



## **How Seymour Friends Revitalized Their Group**

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Almost 17 miles away from the King Family Library in Sevierville lies Seymour, an unincorporated community of nearly 11,000. A cozy and comfortable reading center around a fireplace welcomes visitors to the Seymour Branch Library. As of March 6, 10,921 adults and 4,367 children were registered patrons of the library, a number that exceeds the area's population because the library draws residents from Sevier, Blount, and Knox counties. Fourteen computers available to the public are almost always busy, and shelves of hardbacks and paperbacks are filled to capacity in the 3,500-square-foot facility built in 2004.

Various iterations of Friends affected by cyclical ebb and flow go back to 1979, when the Seymour branch was founded. Reorganized in 2000, the Friends helped to bring about the construction of the new building, but numbers of members fluctuated until 2010 when a search for new leadership began. When the economic downturn brought new challenges to the library in the form of reduced hours, residents reacted to that threat to their branch by joining the chorus of opposition to cuts and speaking on behalf of the library to county commissioners. What originally drew neighbors to become Friends of this library is a story that can be repeated in many different locations. Love of books and reading, passions instilled in them in childhood by parents who were readers and who read to their children, attracted Seymour residents to a book club that met at the library. Some of those book clubbers were already Friends who invited readers to join them in their support of the library - Friends make Friends.

**The goals of the current dynamic leaders of the Seymour Friends are both daunting and laudable.** Ultimately hoping to build broad-based support for a larger library which could become a gathering place for the unincorporated community, they seek to become better known as advocates for the existing facility, to enlist more neighbors in their support, and to provide immediate financial support for the existing library.

**To these ends they have already made progress.** The Friends have already increased their visibility in the community. Selling used books at the Farmer's Market and publicizing that venue in the local press have brought the organization into the public's landscape. A new brochure for prospective members is in the works. Hosting a recent meeting of the library board both helps the Friends learn more about the important relationship between the board and the commissioners and identifies the role of Friends as concerned citizens in that complex relationship. Library staff and Friends are working together to encourage donations for resale, and a member is now selling some of those used books online. Every two months the Friends donate \$100 to the

branch library for the purchase of new books. Meeting bi-monthly at the library, they have engaged speakers who attract the community like Celia Barker Lottridge, author of the young adult book *Home Is Beyond the Mountains*, and Don Williams, writer and resident of the area.

In 2013 the group launched a new series on the first Tuesday of the month. *How We Live: Then and Now* explores the people and culture of East Tennessee. And in 2012 and 2013 delegates from the Seymour Friends attended the Friends of Tennessee Libraries' annual meeting to network with other groups. Paul Boyer was recognized at the 2012 FOTL annual meeting for his service as a vital link between the inactive Friends' organization, whose spirit he had kept alive, and the revitalized group.

**Collaboration with Friends from the other branches of the Sevier County Public Library in Kodak and Sevierville has been especially successful.** Working together to acquire donations, sort them, and offer them for resale two times a year, the three groups divide the income equally at the same time that they are establishing their identity in the community as supporters of libraries and exchanging ideas about how they can strengthen that support. Mini sales like the Valentine special of romance novels are also bringing funds into the Friends' treasuries. Adding children's books to each resale is proving to be popular with patrons.

**The Friends are also investigating several ventures for the future.** Making presentations to service clubs and church groups about who the Friends are and what they do is one possibility. Adding books in Spanish and in English as a Second Language would especially to appeal to a growing Hispanic population. Finding partnerships like the recent fundraiser at Zaxby's is another promising project.

Dwight Shepherd, long-time Friend and board member of the Friends of Tennessee Libraries, has observed that the Friends of the Seymour Branch have already come a long way, perhaps farther than even they realize, and he predicts that the energy, vision, and dedication of the leaders will ensure a dynamic future.



Diane Johnson and David Sarten were among the leaders who helped to organize Friends of the King Family Library in Sevierville, below.



## The Seymour Branch Library



In photos below, FOTL's Dwight Shepherd, standing, meets with Colleen Shannon, Nancy Richenbach, and other Seymour Friends.

