

# Expedition Bound!

## Clever Passport Program Ups Library Visits, Engagement

MARY FELLOWS



Library Expedition artwork was created by artist Ira Marcks ([www.iramarcks.com](http://www.iramarcks.com)).

**Q:** What builds support for libraries, engages stakeholders, delights users, boosts staff pride, and brings business to local communities?

**A:** *A library expedition!*

What's a library expedition? At Upper Hudson Library System (UHLS) in Albany, New York, it's a robust, self-guided library tour for users that's wildly popular with families and adults, fun for staff, and engaging for stakeholders.

Our Library Expedition began with a dream to deliver an experience that enticed people to visit all thirty-six library locations in UHLS. We're a cooperative regional library system in upstate New York of twenty-nine independent libraries and their branches, serving 474,000. Staff knew that most residents of our two counties were unaware of the many shared services available to them beyond their library's walls.

While some community libraries are as close together as three miles, others involve ninety minutes of travel to go between them. Few people had visited more than a handful of their closest libraries. With our daily weekday delivery service, patrons had little incentive to seek out far-flung libraries.

So, in 2017, a planning team of library colleagues and system staff set out to design an experience that would:

- Educate users on UHLS and the services available through us
- Showcase each library's uniqueness

- Reinforce the value of nurturing a family/individual library habit
- Build support for libraries in society
- Demonstrate libraries' community support to funders and decision-makers.

To get buy-in from our members, we carefully articulated the value of the Expedition to each library:

- Media exposure through joint marketing
- Potential for increased library use and new users
- A fun public event that attracts positive feedback and boosts staff morale
- Stronger connections to other UHLS libraries for greater collaboration and innovation



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## Once and Again

A year later, the 2018 Library Expedition launched. Riffing on the well-known “Become a 46er” slogan of the local upstate New York Adirondack Mountain Club, the Expedition’s “Become a 36er” slogan offered a regional flavor. We were fortunate to engage local comic artist/author Ira Marcks to design our graphic pieces. Ira’s eye-catching poster, bumper sticker, map, buttons, pin, sticker and other pieces generated instant interest. His iconic bear duo in their vintage VW van immediately attracted devoted fans!

Participants received a map to be stamped at each library and prizes when they visited five, fifteen, and twenty-five libraries. The prize for visiting all thirty-six, which we offered a bit tongue-in-cheek, was a VIP gold library card. Unlike the Willy Wonka golden ticket, there were no special privileges attached to the card, but it was—surprisingly—nearly as coveted!

More than three thousand people participated in the 2018 Expedition, and 375 people completed it to earn their prized gold card. Before its conclusion, people were petitioning us to do an Expedition again next year. We gently broke the news that no, this was not an annual project. The amount of work and expense precluded that, but we’d do it again “someday.”

In 2022, we decided that “someday” was on the horizon. We were past the worst of the pandemic adjustments. Libraries were working hard to reconnect with their communities, while fun still seemed in short supply. The time was right for another Expedition.



A new team jumped into planning, helped by the lessons learned in the earlier version. Marcks again designed wonderful new graphics that included the beloved Hawaiian shirt-wearing bears from 2018—this time with a baby bear in tow.

By late March 2023, printed materials and prizes based on 2018 participation were on hand. To the gold library card option, we added a VIP platinum card for the uber library-lovers who would become second time 36ers. We also opened a virtual store with print-on-demand Expedition merchandise.

All thirty-six locations had instructions, programming ideas, marketing language, and a supply of prizes. On April 3, we launched Expedition 2023. And the doors blew off.

## Results

By the end of the second week, there had been 3,539 Expedition visits to our libraries. We were thrilled, and a bit concerned. Our initial orders of prizes had been nail-bitingly delayed by supply chain issues, and now we needed to get more of almost everything quickly. This became the theme of the 2023 Expedition: sheer delight at its success—circulation increased by 4.2%—and anxiety about keeping it running smoothly for libraries and Expeditioners.

At its conclusion, Expedition 2023 netted our libraries 41,000 Expedition-related visits. From newborn babies to octogenarians, Expeditioners engaged with libraries, charmed and were charmed by staff, and proved through heartwarming stories how very important libraries are to them.

And were they motivated by the challenge! One Expeditioner said, “When I reached my 36er final library, I was having a medical emergency. The staff called 911 and I was transported to [local hospital]. I made sure I got my stamp before they made the call!”

## Expeditions in a Nutshell

Here are some takeaways from our two Expeditions.

- It's a lot of work, but it can pay off 100-fold tangibly and intangibly.
- Exciting graphics make all the difference.
- Add-ons are unlimited (store, games, extra challenges).
- Eager Expeditioners invest and with encouragement become creators (we had a Made By You section on our website).
- The value grows after the Expedition is over (the stories keep coming!).

Think you might want to do an Expedition? Here are some tips:

- Start nine to twelve months in advance.
- Spend the money and hire an artist. The graphics carry it.
- Offer a gold library card for the final reward.
- Assist legislators in Expeditioning to their libraries.
- Plan on having a party!

Staff rose to the challenge. The director of our tiniest library sang a composed-on-the-spot song for Expedition families that included the children's names. Other libraries offered young Expeditioners snacks or stuffed travel companions.

Workers were sometimes run ragged by the hundreds of excited Expeditioners, yet also loved their enthusiasm. Said one staff member, "Seeing so MUCH LOVE for all libraries was fantastic and heartwarming." Another observed, "This program was like having visiting carolers—a bright spot in our day." Others

reported visitors who returned to make donations because they were so impressed with the children's programming.

Library directors saw other benefits. Anita S. Wilson, director of Petersburg Public Library, said, "We had a huge boost in visitors (and statistics). Many folks pleasantly surprised at our wonderful space. The comments and publicity also improved the opinions of town officials and gave more credence to the importance and viability of having a library."

When the Expedition officially concluded on July 31, 918 people had earned a gold or—for second-time 36ers—platinum card. Pleased (and tired) as we were with the Expedition's success, we weren't done.

## Celebrate!

After the 2018 Expedition ended, participants wanted a celebration. We held one nine months later, and three hundred people came. In 2023, more than six hundred legislators, local officials, library lovers, and Expeditioners of all ages came to our September Library Love Fest.

We had music and food, prizes and games, and the rain held off! Each library had a table so party-goers could do a mini-Expedition and reconnect with the staff of their favorite libraries. We leveraged the opportunity for library advocacy—a library value calculator showed families how much libraries save them, and staff from our state library association gathered emails for an advocacy list and discussed libraries' role in freedom of information. Legislators and other elected officials took in the crowds of library supporters and posed for photos. Everyone seems to have a wonderful time. One staff member later reported, "We had folks come in the next day and just rave about how much fun they had at the party!"

## Conclusions

Both Library Expeditions have visibly and enduringly demonstrated how beloved and valued our UHLS libraries are. When an initiative sparks tens of thousands of library visits, creates new library advocates, captures stakeholder attention, delights people of all ages, and reinforces the central role of libraries in their communities, that's a win! &