April 27, 2020

Dear Library Friends,

I had thought I would originally wait until my presidential column in the Friends News and Notes newsletter to speak to all of you. But the June issue seems far off and who knows how the world will be then? I think we are all learning to seize the moment.

We have helped do our part to stem the spread of coronavirus. But in the process, we have had to master online communication and broader uses of technology nearly overnight. Seriously, had you heard of Zoom before March 15?

We expect library staff these days to have great technical skills, but they have been forced to learn and embrace even more skills. Libraries have shut their doors, but their communities have continued to have questions and factual information needs. As institutions, libraries have always been based on face-to-face relations with staff, where we find the answer we need, the perfect book for a rainy afternoon, and the Wi-Fi connection we do not have at home. Library programs moved quickly onto videoconferencing platforms, Zooming into our living rooms, offering cyber-style storytimes on YouTube and Facebook Live and even live streamed book discussions.

Library staff did not go on hiatus. They have made it all work. They have established a meaningful online presence with their communities watching and participating. Has this novel experience made the general public more appreciative of the library’s services and staff? I think it has left them hungry for all that we nearly took for granted.

We all have a duty to contribute to public health, to not allow this disease to spread. But the words strange and unprecedented have become commonplace. Working from home in the bedroom and homeschooling in the dining room has led to chaotic and confusing days. It is a disorienting time, especially when wearing a face mask that continuously fogs up your eyeglasses. It has been longer than we wanted and harder than we imagined to stay home and away from one another. We are anxious to get back to our volunteer work, to see our friends with a lower case F.

The New York State on PAUSE order signed by Gov. Cuomo led to many cancellations and postponements, many of which were standard fundraising events for libraries. Libraries and library workers are essential. Our work as Friends will certainly go on as we support libraries, but not necessarily in a manner we are accustomed to.

For those in our community who are out of work or may lose their livelihood, the level of suffering and loss is incalculable. Libraries are also facing severe financial instability, as the state’s resources have been drained in fighting the coronavirus pandemic. Friends will be called upon to step up in ways we could not have imagined before.
Friends have nearly always been about the extras of library service and programs. But soon we may be asked for help with basics and necessities to enable the library to fulfill its mission. The reserve funds set aside for the library will need to be released until we can effectively fundraise again.

We will need to find a new paradigm. What fundraisers will be vital and effective? As a society, we have found creative ways to help finance the purchase of personal protective equipment for our frontline workers. I am confident Friends will embrace similar out-of-the-box solutions. But the strategic plans for our organizations will need to incorporate the possibilities of future cancellations, disruptions, or postponements.

Non-traditional fundraising: what will that look like? I do not know. My crystal ball is cloudy. I do know that our active cadre of volunteers is often the same population that is most vulnerable to COVID-19. We cannot blame them if they are not ready to get together with us as things slowly open up again. Friends leaders will need to look for ways to reassure volunteers and patrons that there are still ways to help the library even without a book sale or other large scale event. Be certain that the “Donate Now” button on your website is large, easy to find, and convenient to use.

Thanks to you, I am certain your libraries will continue to thrive as we come out the other side. Please stay safe and remain steadfast in your commitment to support our critical work in the NYS library community.

Sending everyone a safe virtual hug,
Lisa

Lisa C. Wemett, FLS President