SANDY DOLNICK

The Present State of Library Friends

The Friends of Libraries Committee of the Public Relations Section of the Library Administration and Management Association (LAMA), as should be well known by now, has given birth to a new group called Friends of Libraries U.S.A. Some of the reasons which led to this development should be singled out. The first is the healthy state of friends of libraries today: there are at least 2000 groups, with a membership which has been conservatively estimated at one-half million members. The second is the directory which lists these groups.\(^1\) The third is a book of essays on library friends groups, scheduled for publication in November 1980, complementing the book by Sarah Wallace issued in 1962.\(^2\) Another strong influence is the newsletter, called *Friends of the Library National Notebook.*\(^3\) Originally subsidized by LAMA, the newsletter was begun with the hope that 400 subscribers would be enlisted to cover expenses. Today we have 700; in the future the newsletter will be available only to the members of Friends of Libraries U.S.A.

As editor of the book of essays and the newsletter, and president of the new organization, I would like to share some observations by way of describing the present state of our library friends groups. The basis of this paper involves my own observations, as well as a survey conducted in connection with the forthcoming book. For this survey, over 700 groups were selected at random from public and academic libraries; we had a 46 percent response rate. The following data, gathered in 1977-78, are probably still valid:

- 90 percent of the responses were from public libraries.
- 31 percent of these public libraries served a population of between 25,000 and 100,000.
- 6 percent of them served a population of more than 500,000.
- Of the groups surveyed, 47 percent of the libraries had collections of less than 100,000 volumes.
- 46 percent of the respondents represented libraries with budgets of less than $500,000.
- Unions were not a factor in most of the libraries.
- Most of the groups were organized after 1950.
Most of the groups had fewer than 200 members.
Once formed, most groups have been continually active.
Most are exempt from federal and state taxes.
Paid help is uncommon for all but the largest groups.
Most groups prefer not to use the word *lobby*, but nevertheless are strong
advocates of their library.
Library staff members, usually the library director, are almost always in-
volved with successful groups.
Most states do not have a state group to which the group could belong.
Most groups felt the need for a national organization.

It is important to keep this profile in mind when talking about friends of
libraries. If this survey is valid, most groups exist in relatively small towns
or colleges. This enhances their scope considerably, since friends can play a
much more important part in the life of a small community than in a large
one.

It is overwhelming to consider the variety of activities undertaken by
friends. I would like to give a sampling of some that have come to my
attention. Two types of programs have been used historically to bring
library friends groups to the attention of the public: the book-and-author
program and the book sale. The book sale can be a continuing event or it
may be held at given intervals throughout the year. It can be made up of
library discards, or of contributions from citizens. It is important not only
because it fosters goodwill in the community (who can resist a bargain?),
but also because it needs people to organize it, thus providing a means of
member involvement. It can also bring in new members, who are drawn
to the sale and want to enjoy the privilege of a members-only preview. Li-
braries are much more than collections of books, but library friends are
still attracted by that image. Ours may be among the last few generations
to enjoy the search through a card file or the leisurely perusal of the stacks,
but the tangible feeling of a book in hand has a powerful emotional appeal
to friends of libraries. The elusive spirit of a creative person is one of the
attractions of the book-and-author program. What kind of person writes
your favorite type of fiction or history? Members may be shy in speaking
directly to the author, but the appeal of seeing and hearing an author is still
a powerful one. Local or imported, the writer may not be a very good
speaker, but will still have an intangible aura.

These two types of programs, book-and-author programs and book
sales, may be best for fund raising because of their association with books.
The books can be priced so that anyone can afford to buy; or the prices may
exceed fair market value, as in an antiquarian book sale of donated items,
so that more money is raised.
Other types of book-related programs involve book production or illustration. Book review programs are popular, involving either a panel discussing a topic suggested by books, or a review of a specific book by a single person. Book discussion groups are also popular. Another money-making venture is a book fair, in which new books are sold at regular prices, with the group getting some percentage of the sales.

Certainly, library friends are anxious to show off their libraries and the mechanisms, new and old, that are a part of it. These programs are appropriate any time of year, not just during National Library Week. They can range from sessions on how to use the library to demonstrations of new equipment or displays of part of the library collection, such as new books, rare books, current or nostalgic films, videotapes, paintings, travel information — the list is as extensive as the resources of a library.

Programs of a social nature are a means of bringing other members of the community into the library group, not only through enlarging membership, but also through enhancing the group’s stature in the community as it relates more meaningfully to other groups. For those people who are afraid they do not read enough or are not smart enough to be a friend of the library, such programs are a good way of showing the diversity of the library’s community.

Many groups have found that introducing new paintings for rent, purchase, or just for show brings in a new type of friend, willing to help with display and to find artists to show their work. The same is true of concert series. There is generally space available for both types of activity at a library, and the surroundings are conducive to the enjoyment of art, music and books. Programs which mix the arts are especially popular in academic libraries.

Cosponsorship of a program with another group is an excellent way to enlarge the scope of your group. The League of Women Voters often needs help with a “Candidates Night.” The local historical or genealogical society, familiar with area history records, is often willing to demonstrate the work involved in tracing a family tree. Cosponsorship of a theater or symphony night has raised funds for libraries, providing a pleasant evening as well. One must remember that there is nothing wrong with such fun. Too serious an image eliminates a large part of the population from your group’s potential support. Also, remember various ethnic groups when planning your year’s programs. Many friends groups accent ethnic heritage during the holiday season, but a national holiday of another country might also be appropriate for celebration.

Craft programs are always popular and can provide for your group a core of helpers known to be good with their hands, industrious, and able to carry on long-term projects. Sometimes these same people can be prevailed
upon to address envelopes or to do telephoning; a reception can show off their finished projects.

Consumer advocacy and legal counsel, tax and estate planning, and real estate and stock investment programs bring in different groups and provide a very real service. The books in the library on these subjects can be shown and coffee served.

Social evenings set in the library building give a different slant to what we see behind the bricks and mortar. "Supper in the stacks" was held in Manhasset, New York: volunteer chefs among the friends prepared and served their specialties and distributed their recipes. An ice cream social and a strawberry festival have been held in other localities. The Laura Ingalls Wilder Gingerbread Sociable, in Pomona, California, sounds delicious. The Bookfellows of Milwaukee held a tea dance in the rotunda of the central library building, celebrating the library's centennial and evoking the period of the 1920s.

Other groups have sponsored tours. Four academic library friends groups in California joined to visit a Folger Shakespeare Library exhibit in San Francisco. The Cleveland Friends as a group visited the Metropolitan Toronto Library. Other tours may not be book- or library-related. A tour of homes is as appropriate for a library friends group as for an art club, as is a trip to a neighboring town to see a museum or a show.

One of the most ambitious plans for a year's programs is sponsored by the Mount Lebanon Public Library Association near Pittsburgh. They require only a minimum donation of one dollar for membership and offer these numerous opportunities for fun, self-improvement and volunteer work:

**Volunteer opportunities**
- Friends Reading Aloud program at the Baptist and Methodist Home
- Homebound service delivery
- Addressing envelopes for Friends
- Being host or hostess at library programs
- Staffing Friends' membership desk at library during annual drive
- Participation on telephone committee
- Delivering posters to local stores to advertise book sale
- Helping sort books for sale

**Learning opportunities**
- Genealogy study group
- French, Spanish and German conversation groups
- Informal book review group
- Storytellers (a group which meets to learn about and practice storytelling)
- Book discussion group
- Art appreciation group
Local history project
Chess club
Backgammon club
Craft workshop

One cannot help but admire the enthusiasm of this friends group and congratulate its leaders in their success in involving its membership. It may not be advisable to plan so much in a larger community, where other groups might offer much the same types of opportunities, but if the Mount Lebanon Public Library ever needs citizen support, it will have a core group and half the battle won. Money helps, but it isn't everything; without friends to speak up for it, a library during a budget crunch has to start from scratch to find supporters.

Some librarians feel that friends are not as effective politically as a citizens committee formed for one specific purpose, for instance, to get a bond issue passed or to prevent closings of branches. I disagree. Friends can be whatever you want them to be, and within federally established guidelines, friends groups can set up separate committees to handle special programs and funds for political purposes.

But the days of "ladies who do nothing but pour tea and hold bake sales" is long past. There still are some, and treasure them if you are lucky enough to know them. But volunteerism is no longer something to fill time until the next bridge game. It is a commitment citizens make for a stronger community, important for our standard of living as we know it today and for the amenities we take for granted. Many enlightened businesses now support their workers in volunteer activities, even to the extent of loaning them to charities for special causes, or giving them time off to discharge volunteer duties. Community service is an important part of a person's resume, and libraries must learn to take advantage of this. Many businesses also make cash commitments to tax-exempt institutions, as the work of library friends in Detroit and Minneapolis will attest. It is in this climate of increased appreciation of volunteers, and of acknowledgment that friends are not something to pull out of a hat once a year to thank for their flower arrangements, that Friends of Libraries U.S.A. was born.

Undoubtedly, the specter of Proposition 13 has had a lot to do with the increased interest in friends. California, which has always had a strong friends organization, found that friends were there to pick up the pieces after the politicians left. In Los Angeles County alone, forty-two new friends organizations were started last year. Friends have always given time and money. And they responded to the crisis, as in Palos Verdes peninsula, where fifty volunteers check, maintain, and shelve the record collection, read the shelves weekly, clear the book drop daily, answer the phone, and help with
children’s programs. They are being taught to repair damaged books, sculptures and paintings. They will be used to run the audiovisual department, help with typing, maintain the local history room and picture file. They are freeing the professional librarian to do professional work, and not taking over the librarian’s role, as so many fear.

Inquiries for materials on how to form a friends group come in regularly from librarians of small, large, academic, public, state, and system libraries. There has been something of a bandwagon feeling, for whatever reasons, and this past year was clearly the time to begin a national organization. Friends need to know more about each other, since in numbers there is strength. A network is needed to help encourage others to become friends. The public needs to be aware of friends groups and of the services they perform. The American Library Association has been most helpful in supporting this project, in the belief that citizen involvement is healthy and vital to the continuance of good library service. The timing of the White House conference may be just right, but special attention will be needed to assure that the friends momentum will not dissipate when the conference ends.

Friends of Libraries U.S.A. hopes to see individuals, groups, and libraries continue to work together, and to provide a necessary link in their communication. Please let us know what you’re doing and how you are doing it. We also hope to be able to fill information gaps and to provide workshops on subjects of interest to friends. Our first effort will be a public relations kit containing television, radio and newspaper material for public service use, so as to enhance the friends’ image from coast to coast. Many small groups lack the capabilities or expertise to produce these materials. We do not plan to raise funds for any purpose except our own expenses; our member groups are fighting their own fight for every dollar they raise, and it should rightly go to their libraries. For that reason, we have a sliding dues scale.

The board will seek a wide representation, geographically and by kind of library. Our first annual meeting will be held during the ALA conference in New York in summer 1980. You are cordially urged to join and to have your friends join.

In conclusion, and as a sample of our group efforts, it is useful to repeat the “Ten Commandments for Friends of Libraries.” The list was compiled in part from my own experience, and in part from the 320 responses to our survey questionnaire. Certain elements repeated themselves; some are based on comments made because we promised anonymity; some come from librarians and some from friends. The rules should apply both to groups about to be formed and to those which encounter rough sailing:

Ten Commandments for Friends of Libraries

1. The head librarian must want a friends group.
2. The library staff must be willing to work with the friends.
3. Those involved must be willing to make a commitment of time.
4. The library must make a commitment as to which of its resources may be used by the friends group (space, staff time, paper, artist, printing, phones, desks, etc.).
5. A core group of interested people must exist.
6. The authority to which the librarian is responsible (the trustees, the provost) should be aware of and in agreement with the need for a friends group.
7. Communication must be open among all groups concerned with library policy.
8. It is agreed that friends are not concerned with library policy.
9. The group must understand the role that it is expected to play.
10. It must be clear that the functions of the trustees and friends are separate.

This is my prescription for a healthy group. The state of friends of library groups today is vital and healthy. One has the feeling that friends, having survived the period of passivity and having been tolerated in many instances as a necessary evil, have come to be accepted in the modern library and by their librarians as part of the community. As libraries increase their reliance on friends as a means of reaching the public, friends should continue to increase in effectiveness. As we begin the 1980s with a solid growth spurt, bolstered by the citizens involved in the White House conference and the framework of Friends of Libraries U.S.A., it is a pleasure to say that the state of friends of libraries has never been better. Indeed, its potential has just barely been explored.

NOTES

4. Dolnick, *Friends of the Library Sourcebook*, op. cit. (Reprinted with permission of publisher.)