

SUSTAINING AND GROWING FRIENDS GROUPS OLA 2008

Val Marshall Friends of the Ajax Public Library

Friends of Library groups function like a “marriage.” It’s all about relationships – with the added difficulty that many more than two people involved. The CEO, the Library Board, the library staff, the local community and – all the Friends.

Again, like a marriage, it takes cooperation, flexibility, patience, understanding, a sense of humour and tolerance – plus the ability to overcome changes.

So how do you keep harmony, sustain and grow your Friends Group?

- 1) **BUILD ON A SOLID FOUNDATION:** e.g. constitution, bylaws, charitable status. Friends also manage their own finances.
- 2) **DEFINE THE ROLE OF THE FRIENDS FUNDRAISING?** Define the role of the Friends. E.g. fundraising, public relations, advocacy, special programs. In non-unionized libraries Friends may also have designated duties in the library such as shelving books. This will not happen in a unionized environment and it’s vital that all jobs, which involve helping staff, be discussed and agreed upon by library management.

Ajax Friends operate in a unionized library but they do have one unique role. Friends water the plants in the Main Library on a weekly roster system. Over the past twelve years, Ajax Friends have maintained a healthy relationship with staff working with the Library Community Coordinator. Front desk staff help the Friends by selling tickets to Friends events, while the Friends host all the library staff to an annual lunch, which the Friends provide and serve in the Program Room.

- 3) **FUNDRAISING** - Will the Friends or the Library Board be in charge of fundraising? Will it depend on each individual project?

(The Library Board gives the Friends a “Wish List” each year. Presently they are working on raising \$75,000 towards a self-check out/security system. However, smaller items are purchased for the library so that Friends can see how they are making a difference in the community. Shopping baskets and a walker complete with basket has recently been purchased).

- 3) **WILL STAFF SUPPORT BE PROVIDED?** If so, how much?
- 4) **REGULAR COMMUNICATION** – Keep all parties informed and up-to-date.
- a. Regular Newsletter for members and the public, information on the Friends displayed in the library, flyers for events, inclusion in library publications, the library website, press releases in local newspapers, other organizations newsletters and a telephone committee, monthly written report on Friends activities as part of the Library Board Agenda. In Ajax the CEO is a non-voting member of the Friends Executive and regularly attends the monthly meetings.
 - b. Scheduled Meetings and the Annual General Meeting. Make the meetings interesting and fun with author's visits, local artists, art groups and performers. Invite other community groups to give workshops. Ajax Friends partnered with the local Arts Group to present a Chinese Afternoon with demonstrations of Chinese Brush Painting and Paper Lantern construction. The organization also displayed their artwork in the library that same month. With Chinese cookies, fortune cookies and green tea the afternoon was a great learning experience and brought in new members to the Friends. Other events are planned for the future.
 - c. Social events as well as book sales and raffles. Reward your friends with barbeques, potlucks, and snacks while they work.
 - d. Encourage new members and make them welcome at all the functions.
- 5) **DEALING WITH CHANGES:** Changes need to be addressed without delay, as they can “scuttle” any marriage. Be proactive and optimistic. Try to avoid misunderstandings. Friends may have to deal with:
- a) **CHANGE OF THE CEO** – Communicate early with the Search Committee. Explain the role of the Friends and their present position in the library – regular duties, use of facilities, staff support – plus the value of your Friends to the library and to the community. It's probably a good idea to put this in writing. If the new CEO does not want a Friends Group, then “divorce” inevitable.
 - b) **NEW BOARD MEMBERS** – Make sure they are well informed about the Friends. Invite Board Members to all events and give them copies of your newsletter. Why not invite them to speak at one of your meetings or open your book sale?

- c) **CLOSURE OF LIBRARY BRANCHES BY THE LIBRARY BOARD.** This is a delicate situation and it should be obvious that closures are last resort decision by any Library Board. This decision should not come as a shock to the Friends if they have continuous communication with the
 - d) Board. Discuss this with the Board Chair and the CEO prior to any decision and request that they speak to your Friends Group. Friends are there to support the Board, not to be working against them. You can be sure that the Board will call upon the Friends for help with advocacy on behalf of the library, showing their support at a meeting of Town Council, raising awareness of issues and funding special programs and equipment.
- 6) **LACK OF INTEREST FROM THE FRIENDS.** Lack of interest or a drop in membership, a misunderstanding, or losing key members of the executive? Check on your level of activities. Have the Friends just finished a major fundraiser? They probably need a well-deserved break. Too few people doing all the work and experiencing burn-out? Perhaps the Friends don't feel valued? Plan a get-together and discuss the problems.
- a) **Activities** – Balance the program with more social events and entertainment. Make sure it's fun! Ajax Friends runs the Ajax Film circuit at the local Cineplex Odeon in cooperation with the Toronto International Film Association. To encourage people to come into the library and use the resources, we also run "Music On a Sunday Afternoon" during the winter months. In fact our recent "Tribute to Robbie Burns" was a sellout with 100 people. Nothing like having Bagpipes in the library to liven up the atmosphere!
 - b) **Membership** – Encourage Friends to help out on all the regular committees. Many people don't want the responsibility of organizing a whole event, but will certainly help with your hospitality, telephone, publicity, and book sale committees. Give plenty of training and make sure they are doing an activity they enjoy.
 - c) **Boost your Membership Campaign** – This should be a year around activity. Have membership applications and information at all events. Ask people to join – sometimes that's all it takes.

7) **APPRECIATE YOUR FRIENDS** – Try the following rewards.

- a) Friend of the Year Awards at your Annual General Meeting. A simple, framed certificate.
- b) The Library Board to host an annual reception or lunch for the Friends.
- c) Organize or attend a regional meeting with local Friends groups. Great meetings to share ideas, congratulate each other for the triumphs and laugh with each other over those failures. Friends of Canadian Libraries (FOCAL) can provide assistance with these events.
- d) Make sure that the Mayor and members of Council know of your efforts. When Ajax Friends won the Friends of the Year award from FOCAL, it was presented at a televised meeting of Council. This gave the mayor the opportunity to thank the Friends on behalf of the community. Friends can also make a presentation at a Council Meeting, giving an update on their activities.
- e) Ask the Mayor to be your Guest Speaker at the AGM.

Can Friends groups stay the course and grow? Yes, they can. Friends groups are alive and well in Canada. Eleven years ago when FOCAL was being formed, Library friends were there, but now well known or understood. Now they are readily accepted as part of the library family. Thanks to FOCAL, there are resources available from their organization to assist groups.

Keep the communication going
Keep things fun
Appreciate your Friends
Enjoy Your Library!