

Boy, Dewey have a story for you?

Building a library legacy took stacks of dedication

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For the *TODAY*

Libraries are supposed to be quiet places, but sometimes it takes a lot of noise to get them built. The following is the tale of the ladies of the Siletz Valley Friends of the Library, née the Siletz Civic Club, who have girl-power pride about taking a failing library and turning it into a treasure for their community.

“We certainly aren’t against men and have had tons of help from them, including our husbands and current board member Jim Buisman,” said SVFL member Sally Jennings. “But the women have been the backbone of taking this project from dream to reality.”

Siletz has had a library since 1954 but, by the turn of the millennium, the building it was housed in since 1983 made the library more of a source of amusement than edification.

“We joked that it was being held together by termite saliva,” Jennings said. “It was totally leaky but you couldn’t even put a new roof on it because the structure wouldn’t hold the weight.”

For Jennings and other still very much involved members of the original Siletz Civic Club, including Sunshine Keck and Karen Carlson, the library became the primary purpose of the club. Existing funding sources for the library were enough for a tiny staff and small number of books, but nothing for the actual building.

“We kept hoping someone would come along and build us a new library,” Jennings said. “We finally realized that we could wait the rest of our lives for someone to come along or we can just do it ourselves.”

Changing the club name to the Siletz Valley Friends of the Library was a way to focus the effort but also widen the net for the people involved.

“Many of us live outside of the town of Siletz,” Carlson said. “But this is our community too.”

The ladies with the newly sharp club focus formed a 501©(3), rolled up their sleeves and started fundraising with events

including car washes, bake sales and silent auctions at the aquarium.

“We did one car wash dressed as old ladies,” Carlson said. “Anything to get people’s attention. We wanted to prove how dedicated we were.”

In a few years, the grass roots efforts had raised roughly \$30,000, which was enough to stimulate other funding sources. When the coffers reached \$86,000 from individuals, businesses and small grants, a significant donation came in from Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians.

“The Tribe could see that we were doing something that would serve the Tribal members as well as the rest of the community and they pledged to help us with funding from the beginning,” Jennings said. “They committed \$250,000 and our world changed right then.”

The group continued writing and winning grants, working toward the goal of an initial estimate cost of \$700,000.

“We thought we could break ground in enough time to open in 2006, but suddenly the cost of things went up after Hurricane Katrina,” Jennings said. “The lowest bid that came in was \$850,000. We were so disappointed, but what happened next tells you the kind of community we have.”

Ron Anderson, a local contractor, heard what happened and told the board to re-open the bidding.

“This is called the Ron Anderson and Larry Franks memorial building because of everything they did to make this happen,” Jennings said. “We had scaled back our plans to bring costs down, but they said we aren’t going cheap. I never saw the books but I bet they didn’t make a dime.”

Then the group was hit with another surprise.

“Right when we almost had finished plans for the building, earthquakes became a big issue,” Keck said. “So, then we had to change the plans to fit the highest standards of earthquake readiness.”

But the ladies knew this story couldn’t close without a happy ending.

“We were exhausted and all of our husbands were in shock,” Carlson said. “But the women on the board are tenacious, and if we say we are going to do something we do it.”

Finally, on January 6, 2007, the new



Sally Jennings, Karen Carlson and Sunshine Keck

library opened to the public. Within the first year, circulation jumped from 9,861 to 14,048.

In addition to books and other things for community use like computers, a projector for public presentations and free WiFi, the library has a glass case filled with traditional Siletz Tribal baskets and modern works of art based on the basket theme.

“This is so more more than a library for us, it’s a community hub,” Jennings said. “We think of it like a basket which has been the guiding theme since Siletz tribal member Tina Retasket brought in some of her beautiful baskets and we used them for the color scheme of the outside of the building.”

Though the Lincoln County Library District provides some funding for staff and books, the SVFL continues to raise money to keep the building in good shape.

“Every month we have something new that needs to be taken care of,” Keck said. “But the support we continue to get from the community is profound. The Tribe always encourages us to apply for funds; and we have other supporters like Rita Peck, owner of the Little Chief Diner, who helps us host events and never says ‘no.’ She has been a quiet but constant supporter from the beginning.”

Throughout the process, life went on for the ladies of SVFL. The treasurer fought cancer; babies were born to mothers who simply packed them up and brought them along to meetings.

“It took a few years before people believed in what we were trying to do,” Jennings said. “One person dismissed us by saying we were building a castle in the sky. Never tell women they are building a castle in the sky; all that does is make us more determined.”