

# With a little help from our friends

Daniel Ferguson, Friends of Libraries Australia

Active involvement in community issues has been a characteristic of the American library scene for decades. Recently, Bill Clinton, commended Friends of Libraries USA (FOLUSA) for its leadership and active participation in the America Reads Challenge program. For most Americans, the notion of 'getting involved' has two fundamental meanings: first, it expresses a genuine concern for one's local community; and secondly, on an individual level, it relates to the protection of one's own interests.

Australians, on the other hand, still adopt the far more passive role associated with a subject culture. They remain primarily focused on the outward aspects of their system of government — that is, they are more interested in what they are receiving from the government than they are in the reciprocal duties and obligations of active, participatory citizens.

However, this focus appears to be shifting. Since the launch of Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA) in December 1994, community participation and support for library services on an organised basis has increased. In 1990 there were fewer than sixty Friends of Library groups in Australia; now there are more than 150.

## Getting involved

The challenges currently facing our communities, institutions and governments in the global marketplace of competition and rapid change seem to be responsible for an increase in the number of Australians getting involved. In 1996 a group of key library and information professionals, including state librarians and library organisation leaders, developed a document entitled *2020 Vision: Towards the libraries of the future*. This document recognises the opportunities for libraries to take advantage of current trends, to re-invent themselves in the new economy of knowledge and to take account of new opportunities of citizenship and identity.

*2020 Vision* sees libraries as resources for equity, citizenship and social, economic and cultural development. Libraries are seen as 'testbeds' for civic values which give us a sense of place. One reason why the Friends of Libraries groups have been an important part of the American library fabric for many decades is that the institution of the public library has been a significant 'testbed' for the democratic culture of American society.

## Developing Friends groups

Establishing a 'Friends group' is one way for a library to identify client needs and interests while encouraging members of the community to participate in community life.

FOLUSA has created a greater awareness and appreciation of library services by: helping local groups generate local and state support; providing guidance, education and counselling services; promoting the development of strong library and advocacy problems; and serving as a clearinghouse of information and expertise.

The national body supporting Friends groups in Australia — FOLA — has the same agenda.

## Friends in Australia today

Where do we stand, three years after the launch of FOLA by our patron, the Honourable Justice Michael Kirby?

Some facts: Friends of Library groups are established in all Australian states and territories; Victoria has witnessed the greatest increase in groups, perhaps due in some measure to local government reform and the impact on library services; most groups have between ten and forty members; most State libraries have a flourishing group; the National Library of Australia's group is Australia's largest with 1400 members; and the main activities for most groups are conducting booksales and holding social and literary functions.

In 1997 FOLA presented Australian Library Week awards to a number of outstanding groups: Alexandra, Victoria; Byron Bay, New South Wales; Hastings, New South Wales; Warragul, Victoria; Willunga and Aldinga, South Australia; and Unley, South Australia. In 1998 FOLA will launch the FOLA Best of Friends Awards for achievement and excellence in FOL groups.

In October, FOLA will be holding its second biennial conference in Adelaide. A full-day program is being organised with speakers, workshops, delegate reports and social events.

A successful Friends group is not necessarily from a large, well-funded library. In fact, one of the most active and successful groups is the small Junior Friends of the Alexandra Library in Victoria.

FOLA believes that success comes from strategic co-operation, a willingness to give and a desire to share information and combine resources. Our vision is to provide leadership to Friends of Libraries groups. We need the support of the library profession to achieve a national strategy with lasting benefit to libraries, the community and the nation.

Friends of Libraries Australia Inc can be contacted at PO Box 1315 Tullamarine 3043, fax 03 9335 1903. ■



... from previous page

• **11/5-14/12 Vic Special Libraries section.** *Committee meeting dates for 1998.* Venue: Heart Foundation, 411 King Street, West Melbourne at 5:30pm (unless advised otherwise). 11/5; 1/6, 13/7; 10/8; 14/9; 12/10; 9/11; 14/12. Contact: June Hooper, ph 03 9329 8511, fx 03 9321 1574, heartvic@vicnet.net.au

• **12/5 Vic RAISS section** *Electronic Resources Trial (and Tribulations).* Panel discussion. Uni of Melbourne, Baillieu Library, Ground Floor. 5:30 for 6pm. No charge. Contact: Margaret Smith, ph 03 9669 9726, fx 03 9663 1480, msmith@slv.vic.gov.au

• **16/5-28/11 Vic School Libraries section** *Committee meetings* 9:30am at Statewide Resource Centre, 217 Church Street, Richmond. All members welcome. Dates: 16/5, 20/6, 18/7, 15/8, 12/9, 17/10, AGM — 28/11. Contact: Anne Girolami, ph 03 9267 0228.

• **23/5 Vic School Libraries section** *Collecting for 2000 seminar.* Keynote speakers: Ken Dillon and Barbara Bugg. 9-3:30pm, \$50 ALIA members, \$60 non-members, \$40 concession. Venue: ACER, 19 Prospect Hill Road, Camberwell. Contact: Anne Girolami, ph 03 9267 0228.

• **13/6 Vic Children's and Youth Services section.** *Electronic information access — What skills do children's librarians need?* Venue: TBA. Contact: Terry May, ph 03 9743 1168.

• **17/6 Vic Library Technicians section.** *Committee meeting* — all welcome. 6 for 6:30pm, SLVic, Level 2 function room. Please meet Kerrie at 6pm in the Swanston Street foyer. RSVP: Kerrie Kelly, ph 03 9669 9037, kerriek@slv.vic.gov.au

**17-19/6 The Dialog Corporation** *Update 98: what's happening with Dialog?* Seminars on business, patents, health/medical and sciences. Training courses. Contact: Haydn Glick, ph 02 9299 6767.

• **27/6 Vic School Libraries section.** *Professional development day.* Details will be made available at a future date. Contact: Anne Girolami, ph 03 9267 0228.

• **12/8 Vic Library Technicians section.** *Committee meeting* — everyone is welcome. 6 for 6:30pm, State Library of Victoria, Level 2 function room. Please meet Kerrie at 6pm in the Swanston Street foyer. RSVP: Kerrie Kelly, ph 03 9669 9037, kerriek@slv.vic.gov.au

## WA

• **3/5 WA Local Studies section.** *ALW — Pinjarra coach tour.* Departs 8:30am, Heritage House, Mends Street, South Perth. South of the river pickup at Murdoch Park and Ride Station at 8:50am. Lunch included.

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