

Thank a Friend at the library

By Robert Morton-Ranney

The Friends of the Jamestown Library have from the beginning had the goal of helping to make as many resources as possible available to as many people as possible on this island. Indeed, the first bylaws drafted by the Friends said their purpose should be "developing library services and facilities for the community." It still is.

As a volunteer organization separate from the library trustees, the Friends of the Jamestown Library provide virtually all the programming the library offers. Except for the occasional excursion, programs are at the li-

brary itself and are free and open to the public.

Mary McGaughan, writing in her account of the beginnings of the Friends, ignored the opinion of some of the more influential people in Jamestown that "the island already had enough organizations."

As a new library trustee in the late 1960s, McGaughan noticed that seating all four board members comfortably in the eight-hundred-square-foot building on Narragansett Avenue, now used by the Jamestown Historical Society, was a challenge.

Stacks reached almost to the ceiling, some standing a mere 23

inches apart. There was no study area, no room for newspapers or periodicals, and no room for children. New books couldn't be added until old ones were removed. Hearing that the Rhode Island Development Council was forecasting a doubling of the island's population within two decades, MacGaughan wrote, "Ideas about a new library began to creep into my head."

How best to pull it off? A new organization! And, drawing on the experience of similar groups in other communities, the "Friends of the Jamestown Philomenian Public Library" was established in December of 1967.

The central notion that would guide the Friend's energies to

this day shone through in MacGaughan's research on library locations.

"No longer should the building be an imposing, hallowed temple of learning in some lofty, inaccessible place. Rather, it should be plunk in the center of pedestrian traffic, quickly and easily approached with a full view of the interior available to passers-by."

With the Friends at the very center of the project, the new library building, at 26 North Main Rd., was dedicated on July 25, 1971. When it came time for an addition, opening to the public in 1993, the Friends provided seed money for initial architectural work and participated in fund-raising efforts.

Current Friends President Bev Rudman believes the library "is such a wonderful place."

She should know. She drops in three or four times a week. You feel right at home there, she says, because "everyone knows you."

Rudman oversees an active board of 17 members, each of whom has responsibility for at least two programs. She enjoys the diversity represented on the board, and marvels at its energy.

There are programs to fit almost every age and taste. A live music series features jazz, Celtic, classical, and the Jamestown middle school band, among others. There is a foreign film series, and a sailing series.

Arts and crafts offerings include instructions around specific projects and a knitting circle.

Health interests include screenings, and lectures on particular health concerns, quite-smoking advice among them, and Medicare. Home topics touch on gardening, home maintenance projects, and don't forget antique appraisal.

Children's programming is quite varied. Young teens, for instance, have learned CPR, and during this week, kids were invited to put a puppet show together. The whole family can get in on TV turn-off week, and advice on finding/creating a caregiver support network helped everyone.

Not bad for a volunteer organization.

And the Friends are just getting

started. Their programs also include presentations on local history, instructions for checking up on your personal ancestry, a volunteer fair to put you in touch with organizations you would enjoy, museum trips and passes to locations in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Connecticut, live reader's theater in the meeting room, and an organized boat tour of the bay.

Oh, yes, and there are regular meet-the-author sessions as well.

Is it any wonder Bev Rudman says the Friends are always looking for new members and suggestions? Current membership stands at well over 200.

How do the Friends pay for all these programs? The Friend's next biennial fund-raiser is the Cinco de Mayo Party, so mark May 5 on your calendar. Taking place at the Portuguese American Citizens' Club, there will be dinner, dancing to a live band, a silent auction, and a live auction. Tickets sell out fast. The last Mardi Gras party raised over \$12,000, and the Friends are hoping to better that this time.

Library Director Judy Bell says the Friends are "really important" in the ongoing life of the library. In addition to planning and funding programming, a great deal of what she learns about the interests and needs of the community comes through the Friends. There are "so many different kinds of people" in the Friends, and "they volunteer so much time" and are "so much fun."

An up-to-date listing of the Friends' programs and other library offerings can be found on their Web site, www.jamestownri.com/library. Click on the Events Calendar.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the beginnings of the Friends of the Jamestown Library.

Next time you walk into the library and see the space where the children can gather, all the chairs and carrels inviting you to savor books, newspapers or magazines, all the tapes, CD's and movies waiting to be taken home with you, and the flyers announcing the next program, and all the people making you feel at home, thank a Friend.



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