

In preparation for a workshop presented at the 2015 Spring Conference by library consultant Tom Ladd, the NH Library Trustees Association conducted a survey of Friends of the Library groups. The results reveal the challenges faced by many Friends groups, as well as their successes. This three-part series of articles explores several topics the survey identified as being of interest to Friends groups and the libraries and trustees who value their support.

FRIENDS

By Susan Gaudiello, NHLTA Director

Article #1 in Friends Series:

Can't We All Be Friends?

Forty-six people participated in the survey, nearly half from towns with populations under 5,000, and another 30% from towns with population between 5,000 and 10,000. The vast majority (74%) were from groups that have been operating longer than 10 years, and 93% are incorporated as tax exempt charities under section 501(c)(3) of the IRS tax code. This article will focus on membership issues; future articles will cover successful fund-raising ventures and the many ways Friends groups contribute to their libraries.

How Many Friends Does It Take to Support a Library?

This twist on the old lightbulb joke has at least two answers: 1) the number of people listed as Friends (paying annual dues or contributing funds to the Friends), and 2) the number of people who show up for meetings and do the heavy lifting, often referred to as the “active members.” In our survey, 52% of respondents reported membership of 25 or fewer, while 22% cited membership exceeding 100. For those who become discouraged because 20 people or fewer do all the work while 100-250 or more are passive participants, take heart. This division of active/passive members is almost universal, not only at libraries, but in many other non-profit membership organizations.

The most common reasons cited in the survey as to why groups are struggling to grow or even maintain membership included:

- Too many years of a small number of volunteers doing everything;
- No regular meetings, no organized efforts to recruit new members;
- Busy schedules, with many prospective members more involved in other aspects of town life, such as PTA;
- The difficulty of getting "younger" residents (30-40 age group) to commit to ongoing volunteer positions; the new generation is busier and less apt to volunteer;
- Completion of the project that originally attracted volunteers to fund-raising activities.

What Can Friends Do to Increase Their Membership?

A number of survey respondents shared strategies they have employed to recruit new members or to engage more members to move from the passive to the active column.

Enhancing the visibility of the Friends is one common tactic. “We have been attempting to increase our visibility by participating in town meeting, town fair, parades, and library signage,” wrote one member from Chester. “We have done many raffles and bake sales, had T-shirts printed up with the Friends logo (which we wear whenever participating in an event), and we always label gift purchases made for the library so people are aware of how we spend funds.”

Meredith capitalizes on their exposure during their fabulous book sales: “We bought tote bags with our logo on it. When people show up for our book sales, we offer to let them join the Friends, give them a free tote bag with their membership and let them fill the tote for free just that once at the sale. Really helped to grow members.”

Many cited “word of mouth” as the way they acquire most new members, and offered several strategies in this vein. One group asks existing members to bring a friend to a meeting, and in another town members promote the friends at other organizations to which they belong, like the historical society, women’s club or PTA. How else can you spread the word? As a Goffstown Friend wrote: “Promotion, promotion, promotion! Facebook, the newspaper, chatting to everyone who will listen!”

“The dedication and love that our group has is ongoing regardless of the size of this group. We love our library.”

Linda Skidmore, VP, Friends of the Hampstead Public Library

Some other groups have tried to sweeten the deal with special members-only benefits. In Barrington, the library offers Friends an extra week on any book loans (4 weeks instead of 3) and a 50% discount on copying fees. Friends also get first choice of plants at their annual perennial sale if they help during the set-up or the sale. In Nashua, a membership drive was launched with 10 gift baskets of books and other items displayed in the library. When people buy or renew their membership during the month of January, they get a raffle ticket for the baskets. The Nashua Friends also sponsored a One City, One Book author event, open to the public (\$10 ticket). A private reception with the author beforehand was only open to Friends, which brought in a number of new members.

Friends of the Barrington Public Library



Another challenge is recruiting the younger segment of the community and identifying new leadership for the group. Because many people join organizations for the social interaction they offer, one group meets in the local pub in a back room and combines the meeting with a social exchange. Another recruits parents whose children attend library programs. These younger patrons brought some great programming ideas they knew would interest their children, such as a Lego league. To encourage new leaders to step forward, one respondent wrote, “A real effort has been made to bring in new members for leadership, with lots of advertising for these new positions. Folks are attracted by specific ‘job descriptions.’” Several noted that “big fundraising goals or projects tend to bring new people out to volunteer and many are then engaged in the group.”

Secrets to Membership Success

- A fun, friendly atmosphere
- Strong leadership and enthusiasm
- Lots more communication, increasingly electronic
- New and different events to bring different people into the mix

Show Me the Money!

One of the primary missions of Friends groups is to raise funds to support library programs and facilities. The most common fundraising activities cited in the survey were: ongoing book sale in the library (64%); book sale events (76%); raffles (45%); bake sales (31%); and plant sales (17%). A number of respondents described some of their most successful efforts which went beyond these popular activities. Perhaps your own Friends group might find inspiration in these ideas. The source of the projects listed is cited when available, should your Friends group want to contact the library for more information.

Food

Food-centered events seem to have an appeal, particularly when they are different than the traditional bake sale. One group's annual chocolate tasting event sold out this year, and another town recently launched a baking competition they dubbed "Just Desserts" (Barrington). Tasters paid \$5 to attend and voted for their favorite dessert, and prizes were awarded to the winner and two runners-up. Leftover goodies were sold in a silent auction at the close of the event.

Sports, Arts, and Entertainment

It's not all about the food, though. A number of Friends groups sponsor road races. Meredith is successful in obtaining sponsors for their event, including one that buys T-shirts for runners with their "Bookit Race" logo. Runners pay to run or walk in the race.

Friends of the Barrington Public Library



On a twist of the raffle idea, the Friends group in Chester held a "book basket competition," in which people were invited to make a themed basket (around a book or movie) and the baskets were then raffled. The Friends voted for the best one, based on creativity, and the winner received an Amazon gift card.

Others take advantage of local talent by involving artists and musicians in events. For example, Rebecca Rule's home town of Northwood (Chesley Memorial Library) puts on a storytelling/music concert, featuring Becky and a local band, Cordwood, performing together. The Gafney Library in Wakefield sponsors a two-month art exhibit, in which local artists exhibit two pieces, one for sale if they choose and one donated as a raffle item. The group also holds an opening and closing reception for the exhibit. Deerfield has been sponsoring their "Cabin Fever Arts & Crafts Fair" in March for the past four years, with revenue coming from "rental" of tables. And Madison capitalized on a famous past summer resident, E.E. Cummings, with "Cummings at Silver Lake Weekend" in July 2015. The event offered a variety of art, music and poetry readings, as well as a tour of Cummings-related sites. In 2014 the group sponsored a very successful Barn Tour.

Auctions also appear to be popular and successful (New Boston, Hampstead, Ashland). And, several groups rely on an annual appeal letters that generate a few thousand dollars to as much as \$20,000 per year. (Sunapee, Newfields, Claremont, and others). Other ventures ranged from a rabies clinic to Breakfast with Santa, so Friends groups have clearly expanded beyond the traditional book sale!

Fund-raising ideas are limited only by a group's imagination and willingness to work hard and sometimes take a risk. Lest you think only larger towns can carry off these ambitious events, most of those who responded to the survey are from small towns with populations of 5–10,000.

More Than Money: Programs Sponsored by Friends

Most Friends groups are formed to raise funds in order to supplement the programs, materials and services offered at their local public library. Of those responding to the NHLTA survey in the Spring of 2015, Friends reported spending their hard-earned money most frequently on museum passes (87%), Summer Reading Program activities (78%), purchase of materials (76%), children's programming (70%), adult lectures (57%), and providing hospitality (refreshments) for library programs (50%).

Programs

Some Friends have actually taken on responsibility for coordinating some programs for the Library while others underwrite specific programs. The Friends of the Hooksett Library started a FIRST Lego Robotic League in the Fall of 2014 with 5 teams, and held a robotic expo at the library with over 100 people in attendance. They purchased Lego kits for the library to circulate, which have been a huge hit with the patrons. Most Friends groups support both adult and children's programs, like the American Girl Tea sponsored by the Friends of the Kingston Community Library. The Friends of the Brown Memorial Library (Bradford) offers a monthly chess night, and have offered poetry writing workshops for teens. And The Friends of the Weeks Memorial Library (Lancaster) supports, among other programs, the annual Library Card Party for Lancaster School first-graders.

While museum passes are by far the most common benefit offered by Friends, the Friends of the Barrington Public Library found that the expensive passes were not used enough to justify their cost. They launched instead a "museum reimbursement program," taking the funds they were spending on passes and using that pool to reimburse patrons up to \$20 per family per year for admission fees to any New England museum. Patrons love the freedom this approach gives them.

Landscaping

At a number of libraries, the Friends seem to have a lot of members with green thumbs. The Friends of the Whipple Free Library (New Boston) has paid for the plants for gardens and recruits and coordinates volunteers to work in the gardens, and they supported the landscaping at the new library as well. The Friends of the Meredith Public Library also help to plant and maintain their library's garden each year.

Friends of the Meredith Public Library



Communications

Friends of the Paul Memorial Library (Newfields) provide a newsletter to the town that is mailed out quarterly with information about the library and other organizations in town. They also produce a monthly e-newsletter using Constant Contact which is sent to Friends and others who ask to be on their mailing list. The Friends of the Barrington Public Library produces a monthly newsletter as well, using the free service MailChimp. In addition to announcing news of fundraisers and programs supported, the Barrington newsletter includes a list of books recommended by the Friends every month (the closing agenda item of their monthly meeting).

Equipment and Furnishings

Many Friends groups have assisted with the purchase of equipment and contributed toward library renovations. The Friends of the Effingham Public Library raised funds to furnish a children's room in the library, and the Friends of the Amherst Town Library purchased an AED for the library, among other items. The Friends of the Northwood Libraries is particularly proud of the exterior sign they purchased for the library, which helps to promote the library and its programs. The Friends of the Nashua Public Library purchased several big-ticket items related to library programming, including a portable indoor stage, sound system, and a BluRay player for their film nights.

As Mary Jo Martin of the Friends of the Jaffrey Library wrote, "We raise money for anything not covered in the budget, or things to enhance library services, ranging from specialized shelving and carpet to professional magazines, puppets, databases, museum passes. We respond to requests from the library staff." It is that coordination and collaboration with the Library staff that makes the support offered by Friends groups so successful and so much appreciated by their library staff, trustees and patrons.

Friends of the Moultonborough Public Library



The Friends presented each Moultonborough kindergartner with a copy of *Summer Visits* by Karel Hayes.

NHLTA values the great contribution of Friends groups and wishes to support their efforts through education and networking. We have a Friends page on the NHLTA website [<http://www.nhlta.org/friends.asp>] with links to information on how to maintain your non-profit status with the IRS and State of NH and best practices and links to other resources of importance.

NHLTA also welcome Friends as NHLTA members, and offer discounted registration for the NHLTA Annual Conference to all members of library Friends groups.

