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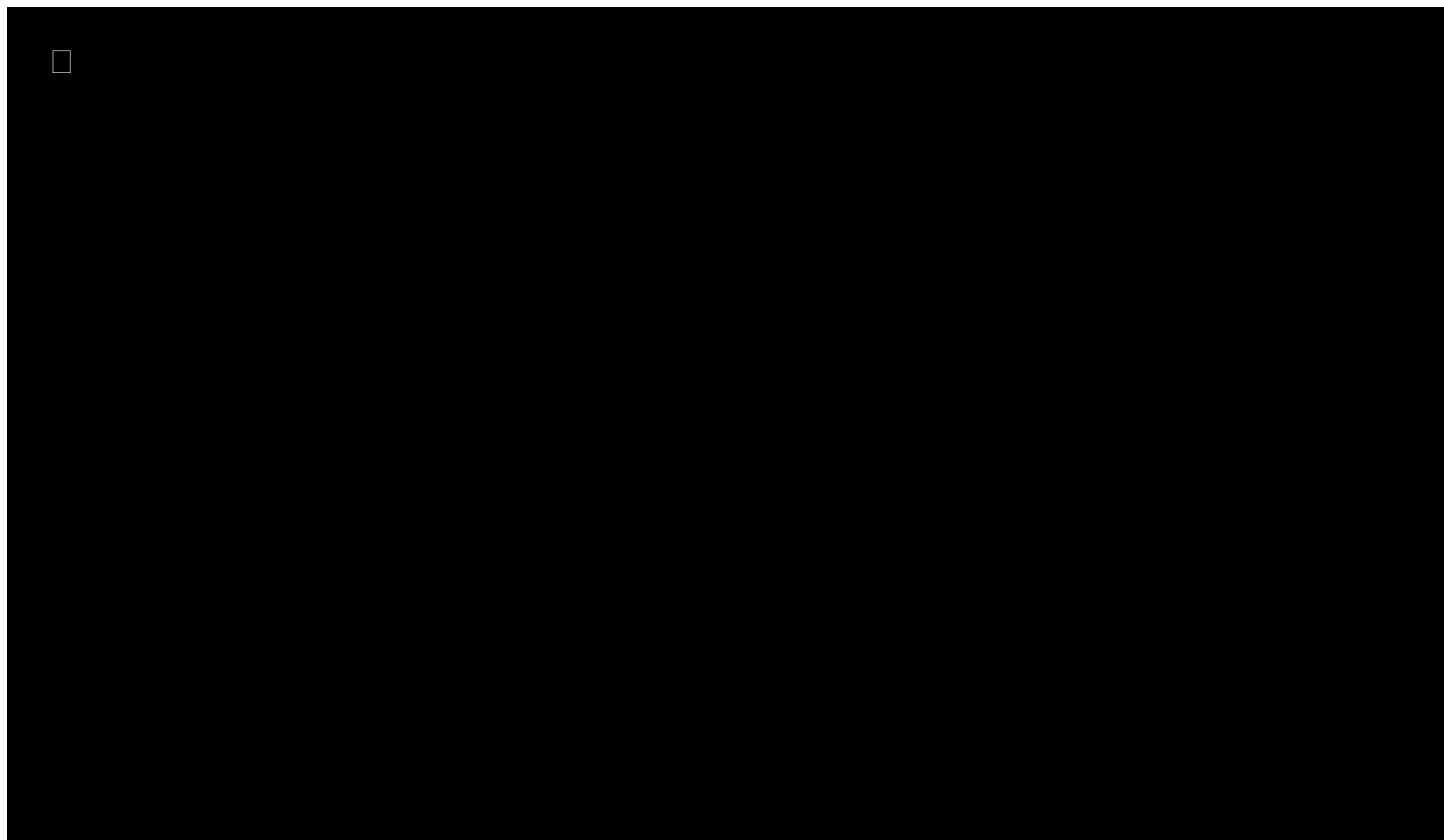


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Ginnie Graham: Friends of the Library celebrates 60 years

By Ginnie Graham News Columnist Oct 11, 2017 Updated 7 hrs ago ☐ 0





Karen McCullough of Tulsa reorganizes books in the Tulsa Central Library. The 50-year-old building was re-opened last year after a \$55 million renovation. IAN MAULE/Tulsa World file

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Friends of the Library Week Celebration

11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Monday at the Central Library, 400 Civic Center

Speakers include a proclamation by Mayor G.T. Bynum and remarks from Library CEO Kim Johnson and Friends of the Library president Debora Riggs Grillot. State Sen. Dave Rader will give a guest review of "Hillbilly Elegy" by J.D. Vance as part of the Books Sandwiched In series.



When the Tulsa Friends of the Library formed in 1957, it pledged to work for a new Central Library and expanded services through \$1 yearly memberships for adults and 25 cents for children.

The supporting nonprofit grew from a need for an organized, broad base of like-minded supporters to advocate for more space and resources.

"It's only \$10 a year to join now," said president Debora Riggs Grillot. "Everything we do is free to the public, and we have a lot of programs we sponsor. That's quite a bang for the buck. We're efficient with what we do."

The nonprofit operates independently from the Tulsa City-County

Library but with the mission to support the system. While there are five other Friends of the Library groups benefiting individual branches, the original one covering all county libraries is celebrating its 60th year.

An event at 11:30 a.m. Monday at Central Library, 400 Civic Center, will include a proclamation by Mayor G.T. Bynum and a review of “Hillbilly Elegy” by J.D. Vance given by state Sen. Dave Rader as part of the Books Sandwiched In series. It corresponds with National Friends of the Libraries Week.

“I hope observing National Friends of Libraries Week will reinforce how important it is for Tulsans to support their network of libraries, whether they do it directly by becoming an official Friend of Library or by simply volunteering at one of the 24 local branches,” Grillot said. “We have a fantastic metropolitan system with Central as its crown jewel.”

Meeting needs: Tulsa’s original library opened in 1913 in two rooms in the basement of the old courthouse when the city had about 20,000 residents. On the first day, 75 people borrowed books from a 1,100-volume collection.

Two years later, a Carnegie Library opened at Third Street and Cheyenne Avenue to serve a population of about 35,000 people. But Tulsa rapidly changed as oil was discovered and manufacturing ramped up development.

By 1950, the census counted 182,740 Tulsa residents, which jumped by 43 percent within a decade to 261,685 people.

The library wasn’t big enough anymore, and the city was at an impasse on what to do about it.

A group of 22 people met in April 1957 to discuss the possibility of forming a Friends of the Library, which had been done in other metropolitan areas. Lillian Norberg, who later became known as

the “First Lady of Oklahoma Libraries,” became the temporary chairwoman of the grassroots group.

The notion got a boost when Leon Harris, a Dallas clothing store executive, left a \$100 check after speaking to a Tulsa citizens advisory subcommittee that had been investigating library options. Harris founded the Dallas Friends of the Libraries and urged Tulsans to do the same thing.

The first meeting of the Tulsa Friends was on May 16, 1957, with Dr. Waldo Stephens, an oilman and patron of the Oklahoma City Friends of the Libraries, telling them: “A modern, active library can add the cultural balance Tulsa needs,” stated a Tulsa World story.

That night, 105 people attended, and 78 of them paid the \$1 dues.

“So the group started with \$178,” Grillot said.

The first president was M. Darwin Kirk, with Norberg continuing as vice president, though she eventually served as president and become instrumental in establishing Friends groups throughout the state.



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Those early years included heavy, and at times emotional, debate on the location of a library. Dr. Frederick Wezeman told the Friends group in 1958 that moving the Central Library to the burgeoning Civic Center would be “disastrous.”

Eventually, the Tulsa Friends group helped push through the bond to build a new Central Library at its current location, with its architecture attracting international attention. The 50-year-old building was re-opened last year after a \$55 million renovation.

Good friends: Six decades since being founded, the Tulsa Friends has more than 450 members, who contributed 2,036 volunteer hours last year. More than \$1 million has been given to the library through the years, Grillot said.

The group sponsors programs now considered Tulsa traditions: Books Sandwiched In is in its 50th year, the Adult Creative Writing Contest is in its 40th and Travels with Tulsans has been going for 37 years.

The nonprofit’s budget of \$21,290 also supports scholarships for library employees seeking more education. While memberships are \$10, many give at higher levels and bequeath gifts in estates.

Grillot opens meetings with a quote about libraries, and chose one from Carl Sagan earlier this month: “I think the health of our civilization, the depth of our awareness about the underpinnings of our culture and our concern for the future can all be tested by

how well we support our libraries.”

Grillot added: “I see the Friends groups across the country as partners, advocates and guardians of libraries in the 21st century.”

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