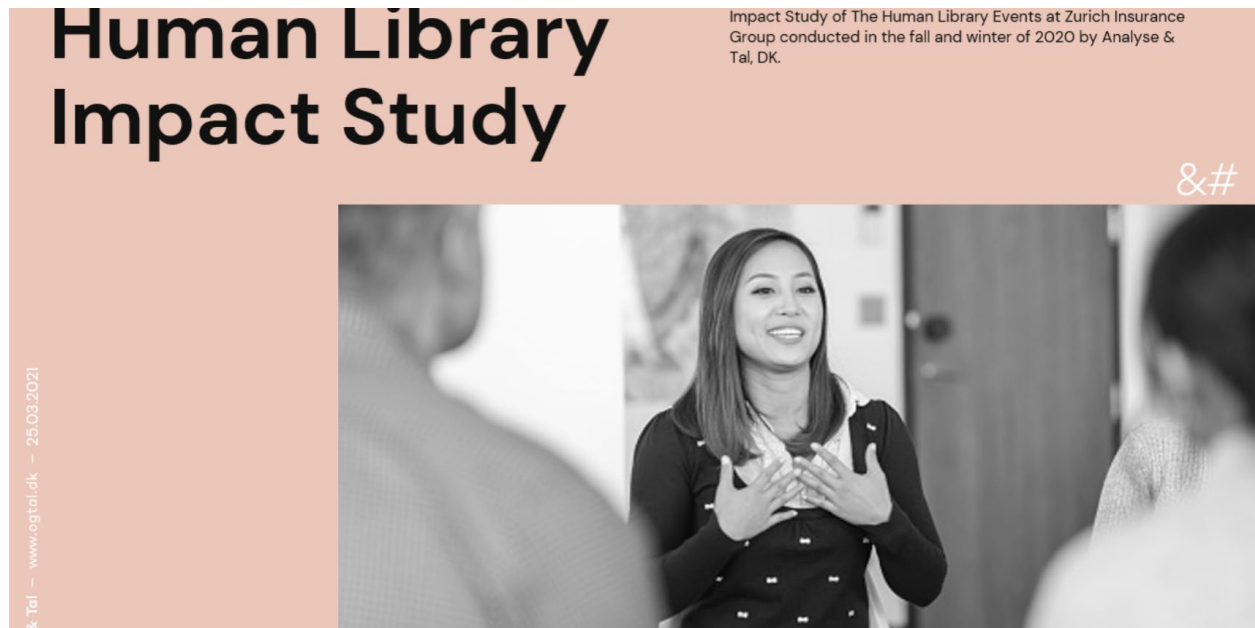
**Human Library** – A program which allows human volunteers to be checked out like books by other members of their community in order to share their knowledge and experiences. It is set up in a similar way to a regular library, with there even being a catalog containing the books which are able to be checked out (Wentz, 2013).

**Books** – Human volunteers who agree to be checked out like a book and hold open, unscripted conversations with the readers who check them out. They are each given a title and a description in the catalog and often have unique personal experiences and perspectives on life to share with their readers (Wentz, 2013).

**Readers** – Other members of the community who participate in the Human Library program; they browse through the catalog to find a book to check out, then meet their chosen book for a unique one-on-one conversation (Wentz, 2013).

**Catalog** – A list with a title and a short description for each book available to be checked out; it is given to prospective readers so they can choose a book that interests them (Wentz, 2013).

## Impact of the Human Library



(Arne-Skidmore, 2021)

A study was conducted by Danish researchers part of the consultancy Analyze & Tal to determine the effect of human library events on employees around the world; according to it, these events can help their participants broaden their understanding of many forms of diversity and acknowledge that being truly inclusive takes direct action, not just blind acceptance of someone. They found that participants were highly satisfied with the events and were significantly affected by the experiences in the short-term; participants were able to reflect on their own biases and following the events, were better able to perceive stigmatized groups in the workplace, including those not typically included in workplace DEI training (Arne-Skidmore, 2021).

## Promises & Challenges



(Ray, 2019)

Human library programs show a lot of promise for the libraries that host them. They are a remarkably good fit for the operational structure of libraries, requiring a catalog to be made, library cards to be distributed, and a book checkout process to be instituted, along with several additional functions which libraries perform every single day. The goals of the program are also a really good match for the goals of public libraries, such as being a place where people can learn and discover new information in a space which is neutral and safe while freely exploring different ideas from a variety of viewpoints (Wentz, 2013).

The human library can also provide chances for public libraries to perform outreach to different organizations, empowering them to form new connections and relationships while strengthening existing ones. This can, in turn, expand access to resources at these public libraries and elevate their community profiles, allowing them to more effectively reach their patrons and other community members while emphasizing their value as a community organization (Wentz,

2013). This connection to their local community is an additional boon, as individuals in the community are given a platform to voice their experiences and share them with one another, providing them with an opportunity they otherwise might not be able to have. This helps tie the community to the library just as much as it ties the library to the community; individuals also end up with closer ties to both their communities and their local libraries, resulting in mutually stronger connections overall (Wentz, 2013).

The only real challenge of hosting a human library program is finding people in the community who are willing to serve as books for the event and getting them ready for the program; this includes working with them to create a description for the catalog and holding a practice session to let them know what to expect from the event and introduce them to the other books in the program. These and other potential challenges can be mitigated by browsing the numerous resources and strategies created through trial and error by libraries which have hosted human library events in the past; these resources and more have been made available on the website of the Human Library Organization (Wentz, 2013).

## Conclusion

We are all made of stories, every one of us. Our stories impact our own view of the world, and they have the potential to impact the worldview of others in our community as well. Human library events help provide a platform for people to share their stories, and in doing so, they are provided with the ability to directly change the lives of people in their respective communities. With the opportunity to learn from each other's stories, we are subsequently granted the opportunity to help our community become more diverse, equitable, and inclusive, and understand the serious amount of effort it will take for community members to truly embrace these values in their everyday thoughts and actions. The advantages of hosting a human library event cannot be overstated, and it would be to the benefit of the Puyallup Public Library and the wider Puyallup community to strongly consider putting together such an event.



## References

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