

FRIENDS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

by John B. Straw



While many people think in terms of Friends groups for public libraries, such groups also play an important role in academic libraries. The first Friends organization for an academic library dates back to Harvard in 1925. The idea for a Friends group at Ball State University was proposed at a luncheon at the dedication of the Alexander M. Bracken Library, named for then president of the Ball State University Board of Trustees, on March 28, 1976.

Founder E. Bruce Kirkham, professor of English, and a small group met on May 14, 1977, to officially establish the Friends of the Alexander M. Bracken Library. Dr. Kirkham was appointed as executive secretary for the Friends and a fifteen-member board of governors was established. The purpose of the board of governors was to “establish goals and coordinate the functions of the Friends” (*Bylaws of the Friends of Bracken Library*). The Ball State University president, and later the provost, served as president of the board. Recently, the bylaws were amended so that the dean of University Libraries serves as the board president.

According to the bylaws, “the purpose of the Friends shall be to maintain an association of persons interested in strengthening the University Library system, enhancing its collections, and promoting its usefulness” (*Bylaws of the Friends of Bracken Library*). The membership is open to “any person who has

contributed personal time, money, books, manuscripts, periodicals, or other educational materials to the University Library system” (*Bylaws of the Friends of Bracken Library*).

After its first year of existence, membership in the Friends stood at more than two hundred in thirty-three states and fourteen foreign countries. By the time of its ten-year anniversary, the Friends had exceeded one thousand members. A 1994 telephone campaign conducted by the Office of University Development increased the membership numbers to more than two thousand. As the thirtieth anniversary is celebrated this year, the Friends number more than two thousand and six hundred from fifty states and forty countries.

Out of the twenty-six hundred world-wide members, a little more than one thousand are identified as “active” members, meaning they have given to the University Libraries in some manner over the last five years. More than three-hundred donate to the University Libraries in a single year and typically more than a hundred members contribute financial support in excess of one hundred dollars per year.

The Friends have sponsored many types of programs over the years that attract community and campus audiences to the University Libraries. One of the first activities that the Friends sponsored was the Annual Bracken Library Carol Sing (later known as



Friends Board Meeting



Friends Board Meeting

Winter Music Festival and Holiday Music Festival) held during December. This event, which has continued for fifteen consecutive years, was described in the 1979 issue of the Friends newsletter in the following way:

For twelve hours the Library was filled with seasonal sounds. Many of the groups who performed last year returned, but many were new. In addition to soloists and duos, the program offered the Spanish Club, a music theory class from laboratory school, a marimba ensemble, a bell choir, a French horn group, a trombone choir, a recorder quartet, and the University Orchestra. (*Friends of the Alexander M. Bracken Library Newsletter*, September 15, 1979, p. 1)

In addition to occasional special events and programs, such as an exhibit of Indianapolis 500 photographs taken by local photographers, the Friends have typically sponsored four or five programs each year that feature writers, Ball State faculty, historians, and other speakers of local or academic interest. Programs in recent years have run the gamut from “Confessions of a Rock and Roll Reporter” to “It Can’t Happen Here? Nazi Propaganda, the Holocaust, and the Ku Klux Klan.” Often through the years, the Friends have worked closely with University Libraries’ Archives and Special Collections to coordinate exhibits with the programs.

When the Friends organization began, annual luncheons were held at the end of the academic year. As interest and membership grew, the luncheon became an annual meeting and dinner, which included a speaker. Also over the last few years, the occasions have included recognition of significant donors. In recent years, attendance at these events has grown to around eighty Friends.

At the 2000 annual meeting, then Ball State provost and president of the Friends’ Board of Governors, C. Warren Vander Hill, announced that future presentations at the annual dinner would be known as the Kirkham Lecture to recognize Dr. E. Bruce Kirkham’s twenty-five years as the founding executive secretary of the Friends. That year, Dr. Kirkham delivered the first lecture named in his honor. Recent Kirkham Lectures

have included speakers presenting programs on such topics as “Native American Music” and “In Defense of Literary Biography.” For the thirtieth anniversary of Bracken Library this year, Frank A. Bracken, son of Alexander M. Bracken and member of the Ball State Board of Trustees, delivered the Kirkham Lecture on “Civil War Battlefield Preservation.”

In addition to sponsoring programs and activities, the Friends support the University Libraries, its collections, and its personnel in a number of ways. In 1991, the Friends implemented a scholarship program to support Library employees pursuing graduate degrees in library science. To qualify for the award, the applicant must be a current employee of the University Libraries with no less than two calendar years of satisfactory performance, be enrolled in a master of library science degree program (or its approved equivalent) at an accredited institution in Indiana, and have completed at least eighteen graduate hours with a cumulative grade point average of at least 3.6 on a 4.0 scale. The employee must also continue working in the University Libraries no less than one year subsequent to the award.

In 1995, the Friends established a student recognition award to honor library student assistants who have made significant achievements both academically and in their work for the library. Applicants are required to have at least a 3.0 grade point average and have completed three semesters of employment with and be currently employed by the library. Typically four or five student assistants receive certificates of recognition and checks for \$100 at the annual meeting and dinner.

Besides providing scholarships, Friends funds through the years have also been used to support travel for librarians and staff members to attend professional conferences and workshops, to purchase exhibit cases and other equipment, and, of course, to buy books and other materials to build and strengthen the collections of the University Libraries. Recently, the Friends continued their outstanding support when the board of governors approved funds toward the purchase of a digital content management system to provide access to digital resources for learning, teaching, and research.

To keep Friends members informed and involved, a newsletter is produced annually and mailed to the entire membership. Additionally, the Kirkham Lecture is published (when the format of the presentation permits) and sent to the members with the newsletters. (Since 2000, the newsletter and the Kirkham Lecture publication have also been made available on the Friends website.) In the same mailing, a donor envelope is provided for Friends to make their annual contributions if they wish.

In addition to the annual mailing, membership in the Friends organization is promoted through a web



Friends Dinner

site (www.bsu.edu/library/collections/fambl) and a page in the *Library Insider* online newsletter (www.bsu.edu/library/virtualpress/libinsider). A Friends brochure is currently in development. Some programs sponsored by the Friends are videotaped and made available for viewing on the Web page, which also includes a list of board members, information on programs and the annual dinner, and a copy of the bylaws.

To help generate funds for the University Libraries, the Friends held its first book sale in April 1983 and brought in over \$1,000. The book sales continued for a number of years until space became a problem. However, the Friends continue to raise funds through the sale of books to dealers as duplicate gift materials are given to the Friends organization.

Contributions to support the University Libraries are made to the Friends account through the Ball State University Foundation. Financial gifts to other foundation accounts supporting the University Libraries also qualify the donors for membership in the Friends, as do gifts-in-kind such as books, journals, videos, and other materials for the library. In 2004, Friends financial contributions exceeded \$29,000, plus a one-time estate gift of over \$71,000.

The Friends of the Alexander M. Bracken Library, their activities, and their contributions provide an example of how a dynamic Friends organization can participate in the growth and success of an academic library. Since its founding in 1976, the Friends have “made a difference” for the Ball State University Libraries. They generate funds, materials, ideas, and good will that help move the University Libraries forward. And, as the popular song says, “That’s what Friends are for.”

REFERENCES

Bylaws of the Friends of Bracken Library, Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, Friends of the Alexander M. Bracken Library, Ball State University Libraries, Muncie, Indiana. Copy found at <http://www.bsu.edu/libraries/collections/fambl/bylaws.pdf>.

Friends of the Alexander M. Bracken Library Newsletter, Friends of the Alexander M. Bracken Library, Ball State University Libraries, Muncie, Indiana, September 15, 1979, p. 1.

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