

A Library of People!

The Human Library celebrates 20 years of sharing our stories.



Human books Jannie Westermann and Aske Ravn

Most libraries are full of books. But there's one without a single book. In fact, it is made of *people!* Welcome to the Human Library, a very *different* kind of library. Instead of reading stories on paper, visitors learn personal stories from people.

Ronni Abergel created the Human Library in 2000. He wanted to bring peace to his city of Copenhagen, Denmark. And he thought he could help by giving strangers a safe space to talk. If they were able to have a conversation, they would improve their relationship. Does it work? "People with good relations don't get into fights," Abergel told *News-O-Matic*.

People volunteer to share their stories at the Human Library. Called "human books," these folks tell others about their personal experiences. Anyone can join to have a chat. "There is no question you can't ask," said Abergel.

These conversations let us learn from one another. Abergel explained how. He said meeting new people teaches us about diversity. Without the Human Library, after all, many people might not have a chance to meet others with such different experiences.

Jannie Westermann is a volunteer at the Human Library. She was adopted and is disabled. "I was involved in a car accident many years ago," she told *News-O-Matic*. "But life goes on," she explained. "It is our mindset that decides what we want to make of our lives." Westermann described how she feels after someone "reads" her story. "I find it uplifting that I have been able to add a few words and even thoughts to another human being."

"I didn't speak for the first 10 years of my life," said Aske Ravn. "Today, talking to strangers in the Human

Library is one of my favorite things to do,” he explained. “It gives me a chance to learn more about myself,” said the volunteer. “It helps me to talk about it,” Ravn added. “And it helps other people to understand better.”

Abergel said the Human Library can help people find “common ground” and “learn about other groups in their community.” And that community has grown over the past 20 years. First the Human Library spread across Europe. In 2008, it reached the United States. By now, it has helped make connections to people in more than 80 countries.

Of course, the coronavirus has made it harder to make connections. After all, people are staying home — and staying apart. The Human Library says it’s never been more needed. “The need for conversation and human connection is huge in times of lockdowns,” said the library.

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By Teresa Johnson