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Peephole Power at the BPL

A visit to a library is always an opportunity to grow. The citizenship exhibit opening today at the Boston Public Library expands the possibilities with interactive displays illustrating the power of the individual to combat apathy and hate.

Presented by "Facing History and Ourselves," a 20-year-old national educational organization, and funded by area businesses, cultural groups, and foundations, the exhibit uses compelling recorded narratives and dramatic photographs to engage passersby in an impromptu civics lesson called "Choosing to Participate."

The class begins just inside the library's Boylston Street entrance, where a sign reads, "What's going on here?" and the backs of people in a crowd are painted on a round structure dotted with peepholes. Looking inside, the observer sees photos of street scenes -- a beating, someone committing vandalism, a lost boy, a homeless man -- and hears voices crying for help or offering it.

People also see one another looking through the holes, and the wall that stands between strangers breaks down in eye contact and talk.

Downstairs, black and white visitors make room for one another in an exhibit showing how two people stopped to help a 15-year-old girl facing a racist mob in a Little Rock schoolyard. They squeeze together on a bench to watch taped interviews with Billings, Mont., residents who joined ecumenical forces in 1993 to stop anti-Semitic violence.

On a table near a sign board reading "Even the smallest decisions can have enormous

consequences," people fill out cards describing a time when they or someone they know made a choice that mattered to others.

The exhibit, which will be viewed by 5,000 school children from around the state over the next seven weeks, is also a fine tool to prompt adult discussion and introspection. Its tour of seven US cities can contribute to the nation's much-needed dialogue on race and remind citizens that democracy is fragile, requiring constant attention to the ripple effect of every action, or inaction.