Why do libraries need FRIENDS?

ILZE SWART

Chairman of the Friends Indaba (an umbrella organisation for all the Friends groups in the City of Cape Town)

What are Library Friends?

Ilze Swart, former chief librarian of Bellville Public Library who retired at the end of September 2011, said in her farewell speech that her career as librarian and the Bellville Library would have been so much poorer had it not been for the Friends of the Library, launched in 1970 by Bea Coetzee. With 40 years of experience in Friends of the Library, she has agreed to set those libraries who have yet to establish a Friends on the road with some practical guidelines in a series of five articles, starting off with some basic information. In the series she will also deal with memberships; events planning/activities and fundraising; administration; libraries; code of conduct/lobbying; and advocacy.

Library Friends are a group of users of a particular library formed for the purpose of supporting and promoting their library. As each community is unique, so is each Friends group, and its emphasis in terms of programmes and services may differ. While the initial reason for starting a Friends group may differ from library to library, the following are generally included:

Money: fund-raising for buying library material and financing items and projects which the annual budget will not cover. Friends should provide the gravy, not the meat and potatoes!

Services: unlimited services can be provided by Friends, whether it be hands-on help such as repair and processing of books, story-telling, services to special groups such as the elderly, or in-kind support through connections in the business community, soliciting donations, et cetera.

Public relations: promoting and publicising the activities of the library and its facilities, Friends' activities enhance the image of the library. Friends may speak to the media about their library on contentious issues whereas librarians generally are forbidden to speak to the press.

Lobbying: an informed Friends group can be a library's strongest support in times of hardship and budget cuts. Friends may lobby politicians and city fathers and put across the message that a library is an essential element in a community's cultural, economic and political well-being.

Community involvement: a formally constituted Friends group is proof of the importance of the library in the community. Informed Friends can disseminate information about the library to the community at large.

How to start a Friends

- The Librarian-in-charge (LiC) must want a Friends group, believe that it will be beneficial to the library and enlist the support of the staff.
- The LiC must be willing to liaise and communicate with Friends on a constant basis. The LiC and Friends must understand each other's roles in the partnership. A *Code of conduct* defining the relationship between the two will be discussed in a later article. Library management and Friends must work together to achieve aims rather than work at odds with each other. Friends should be kept informed of library activities, staffing changes or issues, goals and future projects.
- The local authority to whom the LiC reports must recognise the Friends as a partner and support body, so it should be kept informed of developments.
- A Steering Committee, consisting of the LiC, selected library staff members and some prospective Friends, must determine the purpose of the proposed Friends group and examine the needs of the library within

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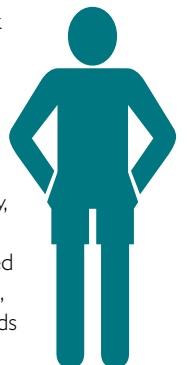
the community it serves. The committee should consider the economic condition of the community to determine what actions will be feasible. Public libraries are funded with public money so councillors should be included, also influential people in the community, for example, teachers, businessmen and ministers. Involve people who have the time to devote to Friends affairs and who are willing to work without payment for the cause.

- A draft constitution is necessary (see below) before a Friends group can be formally constituted.
- A launch meeting should be widely publicised through the press and fliers distributed in the community. Invitations should be sent to important people one wants to involve, and to representatives of existing groups, for example, those who use the library facilities for their meetings and are already well disposed towards the library.
- Refreshments must be provided.
- At the launch a draft constitution should be presented and office bearers and committee members elected. They will take the initiative forward and implement the terms of the constitution. The active participation and leadership of the first chairman is crucial in carrying the momentum of the launch forward. Prospective committee members must be told that time, energy and enthusiasm will be required of them.

Constitution

The Constitution must be flexible enough to remain functional as the organisation grows. It should contain:

- *name and objectives* of the organisation
- *membership*: who is eligible. Do not put a membership fee amount in the constitution as it will need an amendment to change it when fees are increased
- *executive committee:* who will run the daily affairs of the organisation: composition, quorum, frequency of meetings, powers
- *meetings:* annual and special general meetings: when held, quorum
- requirements for *amendments* to the constitution
- *finances* and *record keeping* to trace the flow of income and expenditure; bank account and signatories; duties of treasurer and appointment of an honorary auditor
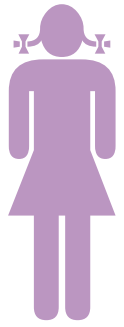- *dissolution*: procedure and distribution of assets.

If the Friends want to apply for registration as a NPO (non-profit organisation), qualifications for clauses which must appear in the constitution are set out on the web site *www.dsd.gov.za/npo/index.php*

A generic Friends constitution has been drawn up by The City of Cape Library and Information Services (CoCT LIS) management and is available on application. CoCT LIS has a Library Charter which Friends sign to be formally recognised by management.

References

http://www.ala.org/altaff/friends/factsheets
http://www.fola.org.au

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"*You seem so distant lately and I noticed a long blonde hair on your jacket. I must know, Howard, are you seeing another editor?*"