

BE

AT THE LOS ANGELES

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Belonging at the Los Angeles Public Library

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Los Angeles, California, USA

Second printing

Developed by Christine Wong Yap and contributors in collaboration with the Library Foundation of Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Public Library, and the Wellcome Trust, as part of its international cultural program about mental health, *Mindscales*.



The project is presented in *Something in Common*, an exhibition at the LAPL Central Library, Getty Gallery, from May 7 to November 6, 2022.

All artworks and photos by Christine Wong Yap unless otherwise noted.

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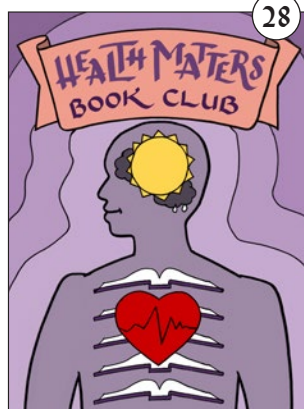
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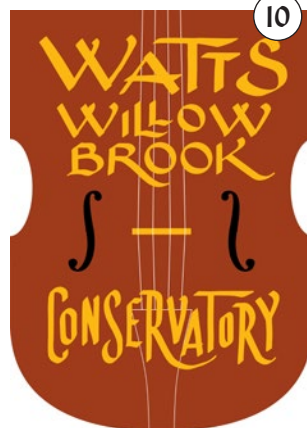
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Contributors



ADULT LITERACY SERVICES

Catalina Gancz
Darrell Harville
Georgia Bell
Goldie Hoffman
Jinkyung "Coco" Im
Razi
Sidney Zafran
Stu



PERSIAN POETRY FORUM OF LA

Farideh Shabanfar
Max Rahni
Ramin Naderi
Sheyda Mina



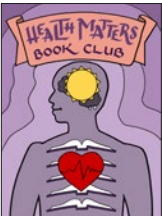
FRENCH CONVERSATION CLUB

David Aaron
Louise Kornberg
Razi



TEEN COUNCIL

A.F.
Fiona Herzog
Francina Poma
Karen Huang
Roselyn Chin
Sarah Lepkowitz
Sophie Zhu
Yingyi Ma
Zhangyang Wu



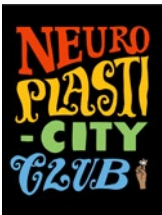
HEALTH MATTERS BOOK CLUB

Cheryl Grimm
LK
Pam
Rachel Rose
Yeumei Shon



WATTS WILLOWBROOK CONSERVATORY

Billy Mitchell
Jermaine Paul
Mari Paul



NEUROPLASTICITY CLUB

Lenore Blecker
Michael Ashmore
Yago Cura

Many additional individuals shared insights which were very much appreciated. Contributions included represent a modest fraction due to space constraints.

Introduction

CHRISTINE WONG YAP

Belonging at the Los Angeles Public Library is an art project consisting of a series of seven banners, this zine, and a six-month residency and process of social engagement and cooperation. Each banner commemorates a club or affinity group associated with the Los Angeles Public Library as a space of belonging.

These spaces engage participants ranging in age from children and teens to seniors; in geographies from Chinatown to the Palisades and from Central LA to the San Fernando Valley; and from demographics including recent newcomers, families, and members of the Persian diaspora, for example. The groups vary in size and institutional involvement, from massive, staffed library programs to discussions among a half-dozen friends; in duration of existence (some groups have members who have participated for over a decade); and formality, spanning parliamentary structures to spontaneous self-direction. There must be countless groups which meet at the LAPL, and I credit Todd Lerew, Shirley Thao, Joyce Cooper, and the library's Area Managers with identifying these seven groups and curating this diverse snapshot.

BACKGROUND

I am a visual artist and social practitioner



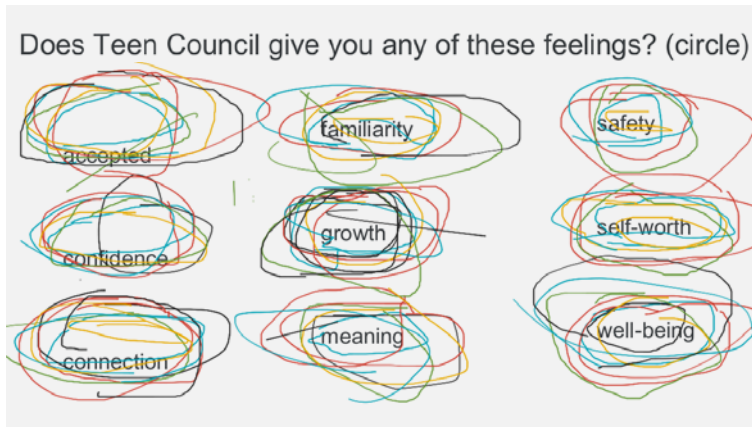
Adult Literacy learner Darrell Harville (left) with Adult Literacy Coordinators Abel Santibanez (center) and Zachary Valdivia (right) taking in the banner.

exploring psychological well-being. My participatory projects typically combine community engagement, drawing, lettering, publications, and other media. Todd Lerew, Director of Special Projects at the Library Foundation of Los Angeles (LFLA), had seen some of my previous projects exploring belonging. He invited me to do a residency and commission with the LFLA, in a collaboration with the LAPL and the Wellcome Trust, as part of its international cultural program about mental health, *Mindscales*.

PROCESS

Last fall, I toured the Central Library and several branch libraries across LA and met with librarians who generously introduced me to the groups. Over the winter, I gathered perspectives →

INTRODUCTION, CONTINUED



Screenshot of collaborative whiteboard responses from Teen Council participants.

directly from group members by observing club meetings, conducting interviews, and facilitating group feedback sessions. I led mood board activities with members of three Teen Councils, collaborative brainstorming with volunteer literacy tutors and teachers, and three-way discussions with the help of a Persian interpreter.

These dialogues are the source of the quotations on the banners. They also inspire the banner designs. Some designs were collaborations, which deepened my understanding of the people and cultures served by the groups. For example, I worked extensively with a collaborator to develop a bilingual, culturally-appropriate design for the Persian Poetry Forum of LA.

INSIDE THE ZINE

In the following pages, you will find photos of the finished banners (roughly 48×36 inches each) and design inspiration alongside information about each group and excerpts

from the dialogues. Due to space limitations, the perspectives included here represent just a fraction of the valuable reflections, narratives, and feedback shared with me.

Additionally, the zine contains activities so you can experience a taste of what the groups do. I invited group members and facilitators to create or suggest activities. Some are authored by them. For example, a facilitator shared step-by-step instructions for replicating best practices, rich with insights about the nuances of community-building. Other activities started as seeds of ideas which were developed by myself or with collaborators. The aim of these activities is to honor the principle that people are the experts of their own experiences. They know how spaces of belonging impact them personally, and which practices sustain a sense of belonging.

At the end of the zine, I offer reflections on the relationship between belonging and mental health. ■

Foreword

TODD LEREW

In working with Christine Wong Yap to explore belonging at the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL), I've been thinking about all the things that word can mean. Is belonging a feeling, a state of being, a need, a facet of our identity? And if it's any or all of these intangibles, how is it that a public library might provide it as a service? There's no line item for belonging in the city's library budget, you won't find it mentioned explicitly in any directory of what the library provides online or in person, it's not something you can check out and return, and it certainly can't be streamed or downloaded.

Through a series of meetings and conversations that led to the development of this zine and the beautiful set of banners it accompanies, I've gained a greater appreciation for how we might understand belonging as a service provided by great public library systems like LAPL. I now know that belonging looks like the city-wide adult literacy services, where deep friendships have been forged between people from very different places who face similar challenges, and where teachers who volunteer their time insist that they benefit as much if not more from a class than those who are there because of a desire or need to learn. Belonging looks like the French Conversation Club at the Westwood Branch

Library, which didn't just go virtual when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, but asked if they could meet twice as often to keep connected and maintain their regular, informal Francophonic conversations with one another during a time of unprecedented physical isolation. Belonging looks like a husband and wife librarian duo hosting their own radio show in Farsi to meet their patrons where they are and spread the word about resources and programming for the Persian communities of LA.

It shouldn't come as any surprise that our neighborhood branch libraries across the city offer an array of programs that are open to all. And yet, through Christine's lens it becomes clear that the space of belonging these programs can provide is profound, and deserves to be recognized as such. She has created work that transforms this elusive concept into something tangible. By drawing out the experiences of librarians and patrons and reflecting it back in the form of striking works of art, we can all take inspiration from the idea that the Los Angeles Public Library, in all its 73 locations across the city, is not just a place where everyone can find something that will interest or benefit them, but a place where everyone belongs. ■

Adult Literacy Services

For over 35 years, Adult Literacy Services has helped adults reach their literacy goals through robust program offerings, including tutoring, classes, and literacy centers in branch libraries throughout LA.

The banner design celebrates the growth and connection felt by learners and volunteers, symbolized by a collectively-created bouquet of flowers held by hands of many colors. The Adult Literacy banner features two quotations to acknowledge the important cycle of generosity and gratitude established by learners and volunteers.

Discussions with program coordinators, interviews with learners, and feedback sessions with volunteers all shared the recurring themes of personal growth and growth mindset—the belief that intelligence can be developed, rather than remaining fixed. The learning environment encourages learners to take risks and persevere.

“A class teacher told us, ‘Don’t be afraid to make mistakes; without mistakes, you can’t grow.’ I would like to say to my fellow students, just try, because you are a learner.”

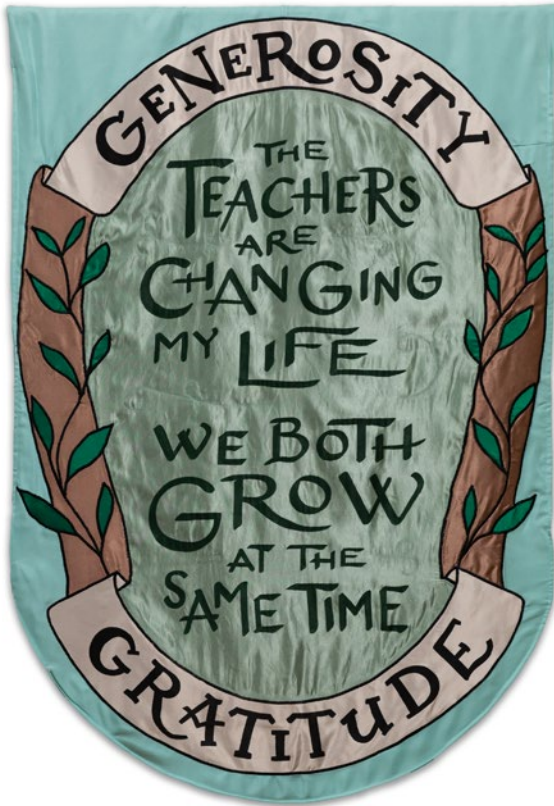
—JINKYUNG “COCO” IM



Learners aren’t the only ones who experience growth. Volunteer Catalina Gancz shared, “Working with my students gives us both the sense that it is important. We both grow at the same time.”

In addition, the program builds a sense of community, as well as satisfaction and self-worth.

“Many friendships have formed in my class among the students, and it’s enormously gratifying to see how much many of the students care for each other. It’s also great to



see people who have different native languages use their English to connect.”

—STU

For Stu, volunteering provides “a sense of emotional, intellectual and spiritual fulfillment.” Sidney Zafran, who is retired, said that volunteering “makes me feel worthwhile knowing that I can still add to my community. My volunteering is useful and appreciated. It gives me instant feedback.”

Enthusiasm for the program seems rooted in an

awareness of beneficence and a resulting impulse towards reciprocity.

“When I meet volunteer teachers, my heart is very warm, because they spend a lot of time with us. One day I want to volunteer in the library. I have to do something for the library, because the teachers are changing my life.”

—JINKYUNG “COCO” IM

“Volunteering has actually been a great help for my mental health. I always tell the learners when they thank me, ‘No, thank YOU.’ It really is true that giving back really gives back to yourself, too.”

—GOLDIE HOFFMAN

These sentiments contribute to a sense of belonging and aliveness.

“[When you belong,] you feel like part of you has come alive, the people that are around you have come alive... People feel good to you.”

—DARRELL HARVILLE

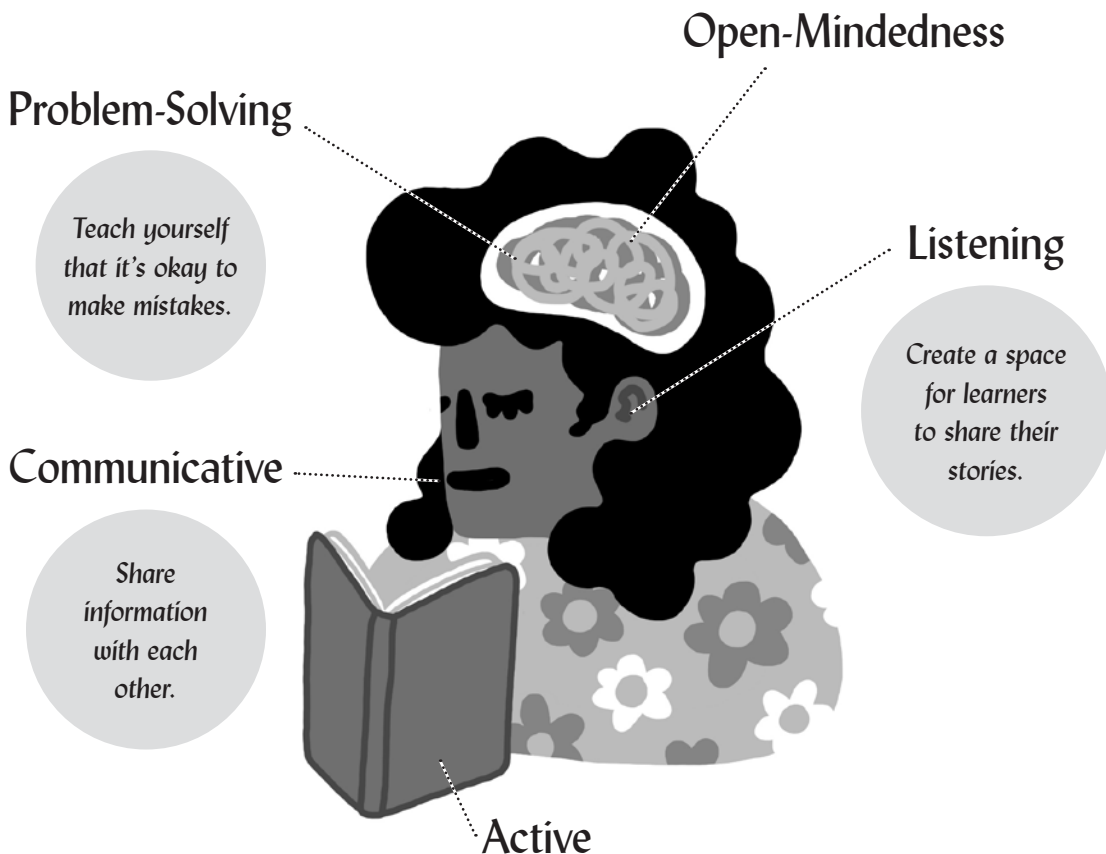
Quotations on banner by Jinkyung “Coco” Im & Catalina Gancz. Banner design & stitching by Christine Wong Yap. Painting assistance by Kennedy Morgan.

Try it! Learn about attributes and workouts for empowerment on the next page. →

Anatomy & Workout Plan for Empowerment

CONCEPT & CONTENT BY ABEL SANTIBANEZ

We can empower ourselves with everyday superpowers like these attributes labeled below. Just as exercise contributes to physical wellbeing, here are some workout ideas (in the circles) to empower learners and volunteers.





Leadership

Encourage learners to become volunteers.

Conflict Resolution

Mediator

Empathy

Instill that everyone is welcome and that the library is a level playing field.

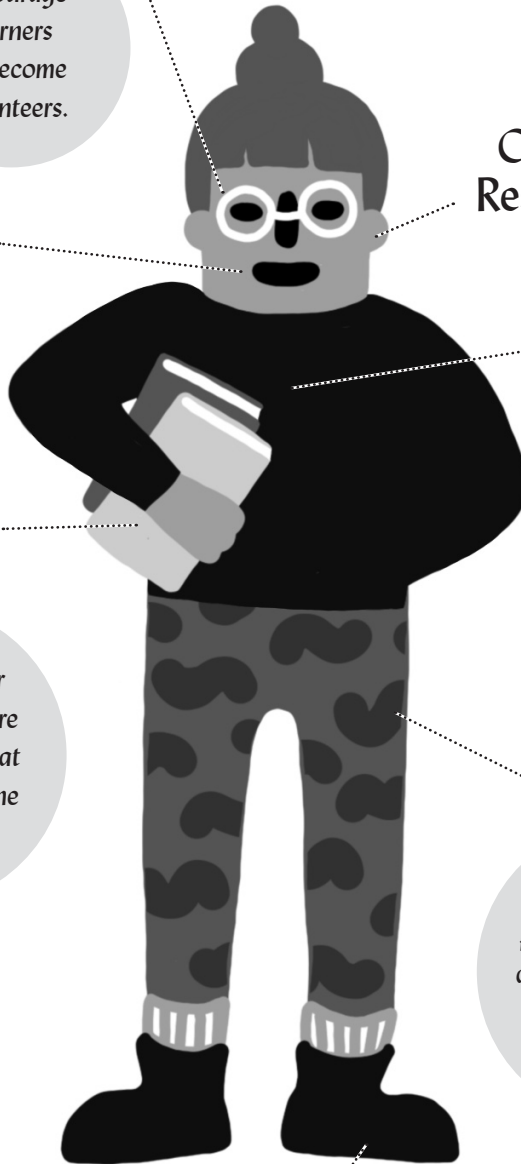
Lifelong Learning

Organize learner round tables where learners share what they want from the program.

Teamwork

Develop the program so learners determine what they want, need, and how.

Assertiveness



Watts Willowbrook Conservatory

The Watts Willowbrook Conservatory offers free music workshops and low-cost musical instruments to children and teens in areas with high percentages of at-risk youth. A program of the Scholarship Audition Performance Preparatory Academy (SAPPA), the conservatory conducts cello classes and solo recitals at the Alma Reaves Woods–Watts Branch Library.

The banner design takes its shape from the double bass, which played a pivotal role in a young musician’s development.

Jermaine Paul is a program alum and musician who had performed at Lincoln Center and toured Europe by age 20. Mari Paul is his mother, who has five other children who have participated in the conservatory. In phone interviews, Mari and Jermaine spoke passionately about the impact of the program and particularly of SAPPA founder and director Billy Mitchell.

“One day Billy called me into his office. He was like, ‘I have something I wanna show you.’ And he had a bass there and it was kind



of broken, but not unsalvageable. He was like, ‘We had this used bass violin that had been donated by UCLA. If you play for me for the next year, it’s yours.’ And so I did, and he gave it to me, and we fixed it up, and it’s now one of the basses I play on primarily. Billy gave me a lot of classical training with all the repertoire, a lot of gig experience (because we were going out and playing corporate events), and a bass to be able to do it all. He really just gave me a whole jump start to the career genuinely.”

—JERMAINE PAUL



“We have three boys and three girls who went through the program. In our area, SAPPA is very important. ‘Cause it’s not like we have [other] things to choose from. We don’t even have like music stores in the area, let alone music programs. So to have something that was offered to the children free of charge, very minimal requirements financially for families, was amazing for us to do. Your sense of belonging when you participate in programs like this, it expands. It’s just the biggest thing for a child to expand their horizons, and know that they’re capable and

able, and that there are other possibilities out there. And the measure of expansion through SAPPA has just been awesome. You know, belonging is relative to every community, but somebody supporting you and caring enough to show you something different is a gift that you’ll forever be grateful for. When Mr. Mitchell gave Jermaine his first bass, that changed the whole trajectory of his life and what he’s doing now and knowing that he can do whatever he wants to do. He’s graduating college this year. So, I’m assuming he will continue to tour ‘cause he’s been touring like crazy. He knows he belongs anywhere. He doesn’t have any limitations. He doesn’t have, a fear of, ‘Well maybe I can’t do that.’ SAPPA is a place of belonging to propel the kids, to know that they could belong other places and they don’t have to be afraid to try, or to do things, they could just be fearless and go out and do what they need to do.”

—MARI PAUL

Banner quotation by Mari Paul. Banner design & stitching by Christine Wong Yap. Painting assistance by Kennedy Morgan.

Teen Council

Spanning many neighborhoods, demographics, and interests, Teen Councils are LAPL programs at branches throughout LA. Participants hold elected offices, and receive volunteer credits and community service hours. Some also develop Teens Leading Change service learning projects exploring topics such as food waste, environmental racism, or the school-to-prison pipeline.

To represent Teen Councils as a whole, the banner design features a fist bump to signal cooperation and connection. Friendship bracelets symbolize social relationships, diversity, and the open-mindedness and safety of being accepted as you are. The lettering style and burst motif are borrowed from superhero comics to suggest dynamism, action, and empowerment.

In a virtual meeting with Teen Council members from the Chinatown, Robertson, and Palisades Branch Libraries, participants shared their perspectives and motivations.

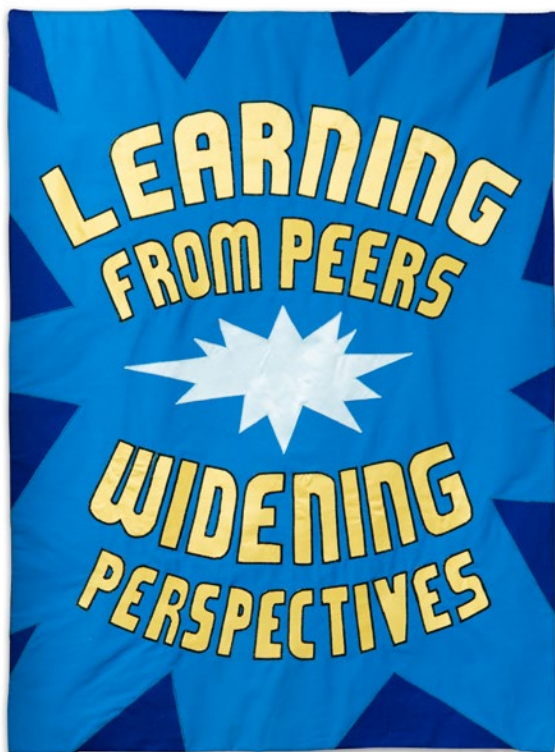
“Teen Council is an uplifting, positive environment that encourages growth and motivation. It encourages teens to build connections, participate in activities that they may not have access to at home, exercise leadership skills and advocacy, and



gain volunteer experience. I feel a part of a community where I am comfortable and open to new perspectives while being myself. The activities allow me to feel included and not alone in certain issues.”

—KAREN HUANG

For many teens experiencing the social isolation of the pandemic, Teen Councils helped to foster relationships and a sense of support. They valued the “peer connection” (Yingyi Ma) and the “supportive and helpful community” (A.F.). This relationship building went hand-in-hand with expanding one’s world. Sarah Lepkowitz



appreciated “learning from my peers and widening my perspectives.”

Other teens articulated how relationship building aided service learning and vice versa.

“We were strangers who seemed like we had no similarities, but we came together to address certain issues and ended up getting to know each other in the end.”

—FRANCIA POMA

Teens also prized the sense of belonging and psychological safety: they felt free to express their

most authentic selves without fear of judgment or recrimination.

“Teen Council is a safe place where I can express my thoughts without feeling judged. Everyone in the group is kind and open-minded.”

—SARAH LEPKOWITZ

“Despite us being from different backgrounds, we can always sit together and exchange our ideas with no judgment.”

—YINGYI MA

By cultivating safety, Teen Council also builds self-knowledge and authenticity.

“I feel that we are truly connecting with each other and ourselves.”

—ROSELYN CHIN

Banner quotation by Sarah Lepkowitz. Banner design by Christine Wong Yap. Stitching by Tiffy Amundson (IATSE 784).

Try it! Play a board game and learn more about Teen Council activities on the next page. →

Teen Council Adventure

CONCEPT BY TEEN COUNCIL MEMBERS



Concept by Fiona Herzog, Francia Poma & Sophie Zhu, Teen Council members at the Palisades Branch Library, with contributions from Teen Council members at the Chinatown Branch Library.



MATERIALS

- One game die
- Gameboard (see the following spread)
- Game pieces (see opposite page)

PREP

1. Photocopy the game pieces on the opposite page onto cardstock.
2. Cut out game pieces along the dotted lines. You will need one game piece per player. Cut out a semi-circular base for every game piece you need.
3. Cut the lines coming up from the bottom of each game piece, making sure to stop at the dot. Cut the corresponding lines going down the middle of the semi-circular base, again stopping at the dot.
4. Assemble by inserting the cut into the game piece into the cut on the base.

RULES OF PLAY

1. The goal of the game is to be the first to reach the final tile, which is the Los Angeles Public Library.
2. Place all players' game pieces on the "start" tile.
3. The first player will roll the die and then advance the number of tiles according to the number on the die.
4. If a player lands on a square with a booster Teen Council activity, follow the arrows to skip several tiles.
5. Players continue in order until reaching the "end" tile.



Teen Council Adventure

START

Attend a career day to find a passion.

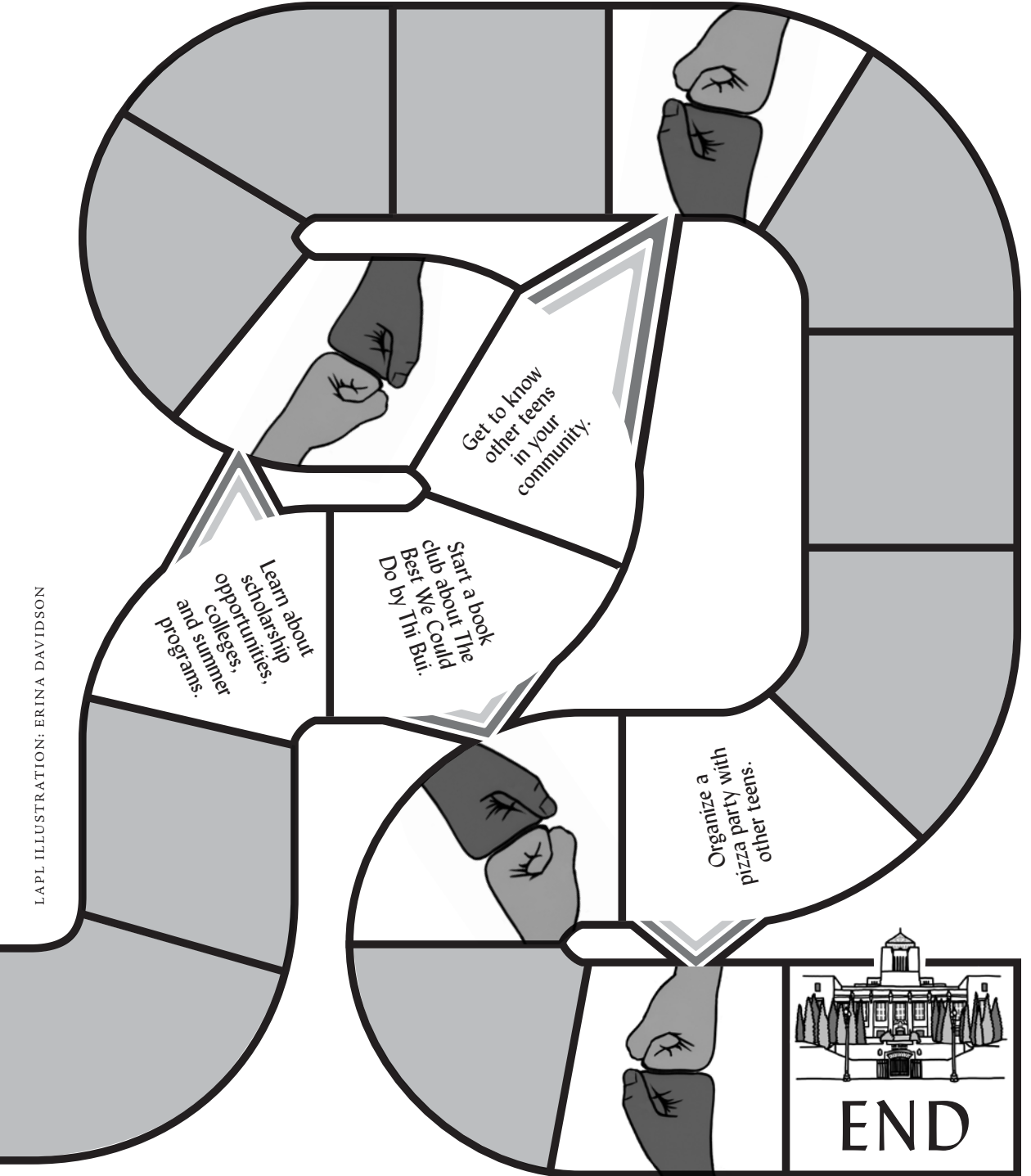
Collaborate on a Teens Leading Change goal.

Run for Teen Council office.

Attend a paint night.

Help distribute groceries to elderly neighbors.

Learn how to help our environment locally.



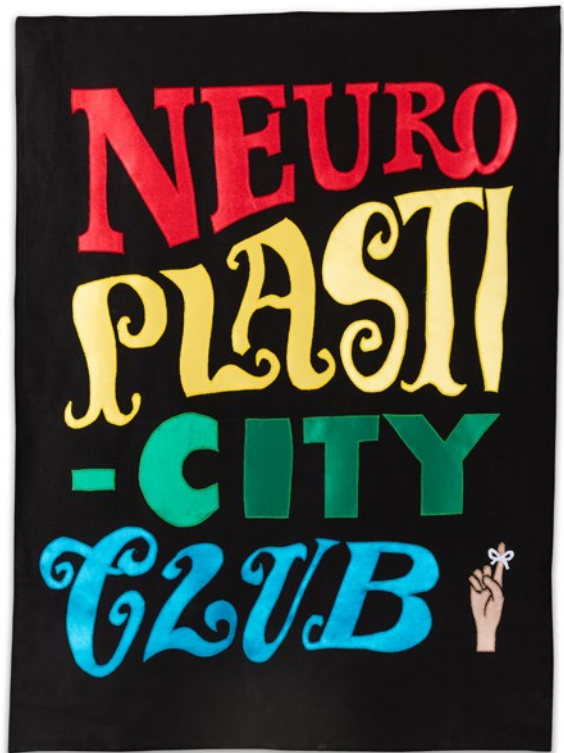
END

Neuroplasticity Club

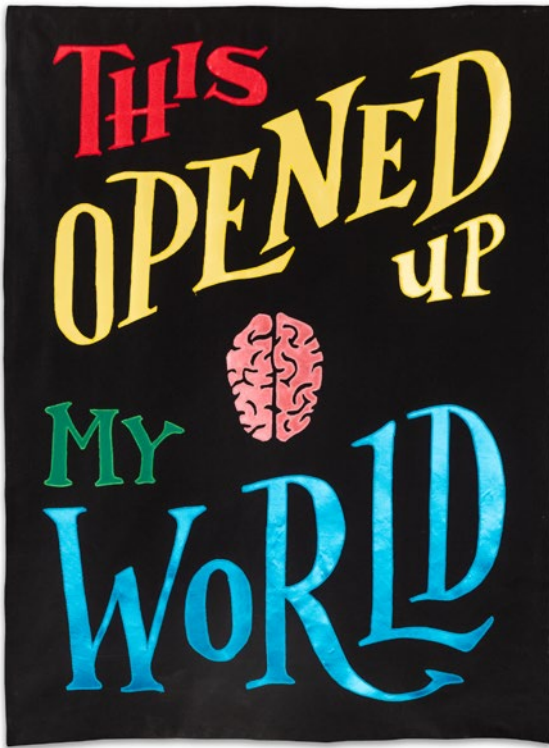
Participants in the Neuroplasticity Club are residents of Menorah House, a nonprofit providing affordable housing for low-income older adults. The club provides access to printed copies of thought-provoking readings and hosts group discussions by phone, which are carefully facilitated by librarian Yago Cura. The poems, articles, and passages include intellectually rigorous material spanning a wide range of topics.

The banner design incorporates contributions from club member Michael Ashmore, a retired sign painter (not to mention retired rodeo rider among other careers). A string tied around a finger is a mnemonic device to remember to do something. The brain references the cognitive capacities that the club exercises.

In a group interview, participants appreciated the access to and curation of the readings, as well as the benefits of social connection and relationships.



"I always find our sessions to be interesting and I learn new things. These books are not the sort of things that I seek out on my own. So I appreciate having them brought to my attention. The club forces us to find meaning in phrases and words. And it forces us to connect with our history, our lives, as people on this earth. I have a great respect and appreciation for some of the people (we read about) who I probably would never have heard



of otherwise. And whom I probably wouldn't have appreciated had it not been for the way the information was presented during the session. There is a feeling of connection that I feel with the other participants, and obviously with Yago, the facilitator. I just like that feeling. I enjoy feeling connected."

—MICHAEL ASHMORE

The pandemic has exacerbated and complicated seniors' abilities to connect with others and to access resources. The Neuroplasticity Club has helped to ameliorate some of this disconnection.

"This pandemic has destroyed a lot of our energy in so many directions, that it's wonderful to be able to reach out and speak to people who are knowledgeable, who are well-read, who are animated, and are not frightened of conversation. For those of us that are homebound or stuck at home for any length of time, which I am, this really opened up my world in a way that I didn't think it would."

—LENORE BLECKER

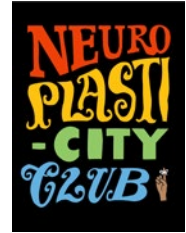
Banner quotation by Lenore Blecker. Michael Ashmore contributed the lettering on the front of the banner, as well as the illustrations. The lettering on the back is by Christine Wong Yap. Stitched by Tiffy Amundson (IATSE 784).

Try it! Learn how to start a Neuroplasticity Club on the next page. →

How to Start a Neuroplasticity Club

BY YAGO CURA

1. Find a **dry, quiet space** where you can hold a discussion and create a dialogue. For maximum effect, you can choose to hold your session in a grotto, garden, or study. As long as you can hear each other speak, and the ambient noise doesn't preclude rapport, that's all that you really need.
2. Go over the **ground rules** which include:
 - ✦ No hurtful assertions about race, sex, or sexual orientation.
 - ✦ No aggressive overtures designed to intimidate.
 - ✦ Curiosity over virtuosity. (We are all here to learn, not lecture.)We are here to discuss challenging ideas and need to ensure we utilize a compassionate vocabulary.
3. For two weeks prior to the workshop, **read voraciously and note lyrical passages** in interesting articles, chapters, and poems in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, or *The Atlantic*.
4. **Choose a specific excerpt** from a novel or article that you found rewarding but challenging to read. Ensure that it is accessible but difficult to enter/inhabit. In other words, focus on an article or chapter from a novel that takes time to develop its ideas and contentions. If you would prefer to focus on a poet, choose at least five poems that speak to you or form part of a series (i.e. Ted Berrigan's *The Sonnets*, Wendell Berry's *The Dream Songs* or even Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*).
5. Although there is no correct way to discuss a challenging piece of writing, **familiarize participants with the following schema** created by Keen and Zimmerman in their 1997 literacy primer, *Mosaic of Thought*:
 - ✦ **Text-to-self:** Connection between text and an experience in your life.
 - ✦ **Text-to-text:** Connection between text and another piece of text (painting, movie, poetry, or prose).
 - ✦ **Text-to-world:** Connection between text and something happening in the greater world or an international level.



6. In the week leading up to the workshop, re-read the text you are assigning. Underline important phrases and define ambiguous words. **Develop a strategy** to bring meaning to the text that does not necessarily follow chronological progression. In other words, the facilitator can approach the text in any order they like. It might help to write out a script that progresses from idea to idea and point to point.
7. If you are reading a series of poems from the same poet, please **search on popular databases** like Literature Resource Center or integral organizations like The Poetry Foundation or Poetry Society of America for insights, interpretations, and ideas about the texts. The idea is not to know more than the participants, but to support their intuition as they parse through the text and attempt to render meaning.
8. Come up with at least **10 questions** that you would like to discuss with the participants. Strive to compose open-ended questions that invite inquiry. If you have trouble coming up with 10 open-ended questions, solicit them from participants on the day of the workshop.
9. **Facilitate the workshop.** Encourage everyone to participate. If you find that one participant is standing out more than any other participant, ask the zealous participant to interact with one of the other participants by asking them a question. If the zealous participant can't come up with a question, ask them to come up with an assertion about the text so they can pose the question to a participant that hasn't said much.
10. Make a conscious effort to **listen more than talk**. Leave about ten minutes at the end of the workshop for questions, comments, and more rapport building. ■

RESOURCES

- Keene, Ellin Oliver, and Susan Zimmerman. *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997.
- LeCourt, Donna. *The Text-Wrestling Book*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Pub. Co., 2005.

French Conversation Club

The French Conversation Club has been meeting for over 10 years at the Westwood Branch Library. With high participation and interest, the group meets twice per month. The meetings are free-form. There are no facilitators, agendas, or assignments. Conversations flow from personal stories to French culture to current events. Language learners turn to native speakers for guidance. Many returning participants have developed a friendly rapport over the years.

The banner design is inspired by the energetic, multivocal chatting in the meetings. The text, in typefaces and lettering styles associated with French culture, appears in speech bubbles coming from many angles on a tricolor background.

In interviews, French Conversation Club members shared why participating is enjoyable to them.



“My late husband and I started going to the group around 2013 or 2014, not because we wanted to learn, but because we like the language and we thought it would be fun. We didn’t have that many occasions to speak French; we spoke with each other because we were both born in Paris. That’s why we went and it was very pleasant, frankly. Over the years, some people have become familiar, so I feel it’s almost a friendship, even though we don’t get in touch with each other outside of the class. I like hearing these people, most of these people have lived in France and speak very well; some not so well, but they’re from



different countries and are learning French. I enjoy offering help in pronunciation or translation. It's just a nice group of people of various ages. [Being retired,] I've got a lot of time now and I look forward to the connection with various people, with people who obviously like the language as much as I do. I tell them a little something personal which I enjoy. I've lived such a long life. Most of these people are younger than I am and sometimes they enjoy my stories. Little stories that I tell them, what I was a witness to during WWII."

—LOUISE KORNBERG

"We want new people to have a chance to talk. We'll draw them out, so they feel good about their visit. Sometimes there is a moment of quiet, but it doesn't last very long. If you're learning French, to reinforce what you're learning, you need to get outside of yourself, you need to speak to other people. It's a good feeling. You just love language, and speaking French gives you a lot of joy. At this point the group is very familiar, very comfortable. The meetings are two hours, which is nice. Everybody's happy about that. I thought it was nice of the library. For me, those two hours are very unstressful."

—DAVID AARON

One member, Razi, is a polyglot and avid learner. (In fact, she attends the French Conversation Club as well as Adult Literacy Services' Multicultural Literacy Class.) Fluency in French has a functional purpose for her.

"I have two sisters who live in France. My nephew and brother-in-law are French. When I go to France and meet them, I only speak French. That's why I want to learn French."

—RAZI

Banner design by Christine Wong Yap. Stitching by Francesca Palizzi (IATSE 768).

Persian Poetry Forum OF LOS ANGELES

Librarian Ramin Naderi and volunteer Max Rahni co-organize monthly gatherings featuring poetry readings, guest speakers, open mics, facilitated discussions, and cultural celebrations with Persian community members. With the switch to virtual meetings, participants hail from the Persian diaspora in LA as well as from around the world.

The highly collaborative banner design uses the motif and colors of a phoenix, or *símurgh*, because of its centrality in Persian poetry, especially the poetry of Ferdowsi and Attar. It symbolizes crossing borders, rebuilding lives in new homelands, and the experience of freedom. The Forum fosters self-expression, welcoming difference and diversity. The theme of heterogeneity is reinforced by incorporating a wide variety of patterns from handwoven fabrics and tapestries: *termeh* (found in central provinces in Iran, such as Isfahan and Yazd), *ja'ím* (found in almost every region in Iran), and *kílím* (found throughout Iran and other geographies in the former Persian Empire).



The forum's focus on poetry is a culturally-specific framework.

"Poetry is the identity of Persians. Persian poetry is musical, concise, and meaningful. It includes a lot of wisdom and offers opportunities for reflection. When two Farsi speakers enter a discussion or an argument, they use poetry to help each other understand their point of view."

—MAX RAHNI

A forum is an open space for discussion, implicit with principles, which are intentionally practiced.



“Our group gives people a sense of freedom and comfort, because we do not impose any censorship on any topic or discussion.”

—MAX RAHNI

“We come from a huge country with 80 million people. You can imagine the different parts of Iran, the different cultures. In the Forum, we gather all different people with different characteristics and emotions. Sometimes they’re angry because we are coming from a country with eight years of war. The benefit I learn from these classes, aside from the cultural part, is how we can

practice accepting each other and be patient. One of the failures with our culture is that we cannot accept if anybody is talking against our idea. And I think this class is very good because they practice accepting and learning. Most of the other Iranian groups in LA have a political link. But a library is neutral. And I think that’s very, very important.”

—SHEYDA MINA

The social connection is highly valued.

“The Forum is where you learn, enjoy, see friends or make friends. There’s satisfaction, enjoyment, and support. The group is something that brings people together and helps them be who they are. It’s very positive.”

—FARIDEH SHABANFAR

“When I see that I can share what I have with people via this forum, it makes me feel happy and proud.”

—MAX RAHNI

Banner quotation by Farideh Shabanfar. Banner concept and translation by Ramin Naderi. Banner design by Christine Wong Yap in consultation with Ramin Naderi. Stitching by Christine Wong Yap.

Try it! Download detailed instructions on how to create your own Persian Poetry Forum at belongingLAPL.ChristineWongYap.com. Learn how to play a poetry game on the next page. →

Musha'irih: The Game of Poetry Recital

BY RAMIN NADERI

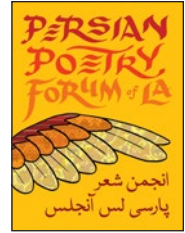
Musha'irih is one of the most popular party games among Persian (Farsi) speakers. The game is played in a group setting and the goal is to recite as many verses as possible. Except, it's not that easy!

GETTING STARTED

1. Grab a set of **alphabet letters or cubes**. If you don't have one, just write each letter on a small slip of paper and put them in a bag.
2. **Invite players.** The game can be played with as few as two players. But it is the most fun when everybody in the party plays.
3. Have the players **sit in a circle**.
4. The **first player recites** a line or verse of a poem from memory. This verse has to start with the letter that's been dealt.
5. Everyone listens carefully to **identify the ending letter of the verse** being recited.

HOW TO PLAY MUSHA'IRIH

1. The game is played in **turns** and moves in a **clockwise** direction.
2. The party host serves as the **dealer** and **draws** a letter randomly.
3. The **oldest player goes first**—respect those who have paved the way for you...
6. The **dealer announces the ending letter** and passes the turn to the next player by saying "give me a [letter]". For example, "give me a T=ت".
7. The next player has **30 seconds to prepare themselves to recite a verse** from memory that starts with the ending letter that the dealer has announced.
8. Players take turns in **building a chain of poetry** by reciting verses from memory that start with the dealt letters.
9. **Each verse can be recited only once** during the game.



WINNING THE GAME

Players need to know poems by heart, and act quickly and strategically to win the game.

If a player runs out of time before remembering a verse that starts with the dealt letter, they will sit out and take a listen-only role in the game.

If a player recites a verse that starts with a letter other than the dealt letter, or repeats a verse that has been recited already, they will sit out and take a listen-only role in the game.

As players decide on the verses to recite, they strategically select ones that end at a challenging letter, such as Th=ث, Q=غ etc.

Once a player sits out, if it is determined that no verse exists that starts with the dealt letter, the dealer can draw another letter from the bag.

The last person who remains in the game and recites poetry is the winner.

REWARD

Besides commendation from the group and whatever delicious treat the host has set aside, the winner gets to boast about their poetry recital skills by reciting a poem of their choice to the group that is now taking a listen-only role.

PLAY BILINGUALLY

When the party is a mix of Persian (Farsi) and English speakers, play the bilingual version of *Musha'irih*. Each player will recite verses in their own language. The dealer announces the ending consonant or vowel, and the game continues bilingually.

English-speaking players, unfamiliar with Persian poetry will get a bonus if they choose to recite a verse by Hafiz or Rumi. The dealer will allow them to use Divan-Hafez.com or Masnavi.net to find and read a verse. They will have 30 seconds to find a verse that starts with the dealt letter. ■

Health Matters Book Club

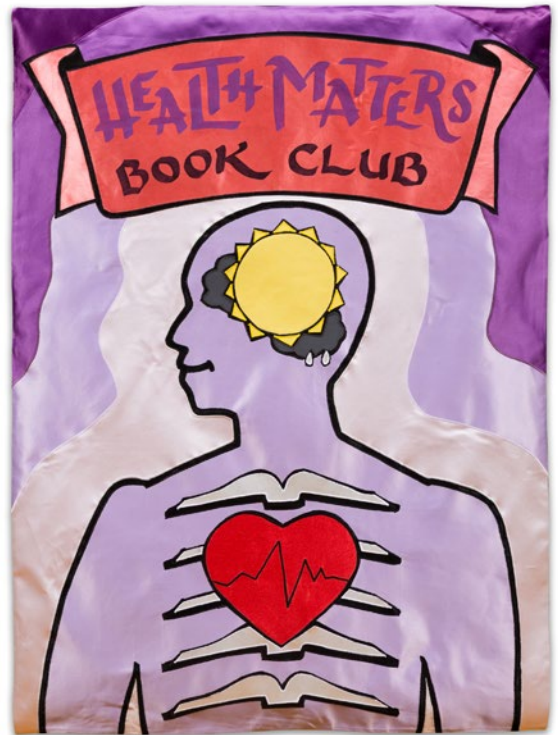
The Health Matters Book Club was founded when a library patron suggested it to a Pacoima Branch librarian a few years ago. The monthly reading group discusses books on physical and mental health.

The design of the banner references X-rays and cardiograms to convey medical and physical health, while weather icons in the mind suggests mental and emotional well-being. The radiating silhouette is inspired by the way participants use their knowledge to encourage friends and family to pursue their respective health goals.

Club members have adapted new healthy habits.

“I originally started the group ‘cause I thought it would help me lose weight. It helps me to eat healthier. I am eating more vegetables. We motivate each other. Reactivity theory, a psychological phenomenon, is that when you know that people are watching you, you could do better than if nobody’s watching.”

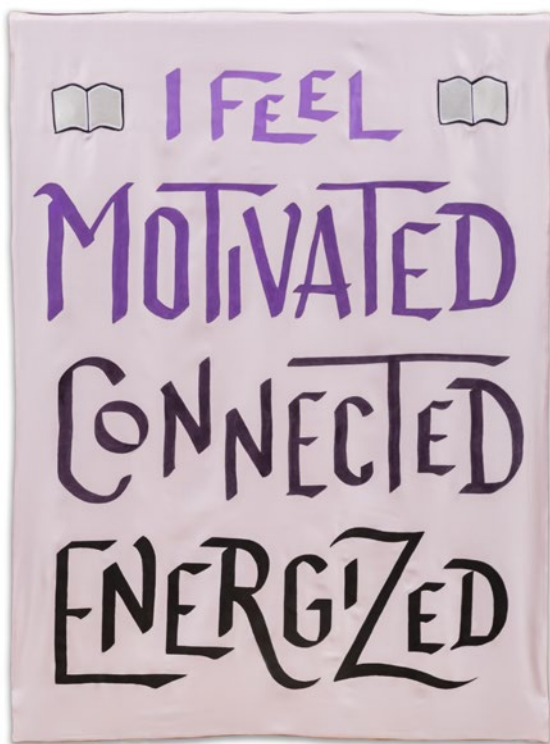
—LK



“I joined the club to meet people, make friends, and to read self-help books. I followed some suggestions in these books and I feel healthier. I lost 30 pounds. Other books helped me cope with the loss of my husband (who passed away), and keeping a gratitude journal. I feel grateful today for what I have. I am happier.”

— CHERYL GRIMM

In addition to knowledge and self-improvement, participants also value the mental and social benefits of connection, which further supports positive change.



“Friendship is the main reason I stay with the group. And I find motivation from everyone’s support and sharing their own experiences in a lot of areas. This helps me to put the theories in the books to work, to become practical and become reality.”

—YEUMEI SHON

“I value the people in this group. It’s the relationships that keeps me coming. Not only does the club help me and the people in the group, but it also expands out to people who I interact with.”

—PAM

“It really is a high point of my week when we meet. I so look forward to this. It’s just such a wonderful, warm feeling. And I’m happy—as the person from the library managing it—that everyone’s so respectful. People go out of their way to communicate well. They try to help and there’s no personal attacks. That builds trust and community and belonging. I really feel energized after this group. Because you’re motivated. I feel connected. I’m always in such a good space at the end.”

—RACHEL ROSE

Flexibility gives members a sense of control and encourages participation.

“We vote on what book we wanna read. If we don’t agree with the majority opinion, we could still read our own book. So we have a lot of freedom and respect.”

—LK

Banner quotation by Rachel Rose. Banner design by Christine Wong Yap. Stitched by Tiffy Amundson (IATSE 784). Painting assistance by Kennedy Morgan.

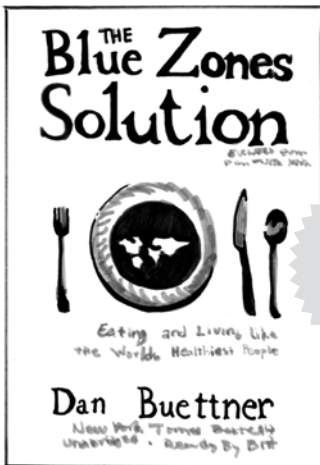
Try it! See recommended books and discussion questions on the next page. →



Books & Discussion Questions

AS RECOMMENDED BY LK & RACHEL ROSE

Anyone can benefit from a book club to improve physical and mental well-being. Start your own book club with these favorite books and suggested discussion questions.

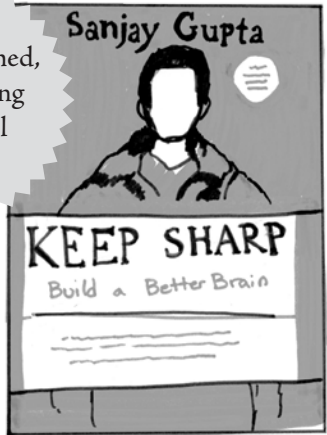


How did the book make you feel?

great role models to learn from

Do you think you'll apply anything from the book to your life? If so, what?

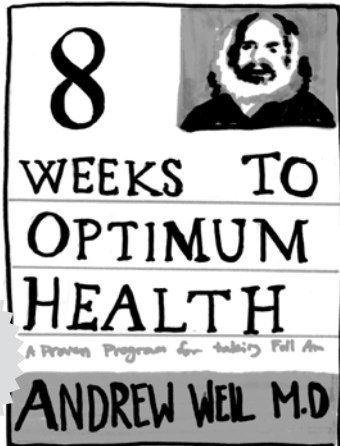
well-researched, with a strong emotional impact



Would you recommend this book to a friend?

What do you like about the book?

practical ways to feel better



ADDITIONAL TITLES

- Atomic Habits* by James Clear
- The Gratitude Diaries* by Janice Kaplan
- Why We Sleep* by Matthew Walker
- Spontaneous Happiness* by Dr. Andrew Weil
- Japanese Women Don't Get Old or Fat* by Naomi Moriyama and William Doyle

Belonging & Mental Health

CHRISTINE WONG YAP

Belonging supports mental health and emotional well-being because it meets needs we all share.

Psychologist Rick Hanson, PhD, with Forrest Hanson, identified three fundamental human needs—**safety, satisfaction, and connection**—in their book *Resilient* (2018). Participants of LAPL groups mentioned each of these needs.

Physical and psychological **safety** are critical prerequisites for a sense of belonging. Psychologically, “we fulfill this need by avoiding harms” (Hanson), such as disconnection, judgment, and shame, which are incompatible with belonging. This is seen in a comment by Fiona Herzog, a member of Teen Council at the Palisades Branch Library, who defined belonging as “being accepted as who you are, even with your flaws.”

We find **satisfaction** by “approaching rewards” (Hanson), that is, by experiencing something that fosters contentment. Many participants said it simply “feels good” to be active in their groups. These positive emotions help to sustain involvement and repair conflict.

Facilitators can feel a profound sense of satisfaction when they see their efforts pay off. A librarian and co-founder of the Persian Poetry Forum of LA discussed the affective rewards of

seeing his goals realized in members’ experiences:

“As organizers, we strive to ‘Americanize the content’—to instill American values, such as freedom of speech and inclusion, in our Persian programming. When participants say they feel safe to express themselves and they experience freedom of speech in this program—as a result of the absence of a political affiliation—it makes my heart swell with pride. It makes me feel that our efforts have started making a real impact. The Persian community is a diverse population, and the political affiliations (Monarchists, Secular Democrats, Reformists, etc.) can be a divisive factor. Being able to represent the neutrality of the library and making this program a welcoming space for people from different parts of the spectrum are successes for me.”

—RAMIN NADERI

Connection with other people was cited as a benefit of participation by members of all the groups. When you’re feeling connected, you might feel friendliness, care, or love (Hanson), which participants associated with belonging. “Belonging is feeling loved,” wrote Zhangyang Wu, a Teen Council member from the Chinatown Branch Library. Cheryl Grimm, of →

REFLECTION, CONTINUED

the Health Matters Book Club, said, “The club supports my sense of belonging because I made some friends.” Literacy volunteer Stu was moved by the care he saw among his students.

While having something in common can draw people together, a joy of connection is exposure to difference. Georgia Bell, a volunteer with Adult Literacy Services, effused, “The learners and volunteers are all people who really want to be there. They’re curious, motivated, sometimes shy, usually friendly. You’ll meet a lot of interesting people!” Razi, a learner from the same program, said, “There are students from different countries, so I’ve learned many things about different cultures. This is one of the best parts that I like about this class.”

The role of belonging in meeting these three needs is suggested when Jinkyung “Coco” Im, a learner with Adult Literacy Services, describes, “If I feel I belong to some group, I feel more safe, confident, peaceful, joyful. I don’t worry about nothing. I have something with somebody.”

I think the “something” Coco mentions is both the “something in common” referenced in the title of the exhibition in conjunction with this project—a shared interest around which a club or affinity group forms—and a greater sense of

connection. In developing this project, I have come to believe that having an activity or interest in common is important. Like the table where people gather, it’s a magnet that attracts. But it is one piece of a larger whole. I think the practices, cultures, norms, and self-giving generosity which contribute to belonging might be the more powerfully transformative elements. The conversations around the table which nourish your soul, filling your hours with enjoyment and aliveness, are like a magnetic *field*, which draw people closer, not only to a commonality, but to each other. The intangibility of these practices—and the shared role of participants to contribute to the community’s culture of belonging—is echoed by another co-founder of the Persian Poetry Forum of LA:

“Belonging doesn’t happen with written texts and books. It needs to happen in practice. We put some elements together and provide a context for people to feel they belong. We provide an environment for them, and by using different facilitators, we try to connect them together so that they can foster that feeling of belonging.”

—MAX RAHNI ■

About

CHRISTINE WONG YAP

Celebrated for her work in social practice and positive psychology, Bay Area-based artist Christine Wong Yap is known for deeply felt and thought-provoking textiles, publications, flags, billboards, and prints that utilize calligraphy and inclusive design to explore ideas around belonging and its relationship to mental health and well-being.



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Acknowledgments

Christine Wong Yap wishes to extend deep gratitude to Todd Lerew, Shirley Thao, the Library Foundation of Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Public Library, the Wellcome Trust, and Danielle Olsen.

Special thanks to Joyce Cooper, the library's Area Managers, Ashley Binning, Abel Santibanez, Zachary Valdivia, Dr. Jen Nobel, Joel Boucher, Rachel Rose, Yago Cura, Ramin Naderi, Toktam Gholami, Max Rahni, Lynn Nguyen, Jessica Levy, Dan Nishimoto, Jasmine Slaughter, Charlene Nichols, and Billy Mitchell.

Thanks to all the contributors and everyone who participated in interviews, group sessions, and meetings with me; Cole Chang, Kennedy Morgan, Erina Davidson, Pablo Manga, Tiffy Amundson (IATSE 784), Francesca Palizzi (IATSE 768); Ann Marshall, Christina Webb, Tiffanie Tran, and the installation team; Keith Kessler; and LAPL staff who make the library a space of belonging everyday. Additional thanks to Mike Arcega and Tana Quincy.

