

Coming to America Stories



Audience: Adult, Teen, Community Members
Popular Topics: Diversity & Multiculturalism, Immigration, Community
Budget: \$0-\$200 depending on paid speakers or facilitators, refreshments

Background:

2016 - Year 1: Inspiration (from Jessica Schneider, Teen Librarian)

EBPL has a teen Harry Potter Alliance chapter (Dobby's Favorite Sock). In 2016, they were obsessed with the Humans of New York Instagram account. They loved the idea of taking photos and posting interesting stories to go along with them.

The HPA teens hosted a coffee house at the library and invited the community to come and tell their stories. We chose the theme of "Coming to America" for several reasons. The biggest reason was that our community has so many immigrants, many of them recently arrived. This was also 2016, the election year, so there was a lot of talk about immigration and its impact on the country. HPA wanted to highlight the stories of immigrants to show a different side to the immigration experience.

Of those who attended, most were not recent immigrants. Teens encouraged parents to speak about their grandparents arriving in this country from Europe. One patron came and told the story of his family arriving during early colonialism. We had other immigrants who talked about their personal journeys to get to New Jersey, including one teen who remembered what life was like in India before moving to America.

We also invited an immigration attorney who, while she was mostly there to provide advice to anyone who was looking for information, ended up sharing her own story of immigration to this country. She talked about the challenges her clients faced as well as the uncertainty of what might come with a new administration in the White House.

The majority spoke about how coming to America improved their lives and the lives of their families, but one woman spoke of her rough transition into American culture. She held advanced degrees from India, and intended to practice medicine, but she would have been required to return to school to do so.

2017 - Year 2: Transition and Challenges

In 2017 Melissa Hozik and Paul Kibala adopted the program for adults. We continued the invitations to community partners from multicultural organizations, including the EB Human Relations Council, CACA Mid-Jersey Chinese School, and the Indian Cultural Society. Three panelists were selected for the evening, representing residents from different countries. The event included attendees who immigrated or had ancestors from Pakistan, Germany, Taiwan, Russia, and Poland. Stories covered different views and challenges faced by immigrants in 20th through 21st centuries.

The 2017 program went from the speakers answering questions posed by Paul and Melissa, to a political argument surrounding the Trump Travel Ban. Two individuals, both on opposite sides of the issue, began yelling at each other, making everyone feel uncomfortable. People walked out of the program before it was done. This was heartbreaking.

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2018 - Year 3: Lessons Learned

We were determined to learn from our mistakes in 2017 and run the program again. We hired Nancy Kranich (Past-President of ALA who worked on the “Libraries Transforming Communities” initiative) to facilitate the evening. Nancy assisted with creating focused questions and guidelines for those who attended, and small group discussion activities so people could also share, but not dominate the entire program.

Advice: Finding speakers who are willing to share their stories can be difficult, as some may not be comfortable speaking in front of groups in English. Having a facilitator is important—whether staff or a professional facilitator, someone who can keep the program on-topic, ensure that all attendees can be heard, and make everyone feel welcome is critical part of the process.

Including refreshments and allotting “mingling time” before and after the program also encourages interaction.



EBPL Harry Potter Alliance, Dobby’s Favorite Sock Chapter, 2016 members.



Coming to America Stories room display, 2016.

Other Media:

2018 Video on YouTube: <https://tinyurl.com/librarianmelissa> (under playlists)

Documents on Google Drive: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=1T5PZtUxsqPKADb-HxwpfBanHJJvm6ze2>

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