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A learning moment: Visitors check out 'human books' at Continuum in New Haven

By Anna Bisaro, New Haven Register

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NEW HAVEN >> If there's a message that Becca Miller would want people to take from a book about her life, it's that it's important to just keep moving forward.

"There's so much we can overcome," said Miller. "It's just a normal life to have these things."

When Miller said "these things," she was referring to her struggles with mental illness and Parkinson's disease. Miller is a professor at Yale and director of peer support and family services at the [Connecticut Mental Health Center](#).

Miller's book, "Double Whammy: Mental Illness and Parkinson's Disease," was available for checkout at the human library at [Continuum](#) on Legion Avenue Friday as part of its first human library event.

"It was a chance to share experience," Miller said of wanting to participate as a human book. "It seemed like a very cool project."

As part of the event, from noon to 7 p.m., people could come and check out a book about an issue that interested them, ranging from substance abuse to mental illness among many others. But, instead of getting a book, the person got a 20-minute meeting with a person who has firsthand experience with that issue.

Titles of human books to be checked out included, "Ask an Aspey: Autism and Asperger's," "Suicide Awareness" and "How Modesty Saved My Life: A story of recovery from an eating disorder."

In all, there were 21 human books to be checked out Friday, and the meetings with the subjects were held around the Continuum building.

Tracy Young, a program director at Continuum who helped to coordinate the event, said 30 people initially were interviewed to be human books for the program. Continuum advertised the opportunity through social media and their own personal networks.

Young said she initially thought the event would focus solely on mental illness and substance abuse, but quickly realized there was more to talk about.

"But there are so many other people who have stories to share," Young said.

Young added that the event was a way for people to learn more directly about issues that might interest them, but of which they lack a clear and full understanding.

"We live in a very insular society," she said. "We don't have an understanding."

Young said she was inspired by the stories of those acting as human books Friday.

Readers were given a list of rules before heading up to their interviews with human books that included a disclaimer that the human book could stop the interview at any time if they felt uncomfortable. No recordings were allowed.

[The Human Library](#) is a worldwide movement meant to help build understanding of diversity, according to the organization's website. The Human Library events have been held all over the world.

In her conversation with Miller, Dominique Coleman learned about Miller's journey to being comfortable with sharing details about her mental illness and Parkinson's disease with coworkers. The pair talked about Miller's daily life and where she's found love and adversity along the way.

"This is a wonderful event to hear their stories," Coleman, a clinical director at Continuum, said. "For them to take the time to be vulnerable is really wonderful."

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