

## A SHORT HISTORY OF FRIENDS OF THE KNOX COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

Friends of the Knox County Public Library was founded on September 29, 1970, for the purpose of “promotion and interpretation of the library’s programs and services to the community, and in return making known the community’s needs to the library.” An impetus to begin an organization was the anticipated move into the present building at the corner of Walnut and Church, then under construction. One of the first activities of Friends was a guided tour of the soon-to-be-completed building.

Since then Friends has grown from an initial membership of a little over 100 to its current membership of over 1000. Friends’ mission has evolved over the years as well to include support of the library system and staff through advocacy, programs, and the purchase of items unavailable through public funding. Friends maintains close relationships with both the central library system and the 17 branch libraries which thrive throughout Knox County, advocating for library programs and communicating community needs and interests.

Initially, Friends’ only income was membership dues and gifts. This changed in 1973 when Friends participated in the West Town Charity Fair, selling donated books which the library was unable to use. By the 1980s revenue from the annual sale of donated books and library withdrawals had grown to several thousand dollars and had moved first to the library building and then to the Candy Factory. The Friends’ Annual Sale came to be recognized as one of the best events of its kind in the Southeast when it moved to the Convention Center on the World’s Fair site and then to the Jacob Building in Chilhowee Park.

Book sales became a year-round event with the addition of a number of branch library and special event sales and the Friends @ Rothrock Used Book Shop, opened in Lawson McGhee Library in 2008. Rothrock memorializes Knox County library pioneer, Mary Utopia Rothrock, head of Lawson McGhee 1916–1933. Volunteers staff the shop, which is open daily. Friends has donated well over \$1m to the library, mostly as a result of sales of books for \$2 or less and \$10–25 memberships. It is a remarkable achievement.

As a volunteer-driven organization, Friends has always managed with low administrative expenses. Until 1990, when a part-time coordinator was hired, expenses were mostly postage and stationary. From the beginning the office has been housed at Lawson McGhee. The coordinator is now full-time and operations are more complex but still closely managed on a small budget.

Friends’ primary objective has been to invest in the library. One of the earliest gifts was a wheelchair for patron use. Other early contributions included the restoration of the elevator in the East Tennessee History Center, encyclopedias and answering machines for branches, and a freezer for preserving the Thompson Photography Collection nitrate negatives. In 1995 Friends purchased 11 computers to provide internet access for Lawson McGhee and 10 branches.

Over time Friends designated several large gifts to the expansion of the McClung Collection, including the Knaffl glass plates and negative collection, the restoration of Catherine Wiley and Lloyd Branson paintings, and custom-made shelving for the John Z. C. Thomas Reading Room. In 2016 Friends gifted \$20,000 to the Knox County Public Library Foundation to support its *From Papers to Pixels* campaign. This project created digital archives of the *Knoxville News Sentinel* from 1922–1990.

Friends has offered author events since the 1980s, often partnering with the library to sponsor lunchtime book reviews, evening appearances of local and regional writers, community reads, and the annual Children's Festival of Reading. In 2007 Friends established the Wilma Dykeman Stokely Lecture Series in honor of one of Appalachia's foremost authors. Many of these programs are free to the public. In recent years Friends has regularly co-sponsored major events with other local agencies to bring nationally known speakers to town.

Always alert to nurturing children's reading skills, Friends has provided readers for the Head Start program since the 1990s. After Gov. Phil Bredesen founded the Governor's Books from Birth Foundation in 2004 to facilitate the expansion of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library to all 95 counties in Tennessee, Friends was the original signatory for the Knox County program in 2005 and has continued as a major funding partner.

Friends is a long-time supporter of the library's summer reading program (Summer Library Club), which has evolved from a focus on maintaining children's reading skills to include both teens and adults.

Composed of dozens of volunteers, committees continually evolve as they rethink programs and create new ones. Work by many committees is the mainstay of the Friends narrative. As the governing entity, the board of directors is responsible for general oversight and financial management. Friends views all of its activities as advocacy for the library. A Board Development committee watches over the overall health of the organization. Friends' growing presence on social media spreads its message to a broader, more diverse audience. The Used Book Committee, restructured and renamed the Sales and Distribution Committee, now includes Books in the Community as a significant part of its stewardship of used books. In less than a year Friends distributed nearly 10,000 books to afterschool programs, detention centers, and nursing homes throughout the community, as well as to holiday baskets of the *Knoxville News Sentinel* Empty Stocking Fund.

For almost 50 years and in a myriad of ways, Friends continues to fulfill its mission **“to foster a love of libraries, books, and reading in the Knox County area through community outreach, advocacy, and support of the Knox County Public Library System and staff.”**

*Merikay Waldvogel, Paula Hickey, Rasha Sams, Maggie Carini 4/18*