



What One Small Group Can Do

By Dwight Shepherd

FOTL Secretary and Past Representative from the former Nolichucky Region

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Friends of Kodak Library (FOKL) perfectly embody that quotation from Margaret Mead. With a total membership in the 40s and an active membership barely in the teens, FOKL is constantly working to make the branch library of Sevier County Public Library System it supports better. The organization has been recognized many times by both Friends of Tennessee Libraries and the Association of Library Trustees, Advocates, Friends and Foundation division of the American Library Association (ALTAFF, now United for Libraries <http://www.ala.org/united>).

The Kodak Friends was actually formed six years **before** the branch ever opened its doors. When the Northview Community Association approached the Sevier County Library Board about the possibility of a branch library to serve the growing community (located around the 407 - Dollywood exit on I-40) that didn't want to fight the traffic on Highway 66 into the Main Library in Sevierville, the Library Board offered to operate a branch if the community would supply a suitable building. The community agreed. As residents pursued that dream, it became apparent that the best way to do that was through a separate “friends of the library” group. They contacted Julie Webb, then president of Friends of Tennessee Libraries, who provided guidance on getting a charter as a Tennessee corporation not-for-profit, filing with the IRS for tax-exemption status, and generally understanding what a friends' group can be. Friends of Kodak Library was officially organized in March 1995.

One of the first things the group did was join Friends of Tennessee Libraries and Friends of Libraries, USA (now United for Libraries). This gave the group access to information, advice, and encouragement. The group worked hard raising money and making plans. When they finally got to the point where they thought they were ready, they put the building out for bid. All bids came in much higher than expected. FOKL regrouped and took a fresh look at their goal. They ended up purchasing a modular building that would meet the needs of the community and allow the project to move forward to a successful conclusion. They were even able to get a donation from the foundation of the company they bought the building from.

After the branch opened in December 2001, FOKL settled into the more traditional role of a Friends' group. They fund Story Time, summer reading programs, materials for the collection, and furnishings for the building. They hold authors' programs and teas for teachers. They provide a monthly stipend that the branch staff can spend on whatever they need that isn't covered by the county budget. For eight years the group took care of all the landscaping at the branch until the county could afford to hire a professional contractor. They have purchased a large-screen TV and a wii gaming system; they have furnished a teen area in the branch, and done much more. They have also donated funds to help build a new branch library in the Seymour community and a new main library (the King Family Library) for the system in Sevierville.

FOKL has teamed with the Northview Optimist Club since 1998 to co-sponsor the annual Kodak Heritage Day to celebrate the rich history of the community. The event includes live entertainment, arts and crafts demonstrations, antique cars, and farm equipment, history displays, and games for kids. Groups such as the Great Smoky Mountains Historical Society, Daughters of the American Revolution, Sons of the American Revolution, and the Sevier County Public Library History Center are on hand to help convey important factual information about the area's past. Admission and parking for the event are free. The groups sell food and hold a silent auction to offset the cost of the event. Any profits are divided evenly between the two groups.

As an outgrowth of that event and the interest it sparked, FOKL teamed with the Library System to create the Kodak Heritage Handcrafted Collection at the branch in 2009. They wrote a grant proposal to get it started. They also arranged a meeting for the branch manager and the system's assistant director with John Rice Irwin, founder of the renowned Museum of Appalachia, an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution. They went on to persuade Irwin to give a quotation to use to promote the collection that has almost become its mission statement. The Friends bought approximately 200 items to begin the collection, including the entire Foxfire series of books and Heartland DVD collection. They also bought craft objects and tools and a display case to house them.

The group is constantly on the lookout for new projects to take on and new ways to promote the library. "We look at what others friends groups and other groups do," said FOKL President Emma Ruth Catlett. "Some of the things they do, we can do. Other things we can adapt. We got one idea from a friends' group in Kansas City. It was actually just a small part of what they were doing. The budget for that group was almost what the budget is for our entire library system. But there was something there that we could make work for us. We don't concentrate on what we can't do. We look for things we can do."

The lesson to be learned from Friends of Kodak Library is to look for things that you can make work for your group, no matter its size. Concentrate on what you can do to make a library a better library for you community.

Dwight Shepherd served as chair of the Steering Committee that started FOKL, is a past president of the group, and currently serves as its secretary. Formerly FOTL's regional representative from the former Nolichucky Region, he now serves FOTL as secretary.