

The Friendly Café Meet-Up

Friday, November 9, 2018 – 3:45 – 5 p.m.

(Program Slot #6 of the 2018 NYLA Annual Convention)

Joseph A. Floreano Rochester Riverside Convention Center

Sponsored by the Friends of Libraries Section/New York Library Association

Co-Sponsored by the Library Trustees Association of NYS; the Friends & Foundation of the Rochester Public Library; LAMS (Leadership & Management Section) of NYLA.

Notes from the discussion. See the agenda.

Presider Lynne Madden, Secretary of the executive board of the Friends of Libraries Section, welcomed the 30 people in attendance, representing 11 library systems from across NYS. Lynne introduced members of the FLS Board who were present.

Three speakers addressed the group about the importance of networking among Friends of the Library groups, especially those in the same region of the state. The audience was encouraged to give consideration to establish similar volunteer support groups in their library systems. Lisa Wemett, Secretary for the Monroe County Library System's (MCLS) Friends Council and incoming FLS President, gave an overview of the Council's organization and activities. The Council is 100% volunteer-driven, with administrative support provided by key system personnel (e.g., the Council's listserv). Hosting duties rotate among the groups twice a year, alternating the east and west sides of the county so volunteers do not have to travel too far. Meetings include a speaker or feature the activities of the local hosts, plus "round the table" reports of current activities from each group. Members request discussion topics to be added to the agenda when they are looking for new ideas or trying to resolve a common problem. Minutes of the meetings and supplemental materials are provided to all the groups.

Bob Pacer, Immediate Past President of the Friends of the Chili Public Library, addressed how the MCLS Friends Council has directly benefited his group. When Bob started on the Chili Friends Board, there were unfilled vacancies. The fledgling officers were encouraged and excited by the MCLS Friends Council meetings, seeing what other groups were doing and what the Chili group could aspire to become. Now their group has projects that other Friends admire and want to emulate. The Council helps the Friends across the county have a sense of community.

Randall Enos, Youth Services Consultant for the Ramapo Catskill Library System (RCLS), discussed the Friends support groups in RCLS and the Mid-Hudson Library System (MHLS). The RCLS Friends groups, in coordination with the Orange County Library Association, meets one time a year for 2 hours. Attendance is about 30 people, representing 10 Friends groups. There is networking, refreshments, and a speaker. A popular event was a "fashion show" when the assembled groups modeled library T-shirts.

MHLS offers similar support for Friends continuing education. Friends representatives meet two times a year in a central location; the System provides a light dinner for the group. Both systems have resources for Friends on their websites (see References at the end of these minutes). Links are provided to Friends webpages; these are a wonderful resource for projects, programs, and membership forms when you are looking for new ideas.

Our discussion moderator was Kenya Malcolm of the Friends of the Ogden Farmers Library, Spencerport, Monroe County. Each audience member was asked to introduce themselves and to cite one way the group promotes joining the Friends. Some of the membership promotion and recruitment efforts were:

- encouraging members of the library's Board of Trustees to join the Friends
- sending individual e-mail notices and posting on the Friends social media accounts that it is "time to renew." Similar reminder notes can be put on mailed newsletters.
- another group sent 100+ reminder letters via USPS and saw a \$1,000 return on their investment of postage
- entering new members into a drawing for a raffle prize (e.g., when the library opened a new café, the prize was a gift certificate to the café)
- updating the group's membership brochure and offering additional levels of membership, including a lifetime membership, increased revenue; another group involved a professional graphic designer to create a new brochure with a more polished look
- rolling renewal dates over the course of the year keeps membership numbers steady
- be visible: get a banner or table drape to use in the library or at community events, where volunteers will be handing out membership brochures ("please join us!")
- consider starting auxiliary groups, such as a Junior Friends group for teens or a young adult group for millennials/30-somethings
- keep your message out there on electronic bulletin boards, whether it is a sign board on campus or at the local firehall
- patrons who are avid readers join the Friends to gain preferred access to borrow the new "Hot Books"
- a presence at the local farmers' market encourages neighbors to join the Friends
- put membership brochures or Friends' program fliers in books as they are checked out at the Circulation Desk. Have signage about joining the Friends and have a stack of brochures visible, encouraging patrons to help themselves.
- a Facebook page reminds followers of Friends activities; see if the staff member who provides technical support to the library might help a volunteer set up a page
- the "carrot" of an invitation-only preview sale for Friends, prior to the public start to the annual book sale, can recruit many new members
- gift memberships can be promoted for anniversaries, holidays, etc. One FLS Board member gave memberships to his family so they would see what his volunteer service was about when they received the group's newsletter!
- at library programs underwritten by the Friends, a Friends member promotes the group's work, makes a membership pitch to the audience, and distributes forms to join the group

Regarding the last item, we cannot assume "everyone" knows what the Friends do. The general public may not be fully aware of the Friends role as a volunteer support group for the library. They might respond, "Of course, I'm a friend of the library" – note the lower-case F. Educating the public about our mission, our purpose, and the "extras" we purchase for the library needs to be an ongoing process.

See www.nyla.org/friends and select Publications on the left sidebar. In the FLS newsletter archives, select the June 2017 issue. On page 7, see "Marketing Friends Membership to the Community" for additional ways to attract members to the Friends.

Kenya encouraged us to "find our people" and continue to grow. Bob Pacer stated we cannot be afraid of rejection: as in sales, we may only see success 10% of the time. The key is to keep asking! One group echoed the sentiment: down to only 16 members a few years ago, they are now 74 members strong – more than a 360% increase. An encouraging story.

Time was short, as it always is at the FLS meet-ups. Participants brainstormed topics they wanted to discuss, but we were unable to get to these:

1. Friends groups and library foundations merging
2. How formal should groups be? [e.g., Do we need a 501(c)(3), by-laws, officers? Do we need the continuity of a monthly in-person meeting? What differentiates a group of volunteers from an actual "Friends group"?)
3. Encouraging more participation from members and how to get new members more active
4. Recruiting younger Friends
5. How to obtain your 501(c)(3)

Hopefully we can take up some of these topics when we gather again.

Evaluations of the session were very positive over all. Given the enthusiasm for this discussion format, FLS plans to have meet-ups at future NYLA Annual Conferences.

Resources:

- Ramapo Catskill Library System Friends page: <http://www.rcls.org/?q=node/288>
- Mid-Hudson Library System Friends page: <http://midhudson.org/topics/sustainable-libraries/friends-groups/>
- Friends of Libraries Section/New York Library Association webpage: www.nyla.org/friends See "Publications" on the left sidebar. Find a synopsis of the Meet-Up on pages 5-6 of the December 2018 issue of the "Friends News and Notes" newsletter, along with a wrap-up of all programs at the Rochester convention.

Notes compiled by Lisa C. Wemett, FLS President