

Organizing a Sherlockian Book Drive

from Chuck Kovacic of The Curious Collectors of Baker Street.

We all remember the first time we read the tales of the great detective, Sherlock Holmes. That experience should be one that is passed on to each new generation. Sadly, many of our public schools and local library systems face budget and acquisition restrictions. Many Sherlockian societies have responded by purchasing volumes for donation.

Negotiating bureaucracy

- For a small project, adopt your local school or public library
- For a system-wide donation, contact your school board representative
 - Ask for the "donations" or "library" department
 - Be more specific than a "general book purchase fund"
 - Teachers or community activists in your organization may provide contacts

Our Experience

The Curious Collectors of Baker Street (CCOBS) approached the Los Angeles Unified School district (LAUSD). We decided to donate new, hardbound editions of The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes to their 87 middle and senior high school libraries. The volumes would be sent to the LAUSD book storage facility and then, as requests were made, distributed to the various schools. Since numerous controversies surround school reading materials, there was noticeable relief when our titles were on their "approved" reading list. Each book then had a custom bookplate announcing the CCOBS as the donor. This was pasted on the inside cover by the district staff who offered to use either their own design or one that we submitted.

The book drive was announced at our January meeting with the intent that we would obtain the necessary copies by that fall. We offered various prizes and awards to those in our ranks who participated and had a few who wrote out checks at that gathering. It's important that each donation be acknowledged with a receipt as it makes a handy write-off the following tax season.

Your challenge may quickly broaden beyond your expectation. It's wise to remember, keep the goal simple. If your membership feels that things are beyond their control and that your stated agenda will not be met in a timely fashion, your participation level will drop accordingly.

Corporate Partners and publicity

We had determined that we wanted to donate "new" hardbound copies, all of the same title. We contacted a local bookstore, part of a national chain, and discovered that The Adventures was in stock and at a discount price. When we mentioned that we were interested in a large purchase (twenty or more) the price dropped another 15 percent. When we mentioned that the volumes were part of a donation program, the store offered an additional discount and arranged for the volumes to be shipped directly to the LAUSD warehouse free of charge. What could be easier?

Two of our members worked for large corporations that funded various community projects. Bank of America offered to match the number of books that we purchased. In these days of corporate philanthropy, our humble community outreach project hit home. In addition, our project merited attention in several local newspapers. In the end, we donated over 200 volumes. Now, if all of this can be achieved in a large urban market such as Los Angeles, imagine the effectiveness that you'll have within a smaller community.

Recognition

At our November gala, the Gasfitters' Ball, a LAUSD representative presented us a formal letter of recognition acknowledging our effort. Several students and their teachers also wrote notes of thanks. The drive was an unqualified success! We waited another year before our next drive and began focusing on the smaller suburban school districts. We also realized that books do wear out. So, every third year we offer a similar donation to the same districts. Once the groundwork has been put in place, your effort can focus on the fundraising aspect.

Success Factors

Several factors contributed to our success: good planning, connected volunteers and a solid school contact. The books themselves were not all that expensive, under \$10. This allowed any of our members to participate as much as or as little as their budgets would allow. The key was to set a well-defined goal, at an affordable price, with a reasonable deadline; in this case, eight months.

What about used books?

Many of our members expressed interest in donating used copies from their collections. We encouraged Sherlockians to take used volumes and paperbacks to their local community libraries. These donations generate needed funds for both operating and acquisition expenses when sold at library book sales.

On the other hand, I suggest that you discuss the matter of a donation of a specific volume directly with the branch librarian. For this purpose *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, edited by Leslie S. Klinger, is a welcome offering.

Here in Los Angeles, The Los Angeles Times coordinates yearly book drives with Scholastic, which matches each volume donated. Borders bookstores, Goodwill and the Salvation Army also have ongoing programs. Keep in mind that your local historical society or community shelter might also be eager to participate. Contact their local representative for specifics.

Books for your adopted library: it's more than Holmes

I like to tell librarians that Sherlockians are interested in so much more than just a good "mystery." The Canon also covers such areas as art, architecture, royalty, botany and technology, all seen through the lens of the Victorian age. Such related writings also make suitable volumes for donation. These offerings allow a scion society to continue expanding its book drive efforts after the initial donation has been made. An ongoing relationship can thus be maintained.

Exhibits and Events: education never ends

It's not just students that benefit from our involvement. One local librarian professed that they hadn't realized that Conan Doyle wrote the original stories! I assured them that he had. An invitation to exhibit Sherlockian items for their main display case resulted and generated additional interest.

Many scions discuss the possibility of study guides to accompany donated texts. Although this could be a desirable goal, any teacher will inform you that they are already so stressed from their daily course instruction and preparation for endless state qualification exams that time simply doesn't exist to introduce new information. Under such circumstances any document becomes entangled in competing social and scholarly agendas. Please see our page on lesson plans for further detail.

In the absence of an established curriculum, an alternative is to offer a costumed interpreter to visit the classroom. Many of your members may have theatrical interests and the necessary costuming. Our scion president made several appearances resplendent in deerstalker and cape when meeting with library officials. This is the sort of photo-op that put public relation departments in overdrive.

Another approach is to sponsor a short story "mystery" contest with books as prizes. For maximum impact, use either the birthday of Holmes (January 6) or Doyle (May 22) as a focal point. The fall and its associations with Halloween (think "the hound" and "mystery" in general) provide other dates to frame your program.

More publicity

When coordinating with a library, offer to create posters announcing your program and have plenty of flyers to distribute.

Smaller media markets like community newspapers, radio and TV stations are especially on the lookout for stories to offer their readers. Be certain to have a brief "press release" of your program (no more than two paragraphs, typed, double spaced) for distribution. Your efforts should be carefully crafted and presented with a degree of professionalism. Don't forget that readers and listeners are also potential scion members! So, be certain to leave plenty of contact numbers along with a calendar of your scion events.

The overall demeanor should remain professional, underlined with an aspect of fun. Keep a diary of all contacts and be generous in offering to assist at other book drive events. Local television stations frequently highlight community activities. In a similar fashion, radio stations, particularly those associated with colleges and universities, seek guests for on-air interviews. Begin by contacting the programming department and ask for "community affairs." I have never found it necessary to pay for such publicity. After all, who wouldn't want an appearance by the World's Greatest Detective to unravel the "mystery of the missing books"?
