



the front line

The only way to have a friend is to be one

Ralph Waldo Emerson

A major factor in library advocacy in the USA is Friends of the Library (FOL) Groups. Since their establishment in the Midwest in the 1930s they have spread with increasing momentum and now number 3,000 with over 750,000 members. They have a recognised place in the program of many public, school, academic and special libraries. They cooperate at a state and national level through FOLUSA (Friends of Libraries USA). This is an affiliate of the American Library Association, with its membership and financial records at ALA Headquarters.

FOLUSA is perhaps one of the best manifestations of Herbert White's observation that libraries '...operate with a great reservoir of goodwill'. There is no reason why we cannot achieve a similar result in Australia, which on a per capita basis would give Australia 200 groups with 60,000 members — an advocacy force of some dimension.

During a very pleasant lunch in late 1986, Chris Henderson, Manager of the Public Libraries Branch in South Australia

endeavoured to persuade me of the value of Friends of the Library; of the worth of putting real effort into fostering their establishment. By the time we had finished our meal my scepticism, product of too many years in the rarified air of academic library administration, had been overcome.

But it wasn't the Pewsey Vale that persuaded — it was the cogency of the argument that we have not fostered 'our great reservoir of goodwill' in any systematic way; that we have very effectively ignored, even ostracised a substantial, influential and caring part of the Australian community in our drive for professional status and independence.

How much attention is given to advocacy, for example, in our schools of librarianship? Very little I suspect, and I would be pleasantly surprised if more than a few graduates know what FOL means or represents.

The message is not new. Our redoubtable Philosopher-King John LeVett sermonised (his description) in his ALJ editorial August 1986 'A properly consolidated, thoughtfully briefed, and continuously (ie not just summoned into being when the library has a problem) cultivated lay body can constitute a powerful force in any library community, particularly when times are hard' John, it may be demonstrated all too rarely but someone has been listening to your incantations and implorations.

Thanks to the energy of Chris Henderson and her colleagues, South Australia alone now has over thirty Friends of the Library, mostly established in the last two years. (If you are looking for a starting kit for FOL the LAA Public Libraries Section (SA) produced a 'Friends of the Library Kit' in 1987. Cost is a modest \$5 from Liz O'Loughlin, Public

Libraries Branch, 121 The Parade, Norwood 5067). There may be upwards of 100 FOL Groups already in Australia. But what's all this to do with the LAA? The hint was at the beginning of this column. Should the LAA be actively fostering the establishment of Friends of the Library; should it be providing 'seeding' support for the establishment of Friends of Australian Libraries (FOAL?) at a state and national level; should it develop a Friends kit; a national newsletter; should it, in short, provide for FOAL what the ALA does for FOLUSA — support, encouragement, information — but not intervention?

I suggest that Friends will do a better job if they become aware of the national — even the international — library scene; if they discover that their own challenges are not unique; if they find an educated sounding board for the testing of ideas.

If the LAA becomes involved in the formation and support of Friends of the Library at both national and state levels, it will, I also suggest, expedite a national and state cohesiveness of those groups that may otherwise take years to eventuate.

Sue Phillips the Assistant Executive Director has written to Branches for help in identifying all FOL Groups in Australia. These groups will then be surveyed for their views on the role of the LAA in supporting their state and national cohesiveness.

But what do you think? Should the LAA get involved? What has been your experience with Friends of the Library — good or bad? Sue Phillips would be pleased to hear from you — better still, write to InCite.

Alan Bundy
President

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