



## Getting Started

### How One Friends' Group Came into Being

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On May 14, 2010, the King Family Library officially opened in Sevierville to serve a community of 17,000 residents. The imposing three-story, 41,000-square foot building at 408 High Street features a 4,000-square-foot vaulted grand reading room, a formal conference room, a computer lab, a café, public meeting spaces, a catering kitchen, a children's reading room, and a teen center. How a brand-new group of Friends came into being to support this marvelous facility begins with an intelligent, thoughtful, and institutionally aware leader - Diane Johnson - who guided the process.

Six months after the library opened, the chair of the Sevier County Public Library System Board of Trustees, David Sarten, asked Diane, a board member and chair of the Public Relations Committee, to spearhead the formation of the Friends of the King Family Library. Within another seven months the Friends came into splendid being.

On October 28th, Diane convened a meeting to introduce the idea of a Friends' group to the community, to gauge the community's interest in the idea, to scour the community for suggestions, and to find people who might be interested in forming a steering committee to grow the group. As the result of carefully crafted publicity, 35 people showed up and five volunteered to serve on the steering committee.

On November 18th the steering committee - comprised of six volunteers, the trustee board chair, and the director of the Sevier County Public Library System - held its first meeting to establish the scope of the project with a list of specific tasks and a schedule for meetings; to review resources from other existing Friends' support; and to organize themselves. In six subsequent meetings from November 2010 until May 2011 the steering committee accomplished the following:

- a mission statement,
- Bylaws,
- Memorandum of Understanding with the library and with the Foundation,
- a slate of officers, and
- plans for the first official business meeting.

That meeting on May 31, 2011, officially established the group. Its actions included the election of officers, approval of the mission statement and bylaws, waiver of membership dues for the first year, and an inspiring speaker, Dr. Bruce Wheeler, a retired professor of history from the University of Tennessee and a neighbor who has already volunteered to help the library expand its collection.

Monthly executive committee meetings have ensued as has the fall meeting of the Friends featuring a call for support and volunteer help with upcoming programs at the library. An after-Christmas party featuring refreshments, carols, and readings celebrated this fruitful beginning. As of December 2011, the Friends had registered 122 members.

Looking back on the success of this venture, Diane Johnson said that bringing the Friends into existence “took on a life of its own, and that is just what I prayed for.” An outsider scrutinizing this venture might have a slightly different perspective on why it succeeded.

- The visionary goal had the backing, blessing, and support of an enlightened board of trustees and library director.
- The steering committee understood the community and had profound insight into the kinds of people who could build an organization that would respond to that community: a robust, diverse group with relationships to diverse segments of the community—talented, influential, “underused” people who were not already heavily committed to other causes.
- The steering committee understood the importance of communication with the public about its intentions. Thus notices of meetings appeared in all local county newspapers and on the radio. Email invitations alerted the board and foundation members. Special invitations went out to the two existing Friends’ groups in the Sevier County Seymour and Kodak branches. Personal, handwritten invitations and phone calls reached out to key individuals - members of the now defunct original Friends, donors, and community leaders.
- The duly-elected executive officers have, individually and collectively, moved the group forward. For example, membership is in the hands of an experienced community leader with a firm grasp of the importance of public relations. Meetings are conducted efficiently, and a proactive nominating committee is looking to the future. The concept of the Lifelong Learning Program originated with this group, which also helped to implement it with introductory sessions on such topics as yoga, digital photography, spring gardening, and the iPad, which may give rise to interest groups that will continue to flourish in the community.
- The organization understands that the first year of its existence is critical to its survival and growth. Every new member receives an “I love my library” pin and a notebook containing the Friends’ mission statement, officers, events, and bylaws. The decision to charge no membership dues for this make-or-break year is brilliant. Whereas there is sometimes a tendency for enthusiastic groups to jump on one horse and ride off in all directions, the Friends of the King Family Library have maintained steady focus. They have clear aims and purpose. They will focus on supporting book sales, the mechanism for which is already in place. They will explore the interests and needs of adults in Sevierville through the Lifelong Learning Committee. And they will be alert to other community needs and interests.

Friends of the King Family Library know that their library is not a luxury. It is a practical lifeline - to basic computer skills and to the Internet. It is a safe place where children come after school and where their parents pick them up later. Those kids may lead the Friends to their parents. In short, the Friends see the library as a place of discovery for all sorts of citizens pursuing information and ideas. To encourage citizens to make those discoveries, Friends will hold out helping hands.

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## **FRIENDS OF TENNESSEE LIBRARIES**

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Website: [www.friendstnlibraries.org](http://www.friendstnlibraries.org) | Facebook Page: <http://tinyurl.com/FOTLFacebook>

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