

Making a Difference: Friends of the Library has created an invaluable asset for Collier book lovers

BY: Joe Landon

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A song by the Beatles is running through my head as I write this column. “Oh, I get by with a little help from my friends.” Sometimes we really need the help, and in certain instances, we wouldn’t be who we are or where we are today if it wasn’t for the help of our friends.

Such is the case for the Collier County Public Library and the Friends of the Library of Collier County, Inc.

You see, the Friends group was formed in 1957 to give us a free public library system. This is where we might sing “Thank you for being a friend,” the theme song from the “Golden Girls” TV show, or Dionne Warwick’s “That’s what friends are for.”

Our very first library, located at 650 Central Avenue in Naples, sits on land that Mr. and Mrs. Ferdinand Lee donated to Friends in 1963. The site is leased to the county, by Friends, for \$1 per year.

The rest, as they say, is history, which I guarantee you can read about at the library. Today with 10 branches, including a magnificent headquarters building on the corner of Orange Blossom Drive and Airport-Pulling Road, the library is thriving thanks in large part to the Friends of the Library.

“As our name indicates, Friends and its 3,000 paying members are the best friends and most ardent supporters of the Collier County libraries,” said Jon Zoler, president of Friends. “For 58 years, Friends has had a special relationship with the libraries and has provided financial assistance, programs and services for patrons at all of its branches.”

Thanks to those members, the Friends group has contributed more than \$1 million in the last 10 years to help our libraries. The money has paid for the expansion and enhancement of educational, recreational and technological needs.

Each year, Friends funds several hundred educational programs for children and adults, literacy programs, genealogy reference books and databases, and iPads for library program users.

Friends also sponsors a rather innovative student internship program known as the Library Electronic Assistance Program (LEAP), which gives 11 high school students the chance to work as many as 10 hours per week at library branches. Being so-called “digital natives,” the students shine when it comes to using today’s technology, so their job is to help library patrons, who might be referred to as “digital immigrants,” set up email and social media accounts and download library systems so they can read magazines on their electronic devices.

“LEAP is beneficial for both the library staff and patrons,” said Friends board member Bobbi Skaggs, coordinator of the program. “Having employees dedicated to teaching patrons how to use their electronic devices provides a valuable one-on-one service that has not been previously available.”

Then there’s the popular Nick Linn Lecture Series, founded by Friends board member Nick Linn and sponsored by Friends. It’s generated more than \$800,000 for the library system since being launched 11 years ago. The series features four nationally known authors each year. Nicholas Sparks and James Patterson were among the presenters in prior years. The current series will begin on Feb. 4, 2016, with Kate Anderson Brower, author of the non-fiction bestseller “The Residence,” a look inside America’s first families.

The Friends group is officially receiving a well-deserved recognition with the Collier County Commission proclaiming this week as Friends of the Library of Collier County week.

To learn more about Friends, or to join them in their work, visit www.collier-friends.org. As James Taylor would ask us in song, and please excuse the grammar, “Ain’t it good to know you’ve got a friend?”

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