

# trustee tale

## Newsletter for Public Library Trustees

### The Responsibility of Being a Fan

By Greta Thompson, OWIS

Like most people in the world in mid-August I was watching the Olympics whenever I could. Like most people in the world, but especially in Wisconsin, on the evening of Wednesday, August 18 I was elated, downcast, and ultimately awestruck by Paul Hamm's performance in the all-around men's gymnastics competition. How could he (and the others) be so strong and so skilled? How could he (and the others) be so awful? How could he come back in two spectacular performances to win the gold?

One of the sportscasters afterward asked him about his dismal performance on the vault. "I thought I'd lost any chance for a medal," he said. Understandably. He'd dropped from first to 12th place. After the parallel bars, he was back up to 4th place, but almost every individual in the competition was scoring 9.7+. The bronze, maybe, the silver, if he was really lucky, but the gold? It would be a stretch, the announcer said, which in sports talk usually means, "Forget it."

"I didn't believe it," Hamm said after his final event, and if you were watching, you saw him say "No!" and then "No!" again as his eyes sought the scoreboard, which told him, "Yes!"

"What did you learn from your experience here?" the announcer asked him.

"What they always tell you," he said. "Don't ever give up."

I admit, I'm one of those people who are moved to tears by excellence in any field, not just the athletic; but I have an especially tight relationship with sports for someone who is essentially a couch potato in a Just Do It culture.

It's because sports provides me with a community, I think. If you live in Wisconsin and are a Packer fan, you understand allusions to the frozen tundra and cheeseheads, you think of Brett and Ahman as personal friends whose triumphs and hardships are like your own, and you find a silver lining in every loss. What's more, you know beyond any doubt that they'll always be there for you. Remember, "the Pack will be back." Remember Eric Heiden, Dan Janssen, Bonnie Blair. Remember the American soccer teams, men's and women's. And Eddie the Eagle Edwards, the British ski jumper at the 1988 Olympics who always placed last.

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# The “I’s” of Communication with Municipal Officials

By Marcia Sarnowski

Preparing for a recent library system workshop on the topic of marketing and libraries, I found in several sources the now familiar “Four P’s” of marketing: product, place, promotion, and price. This alliterative list is easy to remember and makes an interesting springboard for discussion. Inspired by this idea, I developed a list of “I words” to keep in mind when you are communicating with municipal officials, the elected or appointed representatives who have a critical impact on the success of your library.

**Identify:** make sure the library staff and trustees are aware of the names, areas represented, and contact information of those who serve on the community’s governing body. Consider creating an easy-to-find display in the library featuring local information, including a list of the current elected officials and printed copies of the minutes of municipal meetings. Most library web sites include a link to their city’s or county’s web page; a display can help to promote this feature, and provide immediate access to local government information for residents and visitors to the community.

**Invite:** welcome the council members to the library, especially newly elected representatives. Consider arranging a “field trip” for the council members, to the library, to take place after a council meeting with a short agenda. If this occurs outside the library’s regular hours, so much the better – you can do a brief tour, and point out new resources, and demonstrate the library’s automated system – show them how this system makes things easier for them and for all users – searching the catalog from

home, reserving their own materials, using Badgerlink. If the council has many members, and meetings routinely last till late in the evening, invite individual committees to come to the library, after a committee meeting. Officials will be more inclined to support the library if they know something about it, even if they are not regular users.

**Inform:** Go to at least one council meeting during the year besides the budget request session. During the public comment time at the meeting, offer a brief report of what’s happening at the library. Compare library use and program attendance to the number of attendees at school sports events, or whatever is popular in the community. Thank the council for their support of the library

**Inquire:** ask the council members which issues and concerns are major for them right now, as individual citizens and as community representatives. Ask them to think ahead through the next five years – will the issues be the same? Will there be new ones? Ask how the library can help to address those issues. Listen to their responses.

**Infiltrate:** this is an additional “i” contributed by a trustee attending the workshop. She suggested that trustees could run for local offices, or serve on municipal committees – this would give them a networking connection to the governing body, and could facilitate communication and collaboration opportunities for the library.

**Imagine** what it would be like to be a member of the council, considering all the important issues of the community. What kind of information and assistance would help you to create a better future for the citizens you represent? Now imagine how the library’s materials, programs, and services could respond to community needs. Imagine how the library might need to change, to be more responsive to those needs. Now, imagine the opportunities you have to make the case for the library as a valuable community resource, and a valued community partner.



## Review of *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*

by Robert Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein. Simon & Schuster, 2003.

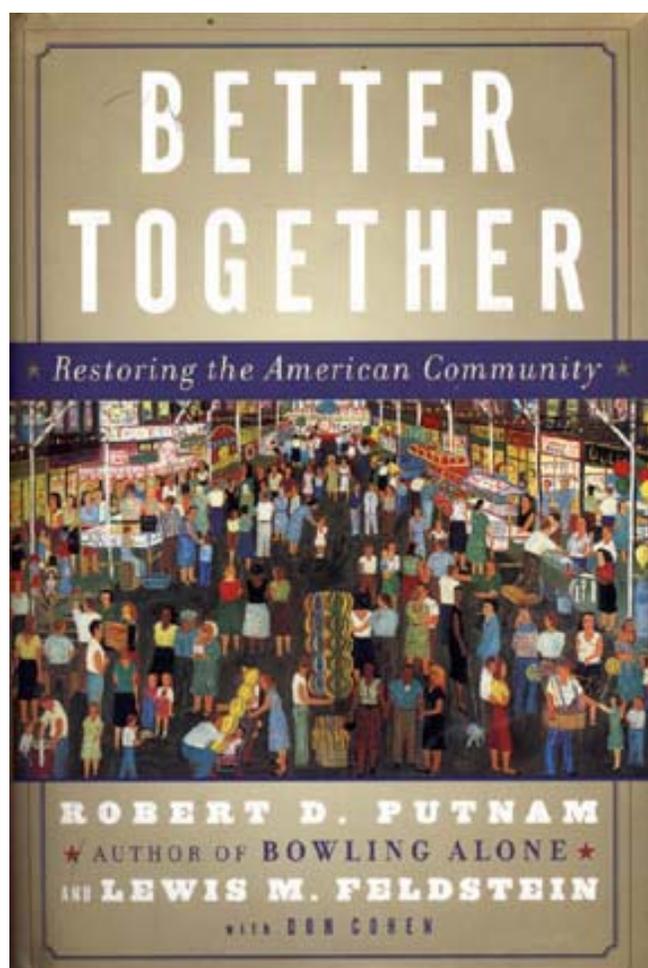
There are all kinds of reasons to read *Better Together*; including the fact that it's inspiring and hopeful, and who doesn't want to read a book like that? It's also easy to read since it's a collection of a dozen true stories about people coming together to do something for their community. Some of those communities are cities and towns; others are a segment of the community, e.g., a church or a union.

All of the stories support the fact that "Society as a whole benefits enormously from the social ties forged by those who choose connective strategies in pursuit of their particular goals" (p. 269, quoting Putnam's earlier book, *Bowling Alone*).

But the primary reason that trustees will want to read the book is chapter 2, "Branch Libraries: The Heartbeat of the Community," the story of what's been happening in Chicago as exemplified in the Near North Branch Library. Just the phrase "the heartbeat of the community" applied to libraries makes one pause and smile and think, "Yes!" Or the "community anchor"—that's another phrase used by the same person, none other than Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley. For someone like me who grew up living in a Chicago suburb when his father was mayor of Chicago, this is proof that anything is possible.

I realize that Chicago is a far different place than Appleton, Oshkosh, Manawa, and Wild Rose, and the scale of the issues and problems that Chicago libraries face is much greater than the scale of our issues. But the kind of issues aren't so different, and the possibilities for the role of libraries aren't so different, and the process for achieving our hopes for libraries isn't at all different.

I'm not going to tell you any more of the story that Putnam and Feldstein tell because you'll want to read it word for word yourselves, but I can't resist one other quotation, one that we need to meditate on: "People may go to the library looking mainly for information, but they find each other there" (p. 49).



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Sports provides me with community, yes, and I have an important role to play. Without the fans who cheer and remember them, where would the athletes and the teams be?

They all face moments when they've screwed up big time. They need us to support and comfort them.

They can't give up, even if they're tired and discouraged. They need us to encourage them.

Sometimes they do something that's really, really cool. They need us to celebrate their good times.

So what has this to do with being a library trustee? Being a fan isn't the only role you play as a library trustee, but it's an important one, maybe the most important one as far as the library director and staff are concerned.

## TRUSTEE SOAPBOX

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