

FOLA at five

Friends — an untapped resource

Daniel Ferguson, Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA) executive officer

Friends of libraries (FOL) groups across the country remain under-utilised: however this is changing.

It is now five years since the establishment of Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA) the organisation which promotes and develops Friends of Library groups in Australia. The Hon Justice Michael Kirby (FOLA Patron) launched FOLA on 9 December 1994 at a function in Queen's Hall, State Library of Victoria.

The development of Friends groups throughout Australia during the past five years is significant, especially considering the resources available. In 1994 some seventy groups were scattered throughout the country, concentrated in Victoria and South Australia. Today 160 Friends groups operate and are found in every state and territory of Australia, representing more than 8000 members.

The changes witnessed over this period in the library industry are reflected in the development of Friends groups. In particular, local government restructuring, economic rationalism, market forces and emerging new technologies have played a part in shaping how Friends groups operate and how they see themselves. Clearly, the emergence of a distinctive form of 'community activism' at the grassroots of local government has contributed to the development of the Friends movement.

Federal and State government's thrust in passing greater responsibility onto the service provider and in challenging the corporate sector to rethink their corporate 'responsibility' to the community has focused attention on the role and effectiveness of many public utilities, including libraries.

The beginning

Before FOLA became a reality, the few scattered Friends groups around the country knew very little about each other. As a library administrator and one involved in the promotion of libraries as president of the Library Promotion Committee in Victoria (LPCV), I saw the need for existing Friends groups to communicate and share effective strategies.

In establishing a Friends sub-committee of LPCV in 1989, a small but effective group — Eric Flynn, Helen Hayes, Mary Kelleher, Brian Southwell, Jellie Wyckelsma and myself — were able to support the development of FOL groups in Victoria. It soon became apparent that the need for information on Friends came from other states as well.

A visit to the United States in 1990 confirmed my view that Australia needed a national body similar to Friends of Libraries USA (FOLUSA). A working party was established in 1993 with the aim of forming a national body within twelve months and on 9 December 1994, Friends of Libraries Incorporated was formed, with the Hon Mrs Margaret Lusink AM becoming the first president. A retired Family Court Judge, Peg was a most enthusiastic foundation president, who was also the president of the Friends of Euroa Library in north central Victoria.

Making the difference

FOLA has made a difference. It provides guidance in the establishment of new FOL groups. It provides consulting services and information in dealing with difficult issues. It organises a biennial conference (Melbourne 1996, Adelaide 1998 and Canberra 2000). It disseminates practical advice through the *Friends of Libraries Resource Book*, a quarterly newsletter, *NewsUpdate*, and other promotional material, and will be undertaking a major upgrade and expansion of its internet site in the next twelve months.

It provides the Best of Friends and Australian Library Week Awards annually and has recently compiled a booklet — *Best of Friends Ideas*, inspirational texts from Friends groups around the country on 'how to do it'.

One of the most inspirational gatherings was held at the Antiquarian Bookshop of Kay Craddock in Melbourne last year, when one of the award winners in the Best of Friends Awards was presented to the Alexandra Library Junior Friends group. Six committee members who ranged in age from thirteen to sixteen years represented the group. This Junior Friends group has clearly made a difference, both to their library and in the community.

Friends moving forward

Friends of Library groups today are providing many libraries with new opportunities by creating new customer service strategies, new ways of marketing services and new ways of building links to the community. The Library Society of New South Wales (the Friends' group) has been successful in performing a strategic partnership which enhances the library to the public, to government and the corporate sector.

The oldest established Friends group in an Australian library can be found at the State Library of South Australia. The group

was established in 1932, and today is one of the most active in the country.

One of the most exciting developments on the Friends scene has been the growth in public library websites, many of whom now refer to their Friends of the Library group. A particularly good site is at Frankston in Victoria. Here the library has seen the value in a marketing strategy that incorporates the Friends. It is an excellent example for other Friends — <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~fofls/>

During the past ten years Friends groups have developed their activities and interests, well beyond book sales and lobbying campaigns. A number of libraries have implemented strategic plans which incorporate Friends input, and value ongoing discussions to improve the level of services. High profile groups are found in every State and Territory, each with a particular strength, but each have an understanding of the community they serve and the library they support. It is all about success through partnering.

FOLA plans to focus on strengthening its Australia-wide partnerships with Friends groups, as well as liaison with overseas bodies such as Friends of Libraries USA and Friends of Canadian Libraries.

A recent report to the Library and Information Commission in the United Kingdom has recommended the establishment of a national body in that country. Unlike Australia, it appears that stakeholders in the United Kingdom have realised the importance of such partnering in developing the cultural and social fabric of the nation. It is only hoped that Australia will eventually be awakened to the benefits of such bodies in our midst.

FOLA could not have accomplished much of its present work without the support of numerous sponsors, of note, Australian Large Print Audio & Video (Bolinda Publishing) and Ulverscroft Large Print. Another valued friend in the development of FOLA has been Dr Alan Bundy, past president of ALIA and university librarian at the University of South Australia. Without such individual support and encouragement FOLA could not have undertaken the task of cultivating the growth of Friends groups throughout the country.

Daniel Ferguson founded FOLA in 1994. He is the executive officer and has been involved in Friends activities for over twenty years.