

# The Living Library at UBC: A richer form of learning

By Glenn Drexhage

UBC Library came alive in September with its first-ever "Living Library" event – an occasion that allows participants to meet a collection of fascinating figures, among them students from Afghanistan and Nigeria, gay writers, a pioneering doctor, an extreme athlete/traveller and more.

A Living Library features real, live people who are "lent out" to interested users who can then speak to them about their lives and experiences. The concept has its roots in Denmark, where the first such event was held in 2000.

The idea is to introduce people to a collection of individuals who come from different walks of life and realities compared to their own. It's an attempt to promote diversity and share a broad range of views and opinions, all within a context of respect and intellectual curiosity.

## Living Library candidates

Candidates included:

- Dr. Judith Hall, a pioneering doctor in pediatrics and genetics, and a UBC Professor Emerita;
- Raul Pacheco-Vega, an instructor in UBC's Department of Political Science and a prominent social media maven;
- Michael V. Smith, an interdisciplinary artist and Assistant Professor of Creative Writing in the Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies at UBC Okanagan;
- David Watmough, a long-established B.C. writer, playwright, short-story writer, critic and broadcaster;
- Joanne Ursino, a member of UBC's Equity Office, an active member of Vancouver's queer community and an artisan;
- Andrew "Chima" Akomas, who was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba but grew up in Nigeria. He returned to Canada in 2003 and is majoring in commerce at UBC. Akomas was diagnosed with Marfan syndrome, a genetic disorder of the connective tissue. After returning to Canada, he also began to lose his sight and has been blind for three years;

- Alyas Omeed, a human rights and disability activist from Afghanistan who is attending UBC (he is improving his language skills and then plans to start his Bachelor of Arts program). He lost his sight as a child during Afghanistan's civil war;
- Rimple Cheema and Lisa Sun, UBC students and participants in the Social Entrepreneurship 101 (SE101) program at the Sauder School of Business;
- Darrell Baillie, a reference librarian at UBC's Koerner Library, and an extreme athlete and traveller.

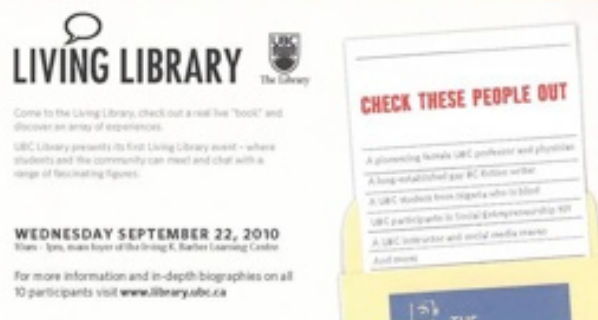


Image credit: Erin Watkins

### “A wonderful idea”

From 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on September 22, people signed up to speak with their candidates of choice, and share stories and insights. “A wonderful idea – couldn’t have been better,” said one registrant. “I think that by meeting various participants I’ve already gained more of an idea about how diverse the UBC community is. Keep it up!”

The “books” also were enthused by the rewarding project. Pacheco-Vega wrote about his experience on his blog: “I was also absolutely delighted with the interactive nature of the Living Library project. Contrary to what happens with books (where the interaction is unidirectional, you read the book, it’s not like you can talk to the book), in the Living Library project I was able to learn just as much from my ‘readers’ (those who ‘signed me out’). My fellow Living Books mentioned similar (and delightful) experiences. This reflexivity made me ponder the nature of interactive media and the whole process of learning. While reading academic books allows me to learn, interacting with other individuals is a much

richer form of learning.” His entire entry can be found at <http://hummingbird604.com/2010/09/23/living-my-life-as-an-open-book-the-living-library-project-at-ubcs-ikblc>.

### Looking forward to more conversations

The event received strong media coverage, including articles in *Metro* and the *Ubyyssey* and on-site interviews with CBC Radio.

Although this was the first Living Library event for UBC Library, we look forward to fostering more conversations with our users on campus and beyond. Thank you to everyone who participated, and to those who helped organize this great day.

For more on UBC Library’s Living Library event, please visit <http://blogs.ubc.ca/libnews/2010/09/24/living-library-media-coverage>.

*Glenn Drexhage is the Communications Officer at UBC Library/Irving K. Barber Learning Centre.*