Friends? Indeed! Library Friends Groups Can Support Funding, Development, and Services for Your Institution

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G-6: “Forging Connections with Library Friends Groups”

Presenters: Mark Podvia, moderator, Dickinson School of Law Library of the Pennsylvania State University; Carol D. Billings, Law Library of Louisiana; Judith A. Gainsburgh, Friends of the Law Library of Louisiana; and Jennie C. Meade, George Washington University Jacob Burns Law Library.

Before attending “Forging Connections with Library Friends Groups” during the AALL Annual Meeting, I was ignorant of friends groups beyond basic public library connotations. The organizers and presenters of this session provided welcome enlightenment about the applications to law libraries as well.

Two very different libraries, one state—Law Library of Louisiana—and one academic—George Washington University Jacob Burns Law Library—were featured in the session. The panel of experts included Bibliographer and Rare Books Librarian Jennie C. Meade of Jacob Burns, Law Library of Louisiana Director Carol D. Billings, and Judith A. Gainsburgh, president of the Friends of the Law Library of Louisiana. The shared experience of other librarians is always helpful, and the panel’s inclusion of a friends group member was most valuable. It sometimes seems as if libraries are most important to those of us who work in them, and I remind myself that an interest in libraries sparked my career—my career didn’t spark the interest. Gainsburgh’s generous participation in the program underscores that such interest is indeed not unique to librarians. An essential lesson I took from the program is that libraries, collections, and services are truly appreciated and supported. Despite the dour messages of dwindling budgets and staff shortages, we have friends who acknowledge and empower us. The session, coordinated by Karen S. Beck, curator of rare books/collection development librarian at Boston College Law Library, was presented in an engaging question and answer format with Mark Podvia, associate law librarian, legal research professor, and archivist at Dickinson School of Law Library of the Pennsylvania State University, as moderator.

The format suited the topic well, providing a framework for each panelist’s remarks, in which comparison and contrast was immediate and apparent. The session progressed smoothly at a pleasant conversational pace. Topics included rationales for groups, practical considerations, and a general discussion that illuminated both common grounds and individual differences.

Friends in Need?

Reasons for friends groups vary. The Friends of the Jacob Burns Law Library was formally introduced in spring 2004, inspired by the need for augmented special collection funding. An original Friends of the Law Library of Louisiana was similarly budget-inspired in 1982. The group has recently been reconstituted to promote the library’s new location and services following a move to the New Orleans French Quarter. The friends’ support is relevant both for this promotion and to fund items that cannot be publicly funded, Billings notes.

Friends respond to promotional and social events, as well as financial needs. Libraries can seek interested individuals and establish a mutually beneficial partnership.
of fees and benefits. Both Jacob Burns and Louisiana have established categories of membership. Due to their relatively recent founding, both groups are currently in the planning/drafting stages of official governance. The Friends of the Law Library of Louisiana is actively drafting articles of incorporation, bylaws, and 501(c)(3) nonprofit status.

**Friends Are for Sharing**

While membership fees provide valuable assets to libraries, libraries likewise provide value to their friends. Jacob Burns, a private institution, offers borrowing privileges at certain levels of membership. Louisiana stresses service to the public, and friends have the opportunity to provide feedback and guidance to the library.

Both libraries produce informative and attractive newsletters for current and potential friends, and both have held special friends events. At Jacob Burns, receptions for faculty authors and emeriti faculty are becoming annual events. At Louisiana, lecture series have included free CLE credit for attorney members.

Each group plans to expand programming, and each has unique ambitions. Meade aspires to sponsorship for archival-quality cases and library exhibitions, increasing friends support for special collections. Billings expresses interest in sponsoring larger, newsworthy events—like the Library of Virginia Literary Awards—to make the library a social and political community hub.

These experiences and goals suggest the range of potential roles for friends and libraries. The benefits of membership reflect and fulfill a library’s mission, promoting collections, services, use, and space.

**Who Are Our Friends?**

Jacob Burns friends are both inside and outside the law school community, with membership levels ranging from alumni to corporate. Louisiana friends include the whole community. The group is currently composed mainly of New Orleans-based legal experts, and Gainsburgh notes a desire to extend it throughout the state.

There are two sides to the friends/library partnership, and library staff also plays a role. Friends provide ideas, says Gainsburgh, which staff put into action. Both groups rely on library staff manpower for events. The implementation of friends’ benefits and financial management for the group may also involve library staff. To have friends, one must be a friend.

**The Forge of Friendship**

Jacob Burns has gained support for its collections and is strengthening bonds with alumni, faculty, and practitioners. Louisiana has established a network of support for expanding community services. Both groups are poised for future development, and each also faces challenges.

At Jacob Burns, the group’s newness and lack of structure enable enthusiasm and innovation, supported by the library and development office, but results can take time. Meade cautions against becoming discouraged.

Billings and Gainsburgh cite the *De Novo* newsletter, library staff, the expertise of members, and increased visibility as strengths. Garnering support from the court has been a challenge, and last year’s hurricanes interrupted activities.

Both libraries note competition for time and attention as ongoing challenges. A healthy friendship requires dedication, and even a single devoted individual can make a difference.

Whenever I hear a good idea for library development, my initial enthusiastic reaction is followed by sobering thoughts of practical implementation. The exemplars of the Jacob Burns Law Library and the Law Library of Louisiana suggest a means for maintaining, rather than deferring, enthusiasm as library friends can help in evaluation, brainstorming, funding, and otherwise achieving library goals.

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