

## **CASE STUDY: BUILDING CONNECTION THROUGH ACCESSIBLE PROGRAMMING, ONE SMALL STEP IN COUNCIL BLUFFS**

### **Overview**



At Council Bluffs Public Library in Iowa, Adult Services Librarian Elisa Cruz was looking for ways to help people come together in a time when many community members felt isolated. Working with seniors, bilingual patrons, and adults who do not always feel comfortable with technology, she saw a growing need for programs that were welcoming, low pressure, and accessible.

When Elisa joined the One Small Step Libraries Initiative, it gave her the platform she was looking for. “It gave me a platform to focus the programming on,” she said. “I think that people need a place to come together and feel like they can have a safe space and be heard.” With OSS as a framework, she began designing programs that centered listening, empathy, and shared experience rather than debate or performance.

Over the course of the grant period, Elisa implemented eight OSS programs, ranging from Coffee and Conversations to bilingual conversation clubs, senior reminiscence sessions, and a final program centered on music and memory. Each program built on what she was learning about her community and about herself as a facilitator.

### **Approach**

Elisa approached her One Small Step work by grounding each program in tools that helped people begin talking without pressure. Across at least eight OSS programs, she relied heavily on the conversation cards to open dialogue. “Those conversation cards that we were provided,” she said, “that was like, for me, that was kind of my bread and butter of a lot of these, getting those conversations started.” The cards gave participants a shared entry point and gave Elisa more confidence as a facilitator, especially when working with groups that did not know one another well.



She adapted the Coffee and Conversations framework repeatedly, modifying it based on audience, location, and accessibility needs. “I used mostly the coffee and conversations outline,” she explained. “And I just kind of modified it a little bit to knowing what I wanted to do with it.” Some programs were hosted at the library, while others took place in senior communities and independent living facilities as outreach events. “Those were outreach events,” Elisa said, “so we were out and about at the senior communities.”



Accessibility shaped nearly every decision. With older participants, Elisa increased font sizes, used paper materials, and leaned into tools that were easy to see and handle. “I liked the postcards for the older people,” she said. “Cause they were able to see them better. When I worked with older folks in my last job, they were always asking, ‘can’t see that,’ ‘can’t hear you.’ So they really responded well to it.” These small adjustments helped ensure that participation felt possible rather than intimidating.

Several of Elisa’s programs were intentionally low cost. A bilingual conversation club required no budget at all. “Some of ‘em, like the one I did in Spanish, I didn’t spend anything,” she said. “I just was like, cool. Hey guys, come talk with me.” What mattered most was creating the invitation and having the space.



### **Facilitating Across Difference**

Facilitating these conversations pushed Elisa beyond her comfort zone. “It was definitely out of my comfort zone,” she said. “I’m more of a person that I don’t like to interrupt people.” Through practice, she gained confidence in guiding conversations while still honoring participants’ voices.

In one program, a participant hesitated before sharing a strong perspective. “One lady was even, she was very honest,” Elisa recalled. “She said, you know, ‘I’m not trying to be too negative.’ And she said, ‘Is that okay to say?’” Elisa responded by affirming the purpose of the space. “Those are your feelings,” she told her. “That’s

how you express right now what you know. And this is a safe space. Whether I agree with you or not, that's of no consequence."

Across programs, Elisa noticed that participants often shared more openly than she expected. "Some people shared more easily than I expected them to," she said. "And that was really a nice surprise. And they were really encouraging to others then too." Moments of honesty created openings for empathy, including conversations about unhoused community members and reflections shaped by lived experience, loss, and history.

These moments also surfaced gaps in understanding. Elisa noticed misinformation emerged during the discussion about unhoused individuals and took those insights seriously. "There was misinformation out there that I wasn't aware of," she said. "That I was then able to share with my superiors and say, this is what people are thinking." The conversations became not only a space for participants to be heard, but also a way for the library to better understand community perceptions.



Her bilingual programming added another layer of connection. Elisa moved fluidly between Spanish and English, encouraging participants to practice in both languages. "I was saying the questions in Spanish and then repeating it in English," she said, "and then they would practice. And I'd say, try it in Spanish and I'll help you." She described the experience as joyful and affirming, especially as participants gained confidence speaking in a supportive group.

### **Music Memories**

Elisa's final OSS program, Music Memories, brought together many of the lessons she had learned. Designed for older adults, the program used familiar music to prompt reflection and conversation. Drawing on songs from the nineteen fifties and nineteen sixties, Elisa and a guest facilitator paired listening with guided questions that invited participants to share stories tied to memory, place, and emotion.

Music offered a gentle entry point. The program built on her outreach relationships with senior communities and her understanding of how to pace conversations for

comfort and accessibility. For Elisa, Music Memories felt like a natural culmination of her OSS work, blending reminiscence, listening, and shared experience.

## What Emerged

Across her programs, Elisa was struck by how eager people were to connect. Participants often thanked her for the effort it took to design and facilitate the programs. “They were really grateful for what I was doing,” she said, noting that people do not always see the work behind library programming. In senior communities especially, the response was immediate and personal. After one visit, residents asked her, “When are you coming back?”

The experience also impacted how Elisa saw her role. Facilitating was challenging at first, but each program strengthened her confidence. “It gave me a platform to try some things that I might have not otherwise,” she said, “and a little bit of confidence.” What stayed with her most was the responsibility and possibility of holding space well, especially for people who do not often feel invited into public conversation.



## Takeaways and Looking Ahead

Elisa plans to continue prioritizing seniors, bilingual patrons, and others who are often left out of traditional programming. She hopes to build on her outreach relationships, explore additional ways to incorporate music, and share OSS tools with colleagues and partner organizations.

For Elisa, One Small Step was not about a single event, but about learning how to create space. Her work shows how adaptable tools, thoughtful facilitation, and attention to accessibility can help libraries meet people where they are and invite them into conversation with care and confidence.

**This case study highlights programs adapted from One Small Step toolkits. Visit [diy.takeonesmallstep.org](http://diy.takeonesmallstep.org) to explore the tools.**