

No Librarian Is An Island Volunteers Are Your Best Untapped Advocates

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When we think of advocacy, we often think of what we, as individuals, could be doing. Am I speaking up enough for the library? How's my elevator pitch? Am I attending city council meetings, back-to-school nights, farmers' markets? Am I doing everything I can to make sure that my community knows all the wonderful things the library has to offer?

But no librarian is an island, and you don't have to advocate alone. Consider a group of library users who already have a stake in the library, those you see with some regularity, and who can become vocal advocates with just a little assistance—your volunteers.

Your volunteers are natural advocates for the library. After all, they wouldn't be volunteering if they didn't have a soft spot for libraries! Volunteers already know at least a little about what the library offers. Maybe they volunteer with your Friends organization and know the annual book sale supports library funding. Maybe they bring their dogs to Paws to Read and have witnessed a child's face light up as they read a library book to a dog with confidence. No matter their role, almost any volunteer can share their own personal connection.

In my library system, I work with two distinct volunteer groups; both are fantastic advocates for the library. A group of adult volunteers we call "Bookleggers" visits every elementary classroom in our school district. With almost one hundred fifty elementary classrooms in our service area and only two and a half children's staff, we would never be able to visit every classroom while still providing the same level of service in branch.

Our Bookleggers go through a six-week training process where they become book-talking experts, choosing five or six books from a curated list to present to each classroom. Every visit is a perfect advocacy moment—they promote the library, talk up programs, and make sure kids and families know about the amazing resources the library offers. These volunteers are passionate literacy advocates, and they bring their passion both to the classroom and to the broader community, sporting one of our branded Booklegger tote bags and recruiting new volunteers.

Even your youngest volunteers can be advocates. In my library system, a team of almost one hundred middle schoolers helps us with our Summer Reading Game. These volunteers sign up families, explain the game, and cheer on readers who are close to earning prizes. They bound up to unsuspecting grown-ups, ready to spread the word about the joy of summer reading for all ages.

These tweens make great advocates because they're big library users and full of enthusiasm. Ours act like miniature carnival barkers, persuading reluctant grown-ups and explaining that yes, babies can participate in the Summer Reading program too. These volunteers are visible to everyone who walks into the library, and when they go home, they tell their friends about incentives, library events, and more. In their downtime, they hang

out at the volunteer table and read—nobody sets a better example than that!

By incorporating volunteers into my advocacy goals, I'm able to expand my reach. Bookleggers come from all walks of life and are able to spread the word to family and friends who may not be library users. My Summer Reading tweens are able to speak kid-to-kid, often reaching friends who haven't been to the library since they grew out of storytime. Because they're volunteers and not employees, they speak out of genuine, unbiased affection for the library, and listeners can tell.

It doesn't take much to turn a volunteer into a vocal advocate. When I train new Bookleggers, I include information that

volunteers can turn around and share. "Did you know the Friends of the Library offers free books for classrooms? Not all our teachers are aware, so bring them a flyer when you visit." This even works with our middle-school volunteers. "Who can guess how many people signed up for summer reading last year? More than five thousand! How many sign-ups should we try for this year?"

The next time you're feeling overwhelmed and unable to advocate, consider your volunteers. Whether you have just three or four dedicated regulars or a small volunteer army, they can revitalize your advocacy efforts without requiring you to do it all on your own. &

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on DVD. At the end of the program, mention that all materials are available for checkout to mitigate the "too pretty to read" phenomenon that often leaves attractive displays untouched.

Have extra copies of handouts ready for latecomers. If you have some other giveaways they certainly can't hurt—again canvass your local pediatricians, WIC office, daycares,

maternity care centers, and anywhere else they might have brochures or goods to share.

Consider offering a tour of the children's room, or a sign-up sheet for your email newsletters. Thank everyone for coming and say that you look forward to seeing them back soon! &

References

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