Jefferson Hosts First 'Human Library' at US Academic Medical Center, Expanding Students' Understanding of Prejudice and Stereotypes

“When I’m a physician, I’ll think back to this experience while treating a patient who may be homeless or a veteran, and will remember that there is more to the story than what is on the surface,” said Nadia Shobnam, a first-year student at Jefferson Medical College.

Jefferson hosted its first-ever Human Library on April 2 at Scott Memorial Library, making it the first academic medical center in the US to host a Human Library.

“A Human Library is where people volunteer to ‘go on loan’ and share their stories,” said Pat Wynne, Associate University Librarian at Scott Memorial Library. “Each person, or ‘book,’ has a title and is available for readers, or visitors, ‘to loan’ for 30-minute time periods.”

The Human Library organization, which started in 2000, was created by five teenagers in Denmark after a mutual friend was stabbed. The teens’ friend survived but the group decided to use peer education to help stop violence.

The Human Library was then born -- focused on the idea that by putting different people together in a small space and creating dialogue, prejudices and stereotypes can be broken and understanding can begin. Human libraries have since been re-created all over the world.

Six books were available for loan at Jefferson’s Human Library. Twenty readers, including students, staff, and clinicians, registered to borrow the books.

“Particularly for our students, we knew that by hosting a Human Library, we could help them take away a better understanding of the world and the patients they’ll serve,” said Pat.

Peter Sacci, a first-year medical student at Jefferson Medical College, borrowed a book entitled Disabled Veteran.

“I thought reading a book would give me exposure to an individual I don’t normally get to interact with, and that was exciting,” he said. “My book and I talked about how he was an army medic and later a hospital technician. He gave me valuable advice, saying, ‘Pay attention to nurses, therapists, technicians, and environmental staff. Many times they notice a patient is in trouble. Have a humanistic approach and listen to your patients and the people around you.’”

The Disabled Veteran book gave that same advice to Nadia Shobnam, also a first-year medical student. “He encouraged me to have empathy and be supportive because many patients, particularly veterans, can suffer from physical and emotional trauma. He said that being empathetic can be just as effective as the medical care I provide. He suffers from chronic pain, so he spoke as a patient and a medic. I was encouraged to hear about his journey. His story had an impact and has since stayed with me.”
Nadia also heard an impactful story from a book entitled *Homeless, Not Helpless.*

“I’ve seen homeless people around Center City but never held a conversation with a homeless person,” she said. “This book was currently employed as a newspaper salesman, working for a paper where the articles are written by homeless individuals. Through our conversation, I learned that even while struggling to find employment without any family support, this book was drug and alcohol-free and was working hard to become self-sufficient.”

“Both stories opened my eyes. I learned a lot in the short time we had. When I’m a physician, I’ll think back to this experience while treating a patient who may be homeless or a veteran, and will remember that there is more to the story than what is on the surface.”

Evaluation forms were filled out after the event. “All the feedback was very positive,” said Pat. “For me, the one word that kept coming to mind was ‘courage.’ Courage from the books, the readers, and our staff. All of it gelled and it felt like something special had happened.”

Bernard Lopez, MD, MS, Dean of Diversity and Community Engagement at Jefferson, said after reading his book, he was a changed man.

Plans are underway to expand the Human Library and bring it back to Jefferson in the future.

To learn more about the Human Library at Jefferson or to become a Human Book, contact Pat Wynne at 3-7815. Learn more about the [HUMAN LIBRARY](#) organization.