

'Human books' featured at Tulane Living Library

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Originally from Nigeria, Olalekan Ogunsakin volunteers as a human book during the first Living Library at Tulane. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

The Tulane community gave new meaning to the old adage of “don’t judge a book by its cover” at the first annual [Living Library](#), which took place on Friday (March 17) and Sunday (March 19) within the Pederson Lobby of the Lavin-Bernick Center.

“Human books” shared their diverse life experiences with attendees, known as “readers.” When checking out a human book, readers would sit with the volunteer in order to listen to their personal narrative.

“The volunteers are a mix of students and members of the New Orleans community,” said Raquel Horlick, the event’s organizer and a coordinator for

scholarly resources in science and engineering at Howard-Tilton Memorial Library.

“The goal is to foster interpersonal, one-on-one communication — to connect with someone who may be experiencing life in a way that’s unique or different,” said Sean Knowlton, scholarly engagement librarian for humanities at Howard-Tilton Memorial Library.

Subjects of the human books ranged from a person living with bipolar disorder to a child experiencing the 1991 volcanic eruption of Mt. Pinatubo in the Philippines.

Second-year Tulane student Rowan Bienes opened up to readers about her ongoing struggle with anorexia.

“I wanted to be a book so someone could see that an athlete, an average person, can struggle with this,” said Bienes. “I just thought that sharing my story may help people understand something that’s not very easy to understand.”

Bienes, who majors in finance, said that she developed signs of the eating disorder during her freshman year of high school. She decided to share a poem with her readers that she wrote during that chapter of her life to help illustrate what the experience is like.

Bienes has since learned to keep her health in check by relying on supportive family members and by focusing on fitness goals.

“It’s been five years since I first told people, and it’s been a huge work in progress. I don’t think it’s something you can fully recover from, but it’s gotten a lot easier,” she said.

The event was presented by the Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Forum Tulane, the Goldman Center for Student Accessibility, the Lavin-Bernick Center, Newcomb-Tulane College, the Office of International Students and Scholars, the Office of Multicultural Affairs, TIDES and The Well.

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