

Start Copy

Friends of Westfield Memorial Library

By JEANNE WHITNEY
Specially Written for This Is Westfield

Library Quiz: What book was checked out most frequently from the Westfield Memorial Library adult collection last year? From the children's collection? (find answer at end.)

With the Westfield Memorial Library currently celebrating 10 years in its home on East Broad Street at Stanley Avenue, the Friends of the Library, a 600-member strong volunteer fundraising group, looks back over a 26-year history and the many important – if not crucial – contributions the group has made to the library.

Ten years ago when the library moved into the new \$3.5 million building, two blocks from its former site in the current municipal building, the Friends of the Library spearheaded a Building Fund drive to raise an additional \$200,000 to finish the project.

Funding for the project from a municipal bond issue combined with state grants covered only construction of the building, as it turned out, leaving no money for furniture or computers. Former Downtown Westfield Director Michelle Picou was an officer of the Friends at the time and remembers the drive ultimately raised a total of \$300,000.

"We created an endowment with the \$100,000 raised beyond the goal of the Building Fund drive," Mrs. Picou said. That was in 1989. With the Westfield Foundation managing the endowment, it is now reported to be worth \$170,000.

"It's for emergencies," Mrs. Picou added.

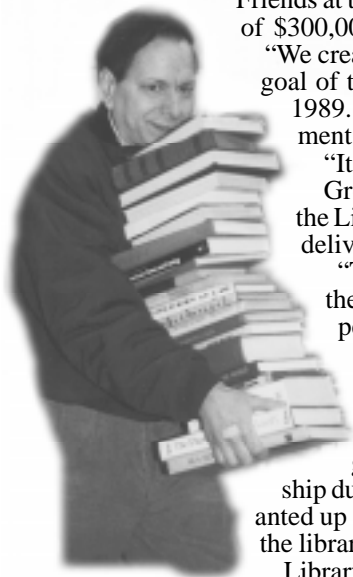
Growing from a mere five members in 1972, the Friends of the Library continue to raise thousands of dollars every year to deliver on a wish list from Library Director Barbara Thiele.

"They are absolutely indispensable," Ms. Thiele says about the Friends. "I've never known a more dedicated group of people."

Mrs. Thiele joined the library as Director in 1984 from Franklin, New Jersey by way of Virginia.

Last year, the Friends' annual sale of 30,000 donated used books raised nearly \$21,000 for the library. The group contributed another \$6,000 raised from membership dues and other sources. Six years ago, the Friends willingly anted up \$50,000 or nearly half the cost of computer upgrades for the library's system.

Library Board of Trustees President, Harrison "Hap" Watson, called the volunteer group "a marvelous resource" and said, "We are



perpetually grateful for everything the Friends do."

The Friends took the lead over 10 years ago in lobbying the Town Council for a new library, when it became evident the existing library had grown too small. Several rooms in the municipal building had served as the town library since the mid-1950s.

According to Mrs. Thiele, at the time, 80 percent of town residents had library cards. "That means over 700 people a day come here. We desperately need double the space," she said at the time.

Friends officer Mrs. Picou remembers taking on the challenge.

"We were the ones who got the non-binding referendum (for a new building) on the ballot and voters were overwhelmingly in favor of a new library, I think to the surprise of the Town Council."

The bonds issued for the new library will be paid off this year after 10 years.

The cornerstone of the new building was laid October 15, 1988 and the Friends of the Library made certain that plaques throughout the finished building recognized the



Librarian Maureen Cooney, center, with Friends of the Library, l-r, Peggy Bender and Bebbins Yudes

names of donors.

Joined by Boy Scouts of America candidates for Eagle Scouts, the National Guard, school board and Town Council members, Library Board Trustees and many other dedicated residents, the Friends of the Library moved the library's 103,000 books to the new building in six hours on a Saturday in early December.

Trustee President Watson said the volunteers saved the town \$75,000 in moving costs by their efforts.

More recently, the Friends added a photocopy machine to the library's second floor, microfiche and microfilm machines, a Fax machine, reference materials, computer terminals, a computer database and nearly 200 large print books. One-half of the profits from the copy machine go to the library while the Friends maintain and service the equipment.

However, these donations make up only 2.4 percent of the library's total budget, according to last year's annual report. This year, the library has asked the town for \$1,117,000 which is about 90 percent of total library expenditures. Another 3.5 percent of the library's budget comes from state aid, overdue fines and fees and grants, according to the report.

Only about one-seventh of the library's budget is spent on books and other resource materials. Last year, nearly 67 percent of the budget was spent on employee wages and benefits. Nineteen percent paid for maintenance and supplies.

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