

Growing friends: celebrating FOLA's 10 years

Daniel Ferguson, executive director, FOLA

The services libraries provide to the community are changing dramatically, and Friends of Library (FOL) groups – citizens who support libraries with time, money and talent – 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 his perceptive opening address that 'Friends of Libraries groups bear living witness to the importance of libraries... a library without a FOL group is a library diminished.' Dr Christine Henderson said 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 recognise that having a Friends group contributes to the strengthening of their service in the community. This is particularly evident in Victoria, at the West Gippsland Regional Library Corporation, where John Murrell, CEO, has Friends represented on the Community Advisory Committee and they '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: an effective model for community participation that other services could emulate.

Since FOLA's establishment more than 10 years ago (in December 1994) by our patron the Hon Justice Michael Kirby, 160 groups have joined from every state and territory of Australia. We are also contributing to Friends development in New Zealand, South Africa and the UK, particularly through the *Friends of*



Daniel Ferguson (FOLA) presenting the Baker & Taylor Best of Friends Award to the Friends of Balmain Library committee (l-r): Helen Colman, Jan Aitkin (FOBL chair), Pam Dingle, Liz Bisson, Joan Chapman and Herma Sieper.

Libraries Resource Book (2005), now in its 2nd edition, and the development of our website <http://www.fola.org.au>.

Bringing people together at the national conference has been a significant part of our success – Melbourne (1996), Adelaide (1998), Canberra (2000), Sydney (2002) and Adelaide (2005). The annual Baker & Taylor Best of Friends Awards has recognised some outstanding FOL 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 its 'fabulous' success in gaining grants.

FOLA is the second such group worldwide. While Australia does not have the success or history of FOL groups in the United States, we have 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. 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 of *Australian Bookstart: a national issue, a compelling case* during its 10th anniversary celebration at the National Library on 3 December 2004. 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.

In March 2006, at the invitation of the Margaret Allen, state librarian of Western Australia, I presented a series of workshops throughout the state to enhance the development of Friends groups. Again, this is recognising the valuable contribution Friends groups make to the social fabric of our communities and to building better library services.

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

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