

## 14 Library Trustees and Friends of the Library as Advocates

Library board members or trustees are a special group of influential people who support the library in a formal setting of meetings with defined responsibilities. Trustees are wonderful advocates for a library. Elsewhere, friends of the library and other library support groups are committed to their library and promote it through volunteer work or by providing financial support for specific library activities. Friends can also advocate for their library when needed and make a significant difference.

### 14.1 Library Board Advocacy

All library boards have people who can speak up for the library. In many countries library boards are library trustees, which means that these boards have higher responsibilities such as hiring and supervising the library director. They decide on the strategy, vision and mission of the library, help to find additional funding and discuss how the budget is spent. Some library boards do not have this high level of responsibility but are simply advisory boards, bringing their experience and the needs of their groups to the library. They bring a lot of ideas and connections that can be extremely useful to the library.

Whatever the board, all members represent a part of the community, whether it is a community, a university or a cultural institution. Their knowledge of the community helps to tailor the library's services and to ensure that the library works to involve all groups in the local community or academic life. Library board members have easy access to local or institutional decision-makers and can advocate at a high level, however, it is sometimes the case that a board member represents his or her own institution or interests in competition with the library. A library director must work diligently to ensure that all board members are supportive and willing to advocate for the library, especially in difficult times.

### 14.2 Library Friends are Good Advocates

Friends of the library are groups of independent volunteers who wish to support their library financially, culturally or politically. They are considered NGOs if they have their own membership organisation. Friends of libraries work closely with library management to identify needs and how best to support them, and

are a great link to the community. Many of them organise cultural programmes or book sales where they sell books discharged from the library and receive donations from the community. They use the proceeds to support children's programmes and restoration of historic collections and to purchase new books or technical equipment.

Friends of the library have a personal attachment to the library, whether it is a public, academic or special library. They are friends because they love their library, and as organised friends they see some privileges and some good things to do. They are driven by their volunteer ethic to give something back to society, but they also get a lot out of their activities, such as contact with other friends and with the community. Not all library friends think they are perfect advocates but they are, and their personalities show that they support the library. Friends fight for new library buildings, against budget cuts or library closures. Sometimes friends take over a library before it is officially closed. Some friends are perfect at organising a campaign, others at supporting it through social media activity and others at contacting a politician. All have their roles in their community and most stay friends for a long time. It is this diversity that makes this group so valuable to any library advocacy effort.

There are some countries where there is no culture of creating a group of friends to advocate for the library. In countries under the influence of the former Soviet Union, the tradition was that everything was paid for by the state. But after the political changes there was not enough money for culture and libraries had to look for other resources and friends of libraries groups were created. Some countries do not allow NGOs, however, a loose group of friends of a library might be possible, such as a reading or book club.

In the USA there is the Association of Library Trustees, Advocates, Friends and Foundations, called "United for Libraries", organised as a division of ALA. They work to bring the different groups together to advocate for libraries and provide regular training for trustees and friends of the library on how to support and advocate for their library. "United for Libraries" has produced a Citizens-Save-Libraries Power Guide (Gardner Reed, Nawalinski and Kalonick 2013) which is a free advocacy guide on how citizens can save libraries in difficult times. There is also a full set of advocacy materials for campaigning to save your local library, including leaflets and postcards from library advocacy campaigns and marketing videos about what libraries do for the community. Some of the material is not accessible to non-members, but much of it is, with the organisation's video about public libraries in New York, including Queens and the Bronx (<https://www.nypl.org/speakout/librariesnow?hspace=258346>) very impressive. The material focuses on the situation and taxpayers in the United States, but there is enough relevant material for any library. The Colorado Association for Libraries (CAL) also has some nice advocacy

tips under the heading “Take 5 minutes to speak out for Libraries”, a handout for library friends at the local level that can be used in any library:

Take 5 Minutes to speak out for Libraries.

1. Name up to 5 influential people in your service area.
2. Identify 5 reasons to invite them to your library.
3. Choose 5 pieces of information to share about how your library supports your community and what it needs to succeed.
4. Set 5 visits during the year.
5. Do it!

Then high-5 yourself for taking action (CAL (n. d.)).

The second page of this document explains how Friends of the Library can be active in meeting influential people in the community and how to show them around the library. This integration of the Friends’ skills helps the library because the Friends do the work of inviting and escorting the person to the library. Friends demonstrate how the library serves the community and what is needed in the future. This advocacy recipe can be used successfully in academic and even special libraries, because the friends make the connections when the library director is not even allowed to contact a politician. Friends of the library are very valuable, not only for selling books and supporting the library financially, but also for connecting the library with relevant decision-makers. Some advice for all libraries that want to start advocacy is to create and support an official or unofficial group of friends of the library and train them to advocate for the library.

The Federal Association of German Library Friends, *Bundesverband der deutschen Bibliotheks-Freundeskreise* (BdB), is a national association of friends of libraries. Around 50 circles of friends, a fifth of all groups, are organised in the BdB, which was newly founded in 2018 and aims to build up state associations of friends in the long term. The BdB clearly formulates another requirement of its work, advocacy; on its website, under “Who we are . . .”, the BdB writes that it represents the interests of library users and stands up for “our” libraries. They want to be advocates for libraries and the interests of users “vis-à-vis politicians and sponsors”. They do this “fearlessly, ideologically and politically neutral”. (BdB 2021)

The chair explains exactly what this means: the BdB sees itself as a nationwide advocate for libraries of all sizes and in all sectors. In contrast to libraries, which are mostly embedded in administrative hierarchies and therefore cannot always act freely, the association can speak and write freely at all political levels, from supporting individual local projects to overarching programmatic announcements. Friends of libraries want to be involved in current issues and can support every-

thing from local problems to national library issues (Pirsich 2020). But can they live up to this claim? The activities of the Friends of the BdB show how good they are as advocates for their libraries. They take library issues to the press and, as users and friends of a library, they send complaints to the administration. They lobby at all levels, which is particularly important when a library director is forbidden to deviate from the hierarchical administrative channel. As friends of the library and their national organisation, they can always contact the relevant members of parliament and ministries to advocate for the library.

Although most Friends groups raise money for their library through book sales and other activities, some groups have become advocates for their library, publicly highlighting low budgets, staff shortages, structural problems and other difficulties.

It is important to have some examples of successful advocacy by friends, as it is not always possible to find out precisely to what extent such activities by friends of the library are successful. ALA division “United for Libraries” has published a few success stories, where friends have prevented the closure of a library, and there are good examples that report successful advocating, ranging from financial donations to support for new library buildings. The *Württembergischer Bibliotheksverein*, an association of friends of the *Württembergische Landesbibliothek*, supported a feasibility study for the extension of the *Württembergische Landesbibliothek*, actively lobbied for it and was incredibly pleased when the new building was successfully opened some time later (Hauke 2015, 30).

Even if many of the circles of friends primarily collect money for their library through book sales and other campaigns, some associations have already become involved as advocates for their library and have publicly pointed out the low budget, lack of staff, structural problems and other difficulties. Friends can always contact the relevant Members of Parliament to advocate for the library, as politicians value the voluntary commitment of citizens and listen to them.

Other sources of effective library advocacy by Friends in Germany can be found in the regular newsletters of the BdB (<https://www.bibliotheks-freundeskreise.de/aktivitaeten/newsletter/>). In addition to 100 stories about how friends support their libraries, there are slightly fewer reports on specific political demands and actions by friends of libraries directed at political decision-makers. The main issues are: 1. financial resources for libraries; 2. new building, extension or conversion of the local library; 3. involvement of political decision-makers in the Friends; and 4. opposition to library closures.

Library Friends fight hard to save their public library, sometimes successfully, and the library is saved, sometimes with a political compromise. Then the Friends, together with dedicated volunteers, are ready to run the library on a vol-

untary basis. However, this does not always happen in coordination with the library management, as examples from the Berlin districts show (openpetition 2013). But their commitment can successfully bridge difficult financial years, as was shown in Berlin. Two branch libraries that had been run by volunteers for more than a decade have now been returned to the district library systems.

Advocacy with politicians and the public will become increasingly important in order to secure the existence of a public library and to develop it in difficult times, and a proactive association of library friends or patrons can be immensely helpful in this regard. They look for citizens who are influential representatives of public life and business (Miedtke 2005, 92); attracting these public figures is extremely beneficial, but at the same time there must be an active membership base to give impetus to the actions. What is special about the advocacy work of the friends is the possibility of a direct relationship with politics and free networking with public opinion and the press, which is particularly the case in cities and municipalities when public figures are members of the Friends of the Library. They sometimes find it easier than the library management to get an appointment with the mayor or a meeting with a member of the regional parliament, because they represent the users, the citizens of the community. This can be particularly effective in election years.

Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA) published a book to mark their twenty-fifth anniversary which charts the development of Friends in Australia and openly discusses the difficulties of recent years:

The way Friends operated in the 1990s, is no longer viable in the 2020s. An indication of this has been the folding of the Canadian body FOCAL and the amalgamation of FOLUSA in the USA, now incorporated into one Friends advocate and philanthropic body. FOLA is the only worldwide body today, representing the interests of Friends groups in a single country (Ferguson 2019).

The quote's last sentence is not the same in all countries, as in Germany the BdB was founded in 2018 and is well organised and active at a national level. Though FOLA sees difficulties in membership developing, the President wrote a letter to the mayor against reducing opening hours at East Gippsland Shire Libraries in Victoria and created a new action plan focusing on advocacy for the rural areas:

Now we want to expand our advocacy for Australia's country libraries. Our plans include: [ . . . ]

- Promoting and advocating for regional, rural, and remote libraries – at the state and federal levels.
- Supporting research into the value and impact of country libraries and drawing attention to global best practices [ . . . ] (Goodman 2022, 3).

The Australian Friends of Libraries have a long history, and they develop their advocacy plan with knowledge and strength based on their experience. It will be important to see the impact of their advocacy in a few years' time. Friends who advocate for libraries can have a big impact on society because they come from the community and politicians will listen to them. However, not all Friends of the Library groups focus on advocacy. Some simply raise money and spend it on rural libraries, like the Friends of African Village Libraries, while others, like the friends of national libraries, focus on cultural programmes and donate to the preservation and conservation of precious books. They are all volunteers, and all their stories are valuable in making the case for libraries to policymakers.

### **14.3 Summary of Trustees and Friends of the Library as Advocates**

From the activities described above it is clear that Friends of the Library are becoming active in advocating for their library. Some groups are part of the national library association and receive advocacy training or train each other to advocate for their library. They fight against library closures, often successfully, and support the expansion and modernisation of library facilities.

In a new wave in Germany, community representatives and local parties are being approached directly to become members of the Friends of the Library to win them over to the cause of the library. Public libraries, but also other libraries that have difficulties in getting recognition and funding from their supporters, can only be strongly advised to set up a Friends of the Library group. With such a group, libraries become more independent of administrative decisions, can carry out new activities in cooperation with the friends of the library and are better anchored in society, which in many cases protects them from restrictions or closure. They are the best partners for all advocacy activities of libraries and can organise help in moments when it becomes difficult for the library. However, you need a good hand and a positive attitude to guide the Friends and keep them together.