

ARLIS/NA Lunchtime chat

How to start a museum library friends group

Friday, October 25, 2013

11am Pacific-12 pm Mountain-1 pm Central-2 pm Eastern

Guest moderator: Eric Wolf, Head Librarian, The Menil Collection

Guest: Jennifer Hennessy, Membership Coordinator, The Menil Collection

Alice Whiteside: Welcome, everyone!

Meg Black: Hi Alice!

Alice Whiteside: Hi!

Eric Wolf: Hello Alice and Meg!

Megan Oliver: Are we typing or using microphones? We've not done this kind of informal chat before...

Meg Black: Hey Eric!

Catherine Petersen: Hello! nice to see familiar names

Courtney Baron: Hello!

Meg Black: Megan, just typing

Jennifer Hennessy: Hi everyone.

Eric Wolf: Thanks so much for joining us Jennifer!

Alice Whiteside: It's great to have folks arriving early! We'll wait until 2 to get started

Eric Wolf: (That's 1:00 CST)

Alice Whiteside: Yes! Thanks, Eric!

Emilee Mathews: Hi everyone!

Allison Hausladen: Hello everyone.

Joan Benedetti: Not sure how to do this. Am I typing in the right space?

Alice Whiteside: Welcome, Emilee and Allison!

Eric Wolf: Yes, Joan, perfect. And welcome!

Meg Black: Yes Joan! Welcome!

Joan Benedetti: Thanks for doing this. I've been retired for a while. But I continue to be interested in what's going on in museum libraries.

Leslie Preston: Hi . I'ts Leslie from FIT ... I'd like to start a friends group here (not associated with the Museum at FIT tho!)

Eric Wolf: Leslie, a lot should be parallel, though membership angle will be different.

Leslie Preston: understood!

Meg Black: Does everyone know that it is National Friends of Librariaries week?

Alice Whiteside: I didn't!

Eric Wolf: Every week should be National Friends of the Library Week!

Joan Benedetti: How perfect!

Meg Black: It is--check it out at the ALA website

Eric Wolf: Leave it to Meg to time this perfectly.

Meg Black: speaking of which, it is the top of hour!

Meg Black: Welcome Everyone!

Meg Black: Welcome to today's lunchtime chat, How to start a museum library friends group.

Meg Black: I'm ARLIS PDC Education Subcommittee member Meg Black; fellow committee member Alice Whiteside and I are your hosts today and we're so pleased to be joined by guest moderator Eric Wolf and guest Jennifer Hennessy who are going to lead a discussion of museum library friends groups

Meg Black: Eric is Head Librarian at The Menil Collection in Houston, Texas

Meg Black: And Jennifer is Membership Coordinator at The Menil.

Meg Black: Eric, please tell us about the library friends at The Menil and your reasons for establishing the group!

Eric Wolf: Sure, and thank you Meg.

Eric Wolf: When I started at the Menil Collection almost 4 years ago, we were no longer able to add to our fairly robust special collections.

Eric Wolf: We were a private collection that opened to the public in 1987. Our founder passed away in the late 1990s and her special collections were substantial. I did not have the budget to continue in that vain, but thought it was important to continue to enhance those holdings.

Eric Wolf: So, working with our terrific development department, I suggested forming a Friends group to generate income to acquire Special Collections items.

Alice Whiteside: [a side note (excuse me, Eric!): anyone is welcome to type something at any time! Eumie, I see that you are raising your hand but am not sure how to message you directly. Please feel free to chime in!]

Eric Wolf: It also has the benefit of raising awareness of our department's existence with members and even trustees (I have a number of Trustees as Friends); this has lead to revnue from membership, as well as some gifts.

Eumie Imm Stroukoff 2: Sorry, I was late and was getting situated. Didn't mean to raise my hand!

Eric Wolf: But, please Eumie, and others, feel free to ask questions, stop me, or ask for clarification of anything.

Meg Black: Eric, what was the response of the development department when you approached them?

Eric Wolf: Part of why I wanted Jennifer here is to address logistics from the development angle. Meg, Development was vey supportive. The stipulation was that Friends had to be already museum members, something that Jennifer helps me track.

Meg Black: does The Menil have other Friends groups (for other departments)?

Eric Wolf: The Menil has one small affinity group for African Art, but that is a very high level. We were the first regular affinity group here, another is in the works for the Friends of the Rose Garden, I believe.

Jennifer Hennessy: The Menil has a very small membership base to start with and we are always cognizant of diluting that base. To combat that we require members of Friends of the Library to already be members of the Menil.

Meg Black: Yes, that makes sense

Eric Wolf: What is also nice is we have three Friends levels, which are independent of Museum membership levels, so a low level museum member can be a high-level Friend.

Megan Oliver: Can you clarify what you mean by "diluting that base"?

Catherine Petersen: can you speak to your collection development policy for Friends group

Jennifer Hennessy: We, for instance, didn't want people to join a friends group in lieu of joining as a Menil member.

Eric Wolf: Catherine, I have been trying to fill voids in our special collections--we are very strong, for instance in 1st editions of Andre Breton texts. I have bought two we were missing.

Jennifer Hennessy: Our membership starts at \$100, not cheap, so we were afraid that adding a friends group would discourage people from being a member of the Menil and a member of the Friends group.

Eric Wolf: And it is important to remember that the Menil Collection does not charge admission, so membership is a harder sell than at some museums.

Jennifer Hennessy: Yes, exactly, Eric. All programs are free as well.

Meg Black: Eric, how many are in your friends group now?

Eric Wolf: Right now we have approximately 40 members.

Joan Benedetti: I think that having a stipulation of belonging to the museum before joining the library friends group is common. Here in Santa Fe, there is a Museum of New Mexico Foundation that includes four state museum plus some state monuments that must be joined before joining the Friends of Folk Art--which is a Friends group specifically for the Museum of International Folk Art.

Eric Wolf: Also, the Menil Library does not have public hours; use of the library is a benefit.

Natalia: Do you do any programming?

Eric Wolf: Yes Natalia. We have an annual event and reception. The first was on Catalogues Raisonne, with the editors of our Jasper Johns Drawings raisonne and our Director who edited the Paul Klee raisonne in a panel discussion, followed by a wine and hors d'oeuvres reception.

Eric Wolf: We had acquisitions with Friends money on display as well as books with bookplates for members on display.

Eric Wolf: Last year the subject was the history of publishing at the Menil with our publisher and archivist presenting.

Eric Wolf: I also send members a quarterly newsletter, highlighting acquisitions with Friends funds, and updates about the library, acquisitions, facilities, etc.

Meg Black: How did you organize the event? Do you have a captain of the Friends?

Leslie Preston 2: Do you have outreach brochure?

Leslie Preston 2: and if so could you share?

Eric Wolf: Leslie, we do have a brochure.

Natalia: Sounds great. How often do the Friends meet?

Eric Wolf: Meg, I work with the Special Events Coordinator in Advancement to organize the events. She is a pro--printed invitations, catering, etc.

Meg Black: Ah!

Eric Wolf: Our event is annual.

Eric Wolf: The two higher membership levels get book plates, which they can dedicate as they like, so I am in communication with them regularly.

Eric Wolf: And Meg raises an important point. Event planning and membership tracking are hard. That is why you NEED to work with your Advancement departments. This is good because it builds strong relationships with them, whcih is a terrific thing.

Eumie Imm Stroukoff 2: Do the Friends group have business meetings where you discuss collection development?

Eric Wolf: Eumie, we have not done that. I really am trying to target acquisitions at gaps identified by myself, my director and curators.

Meg Black: How did you decide on the membership levels?

Eric Wolf: I let my colleagues in development give me guidance. I didn't want it to be too high, as I did not want to compete with other areas. I also like younger members to be able to participate.

Leslie Preston 2: And how do you target the actual donors?

Eric Wolf: Our levels are \$100, \$250 and \$500. Of course we welcome donations beyond that!

Jennifer Hennessy: Leslie, we started out with a direct mail piece to members with the printed brochure and reply form.

Meg Black: Did you need to establish the group as a 501 c 3 organization ?

Eric Wolf: We also have brochures in our bookstore.

Eric Wolf: No, we are not a separate organization, just part of Menil membership.

Meg Black: That's great!

Eric Wolf: Another great benefit of this has been the help from development at getting us good photography from the brochure which we have used for other purposes as well.

Meg Black: I saw the brochure at ARLIS--very nice!

Eric Wolf: Yes, if anyone needs a copy, please email me your address and I can send one.

Eric Wolf: We also have a webpage on our membership section of our website.

Eumie Imm Stroukoff 2: Have you seen an increase in usage of the library after organizing the Friends group?

Meg Black: Megan, is the Friends group at the Ringling also part of Museum membership?

Eric Wolf: Eumie, I have had a few visitor of Friends members. It has not been overwhelming in any way, however.

Eric Wolf: I have also had a few users join the Friends group out of gratitude.

Megan Oliver: At the first of the year, our Development department will be merging all the Friends groups into museum membership.

Alice Whiteside: Megan, could you share a little more about how you started it outside of Development and the process that has led to merging it?

Joan Benedetti: Megan--does that mean that the individual Friends groups will lose their separate identity or does it just mean that they have to also become museum members?

Eric Wolf: I have also really enjoyed being able to acquire a few things that complemented exhibitions. For instance I got Richard Serra's fist gallery show catalogue while we had Serra drawings show. I announced that in our newsletter and got great feedback, even from a trustee.

Meg Black: VEry nice!

Megan Oliver: A dedicated group of docents had shown interest in the library for years. They made up the foundation of our Friends group, and still do. No relationship between the Friends of the Library and Development has existed in the past, but this is changing. All of the Ringling's Friends groups are being re-envisioned to become more sponsorship focused. The Friends groups will now be an addition to one's membership, a way of customizing their experience, so they pay regular membership plus a Friends level. Our new level will be \$125, up from \$100.

Leslie Preston 2: Eric, have you received donations higher than the level donations stated previously ... and what's the average level based on the 40 or so members?

Eric Wolf: Megan, what has been hard for us (and Jennifer can expand) has been synchronizing Friends memberships with museum memberships. This is very difficult if they join at different times.

Eric Wolf: We have 6 at \$500, 10 or so at \$250, and rhe remaing 20-something at \$100.

Megan Oliver: The Friends we already have will be grandfathered in for one year, during which our Development department will campaign to align the two groups more closely. It will be difficult, yes.

Eric Wolf: There have been additional donations, but seldom. But we have also gotten gifts in kind from members (again, trustees, so good stuff that we actually wanted)

Jennifer Hennessy: Yes, the back end has been a challenge for us. We have also had to synchronize expiration dates and renewal solicitations

Jennifer Hennessy: One of my goals is to enable members to join Friend of the Library online. We currently cannot do that but it would make solicitations and renewals much more streamlined.

Eric Wolf: Yes, that would be very helpful. Our development department here is way ahead of our online infrastructure. Hopefully that will change soon!

Meg Black: Sounds like there are some challenges

Megan Oliver: Jennifer, we'd like that as well. We have a new website and a new director of Development, so I think that option will be available for us in the near future. We believe that joining online would be a huge benefit for our library and the museum.

Joan Benedetti: Megan--this is great! And Eric--you have just given us an example of leveraging different avenues of support: publicizing in the museum newsletter the support you got that allowed you to

buy the Serra catalog. Taking advantage of every bit of support to garner more support through other avenues is an important ongoing technique and a Friends group amplifies the opportunities. But getting help either from the Friends group itself and/or from your development department is essential; otherwise--burnout!!

Meg Black: Well said, Joan!

Megan Oliver: Please note: I'm receiving a warning on my chat screen that is telling me my "sharing capabilities will be removed in 2 minute" because "All Named Hosts have left the meeting". I don't know what that means!

Eric Wolf: Yes, Joan, you speak eloquently. We are now in our third year. Our first year we had a little seed money from development, which was essential for the brochure, first event, etc.

Eric Wolf: Now we are entirely self-sustaining, after paying for programming all revenue is for acquisitions.

Eric Wolf: Megan, I got the same message.

Megan Oliver: Ok. Thanks.

Leslie Preston: one minute left!

Joan Benedetti: I just got the same message.

Meg Black: Eric, could you use Friend's money for other purposes besides acquisitions?

Joan Benedetti: Will this chat be available online somewhere--or will the organizers have a copy of it?

Meg Black: Joan, yes

Eric Wolf: Meg, I probably could, as I run the group, but to this point I have used it exclusively for Special Collections acquisitions, as my regular acquisitions budget does not permit me to collect there. That was my reason for starting the group.

Meg Black: the transcript will be posted on the ARLIS/NA website

Alice Whiteside: The chat transcript will be posted on the ARLIS/NA site; I'll email arlis-I when it is posted

Meg Black: A very good reason, Eric!

Alice Whiteside: We should be all set in terms of the warning you were getting. My internet cut out and I didn't realize it! Many apologies!

Meg Black: Thanks Alice!

Joan Benedetti: Are we running out of time for this chat? I don't remember hearing how long it would last. I have a feeling this topic could go on for awhile. Thanks to all!

Beth: Hi All- I was curious about time commitments for maintaining a Friends group. At my museum this is managed through our Development and Education departments, but I would love to have the Friends become more invested in our Library

Eric Wolf: It is actually quite amazing and rewarding what \$7,000 extra dollars can do. I have been able to order from ArsLibri catalogues!

Jennifer Hennessy: This group, Eric's phone calls, and the annual event are all additional touch points

that enable us to connect with our members.

Alice Whiteside: Joan, we have until the top of the hour (the warning was a technical error!) Plenty of time for more questions!

Megan Oliver: The challenge that first made itself obvious and has been an issue ever since has been exposure. Cultivating new Friends has been hard, we've had about 35 since the program began and we'd really like more. Another challenge is giving levels; how much is too much to ask for? The final challenge would be that Friends groups can sometimes feel like they have an exclusive membership and unlimited access to the librarians and the collections. While we don't want to completely disassociate ourselves with that view, we don't want our Friends group to see themselves as members who get a specific benefit (as we can't afford to produce one), but rather as sponsors for our library's special collections efforts and directives.

Eric Wolf: It takes considerable time and effort, once running, I still have to write a quarterly newsletter, organize an event, do bookplates, etc. But it has been well worth it, to get books we couldn't get otherwise and revitalize special collections and raise the profile of the library within the museum and amongst membership.

Leslie Preston: Yes, any bit helps! How do you fund the annual event or other receptions?

Beth: Thank you Eric!

Megan Oliver: We're interested in hearing from libraries that have launched successful marketing campaigns to expand the Friends. Can you have such a thing as too many Friends? How do libraries justify needing a Friends group to their various institutions?

Jennifer Hennessy: To Megan's point - It seems that members here are always seeking ACCESS. Access to the curator, the librarian, the library.

Jennifer Hennessy: That may be the most important resource we at the Menil have to offer.

Eric Wolf: I spend the money on event and programming first. All additional income goes to acquisitions. So I don't acquire until I have covered expenses.

Eric Wolf: Well said, Jennifer.

Jennifer Hennessy: Eric is great about reaching out to members directly with phone calls and his newsletter emails.

Joan Benedetti: I can't resist mentioning: the ARLIS/NA/Scarecrow publication, Art Museum Libraries and Librarianship has a chapter on Fundraising that is basically about support groups and there is also a chapter on marketing and PR.

Eric Wolf: My most important advice would be that Development/

Eric Wolf: Advancement Departments are our best friends.

Eric Wolf: They know what they are doing, but can only help us if we ask them for help.

Meg Black: That is wonderful advice, Eric.

Eric Wolf: I see the clock is winding down. Any questions that Jennifer or I could answer? Feel free to email me if something comes up later that we can help with!

Megan Oliver: Thanks everyone for the informative chat.

Meg Black: Thank you all for the active conversation!

Leslie Preston: Thanks!

Jennifer Hennessy: Thanks for including me!

Meg Black: Thanks to Eric and Jennifer for sharing their expertise with us today!

Allison Hausladen: Yes, thank you!

Eric Wolf: Thanks to Meg and Alice for organizing this!

Meg Black: I hope everyone has a great weekend. Thanks for joining!

Alice Whiteside: Yes, special thanks to Eric and Jennifer, and thank you all for joining us!

Beth: Thank you! I appreciate the offer to email with any questions since I was out on the Reference Desk for the first half and need to read back through everything- very much appreciated!

Eric Wolf: ewolf@menil.org

Jennifer Hennessy: I'm happy to chat offline as well if anyone would like to email me. jhennessy@menil.org

Alice Whiteside: Thanks, Eric and Jennifer! And the full chat transcript will be available on the ARLIS/NA site soon, under Lunchtime Chats

Alice Whiteside: Have a wonderful weekend, everyone!