

Showing Their Libraries Some Love

- By Karen Cernich, Missourian Feature Writer



Wayne Myers, Robertsville, loves to read, and he reads fast — as many as three to five books a week. He has been a regular at the Scenic Regional Library in Pacific for years now, but it wasn't until he joined a book club there that he decided to make his friendship with the Pacific branch official.

“I kept volunteering for things the Friends (of the Library) were doing, particularly the book sales,” said Myers. “I love book sales. It’s a good bargain, and you can stock up so you’re not running to the library every day.”

Now as president of the Friends group in Pacific, Myers gets even more excited about the twice-yearly book sales because it gives him a chance to talk with people about books they are looking for and allows him to be an active participant in making the library a better place for patrons and the community.

Myers isn’t alone in his love for the library. Scenic Regional has a total 434 Friends supporting seven of its nine branches, including five in Franklin County: New Haven, Pacific, St. Clair, Union and Sullivan. Each branch has its own Friends group, with its own elected officers, that holds fundraisers specifically for that branch.

Steve Campbell, director of the Scenic Regional Library system, credits the Friends groups at each Scenic library with making them better places for patrons to visit and better places for the staff to work.

They hold fundraisers to provide extras that aren’t in the library budget. Sometimes that includes something like a bookcase or table, and other times it includes special programming.

They also provide manpower to staff big events, like the recent Summer Reading Kickoff that several branches held. Staff were needed inside the library to sign up children and adults, and more staff were needed outside to run the snack table and various children’s activities.

Since being organized in 2014 under the umbrella of the Scenic Regional Library Foundation, the Friends groups have seen membership grow exponentially, said Campbell, from just 40 members that first year to 434 last fall.

“It’s huge to have that much growth in only five years,” he remarked. “Other Foundations need decades to grow that much.”

Membership surged last year with the opening of new library facilities in each of these communities. All Friends members were treated to private tours of the their facility a week before they opened to the public, and that prompted several new memberships.

“It’s so fun to see that growth,” said Scenic Regional Foundation President Alice Whalen. “It was very exciting.”

People have been impressed by the new library facilities when they come in, so they are staying longer and returning more often.

“They are becoming gathering spaces for the younger group who maybe weren’t in libraries before,” said Whalen, noting the use by homeschool families throughout the day and other students after school.

But library use has been increasing among all ages in the past year, and Campbell, Whalen and all of Scenic’s Friends are excited to keep that growth going.

Raising Revenue

One of the main purposes of the Friends groups is to raise revenue for their individual branches, and for the first few years, they did a respectable job, raising a collective \$13,285 in 2015, \$27,019 in 2016 and \$40,568 in 2017.

But just like membership numbers surged last year, so did the fundraising dollars. As a group, the Friends raised more than \$70,000 for Scenic Regional Libraries between fall 2017 and fall 2018, said Campbell, although he is quick to point out that all of the funds a Friends group raises is earmarked specifically for that branch.

That is important to the donors who are giving the money, “because people want to invest locally,” said Whalen. “People want to know where the money is going, and they want it to be in their community, if at all possible.”

The individual branches had varying levels of success with their different fundraising efforts. Some, like New Haven, did better at selling “Donor Wall Books,” which are wood plaques that look like books with the donors’ names etched on them. Others, like St. Clair, Owensville and Sullivan, did really well holding a Naming Rights Auction for various areas of the libraries.

Owensville raised \$5,500 with a Naming Rights Live Auction; St. Clair raised \$5,400; and Sullivan raised \$4,600, said Campbell. New Haven and Pacific held silent auctions for Naming Rights and raised \$3,070 and \$1,450, respectively.

The book sales that are held twice a year at Scenic branches are the most popular fundraiser, said Campbell. The sales, which used to be run by the library staff and held over the course of a few weeks using a table in the library, are now run by the Friends as special limited-time events.

Friends members organize, set up and clean up each sale. They collect the money and do all of the promotion.

“That saves the staff from doing tons of work,” said Campbell, noting the next book sale will be held in the fall. The dates will be the same for all of the library branches.

The Friends also raise funds through membership dues, which range from \$10 a year to \$500 for a lifetime membership. As members, the Friends get discounts at the book sales and also any of the programs or special events where there is a fee to participate.

From Bookcases to Gardens

The Friends groups use their funds based on what their branch needs for its patrons. At four of the branches (St. Clair, Pacific, Sullivan and Warrenton), that included special spinning “READ” bookcases for the children’s area. The bookcases, which cost \$1,000 each, can hold hundreds of board books and greatly expanded the number of books the branches could offer its youngest patrons, said Campbell.

Myers noted that the Pacific Friends were able to raise enough for their “READ” bookcase after holding just two book sales.

In some cases, the Friends groups are asked to provide big-ticket items, like a digital sign for the Owensville branch, which is located right along Highway 19, or a community garden, like the one currently being installed at the St. Clair branch.

“We asked them to pay for the supplies,” said Campbell, noting that plans are for the garden to have 11 to 12 raised beds. “Anyone can ‘check out’ a bed for the season.”

Adding a community garden was a part of the agreement between Scenic Regional and local churches that donated the land for the new library several years ago, Campbell said. Plans are for the garden to be ready next spring.

Sharon Mackay, president of the St. Clair Friends, is excited at all of the possibilities open to the library with the addition of a community garden.

“We’ll be able to really get the community involved,” said Mackay.

Already she envisioned having master gardeners lead programs in the garden and having other presentations on everything from nutrition to plant science.

At the New Haven Library, the Friends installed a raised flower bed garden just outside the children’s patio and invited children to plant the flowers. In Owensville, the Friends installed a butterfly garden.

Buying 750 Books for the “Big Read”

Scenic Regional Library has been awarded a prestigious NEA Big Read grant through the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in partnership with Arts Midwest. The objective of the NEA Big Read is to get as many people as possible in a community to read and discuss the same book, and Scenic Regional has gotten eight area high schools to agree to incorporate the selected book, "Station Eleven" by Emily St. John Mandel, into their senior English classes.

To make sure copies of the book are available to as many people who want to participate as possible, Scenic Regional plans to purchase 1,750 copies of "Station Eleven," with Friends groups in Union, St. Clair, Warrenton, Pacific and Owensville covering the cost of 750 copies for their local high schools.

The 2014 novel takes place in the Great Lakes region after a flu pandemic has devastated the world, killing most of the population. It won the Arthur C. Clarke Award, given for the best science fiction novel, in 2015.

The grant, which is for \$15,000, will provide funds for a wide range of programming based on the themes of the book. During the six-week period between Sept. 24 and Nov. 5, the library and its partners will present 77 free programs and book discussions throughout the three-county area — Gasconade, Franklin and Warren.

The programming will culminate with a visit from "Station Eleven" author Emily St. John Mandel at the John Edson Anglin Performing Arts Center at East Central College Tuesday, Nov. 5. She will be interviewed by Mike Thomas, host of "Livewire" on KWRE 730 AM in Warrenton, followed by a book signing.

'It's Neat to See That Excitement'

More than just pay for items, though, the Friends groups also are instrumental in providing the manpower needed to plan and run many of the branches' bigger events, said Campbell. At the grand openings held last year for each branch's new facility, it

was the Friends who paid for the cost of entertainment and food, and it was Friends who volunteered to run the events.

“We couldn’t have done it without them,” Campbell remarked. “They handed out the food and really helped us with all of the concessions.

“They have really been instrumental in all the growth we’ve had in the last five years,” he added. “And we don’t want to lose momentum. We hope people realize how valuable our Friends groups are.”

Last Sunday, members of the New Haven Friends held their fourth annual Art Exhibit to highlight the work of local artists. This year’s event featured mother-son artist duo Suzanne and Ward Behle. Past years have included paintings by the late Dee Dann, carvings by Clem Wilding, petrified wood by Randy Schwentker, photography of Tony Carosella, and ceramic/raku pottery by Alan Bell.

The library was closed, but several New Haven Friends, including officers Rhonda Helling, secretary, and Shari Althen, president, were on hand to run the program. The group includes more than 50 members who are excited to show their support for reading and the local library.

“We really have a good group,” said Althen. “Our staff here at the library are so good and easy to work with. We let them know we are here to help them, but not to tell them what to do. If they need something, we don’t want them to hesitate to ask us.

“New Haven is a community where we all like to work together,” Althen said.

Mackay said she finds that many of the St. Clair Friends who volunteer at events like being able to contribute. The group includes around 30 members, ages 10 to 90, and some have more time to give for events than others.

“Some of our members just want to make the financial contribution, because they don’t have the time to volunteer,” said Mackay. “But there are some that really like to feel needed and to work at the events.

“They really feel good . . . and to see the reaction from these guys and that they are so willing to make this library great, to sustain the library and to feel a part of it, it is amazing,” she said. “It is so neat to see that excitement.”

In Pacific, where the Friends recently purchased a large round table to put in the meeting room for groups to play mahjong, Past President Toni Meyers said one of the reasons she loves being in the Friends is the social aspect it provides.

“I just think this is a terrific library and the programs they put on are fantastic,” she said. “I love being a part of that.”

For more information on becoming a Scenic Regional Library Friend, contact your local branch or go to <https://scenicregional.org/>. Under the “About Us” section, select Friends of the Library to complete an application.

Openings on Foundation Board

There are currently two openings on the Scenic Regional Library Foundation’s 12-member board, one for someone from Franklin County and one for someone from Gasconade County. The board meets one evening every other month in Union.

The recent growth of the Friends groups and all of the excitement surrounding the library facilities has opened up possibilities for what the Foundation can do as an umbrella for these Friends groups, said Whalen.

“Those are some discussions that we’re having now,” she said. “Now that we do have this strong base of support in each community, how can we best utilize that to support a whole system?”

For more information or to apply for those board seats, people should contact Campbell at 636-583-0652, ext. 101

The appointments to the Foundation are approved by the library board.