



In the Living Library, Everyone's an Open Book

ON A RECENT afternoon, Margaret Oakley sat at a table at the Santa Monica Library and talked to visitors about her vegan lifestyle. Her goal: to convince people she doesn't dislike carnivores — she's just passionate about her veggies.

Oakley is a "book" in the Living Library, an organization that fights prejudice by hosting discussions in local libraries (living-library.org). "Readers" check out "books" by sitting down and talking to individuals whose lifestyles fall prey to preconceptions — everyone from Buddhists to homeless people to police officers.

Founded in Europe by Ronni Abergel, a Danish antiviolence activist, the Living Library stages events around the globe and has just been introduced in the U.S. "We have a tendency to generalize," explains Abergel, "What we really need to do is give each person a chance to be seen and heard as an individual." And a library is the perfect, neutral place to start the dialogue.

"You can't just walk up to someone in a café who's wearing *hijab* and start asking them questions," says Beth Riggs, who has done time in the Living Library as an Atheist book. "In the Living Library, the ground rules are set. You can say to someone: 'I'm coming to you in a spirit of questioning, not a spirit of confrontation, and if I ask something dumb it's simply because I don't know.'"

Each encounter, Oakley admits, started off with a "deliciously awkward" moment. "There's a beautiful vulnerability in someone putting themselves out there and saying, 'I want to know more about the way you live your life.' That takes courage."

—JEANNE STORCK