

# Friends of Libraries in 2005

## *Developing social capital of a nation*

**Daniel Ferguson, Executive Director FOLA**

---

Paper presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> biennial national conference of Friends of Libraries Australia Adelaide, 14-15 October 2005

**B***ig-hearted nation, just ask.* The headline article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 October 2005. “More Australians are donating to charity and community groups” – these were findings from the ‘Giving Australia’ research project undertaken by the Federal Government. Individuals and businesses donated \$11.5 billion in a year, and represents a 58 percent increase over seven years to 2005. And there has been a big increase in the numbers who volunteer.

Well, does this signal good news for FOLA and Friends across Australia. The report identified that people gave mainly because they identified with the cause and the people it helped, and they preferred to help “innocent” victims. So, are the users of public libraries around Australia “innocent” victims?

Generosity of Australians has often been seen as the prerogative of a few wealthy Australians in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, Elizabeth Cham, national director of Philanthropy Australia has cited two notable examples from this period, Alfred Felton and Sydney Myer. The Felton Bequest, established the National Gallery of Victoria as one of the preeminent collections in the world, a bequest valued at \$1.5 billion. And, The Myer Foundation has displayed the modern-face of philanthropy in our nation today.

However, despite these and other fine examples, donating, philanthropy and volunteering are not part of a national culture, as identified in the United States, where Francie Ostrower has identified a ‘culture of elite philanthropy’ (Ostrower 1995), and the collaborate relationship with business and giving, is identified by Austin (2000) in the *Collaboration Challenge*.

What can be identified is that Australians are finding a niche that represents our culture and ideals in terms of giving and generosity to the nation. I would identify this in terms of how we are developing ‘social capital’.

In 2003 the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) in collaboration with the University of Queensland, undertook a project relating to – Local Government and Social Capital. Social capital is associated with concepts such as “community”, “trust” and “networks” – foundations upon which Friends of Libraries operate. In brief, Social capital refers to the institutions and relationships that shape the quality and quantity of a

society's social interactions. Social capital is not just the sum of institutions that underpin a society – it is the glue that holds them together (World Bank definition, LGAQ 2003). Of interest to FOL groups, the report identified some key strategic areas for support. Community engagement being a key value. It stated “In acknowledging the fundamental importance of community engagement as both a cause and effect of social capital, local government develop and clearly articulate a process for engaging with their constituent communities”. More recently, the fostering and development of community building has been highlighted in the seminal work undertaken in Victoria, *Libraries, Building, Communities* (2005), a research report for the Library Board of Victoria.

Community engagement, partnering, collaboration, are all articles of faith in building social capital. And where better to see this at work than at the ‘coal-face’ of the public library with involvement from Friends of Library groups. This has been the unquestioned strength of the Friends movement in the United States for the past century (Ferguson 1997).

So, what has your Friends group been doing for the past 10 years in developing our ‘social capital’, and where do you want to be in the next 10 years?

## **Growing Friends**

Friends in Australasia have been growing. In the December issue of ‘*National*’ the magazine of the National Library of Australia, Diana Giese outlined ways in which Friends of Libraries have been working with their communities over the past 10 years.

Daniel Ferguson, executive director and founder of Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA) noted: ‘The growth and development of Friends of Library groups world-wide, particularly over the past 10 years, means that library management can no longer ignore the wishes of the community. Friends are helping libraries to become more responsive to community demands, and so are creating better services for their citizens.’ So, what have been the achievements of FOLA during in past 10 years, and what is the position of Friends groups in libraries in this country and New Zealand.

The latest picture tells us that 161 Friends groups operate in Australia, with around 29 operating in New Zealand. Of this number in Australia, 70% can be regarded as ‘active’, 20% as ‘moderately active’ (1-5 meetings/activities) per annum, and the remaining 10% defined as ‘not very active’.

Activities of these FOL groups vary considerably. Altona (Victoria) has well organized booksales throughout the year, which attract people from distant suburbs. Recently they donated books to a school in Ethiopia that had no books. Just part of an extensive community outreach programme undertaken in conjunction with other service organizations such as Rotary and Lions.

One of the youngest FOL groups in the country is situated just north of Melbourne at Alexandra (Victoria), where young members in age from 7 to 17 conduct a range of

activities throughout the year and in 2002, they ran Artageous, a youth art show which received 250 entries and unexpectedly ‘made a load of money’, says Libby Kotschet, the local librarian and moving force behind much of the groups success since establishment.

In the national capital, the Friends of the National Library of Australia have considerable support from library management with the provision of administrative staff, who help in providing a wide-ranging community arts, and literature program throughout the year. However, this does not impede the Friends from voicing dissatisfaction, when they view a management decision with displeasure, as the recent undesirable proposals, such as pay parking or courtyard redesign.

Activity in New South Wales is particularly strong in the country regions, where the Friends of Wollongong City Library marked Seniors Week by inviting six local seniors to talk about producing books – oral histories, Aboriginal experience and coal mining to neglected women writers, poetry and military history. And, at Great Lakes where the Company of Voices sing in the library to packed houses.

In Queensland, Roslyn Cousins, Library Manager at Toowoomba pays tribute to the fundraising capacity of their group (‘well over \$45,000 in seven years’) and are now lobbying council for a new library building by 2009.

The longest established groups of Friends are to be found in South Australia. And from the highly successful Friends at the State Library of South Australia, who fundraise, lobby, arrange tours of the library weekly, publish, provide a range of literary events and dinners, we find a group at Salisbury who have a Friends Shop that sells pre-loved library stock and donations at bargain prices. And at Unley, the Friends have for years been able to partner activities with the Council and library management, delivery better outcomes for the community, particularly in many voluntary roles.

Again, partnership can be an important catalyst for success. In Tasmania at Launceston, the Friends have undertaken numerous activities with the library and the historical society. Recently they were successful in obtaining a \$16,000 grant from the Tasmanian Community Fund to construct a website featuring photographs of 1100 people who had admission to the Tasmanian Exhibition of 1881.

Although New Zealand has a smaller number of Friends groups, the structure and depth of the groups is very healthy. Predating the first established group in Australia, the Dunedin group, established in 1890, is still today, active and important to the Dunedin Public Library system. Two characteristics mark New Zealand groups. Firstly, most have the strong support of library management, most evident at Christchurch, Dunedin, Hutt, Rotorua and North Shore City Libraries. Secondly, measures of local government accountability and proscribed consultation with the community, enhances the opportunity for Friends to perform a key role in the strategic mission of many libraries. This is more akin to the United States than Australia, and gives Friends more sanctioned prestige.

## Some highlights of key Friends groups

- Partnerships with council to deliver strategic outcomes
- Community programs in the arts
- Fundraising with key \$ benefits
- Publicity for target outcomes
- High level of political judgment and ability in persuading decision makers
- Promotional and marketing excellence
- Building new markets with the community
- Providing sustainable library programs

All of these outcomes enhance education, social interaction, recreation and a sense of community pride and increased library identity with council and stakeholders. Not only does this increase the investment in the community, but it also grows social capital. Friends are contributing to the 'big picture' strategic direction, something that many Friends groups in the United States have been achieving for some time.

For example, supporting knowledge and discovery at the Minneapolis Public Library is the 'big picture' for Friends of the Minneapolis Public Library. Last financial year the Friends made a difference by providing the library with nearly \$5 million in direct financial and programmatic support. In addition, advocacy efforts with the Library trustees provided millions more for capital improvements.

While comparisons with our Australasian environment can be unjustified and unwarranted, they do however point to the 'effort of goodwill' amongst the Friends to which we can learn much. Many of the library programs offered by the Friends in these large institutions do provide an example or a challenge, for even the smallest FOL group in this country. A simple reference to some of the main areas of involvement for the Friends of the Minneapolis Public Library can give us a broad insight into new directions and opportunities (<http://www.friendsompl.org/Friends>).

### *Key directions for consideration:*

- Library building program – supporting and providing advocacy for library management in achieving new buildings.
- Membership – encouraging growth and sustaining existing membership.
- Public Programs – assisting with funds and Friends voluntary support in a wide range of activities, thereby increasing the public face of the Friends.
- Friends Bookstore – providing much needed income from books withdrawn from library collections.
- Library Support and Advocacy – being challenged not to accept the status-quo.
- Volunteering – providing help within management guidelines for programs such as, Technology Tutors, 'Read to Me', Book delivery service, Help at a library stand for new members in the library.

Dollars and political action do count, they do make a difference. But the leap for many libraries in Australia and New Zealand, is to have FOL groups incorporated in the Strategic Plan of the library. This should be our aim in the next decade. We have gone from - ‘making a difference’. We now need to become - ‘essential to the future’.

**Encouraging success: B&T Awards**

For some years, FOLA through one of our major sponsors – Baker & Taylor, have encouraged excellence in program outcomes, through the provision of the Baker & Taylor Best of Friends Awards. Some recent winners have been: Toowoomba (Qld), Hastings (NSW), Alexandra (Vic), Unley (SA), Balmain (NSW), State Library of South Australia (SA), Wollongong (NSW) and Castlemaine (Vic). These Friends groups have some common elements that bring success. Characteristics such as: partnering with library management, political advocacy, marketing and promotional ability, teamwork, administrative ability, ‘big-picture’ thinking and a strategic understanding of the issues. Another way at looking at this success is in terms of – building relationships. Making connections with one another, and keeping them going over time. This is about understanding the power within the community and the concept of social capital.

**Community Power**

Friends have been operating within the community expanding the concept of social capital, well before understanding what it precisely meant. Friends have been at the heart of social capital - members of networks, with a set of shared values. The most well known exponent of the phrase ‘social capital’ has been Robert Putnam (1993) who wrote in relation to civic engagement (what Friends do best):

*Social capital here refers to features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions.*

**Our Challenge**

How do Friends groups achieve success and continue to grow. One measure is to understand the key building blocks that have enabled many FOL groups to be successful. These can be summarized as:

*10 Steps to Success*

<p><b>1. Origins – Setting a firm foundation</b> Doing your homework</p>	<p><b>2. Objectives – Where am I going and why</b> What do you want to achieve</p>
--	--

Talking to library management Understanding your community Speaking with FOLA	Lobbying Support Specify AIMS Communicate
<b>2. Constitution – Getting it right</b> Model constitution Incorporation Public Liability Legal Officer	<b>3. Membership – It makes a difference</b> Numbers count Membership target Benefits Communication
<b>4. Revenue – Making it happen</b> \$ make a difference What role fundraising 'Relationship marketing' Personal contacts Saying – thank you	<b>5. Library Support – A helping hand</b> Administrative Personal contacts Discuss with Library Manager
<b>6. Activities – Showing the way</b> Lobbying Programs – social/literary/booksales Annual Meeting Invitations Publicity	<b>7. Problems – Being honest</b> Define purpose of FOL group Volunteer's manual \$'s for what purpose Lobbying Courtesy, planning, communication Seeking help
<b>8. Accomplishments – Make a splash!</b> Publicity/Public Relations Communicate with other FOLs Celebrate occasions Invite Councillors and Donors Do you have a web site	<b>9. Creativity – Being seen</b> Establish a 'niche' Check out other FOLs FOLA's Best of Friends Awards

*Growing Friends for the next decade - Key strategies:*

**Technology – web sites for Friends**

Check out some overseas sites – highly commended would be the Friends of the Minneapolis Public Library (USA).

**Being politically savvy**

Friends of Hastings (NSW), Great Lakes (NSW), Waverley (NSW) – building partnerships with Council.

### **Regional groupings**

West Gippsland Regional Library Corporation (Vic) – expanding Friends groups within the region, creating an effective voice within the management structure.

### **Quality and training**

Friends of Cooloola (Qld), State Library of South Australia (SA), Unley (SA) – providing clear direction and guidelines for effective operations.

### **Code of operations (conduct)**

Friends of Cooloola (Qld) – clearly articulated written policy for new Friends.

### **Publicity**

Friends of Balmain (NSW) – providing effective community publicity and a high quality newsletter.

### **Library Management**

Friends of Balmain (NSW), Unley (SA)

### **Dollars \$\$\$**

Friends of the State Library of South Australia (SA), Toowoomba (Qld), Launceston (Tas).

### **Concluding remarks**

*“BAT MPL – Batgirl: Librarian and 3<sup>rd</sup> biggest action hero in the bat kingdom (as least in comic books). Staffed by heroes who manage the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest collection per capita in the country. There’s more to libraries (and librarians) than you might know.”* And where can this be found? At the Minneapolis Public Library, supported by a Friends movement that understands and contributes to community engagement, partnering and building ‘social capital’. The challenge is before all Friends in Australia to build social capital of our libraries and our communities.

The extent and pace of changes to libraries, the information sector and local government, pose huge challenges to the growth of Friends in Australia and New Zealand. Adapting to the new millennium facing a paradox at the heart of Friends – balancing techniques and practices borrowed from business with a commitment to the democratic practices at the heart of our foundations.

A final challenge is to get the right mix between local and global ideas and action. Friends of Libraries do not operate in a vacuum. They are part of a global network that strengthens civil society, upon which much of our world’s well-being depends.

*In their political associations..., of all conditions, minds, and ages, daily acquire a general taste for association and grow accustomed to the use of it. They meet together in large numbers, they converse, they listen to one another, and they are*

*mutually stimulated to all sorts of undertakings. They afterwards transfer to civil life the notions they have thus acquired and make them subservient to a thousand purposes.*

(De Tocqueville 1832: Book 2, Ch V11)

---

## References

*Association Management* (2005) Vol 6(4).

Austin, James (2000) *The Collaboration Challenge*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

De Tocqueville, Alexis (1990:1832) *Democracy in America*, Volume 2, Vintage, Toronto.

Ferguson, Daniel (1997) *Friends of Libraries Resource Book*, FOLA, Melbourne.

Ferguson, Daniel (2005) *Friends of Libraries Resource Book* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, FOLA, Melbourne.

Field, John (2003) *Social Capital*, Routledge, London.

*Libraries, Building, Communities* (2005) A Research Report for the Library Board of Victoria, State Library of Victoria.

*National: Library of Australia News* (2004) Vol 15(3).

Ostrower, Francie (1995) *Why the Wealthy Give*, Princeton University Press, NJ.

*Sydney Morning Herald* (2005) 8 October.

*What Makes Communities Tick?* (2004) Local Government & Social Capital Action Research Project, LGAQ and CSRC, University of Queensland.

Web site:

<http://www.friendsofimpl.org/images/BAT.pdf>