

Growing Friends: Celebrating FOLA's 10 years

Daniel Ferguson, Executive Director FOLA

Libraries are changing dramatically in the services they provide to the community, and Friends of Library (FOL) groups – the citizens who support libraries with time, money and talents are establishing an important niche in this market.

At the 5th biennial conference of Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA) held in Adelaide in October 2005, Alan Smith, the Director of the State Library of South Australia, noted in a perceptive opening address “Friends of Libraries groups bear living witness to the importance of libraries ... a library without a FOL group is a library diminished.”

And as Dr Christine Henderson, observed in 1988 “The ramifications of citizen support for library services should not be underestimated as it has the potential to determine the future course of library services in this country.”

Numerous librarians throughout the country recognize that having a Friends group contributes to the strengthening of that service in the community. This is particularly evident in Victoria, at the West Gippsland Regional Library Corporation, where John Murrell, CEO has stated that the Friends have the opportunity to be represented on the Community Advisory Committee and “assist the development of a positive relationship between the community and the library service and thus improve the responsiveness of the service.” This library authority has ten FOL groups operating within its region and has established an effective model for community participation in which other services could emulate.

In more than ten years, since the establishment of FOLA in December 1994, by its patron the Hon Justice Michael Kirby, FOLA has 160 groups in every state and territory of Australia. It is also contributing to Friends development in New Zealand, South Africa and the UK, particularly by way of its major resource, the *Friends of Libraries Resource Book* (2005) now in its 2nd edition and the development of its web site www.fola.org.au.

Significant to success has been bringing people together at national conferences – Melbourne (1996), Adelaide (1998), Canberra (2000), Sydney (2002) and Adelaide (2005). Awarding successful FOL groups with the annual Baker & Taylor Best of Friends Awards has recognized some outstanding groups around Australia: Great Lakes, Cooloola, Toowoomba, Unley, Salisbury, West Gippsland, Altona, Launceston, Hastings, Castlemaine, Alexandra, Balmain, Wollongong and the State Library of South Australia.

Chris Jones, Library Manager at Great Lakes (NSW) is enthusiastic in his support: “Friends are awesome, I love all of them, even the ones who drive me to distraction. If you score a good Friends group, and I’m blessed with wonderful people, it adds a whole new and fantastic dimension to the library.” Another manager, Roslyn Cousins at

Toowoomba City Library (Qld), pays tribute to the fundraising capacity of their group and the ‘fabulous’ success in gaining grants.

While Australia does not have the success or history of FOL groups in the United States, FOLA being the second such group worldwide, has achieved some remarkable outcomes ahead of countries such as Canada, UK and New Zealand.

In the past 12 months FOLA has concentrated on developing a framework to tackle some national issues facing the 12 million public library users. Friends are voters and taxpayers, they have a sizeable stake in our national infrastructure. As FOLA president, Dr Alan Bundy AM has stated “Public libraries have a unique cradle to grave clientele...and the challenge is to ensure that library funding decision makers are aware of the breadth of that clientele, and of the resources needed.”

FOLA started its program of reports to the nation with the launch during its 10th anniversary celebration at the National Library on 3 December 2004 of *Australian Bookstart: a national issue, a compelling case*. The second report to the nation *Community critical: Australian public libraries serving seniors* was launched on 14 October at its 5th biennial conference in Adelaide.

The challenge for FOLA over the next 10 years is to create the environment for Friends and libraries to grow in a natural partnership, achieving outcomes for the 12 million Australian library users. This will be FOLA’s greatest investment in the future.

Article prepared for the Australian Library & Information Association’s newsletter *inCite* December 2005.