



Authors Stan Yogi and Elaine Elinson discussed their book, "Wherever There's a Fight," at the Woodcrest and Cathedral City public libraries in Riverside County as part of the "Making a Difference" program on civic dialogue.

# Riverside County Libraries Make a Difference with New Program

## LIBRARY STAFF FOSTERS CIVIC DIALOGUE IN THE COMMUNITY

Libraries are more than just repositories of books. They are increasingly becoming "community living rooms"—places where people gather to learn about and discuss issues affecting the world around them. A new California Council for the Humanities program, supported by funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services—provided through the California State Library—and the National Endowment for the Humanities, will help libraries foster thoughtful, informed and civil community dialogue.

In early October 2009, the Council kicked off the "Making A Difference" program in partnership with the Riverside County Library System, which serves urban, suburban and rural communities that are growing at a rate more than four times that of the state generally and where over 38 percent of the population speak a language other than English at home. The six branch libraries participating in the program range from Glen Avon, Home Gardens and Woodcrest in the western region to Cathedral City, Coachella and Palm Desert in the east.

The libraries are developing civic engagement-oriented public

programming, which consists of reading and conversation on issues of current concern and opportunities to make a difference in their communities. Ten library staff members attended an intensive two-day workshop organized by the Council to learn about ways to engage patrons in meaningful civic dialogue. Participants received training, a handbook and other resources in the humanities-based method of reflection and dialogue facilitation developed by the Project on Civic Reflection, a nationally recognized leader in its field. The librarians used speeches, fiction and poetry—such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s historic speech "The Drum Major Instinct," "The Boy Without a Flag" by Abraham Rodriguez Jr. and "A Litany for Survival" by poet Audre Lorde—as springboards for dialogue.

Over the next few months, web-based meetings will give participating librarians opportunities to share their successes and challenges with each other, seek peer and expert advice, and continue to deepen their practice. Each branch library will be responsible for developing its programs and choosing discussion material, which could be anything from a written text to a film or performance. The "Making a Difference" pilot

program will run through June 2010 and plans are to extend it to other California library systems in the future.

"This program gives us the opportunity to push our programming to a new level," said Riverside County Library Administrator Mark Smith. "As is typical with most library programming, our staff doesn't really interact that much with program participants. We might invite a performer, do the publicity for the event, introduce them and thank them at the end, but that would be the end of it. ["Making a Difference"] directly involves the library staff in part of the programming, in being able to dialogue with the community. This allows us to stimulate a different kind of interest both with our staff and the public."

The first programs took place in early November 2009 at Woodcrest and Cathedral City libraries. On Nov. 2, Woodcrest Branch Manager Connie Rynning led a discussion on censorship using a chapter from the new Heyday Press book "Wherever There's a Fight", about the history of civil liberties in California. The reading and discussion program was followed, two days later, by a lively public reading conducted by the authors, Elaine Elinson

and Stan Yogi. The Cathedral City Library also held an author reading and discussion on freedom of expression and LGBT rights based on excerpts from the book on Nov. 3.

"My job is not to insert my opinions, but to guide people to the text and give them free rein to discuss what they want," Rynning said. "People really got into it. They were involved and engaged and had a lot to say. They said after the event that they really enjoyed the deep conversation and having the chance to get into something so important."

The majority of the libraries will begin their programming this month to coincide with the Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Future programs will take place in March and May, in conjunction with Women's History Month, Cesar Chavez Day and Memorial Day observances.

"The Council is trying to demonstrate that libraries are logical places for community members to come together to talk and interact with one another. That's consistent with what we think the role of libraries is going to be in the future," Smith said.