

Making It Happen: A Small Town Builds Its Own Library

By Kimberly S. Blanchard

A TOWN OF 12,500 RAISES MORE THAN \$1.9 MILLION IN PRIVATE DONATIONS TO TURN AN ABANDONED CHURCH INTO A LIBRARY

Budget crunch forces drastic cutbacks in library services." "Library trustees battle for municipal tax dollars." "Federal and state support for public libraries at all-time low." "Universities drop MLS programs." How many times in recent years have you shaken your head in resignation at headlines like these?

Who would have guessed, in the dour 1990s, that a small town of 12,500 people would undertake and successfully complete a private campaign to raise over \$1.9 million and build the first new public library chartered in New York State in over 50 years?

From its conception in 1986, the Town of Pelham Public Library took almost 10 years to complete. During that time, a dedicated board overcame significant obstacles. The reward was a facility that many of us would be proud to call our hometown library.

Library as concept

The Town of Pelham is a small suburban commuter town situated in Westchester County, just north of the New York City border. Nearly all municipal services are provided by the two villages located within the town. For that reason, the town's annual budget is tiny: just around \$2 million or about \$160 per capita.

The town of Pelham had never created, and arguably couldn't afford, a public library. Eighty years ago, one of the villages located within the town—confusingly named the Village of Pelham—chartered a small public library for its citizens. The little library, operated out of a 1,150-square-foot basement area in one of the local elementary schools,

boasted some of the highest per capita circulation figures in the county. Its budget, hours, space, and staffing, however, were severely constrained and library services beyond simple book lending practically nonexistent.

Meanwhile, residents of the town's other village, Pelham Manor, had no public library at all and were required to pay for a countywide card to obtain library services.

Over the past 30 or 40 years, at one time or another, resi-

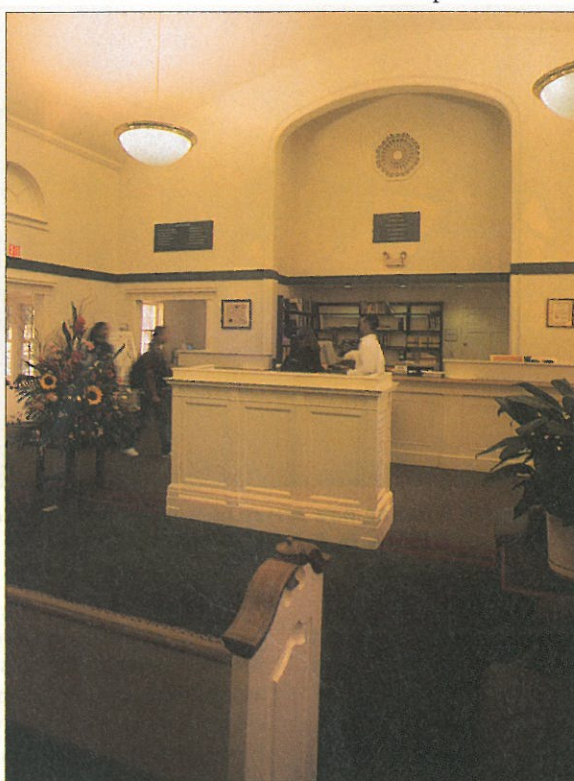
dents of both villages talked about establishing a townwide public library, but these early efforts never got past the talking stage. The obstacles were enormous; even if a means could be found to raise the necessary capital, the task of finding a site for a library was daunting. Pelham is a mature suburb, and the few undeveloped open areas were jealously protected.

Around 1986, talk of a new library began again in earnest. The local chapter of the Junior League took on the project, and Lorri Gorman agreed to spearhead it. Gorman assembled a small group of interested volunteers and with them took a novel proposal to the town council: The volunteers would agree to locate a site, raise all the money to purchase the site, build a library, equip it, and deliver it turnkey as a gift to the town. In return, the town would agree to support and maintain the library as a public library thereafter.

With a deal like this, how could even a financially strapped town refuse?

The council agreed, and two new corporations were formed. The town chartered the Town of Pelham Public Library, a somewhat novel creature in that this library as yet had no assets, no budget, and no staff. Gorman's group incorporated itself as Friends of the Town of Pelham Public Library, Inc., also possibly unique in the sense that the Friends purpose was to build the library that it would eventually become friends with!

The Friends identified several possible sites for the library but none proved workable until one day in 1989 when Victor Henningsen, chair of the Friends, received a call from a realtor representing members of a local church. The realtor



The Pelham library's adapted interior maintains the integrity of the original building.

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recounted the congregation's decision to dissolve and asked, "Would the Friends be interested in purchasing the church property?"

The (former) First Church of Christ, Scientist owned a lovely brick building on a prime corner lot in Pelham. The site was at the crossroads of the two villages, directly across from Pelham's combined middle- and high-school complex. Nearly one acre of property afforded ample room for a modest extension of the church building while retaining a park-like lawn facing the school. The opportunity to acquire this site for the library was a once-in-a-lifetime windfall, and the fact that the site was ideal in every respect certainly explains much of the project's success.

Library as fundraising campaign

The Friends had raised enough seed money from core board members to make a down payment on the church property in April of 1990, and to commit to a two-year mortgage for the balance. Fundraising then began in earnest.

How does a Friends group of about 20 volunteers with no paid staff and no library to show off to the community go about raising over \$1.9 million in a commuter town with fewer than 5,000 households? Even very successful local fundraising events had never netted much more than \$60,000. A door-to-door appeal might raise another \$50,000, if nearly everyone chipped in.

Fortunately, Pelham had two qualities necessary to mount a campaign of this magnitude. First, within its diverse population were a significant number of well-off households, each of which might afford a gift in the \$1,000–\$15,000 range if approached sympathetically. Even more important, Pelham residents had no inclination to take the existence of a public library for granted. Lacking any library at all, Pelhamites from all income levels and all backgrounds rose to the occasion. Their spirit was summed up in the library campaign's bumper sticker: "We're Making It Happen."

The Friends kicked off its fundraising campaign by garnering over \$500,000 in seed money from a few generous individuals and corporations. The church mortgage was repaid in full by April of 1992.

Beginning in 1990 and accelerating through the next two years, over 50 open house receptions were held in the homes of local volunteers and supporters, targeting gifts in the \$1,000–\$15,000 range. These receptions were informal neighborhood-oriented affairs, typically scheduled on Sunday afternoons. Friends board members presented drawings of the new library and entertained questions.

This long-term private reception format was a gamble that

paid off. The key to its success lay in the fact that guests were being invited to the homes of neighbors they already knew, not to a faceless benefit or presentation. The format encouraged a certain amount of healthy competition and "peer pressure," especially since the hosts were generally known to have committed both time and a generous amount of money to the library campaign. Guests were never asked to make donations during the course of the reception. Follow-up was made discreetly and privately by Friends members and hosts, generally someone who knew the guest well.

The Friends also made an all-out effort during this period to increase community awareness of the library plans and to demonstrate what the new library could become. The former church site was transformed on numerous occasions into a stage for local musicians, artists, and storytellers. The nearby New Rochelle Hospital Medical Center converted the site of the library-to-be into a magical exhibition celebrating its

centennial. And every summer, rain or shine, the Friends hosted an old-fashioned "summer social" at the site, including a 5K road race, games and storytelling for the children and prodigious quantities of lemonade and cookies.

Having passed the \$1 million mark, the Friends embarked upon an across-the-board, no-holds-barred effort to reach every household in Pelham. Board member Marilyn Parfet recruited over 175 volunteers to stage a one-day door-to-door

solicitation on April 30, 1994. This "Community Campaign Challenge" exceeded even Parfet's ambitious goal of \$50,000, eventually raising over \$70,000. That success was attributable largely to the almost military organization of the effort. Advance publicity was so comprehensive that virtually no household in Pelham was caught unawares by the appearance of a balloon-toting "Friend" at the door; in fact, several residents called campaign headquarters that morning to "complain" that no one had yet appeared to collect their donations! By 4 p.m. that day every home and apartment in Pelham had been canvassed.

The breadth of the support was overwhelming, with average donations of about \$40 per household. The Pelham Police and Fire Departments sponsored a golf outing to benefit the library, and the Pelham Historical Society launched a special fundraising drive to fund the town historian's office at the library. The donor list swelled to over 1,800 names.

The second part of the broad-based outreach took place Nov. 19, 1994, when a benefit billed "A Novel Night in November" raised over \$100,000 from an attendance of over 700 patrons. The format of this event, credited with its unprecedented success, included 40 private dinners hosted



A converted church building now serves as a new state-of-the-art public library in Pelham, New York.

throughout the town at which 12–40 guests were “invited” by means of a lottery. Invitations went to every household in Pelham, and responders were invited to rank their dinner party selections in order of preference.

Each dinner was organized around a theme from a well-known novel. The homes were elaborately decorated with props appropriate to the novel, and volunteer “actors” dressed up as characters from the book. Guests were invited to appear in “novel” attire appropriate to the party’s theme.

By this time, the Friends treasury had passed \$1.5 million, with donations still coming in. The Friends sold personalized engraved bricks for the library’s sidewalk in a very successful and oversubscribed “Family Walk of Readers” mailing. Even before the campaign reached its monetary goal, construction at the site had already commenced.

Library as edifice

Plans and drawings for Pelham’s new library were being developed continuously over the years following the purchase of the church site in 1990. The Friends, an all-volunteer organization, hired the New Haven architectural firm of Felix Drury to develop and carry through the plans and drawings. RBI Construction Inc. of Scarsdale was hired as the general contractor and VanNostrand Vascotto Associates coordinated the project as construction manager. The volunteer board included two architects, Sera Reycraft and John Brice, who brought both professional expertise and community insight to the design and construction phases of the project.

Perhaps the most notable technical feature of the new Town of Pelham Public Library is the extent to which its design leverages its small size into an advantage. By virtue of being new, the design leapfrogs ahead of much larger libraries in terms of its accessibility and reference capabilities. Built for the twenty-first century, the library features semi-enclosed work spaces for up to eight networked multimedia computer terminals as well as several additional librarian and/or patron computers linked through the state’s system network to services nationwide.

Pelham’s new library makes excellent use of the best design features of the former church. The tall demilune windows of the original brick structure have been reglazed and refinished; where the addition formed a party wall with the existing structure, skylights have been installed in the cantilevered roof over each of these windows to mimic the original natural lighting of the broad, open main reading room. A half-round window gracing the former front door is readapted as the visual focus of the children’s room and story hour area, newly enclosed in glass and featuring carpeted steps for gatherings of small listeners.

The color scheme consists of teal green and red and is reflected throughout the interior. Comfortable, durable furniture was chosen to coordinate with custom millwork that echos the beautiful carpentry of the former church.

An addition incorporates the stack room, seating areas, an exhibition area and one new entry, with a book deposit, to the main circulation desk. Far from being an eyesore added without integration to a preexisting design, the library’s handicap access ramp to the new entry actually enhances the appearance of the raised design. State-of-the-art lighting, heat and air conditioning, telephone, and building systems

make the new library virtually maintenance free.

As if by magic, promptly at 9:30 a.m. the morning of Sept. 16, 1995, over 2,000 people had assembled themselves along a thin blue line, painted the previous night down Pelham’s main street, to mark the mile-long route between the former village library and the new town library. Billed as “Hands Across Pelham,” the line had been organized with the participation of over 30 local volunteer organizations whose common goal was to pass along the library charter from the village to the town library, a journey that evoked both the passing of an 80-year tradition and the arrival of a dream almost 10 years in the making.

The charter having been successfully passed, Pelham gathered at the new library for the ribbon-cutting ceremonies. On hand were Pelham’s elected representatives from Washington and Albany as well as friends from the State Education Department and the Westchester Library System. And with history in the making, Senator Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island—a direct descendant of Pelham’s founding family—came to congratulate his “hometown.”

They made it happen

On Sept. 16 Pelham’s familiar bumper sticker (“We’re Making It Happen”) was replaced. The new bumper sticker stated simply: “We Made It Happen.” At the end of 1995, having exceeded by \$200,000 their original fundraising goal of \$1.7 million, the Friends began to assume the mantle of an “ordinary” Friends of the Library organization, applying its funds and efforts toward expanding the book collection of the now well-used new library.

The entire project of conceiving and bringing a new library to Pelham had been carried out by local volunteers. Volunteers ran all aspects of the project, from accounting to fundraising to design. The Friends found that the key to recruiting and retaining valuable volunteers consisted in finding people who are enthusiastic library advocates and who are willing to work long hours over many years for no pay.

Although monetary support from the board was considered an important symbol of a common resolve, no board member was chosen on monetary grounds to serve as a figurehead. Instead, all members were expected to, and did, contribute substantial time and efforts to the various work that needed to be done.

What didn’t work

So far this story has recounted the Friends’ many successes. Of course, in the process of a 10-year fundraising and building campaign, there were disappointments and pitfalls.

Notwithstanding the generous contributions to the library, no inference should be made that Pelham is a town of uniformly well-off taxpayers. The town’s demographics are extremely diverse, and local government is under constant pressure to keep expenditures to a minimum. In the early stages of Pelham’s campaign, some residents objected to the plan for a townwide library on the ground that it would increase local property taxes. The Friends attempted, successfully for the most part, to demonstrate that the added tax burden would be small. Since the capital costs of the new library would be paid for solely out of private donations, the town’s acquisition of the library would involve no public expenditure. The town’s annual cost for operating the

new library was estimated at about \$175,000 (in 1993), or only about \$45 per household, not much more than the cost of an all-county library card for residents of communities lacking their own library.

In the end, the answer to those skeptical of cost is to convince the great majority of taxpayers that library services are worth paying for. Library advocacy must be a continual process, not a one-shot media blitz. The Pelham Friends believe that library advocacy carries the biggest punch when it originates from within the community, rather from outside advocates or other organizations. Find your friends close to home and let them loose.

Another disappointment visited on the Friends' fundraising plans was the lack of support received from all but a very few charitable foundations. The sobering truth of the matter is that libraries in general are not hot-button issues for most foundations today, which tend to concentrate their charitable and educational giving into social services or high-prestige university giving.

The third disappointment of the Friends' campaign was in dealing with state government officials charged with making grants for library construction. Each year, like all 50 states, New York receives a small grant from Washington to be used for public library construction (the Title II LSCA program). New York had adopted guidelines for allocating this money among libraries statewide based on the general policy of enhancing access to library services in unserved or underserved areas and based on project size and type. However,

when Pelham first made application for a grant, the Division of Library Development denied it, stating that under its interpretation of the State's guidelines, only currently operating and registered libraries could be awarded a grant. In other words, no "library construction" funds could be used to construct a new library where none existed! After two years of fighting this "Catch-22" battle, with the help of the U.S. Department of Education, Pelham ultimately persuaded the DLD to change its guidelines.

The state was also particularly ill-equipped to deal with a library not established "in the regular way" (i.e., by the application of municipal funds). Countless obstacles relating to the Friends' unique plan had to be overcome, ranging from the state's insistence that tax be paid on the mortgage recorded by the Friends' lender (notwithstanding that the library was to be given to a municipal entity exempt from the tax), to its confusion over who to look to for required "matching funds" (usually pledged by a municipal agency or operating library). The Pelham Friends had to blaze a new trail through a wilderness of issues never before encountered in the history of public libraries.

Yet the trail has, at last, been blazed and well marked, allowing others to follow in the Friends' footsteps. By demonstrating what is possible, the Friends hope that their efforts will help library advocates across the country exercise a greater role in the creation, funding, and support of that most cherished of public institutions, the local public library. ♦

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