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“With Friends Like These . . .”

Friends of the Library: so benign, so helpful, so . . . friendly! Yet, so often when one mentions the subject to library administrators reactions are heard which range from, “Oh yes, we had a group years ago, when we had our new building campaign, but after that they became inactive and quietly disappeared,” or, “Oh, you have a friends group? I keep thinking I should try to get a group going for my library, but what do you do with them?” to “Friends? You mean pests! There are days I’d trade them for identifiable enemies!” Are friends worth the bother? Is it heresy to ask?

This small anthology of case studies has been assembled on the basis of discussions with many people, in different parts of the country and from libraries of various sizes. An entire book could be written about the interactions between library administration, the trustees of the library, and the friends group. There appears to be an endless array of stories, experiences, and strong feelings among participants in these mini-dramas. The stories may be individual and different, but some underlying themes emerge when considering the whole:

1. When there is a major purpose or issue, friends can be inspired and mobilized to work hard and effectively.
2. Many friends groups seem to be born of a crisis, such as a bond issue campaign or a censorship challenge. Let us, for the moment, assume they achieve honor and success. During a period of specific need, most friends organizations function well.
3. When there is no longer a major issue to channel the drive and energy of friends, resolute efforts are required to maintain vitality and interest on the part of friends.
4. The “care and feeding” of friends is a constant task, which requires considerable “overhead” in staff time and involvement.
5. Staff members are thus prone to feel the threat of volunteers taking over, or to resent what they perceive as extra work.
6. Meanwhile, the friends group itself needs to be encouraged to develop “new blood” and avoid the “in-group” syndrome.
7. Power struggles are not uncommon between friends and administrators

and/or trustees. The personality of the leaders of these respective groups is crucial.

8. Clear communication and active liaison are imperatives for success.

By way of illustrating these points, let me share some of the cases I learned about, and point to some of the patterns they reveal.

The Community Celebrity

Some years ago, in one of our country's urban centers, a prominent author was enticed to become president of the local friends of the library group. At first, everyone was thrilled that such a celebrity would be willing to take on the role. What publicity for the library! What prestige! People joined the group, in part, to meet and be associated with this renowned personality.

The key word indeed was "personality." As time wore on, it became ever clearer that people were dealing with an egocentric and eccentric person. The individual was virtually incompetent at organization work. There was no working with others, no planning, no communication. Under the helm of this nonleader, the friends started to deteriorate. Records were not kept. When membership renewals came in, they were not acknowledged. New members would join and then not hear a word. There were no meetings. This prominent person would come once a year to a library board meeting and deliver a report. For five years, the identical report was made — a mouthing of platitudes about plans for the coming year. And no one challenged the situation. Though recognized as unreasonable, the person was "local big celebrity" — a sticky situation indeed.

Gradually, the director of the library began openly to discourage people from joining the friends. Through a series of behind-the-scenes maneuvers, it was finally agreed that a kind of coup d'état was the only way out. Planned and arranged in advance, and following careful parliamentary procedures ("machinations" was the word used to describe this), a special membership meeting of friends was called for the purpose of electing a new slate of officers for the group. The troublesome "personality kid" was advised about what was coming, and given the chance to save face by "arranging" to be needed elsewhere on the appointed day. As can be imagined, the ousted president became a bitter enemy of the library.

Fortunately, the impact of that person's ire was mitigated somewhat. Many people had become aware of the situation and had come to recognize the incompetence plus irrational and irascible qualities of that individual. The revived friends group began to function and to contribute to the library soon thereafter. As constituted today, the organization now has as president a person who concurrently serves as a trustee on the library board and was

previously a working city librarian. I am further assured by the head librarian that this arrangement is working beautifully. There must be a lesson to the story; one wonders how many groups have been themselves trapped by the lure of the "community celebrity."

Some Friends Are Like Morris the Cat

Here follows the tale of a library and the several lives of its friends group. Life 1 was that of the kitten. In one of the many suburban communities that sprang up after World War II, a group of people had banded together to create a library where none had previously existed. The group had a very strong leader, and these friends worked enthusiastically and energetically for about four years to bring a library into existence. There were fund-raising parties and events to arouse community awareness. The library began its life in a converted store. The friends contributed hundreds of hours of labor. They painted walls and sanded shelves. They typed borrowers' cards from preregistration forms, alphabetized catalog cards, unpacked books and shelved them. In those early days, they were a cohesive group and had a common, realizable goal. For a period of years after the library began to operate, the group became quiescent and caught its breath — perchance a catnap.

Life 2, then, was that of the pussycat. Next came the drive to buy land and build a "real library." Once again, the friends went to work. They prepared mailings, held house-to-house gatherings to discuss the proposed referendum, conducted a telephone campaign, and got out the vote. Perhaps the surging enthusiasm of "round (life) one" was lacking, but they worked hard and did a fine job. And when the new building was a reality — functioning, beautiful, providing almost undreamed-of services — what then? The friends had nothing to do.

The cataclysm inevitably followed. The group began to look for things to do. They began to poke around, they bothered the staff and were on the way to becoming a considerable nuisance. Neither the trustees nor the director had any real idea of what to do with the group. (In truth, they probably wanted it to go quietly away.) Floundering for a goal, the friends started a newsletter. Since it was "their" newsletter, no one from the library paid too much attention until a fiasco ensued. One of the friends came up with an idea to arrange a charter tour to a foreign country. When people signed up for the trip their "ticket" was put in a raffle. The prize was a free trip. All good intentions and innocence notwithstanding, many in the community were incensed. The tour was regarded as a commercial venture benefiting a particular travel agent. Furthermore, it had no relevance to the library. All disclaimers that it was the friends' idea, not planned or endorsed by the library, were futile in affecting the public's attitude.

The friends and the library are inevitably perceived as *the library*. Anything and everything done by friends reflects on the library. Administrators and trustees who fail to find the time to invest their energies in constantly working with and guiding their friends will incur considerable peril. They are almost certainly courting the "if anything can go wrong, it will" syndrome.

There is a final fillip to the story of the group just described. Some time later, the trustees of the library decided to enlist the help of a consultant in order to reactivate and redirect the friends. After a close look at the situation, the consultant concluded that the library was in a stage of development which did not need the active workings of friends; that, in fact, continuation of the group was counterproductive, a drain on staff time and energy more urgently needed to concentrate on many new services and procedures which the new building had made possible. The consultant advised the board on a "no go" course, recommended that the group be dissolved, and helped effect a graceful exit. The friends had \$4000 in their treasury. They made a last great gesture and donated the money for the purchase of a grand piano, a valuable acquisition entirely appropriate to the high level of cultural programs which the library was sponsoring.

Understanding the Friends' Role

Another story highlights a pitfall, as it also raises a secondary point for consideration. One community found its friends group disaffected with some of the library's trustees. When a vacancy developed, the friends put up a candidate. Independent of the friends, another citizen decided to run for the same seat. The friends organization had a very high membership roster. With dues of only one dollar there were more than 1000 members. In point of fact, there were only about twenty people active in the group. But many people in the community drew the conclusion: if the friends of the library were backing one candidate, he must be "the good guy," while the other candidate was "the enemy." Not only were the facts misleading, but the other candidate was elected. It was thus presumed that this trustee would be unwelcome, not being "the library's choice." The new trustee thus took up board responsibilities under unnecessarily inauspicious circumstances.

A clearer understanding of their role would have enabled these friends to act quite differently. Friends can encourage good people to run for the board without waging a campaign for a chosen candidate. They can encourage a board to consider new areas of service, new directions, without becoming surrogate trustees. They can focus attention on problems and generate community support for improved library service. But friends are *not* the policy-makers for the library. Great care should be taken to avoid

creating a situation in which anyone who does not belong to their organization or share their viewpoint is thus not on "the side of the angels."

This story spotlights a secondary debatable point. It is not unusual to find in many organizations dues-paying members in numbers far exceeding a small contingent of active workers. This case makes one wonder whether a friends group is better off aiming for perhaps a smaller membership, but a membership consciously involved, informed about, and committed to the library. Dues should be kept low so that everyone who is interested can join. Friends groups should be inclusive organizations, not exclusive. A person may find it easier to contribute a dollar to a good cause than to experience the bother or embarrassment of saying no; but true and reliable friends are characterized by other attributes.

Library Friends and the Community

Another complex and interesting story involves a friends group which came to the librarian's side in an issue involving censorship. However praiseworthy, that action seriously contributed to exacerbating an existing though yet unidentified problem. For most of its history, the community had been fairly rural in character, populated by a wealthy, highly conservative elite. But over the years, imperceptibly, the community had been changing. It had expanded in numbers, as well as in its socioeconomic makeup. Many newer residents were of the middle and lower-middle classes. A nearby city had begun to encroach. At about that juncture, members of the older, established part of the community raised a hue and cry and began to demand the removal of some magazines from the library's collection, objecting to the content of titles like *Playboy*. And lo and behold, the newer citizens in the community were siding with the old-timers! The friends leaped into the fray to champion the library's cause. This, bewilderingly, consolidated the opposition. The friends found themselves criticizing the newcomers. No doubt inadvertently, the friends had wrapped themselves in the holier-than-thou banner of "we're the friends, we're on the side of good and right," and, while perhaps not blatantly, the opposition became "the bad guys."

No one could understand why the newcomers were siding with the arch-conservative old-timers. Didn't these (new) people know that the friends were their (more liberal) natural friends/allies? Sentiment in the community heated up.

It took some time for the real issue to surface. The library had not adequately recognized and responded to the information needs of the newer residents. Here were people who had practical problems. "Why is the library spending my hard-earned money on 'garbage' when they don't have any good books on how to upholster a couch, repair my car, etc? I'm

a taxpayer here, too, and I'm not going to vote for a budget so that they can buy more dirty books." By the time these underlying feelings and attitudes began to be understood, the library and the friends were in deep trouble. The administrator sought help from an outside consultant, who managed to unravel and interpret the situation. Thus, the friends were enabled to shift their emphasis and tone. They stopped attacking, they stopped "labeling" opponents. A new positive stand was taken, quietly, simply favoring the rights of all to have their information needs served by the library, endorsing access to information.

What started as a positive instance of friends defending the library against a censorship attack, altered to their (the friends) becoming part of the problem. Here was a situation in which no one — not the librarian, not the trustees, or the friends — had understood the real issue. It had practically nothing to do with understanding their respective roles. But once the friends were embroiled, they were once again *the library*.

There are times when the services of an outsider can be usefully employed. Serving as a catalyst, such a person can facilitate a group's movement away from an untenable position, and still remain sensitive to the ego involvement of friends the library wants to remain friends.

Positive Encounters

But let us also recall some cheerful tales. In Dallas a friends group, nurtured by careful liaison, took on the major task of helping the library acquire a new building site. Over a period of about fifteen years, the friends have been supportive and have taken the lead in bond issue campaigns. The group has served as a conduit for major and minor gifts for the new building. While providing continuing support for the library's rare book collection, plus an annual appropriation for continuing education scholarships, the friends respond to specific requests for help from the administration — to the extent that their treasury can provide. One staff member describes the group as "born of crisis," working for a specific goal, and directed and encouraged by consistent contact from a single staff member assigned as liaison. This echoes nicely one response received for the recent friends survey. When asked about the areas of library activity of special interest to friends, the reply was an emphatic request to libraries to: "[*tell* us the] specific area of responsibility. If you tell us what you need and want, we'll do it."

In a New Jersey suburban community some years ago, the administrator gained the help of a friends group to launch a series of demonstration projects. The friends provided seed money to begin a framed picture collection, to establish a young adult room, plus other ventures. With the new

service as a pilot project, in each case the library succeeded in getting the city to allocate funds so that these services became regular budget-supported features. Talking recently to that administrator about what made that friends group so successful, the answer was almost the same as in Dallas—specific goals, and active, continuous liaison.

Effects of Proposition 13

The impact of Proposition 13, meanwhile, has had its effect on libraries in a variety of ways. In some cases the results have been unexpectedly positive, despite the intrinsic difficulties; in others, distressing. Not only have some California libraries faced severe budget cuts, but the Proposition 13 atmosphere has also led to conflict between professionals and their boards of supervisors.

In one community a board rejected the librarian's plan, which called for curtailed service hours in certain branches, after receiving pressure from the affected local residents. It is hardly necessary to cite specific outcomes of this type of conflict to see the damaged interrelationships (governing body/library/community) that might result in some communities.

What began in one county as a setback for local libraries resulting from Proposition 13 cuts, however, actually stimulated an unexpected boon in library services for two communities. Budget cuts closed both of the small branch buildings, which had been operating in leased quarters, were in poor repair, and located in low-income rural areas. The residents were incensed at the prospect of losing their libraries. They were determined to have library service continue. With guidance from the county librarian, and mutual understanding, they set to work as volunteers at the branches. At the same time, they raised funds locally, formulated plans, and filed for a Community Development Bloc Grant. The result was a two-year grant for \$150,000 in one community and a one-year grant in the other. A new prefabricated library building has been built in one town, and a remodeled building on a site purchased by the county in the other. It was not easy; the friends had to convince the board of supervisors that the money was going for a worthwhile project. The library found itself enmeshed in a web of legal problems: insurance coverage for volunteers in a public building, temporary leases, as well as such questions as who would pay for utilities. But as a model for working together in the face of adversity, we could all do well to emulate this relationship between the library and its friends.

A rather different situation shows what can happen when friends go off on their own. A county governing group was considering whether to utilize bookmobiles. Friends leaped in and became a support group for the officials in their plan. The libraries found themselves recipients of bookmobiles.

Subsequently, when the friends wanted to bring pressure of a different sort on the governing body, they found themselves compromised by their earlier action. They thought it would be like "yelling at a guest in one's own house." The story highlights the diffused and often confused relationship between the two groups.

All over California friends have served as library volunteers; and even when things went smoothly, friends learned that keeping a library operating was not as simple as it had seemed initially. There is perhaps even a bit of irony that in some instances the friends who had so willingly volunteered subsequently came to exercise their influence as citizens to press officials for restored fiscal support for their libraries. In some communities, a measure of distrust by staff greeted friends volunteers. Through experience librarians have learned that it is crucial to prepare a formal, written, structured program for volunteers. Volunteers, administrators, and staff alike need to know specifics: "Why are volunteers here, what are they supposed to accomplish?" Clarity in planning and objectives is the key to successful involvement and coordination of a volunteer program.

Being a Friend Means Making a Friend

There are also tales of determined do-gooders who did good. In one well-to-do community, for instance, the library had functioned for many years in a totally inadequate building never designed to serve as a library. Trustees had attempted to get a bond issue referendum on the ballot, but could not influence village authorities to schedule it. The friends, having amassed a considerable reserve fund, put it to work to counter the village government's obstructive stance. By a postcard poll they substantiated the library's claim that the community wanted a new building. They paid for the services of a respected library consultant and to have plans drawn up (something the library could not do without village authorization for such an expenditure). Excellent newspaper coverage resulted, and finally the village board felt pressured to schedule a referendum. Despite the tactic of holding the vote on a holiday weekend in the middle of winter, the friends' hard work brought out the library's supporters, and victory was achieved. These efforts had taken years. All through the period, the friends met regularly with the director of the library, and they gave their library support in a way that conformed to its purpose. When success was achieved their generosity was fully acknowledged, their prestige enhanced.

This all happened several years ago, but this friends group continues to provide the library with steady, substantial financing for special programs of outstanding distinction. The library, it should be noted, selects the programs. Decisions are made in conference with a friends committee, but the

library retains the ultimate authority. Everyone recognizes that if there are negative repercussions to a particular program, the library suffers directly, the friends only tangentially. And human nature being what it is, some old-timers come to programs at that library today and announce proudly how they voted to make the building possible, with its extra-special meeting room. The staff and friends may know that these persons had actually been opposed; but because being a friend means making a friend for the library, the proper response is to nod pleasantly and say, "Oh yes, isn't it great?"

The Importance of Communication

In matters of scheduling programs, a contrasting unhappy situation in another community shows what happens in the absence of a clear delineation of who sets policy. At issue was the use of the library's meeting room. This was a relatively small library, and the friends took responsibility for arranging programs. Inevitably, the friends planned an event and the director said no. In short order, friends, trustees, and librarian were embroiled in a divisive squabble. Friends assumed the position that if they did the work, they should have the authority. It was by now obvious to everyone that roles had never been defined. Communication was lacking, or at best, irregular. Where once there were friends, there were now angry and abusive citizens. The problem resulted in mayhem between the board and its own director. Everyone lost, no one won.

Are personalities the key? There is the case of one large city library which enjoyed the support of a friends group for several years. The president of the friends was regarded by many as a difficult, opinionated individual. But the administrator and the president of the friends had an easy, comfortable relationship. If they didn't see eye to eye on a question, they would talk about it, think about it, talk about it some more, and work out an agreement.

Then the librarian left the city for a new position and a new director was hired. The smooth working relationship between friends and library was disturbed. No real problem surfaced for a time. Then trouble began to brew. The library administration had made certain priority decisions concerning the location of branches. The friends had their own ideas about where branches should be placed. A conflict of major proportion developed between the friends' leader and the director of the library. So serious was their falling-out that the director had the friend barred from the library. So strong a driving force had the leader been that without that person the friends group disintegrated. The administrator blamed the failure on the the personality of the leader, claiming that he was obsessed with prestige and power. As a note to this story, I've been told that some time ago a major

consulting firm was asked to evaluate the factors that contribute to success in the operation of a library system. Several thousand dollars later, the major conclusion was that the single biggest factor affecting success is the personality of the top person in the organization.

In another library, a friends group volunteered to do a community survey in order to find out how people felt about the library being open on Sundays. The director was aware and enthusiastic. The circulation desk clerks, however, had no idea that the director planned to budget for additional staff, and resented the whole scheme. A friend overheard a staff member remarking to a patron: "Tell that woman you don't favor Sunday openings. Think of the extra work for us!" Clearly, in this case there was a communication gap between librarian and staff, as well as friends and staff.

Another well-intentioned friends project — an incentive grant to garner ideas from staff members that would lead to innovative library programs — backfired. The staff reaction was, "one more example of the friends creating extra work, and trying to tell us how to do our jobs!" This particular near-fiasco was rescued by one friend who recognized the resistance and spent a good deal of time chatting individually with various staff members, informally explaining the anticipated advantages of having "seed money" to try out new ideas.

Staff members may perceive volunteers as "wanting to take over the library." In one library a president of the friends group overheard a tirade, one staff member to another, against the friends volunteers. Fortunately, the president and library director viewed this as a joint problem; neither decided "fault," and after quietly investigating the problem it was agreed that the particular project was counterproductive and should be gradually phased out, redirecting friends efforts to other activities.

Conclusion

There are obviously numerous pitfalls on the path that friends and their libraries tread: power struggles, personality clashes, lack of clearly defined roles, time demands on administrator and staff — these are just a few. Administrators must be prepared to commit themselves to friends, truly to want them. Communication must be open and sensitive. When there is no major goal for friends to work on, motivating the group from day to day will demand energy and creative thinking by the librarian.

Why do some friends groups fade away? They may have been organized only for a crisis and do not have, or do not soon thereafter develop, long-range goals. Sometimes the leadership dies off or moves away. Not uncommonly, the most active friends become trustees; the lifeblood of the group is drained. Personal reasons may intervene, such as loss of interest or

lack of time. All these reasons and more may be present, and it must always be asked: is this necessarily bad?

Friends ideally function *on behalf of* the library, not *as* the library. But we librarians who want friends to be effective need to see them as an important part of our job. Keeping a friends group active, an asset to the library, requires communication, active liaison, sensitivity, clear guidelines as to roles, and something to do. It takes our best effort as professionals, which really means as people.

One respondent to Sandy Dolnick's survey has aptly expressed the basic "simple rules of friendly behavior: consideration, respect, tolerance, understanding, appreciation, self-sacrifice, patience and tact should characterize the friends' and librarian's relationship." The librarian should be further reminded of the sign which Edward Koch, mayor of New York, is said to have on his desk. It reads, "If you say it can't be done, you're right."