

Volunteers in the Chapel Hill Public Library

by: Elizabeth Greer

Director

Chapel Hill Public Library

When one visits the Chapel Hill Public Library today it is difficult to believe that it existed only in the dreams of dedicated volunteer workers fifteen years ago. Before 1958, when the library was established by the Chapel Hill Board of Aldermen, adult readers in the community had depended on the University of North Carolina and children were limited to the collection maintained in an elementary school. Chapel Hill, the home of the University of North Carolina, had the dubious distinction of being the largest town in the state without public library service. The local appropriation of \$4,600 to operate the library that first year, was supplemented by federal funds and donations from interested residents and businesses.

The library opened in rented rooms in an aging clapboard structure, with one highly able employee, Elizabeth MacCarthy, who served as librarian until 1962. During this period, when Mrs. MacCarthy had little salaried assistance, the pattern of using volunteer help was established that continues today. The library is now housed in a handsome building, completed in 1967, with a collection of 40,000 vol-

umes. Bookmobile service was begun in 1972. Open 67 hours weekly, it had a book circulation of almost 262,000 in the last fiscal year and 1,183 films were booked. Many special programs are offered, including story hours, films for both adults and children, meet-the-author teas and art exhibits, as well as other programs planned in cooperation with community groups. All this is maintained with a staff of only five full-time employees, and part-time workers averaging 120 hours weekly. There is no question that the library is understaffed and the purpose of this article is to point out ways that other libraries in similar situations may survive or enrich their present services with the use of volunteer help.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that volunteers in any way replace an adequate, trained staff. Volunteer service should be supportive in all aspects. Only when a library is in a severe financial bind, should volunteers be depended upon for the basic needs. On the other hand, volunteers can perform many routines in a highly competent fashion and release the trained staff for reader service and

other professional duties. The use of volunteers offers us alternatives. We made the decision to operate on Sunday afternoon with a paid staff, using funds that would normally be spent on book processing which is done entirely by volunteers.

The library's use of volunteers falls into three main categories: routine or clerical, professional, and enrichment or added services. All are important, and the amount of time devoted to each depends to some extent on the talent available and current needs. Before we had a children's librarian, for example, volunteers offered story-hours. This is no longer necessary, but volunteers are now used to assist in the planning and operation of adult programs.

Among the routine jobs done regularly by volunteers are all aspects of the physical processing of books and book repair. Other tasks include writing overdue notices, arranging the daily circulation cards, and preliminary filing. Typists have been trained to type catalog cards, borrowers' cards, book lists, and book orders. With supervision, volunteers work at the circulation desk and assist in reader registration. A regular crew of shelvees is not a job that has great attraction; however, young teenagers have been our best source of supply in this area.

Chapel Hill is blessed in the volunteer sense in having many persons with library training and experience who have spare time for and an interest in the public library. They are mainly retired librarians and faculty wives. Over the years they have been of immense help primarily as catalogers. Others have taken on special jobs such as setting up a pamphlet file or preparing reading lists.

Experience has taught us that volunteer service cannot be organized casually. A person is accepted as a volunteer only after specific duties and schedules have been mutually agreed upon. The library staff feels a responsibility to have work and work space available at these times and the volunteers in turn are expected to notify us if they are unable to be on the

job. Chaos would result otherwise. Volunteers generally prefer this precise arrangement and feel a real commitment to keep their schedules. As a general rule, no one works more than one morning or afternoon weekly. This is done for two reasons. First, the work will not fall too far behind in case of absences, although the spirit of the volunteer is such a constructive one that often others offer to fill a time slot when another is ill or on vacation. Also, if a person puts in extensive hours at tedious work, it will soon become a dull chore. A few hours a week can be a pleasant change from normal routines.

The third category of service done by volunteers is extremely important and involves administrative ability as well as dedication. No "one morning-a-week" schedule for these good souls! Under the auspices of the Friends of the Library, volunteers are completely responsible for monthly meet-the-author teas held in the library. For five years, Eva (Mrs. Richard) McKenna has made all arrangements for these popular events from inviting the authors, publicity, procuring food and flowers to introduction of the speaker, and washing the cups and saucers. Only someone who has organized similar functions can fully appreciate what this service means to the library staff.

Equally important, for the third year another volunteer, Mrs. Herbert Bodman, is serving as chairman of the annual book sale which last year netted the library a profit of \$1,200. This is a year-round job for the chairman and her assistants, who sort out the donated books and price and box them until sale time. They handle all aspects of the two-day event, and the library profits not only monetarily but from the good will engendered in the community by the opportunity to buy books at bargain prices.

Volunteers have organized other special programs. For example, a series of slide-illustrated talks on travel and nature topics was highly successful. Last year steps were taken to initiate a "Books for the Homebound" program under the aus-

pices of the Friends and the Council on Aging.

The value of these services to the library far outweighs the inevitable difficulties one encounters in any organizational work. It is always understood that the library administration approves and maintains general supervision of all programs. This policy combined with a dash of tact and good humor generally will solve problems large and small. Among the rewards of work with volunteers is the spirit of friendship and cooperation that develops between staff and members of the community as they work together and meet for morning coffee, and the understanding of library service and problems the volunteers develop and in turn communicate to the community. This is a valuable aspect of involving volunteers in library operation.

For the benefit of those libraries contemplating a move, our most dramatic use of volunteer help occurred when the new

library building was completed in 1967. Jaycees and Boy Scouts in trucks provided by local businesses moved over 20,000 books and other library materials from the old building to the shelves of the new one. Children from a kindergarten marched through downtown Chapel Hill carrying picture books — a gesture of great publicity value. When Durham Transfer and Storage Company learned that we planned this project, its president volunteered to move the bulky items requiring professional handling without cost. In the following week volunteers of all ages participated in every conceivable aspect of preparing the building for service, from shelf reading to transferring cards into the new catalog cabinet. The undertaking was so successful that we plan to repeat it on a smaller scale when we expand into new space for which revenue sharing funds have been allocated, and thereby involve a new generation in the spirit of library service.

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