BUILDING STRONGER LIBRARIES THROUGH FRIENDS AND LEADERSHIP PARTNERSHIPS

BY FRED HARVEY

Public libraries stand as vital centers of learning, connection, and community enrichment. In my 37 years of experience working alongside libraries across the country and internationally, one consistent truth has emerged: libraries achieve their greatest impact when they are supported not only by professional staff and leadership, but also by engaged community advocates. Among the most powerful of these advocates are Friends of the Library groups.

A well-organized Friends group does more than raise funds or organize events. It serves as a bridge between the library and the broader community, amplifying the library's mission and creating deeper connections with those it serves. The Orange County Library System in Orlando, where I proudly serve on the Friends of the Library board, is a strong example of how this relationship can flourish when a Friends group and library leadership work in harmony.

Recruitment: Bringing in the Right Voices

Recruitment of new members is the lifeblood of any Friends organization. Successful Friends groups seek out individuals who bring diverse skills, backgrounds, and perspectives. Volunteers with expertise in marketing, event planning, finance, or community outreach can all strengthen the group's ability to support the library. Recruitment is not simply about numbers; it is about inviting in voices that reflect the full diversity of the community. By doing so, Friends groups expand the library's reach and ensure broader representation in advocacy efforts.

Fred Harvey is a longtime supporter and advocate for libraries. A Central Florida resident since 1991, he has over 37 years of experience serving libraries worldwide and continues to champion the vital role libraries play in education and community life.

Support: Working Alongside, Not Above or Apart

True support of the library means listening to leadership, aligning with strategic goals, and complementing, not competing with, the library's work. Friends organizations thrive when they understand the library's priorities, whether that is advancing digital access, promoting early literacy, or expanding community programming. By tailoring support efforts to those priorities, Friends groups help ensure that resources and energy are directed where they are needed most.

Harmony: Building Lasting Relationships

At the heart of any strong relationship between a Friends group and a library is mutual respect. Library directors and staff bring professional expertise while Friends groups bring community perspective and advocacy power. When these two entities operate in harmony, they create a multiplier effect, expanding the library's ability to innovate, reach underserved populations, and remain at the forefront of community life. Harmony also requires regular communication and transparency. Open dialogue fosters trust, keeps goals aligned, and allows both Friends and library leadership to celebrate successes together.

The Shared Mission

Ultimately, the Friends of the Library and library leadership share the same mission: to strengthen the library's role as an essential public good. When Friends groups recruit thoughtfully, support strategically, and work cohesively with leadership, they elevate not only the library itself but the entire community served.

Libraries remain one of the most trusted and accessible institutions in our society. By working together as professionals, volunteers, and community advocates, we ensure that libraries will continue to thrive and adapt for generations to come.