

# Living books return to Drayton Valley Library

CATHY WEETMAN

Living Books returned to the Drayton Valley Library the week of September 20 as part of Arts and Culture Week in Alberta.

Library programmer Verna Wicks explained that the purpose of Living Books is to hear about people's life experiences and what they've gone through.

"It helps us understand what they've gone through as well," said Wicks. "In public, everybody has a public face. In Living Books, everybody has a story."

Wicks noted that the first Living Books project was started by Leah Sanderson, Library Programmer at the time, followed by two years of cancellations due to COVID-19, and now it's back with four Living Books.

James Stewart is one of the Living Books and he shared his story with the Western Review.

"I was born in Edmonton at the Royal Alexandra Hospital. I moved to Drayton Valley in 1965 and moved back to Edmonton when I was 20. I took Marketing at NAIT. It was an adult education program where I took six months of school and three months of practicum and another three months of schooling. The next year I took three months of school, three months of practicum, and three months of schooling. Because I was on EI at the time, I didn't need to take out any student loans," said Stewart.

After graduating from the program, Stewart signed on with Parkway Enterprises doing water and sewer work. Shortly afterward, he suffered a detached retina in his right eye, which forced him to go

back on EI.

"I couldn't go back to work so I tried looking for other jobs for cash. Then the retina in my left eye detached. Doctors said the detached retinas might have been caused by old injuries," said Stewart.

After a short stay in the Royal Alexandra Hospital, Stewart began receiving benefits through the Alberta Works program and managed to find room and board for \$500 a month.

"I did some couch surfing and got a room in town, but I wasn't in a safe environment. Emily Hickman started up the Mat Program and I felt safe there. Later I found a place to live and I had a list of regular clients that I would do odd jobs for. I'd shovel snow in the winter, and fix fences and do painting jobs in the summer," said Stewart.

While still with Alberta Works, Dianne Nikiforuk asked Stewart to join the Pembina Crisis Connection Society and he stayed with it for six years. Then Emily Hickman asked him to join the Homelessness and Poverty Reduction Board. During that time, he was asked to speak at a symposium in Canmore in front of 180 people, and despite being nervous, Stewart said it was a high point of his life.

The group is presently looking at a Shelter Pod Program that has just started up in Edson. There are a number of small rooms carved into the back of a recycling facility where the homeless can spend the night in a safe environment. So far, the program is doing great, according to Edson Mayor Kevin Zahara.

Stewart said that he's noticed a change in Drayton Valley since the downturn of the economy in 2008.

He explained that since the downturn, there are limited resources in the community. Instead of several non-profit societies asking for donations, the non-profit groups are getting together for one goal. An example, he noted, were oil and gas companies joining together to donate to the Aquatic Centre.

Stewart added that one group of people in Drayton Valley rarely receive any recognition for what they do and that's called AMO Cares. They're ex-employees of Amoco, which was bought by Penn West before being sold to Obsidian.

"Everything they take out of their gardens they donate. Volunteers at the local food bank are also retired oilfield workers. They have time to spare and they do what they can to help out."

When asked why he decided to become a Living Book, Stewart replied that when the economy is down, he likes to lend a hand.

"Volunteering is a great thing," he said.

When he's not volunteering, he's a Thunder Hockey Team supporter, and likes sports and reading.

"If I'm asked again to be a Living Book, I'd do it again," concluded Stewart.