

Fun with and Profit from a Non-profit Library Friends Group: Twenty Years of the Library Friends Group at San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park

David Hull, San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, Building E, Fort Mason, 3rd Floor, San Francisco, California 94115; david_hull@nps.gov

What is fun? And what is profit?

I have a couple of definitions that appear to be outside general bureaucratic usage—at least as I experience it.

Fun: What wealthy people do all the time ... because wealthy people don't have to do anything that's not fun.

There are wealthy people who have a genuine interest in the subject of my park, and there probably are for your park as well. I feed that interest. I tell them about my hopes and desires for my park, as well as those of others, as well as the official plans for the park. I give them the full

menu, it's interesting to them.

But all I do is give information; I do not ask for funding. Why? Because it's fun to hear of hopes and dreams; it's not fun to be asked for money ... nor is it fun to ask for money, nor is it acceptable to National Park Service policy.

I have fun with them; I talk ships with them. Or shipyards. Or sail lofts. Or scrimshaw. Whatever their interest is.

I have fun with them; when they invite me to lunch, I go. I take an interest in them as people; I tell them about who I am, beyond my job. I am open to a relationship with them beyond their being simply another visitor, another acquaintance.

Here's another definition:

Profit: Funds that flow to my park or friends group as a result of my having "fun" with wealthy people.

I feed their interest in my park and its development, I give them the full menu and at some point it does strike some of them as fun to fund some element of it. Some 90–95% of philanthropic giving is by individuals rather than foundations. They are worth paying this kind of attention to.

And they *do volunteer* money. Just before writing this, I was talking to a donor about a class in maritime history that our park—and our library friends group—are sponsoring along with two academic institutions; he

spontaneously declared that he would fund a scholarship for a youngster.

I like to think of the whole process as fun-raising.

Our library friends group concluded its twentieth year last year with over 200 current paid-up members, and with assets over \$350,000, of which over \$300,000 were in cash, of which fully \$220,000 are in permanent funds, or endowments.

All of the permanent funds have come in the past eight years, and much of the rest as well.

Fun-raising.

The history of this friends group falls neatly into two ten-year periods. In the first ten years, the most important thing they achieved was to lobby successfully for the establishment in the park of a library acquisition fund of \$5,000. To this day, regrettably, no other department in the park—which is a museum—has an acquisition fund.

More important, then and now, than what they achieved is what they were: they were and are *friends*—people interested in the challenges and successes of the library ... a *morale boost* for a department that often feels that it is at the bottom of the feeding chain in budget and staffing: behind ships, and rightly so; behind health and safety, and rightly so; behind artifacts because they are unique, and rightly so; ineligible for backlog cataloguing funds.

Administrative and Intellectual Tools for Park Management

Artifacts, archives, books. Now think with me a moment, parenthetically.

Artifacts are essential; they provide a bone-deep reality that nothing else can. Archives are crucial; use of them advances the body of knowledge, they feed the books.

But let me tell you, it is the printed word—in books, reports, on the screen—it is the printed word and concomitant images, it is the printed word with value added—the values of consolidation, summary, reflection, conclusion....

It is the printed word, which is the ground of our understanding of our park's subjects, the seedbed of the knowledge we are charged to preserve and the education we are charged to impart ... the printed word, whose home is the library.

What I am saying is "The library is important."

The library is important.

The library *is* important.

The National Park Service does not understand this, as witness the staffing and funding and policy support it provides to its libraries. The NPS Library Steering Committee is working to repair the damage that NPS has suffered, resulting from its de-emphasis over the decades upon libraries.

But before, during and after whatever success that committee may have, consider this: a library friends group, incorporated as a non-profit, is much more than a friendly morale boost, because a non-profit library friends group is a legal citizen of the world. They can act in the real world, as it were, that is, outside the bureaucracy, and their entire legal purpose is limited to one thing—advancing the library.

It was in the second ten years that our local library friends group took off. The first thing they did was contract for a whaling library that cost 33 times more than anything they had ever bought. They pulled it off too, with loans to pay off the contract within 60 days, then within three years they paid off the loans.

With that success they became a tangible factor in the well-being and the advancement of the library—and the Park Service presented them with a Partnership Leadership Award.

They went on to be instrumental in the

acquisition by donation of two additional major private libraries, valued together at an estimated \$500,000–750,000.

They published seven monographs on maritime history. They established an endowment which fosters research in maritime history with a \$1,000 biennial award. They established an endowment for library acquisitions, an endowment for library collection management, an endowment for maritime education, and a revolving fund for publications. They established on-line sales of books rejected by the library, producing \$20,000 in the first year. They established and provide on-going funding for a work-study program; currently there are seven students in the library doing the work of approximately 1.6 full-time employees.

Clearly this library friends group has become a significant factor in the well-being and advancement of the library program at San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park.

But how did this come to pass? Was it all peaches and cream? Were there obstacles? There *were* obstacles *and* dangers. But there were also solutions. To recount only the major items:

Item: Immediately after establishment of the library friends group, my supervisor opposed it on grounds that a museum group already existed. She sent a GAO auditor to grill me. I produced a copy of a memo serving notice to my supervisor of my intention to establish the group. "Well, she had notice," said the auditor, "and took no action." End of threat, for the moment.

Item: After about 18 months, my supervisor became more creative. She subverted a board member; he made a motion that since the park was not taking action on a co-operative agreement (which action she in fact was preventing), the library friends should become part of the other, larger group.

The library group was saved by a procedural move. The motion was tabled in favor of the president's inquiry of the superintendent

Administrative and Intellectual Tools for Park Management

whether he wanted this public-private partnership or not. The superintendent instructed my supervisor to release the co-operative agreement for finalization.

Item: After about 12 years, a president of the library friends, seeking better funding for the library, negotiated with the larger museum non-profit an agreement wherein it would gradually absorb the library friends. I did not endorse this move, but the board voted for it anyway.

The larger group, however, rushed the process, nor did the hoped-for improvement in library funding materialize, so the subsequent library associates president continued to act independently for the library, and fortunately the agreement fell apart.

Item: Serious and possibly litigious problems developed with the library friends' first consultant in administrative support and subsequently with a third-party administration contract. After four years of cautious work by two presidents, the group was able to overcome those difficult situations.

So the library friends group rolled into and through its twentieth year last year. When we realized that we had not celebrated that anniversary, we set down on paper the various aims and desires that had been expressed for the library and the group over the past several years. It was a five-year plan, designed to position the group so it has even better reasons to celebrate its 25th anniversary. We called it the quarter-century plan. The board cogitated it, the executive committee worked it over, and finally the board approved it. Its most startling element is that, all together, it calls for raising \$1 million dollars—three times its total current assets—for the permanent funds.

The ground of this chutzpah is found in a quote attributed to the famous German philosopher Goethe:

Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, always the chance to draw back. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth—the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans—

and it is this: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamed would have come his way. Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now.

There is not time to even summarize a suggested governance and startup methodology for the projected Friends of the NPS Libraries, but it is based on a model originally written for a Hawaiian group, which is available on-line at www.nps.gov/safr/local/lib/hawaiifriends.html, and I will make one basic, pivotal point regarding the startup methodology.

It is this: the crucial first member of the public to be identified is someone to handle the nuts and bolts, the administrative support—the membership records, the bookkeeping, etc. A retired executive secretary or office manager. It doesn't start with a high-flying executive type; it starts with a *worker* who is willing to make a three-year commitment.

A few years ago I looked for other friends groups of federal libraries.

Across the entire country I found only one other, and it was at the Library of Congress. So I don't expect that you will establish a library friends group for your library, or a friends group for your program area.

What I wanted to do is describe what our library friends group has done for our library, so that you may have some vision of what can be done for your program area by your active participation in conjunction with whatever friends group may address your park, or your region or the National Park Service at large, or merely a category of interest into which your park falls, such as conservation.

If I may paraphrase Goethe, “Do it now! For the fun and profit!”