

# Free Bookmobile

## Start-Up & Operations Guide



**Don't let this guide sit around unused! Check out the first few pages to find out how fun and easy it is to give away great books in your community. But if that's not your thing, please pass the guide to someone who might be interested. Eventually it will land in the right hands and make a lot of people very happy.**

# FREE BOOKMOBILE START-UP & OPERATIONS GUIDE

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Note on format: Each chapter ends with a section labeled “HOW WE DID IT”. These passages provide instructional examples by describing the origins and growth of the Free Bookmobile of Sonoma County (California, USA). Elements of our real-world story also appear in the main text whenever they serve to illustrate an important point.

## Chapter One – Why Start a Free Bookmobile?

There are three superb reasons to start a free bookmobile program: to improve local literacy, delight the populace with a (often unexpected) gift, and have lots of fun! Properly organized and executed, a free bookmobile is an enchantment for everyone involved, from the staff and volunteers to the lucky patrons who get to browse and take books home as if they've won a shopping spree.

First let's talk about the educational impact, which is most relevant when you're trying to acquire book donations or raise money for your project. Over past decades, a vast array of initiatives have been deployed to increase reading time and literacy levels among children, especially lower income kids or those from access-challenged neighborhoods. Why? Recent research has confirmed what many of us already intuited: the more books in the home, the better the educational outcomes. Now reading has also been linked to the development of emotional intelligence and greater empathy for others.

Despite all the resources thrown at the problem, success remains elusive, as indicated by our nation's disappointing literacy statistics. Early parental involvement remains the most consistent positive factor in this campaign. Children without that modeling and encouragement at home face a tough grind. They will be pushed and prodded to spend more time attempting what they have already decided they don't like. Perhaps rewards for persistence are dangled.

We feel the whole process needs to be more engaging, more intriguing. Enter the bookmobile, an exceptional experience for kids to explore with their friends. This is extra fun if they get to climb into a fully-enclosed space. There is something about the interior of a unique vehicle that stimulates children's curiosity and imagination. The more customized it is, the more it will draw them in. It's similar to the fascination with a tree clubhouse. The friendly neighborhood bookmobile becomes kids' rolling clubhouse, their special place.

Once they've been inside enough times to really examine how it's built and functions, they'll start coming back to see what's new on the shelves. Then you must keep growing your stock and feature relevant books across a wide range of subjects and difficulty levels. Keep in mind you're not as concerned about the proficient readers who are already self-motivated. They'll always find something of interest on your shelves. Think about what might attract light and non-readers.

Well-illustrated books about dinosaurs, sports or Pokémon characters? Definitely. Early readers about fairies, princesses or horses? Absolutely! You just have to remember to maintain a judgment-free environment regarding individuals' choices. The goal is simply to get a book into their hands, a book they will pick up again later because they want to, not because they feel

pressured. Once the child is convinced of the value of reading you can start suggesting material to increase their vocabulary, comprehension, and so forth.

A huge impact can be made at the toddler and preschool levels. Getting board books and early readers in front of young eyes is a great start, especially if you pair that with parent participation. The old saying “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” surely applies to developing lifelong learners. We had good results visiting parenting classes and toddler programs such as Kindergym. And we had excellent outcomes when visiting preschools for 3 – 5 year-olds.

We started by talking to the kids about who we were and what we did, then engaged them with an interactive story-time, then brought them out to the bookmobile in small groups. Each child chose three high-quality, age-appropriate books to take home and keep forever. Talk about excitement! And by partnering with the school staff, we ensured teachers would continue encouraging their families to make use of those books and seek out more, even if just by visiting the bookmobile again at one of our weekend community-access route stops.

Here’s another massive benefit: providing analog reading experiences with actual printed paper is valuable pushback against the endless use of digital devices. This has become a very serious child development issue in the last decade. Smartphones and gaming devices are now everywhere, constantly and compellingly soliciting kids’ attention. And there is no doubt that full immersion in this lifestyle, which it seems many parents have given up resisting, has a number of negative consequences for these youngsters and their futures. Any healthy activity that eats away at children’s screen time is a good thing.

We hope you will consider serving adults and senior citizens as well. Seniors in particular benefit greatly from this type of home visitation, as many experience mobility challenges and are living on relatively meager fixed incomes. Bookmobiles help them feel included and better connected with a rapidly changing culture. This can lead to higher quality of life, particularly if they choose to read about health, exercise, spirituality, stress relief and positive social engagement. In fact, elders browsing the bookmobile together often generates such social benefits immediately as they discuss their favorites and make recommendations to each other. On top of all that, research has shown that processing written language slows cognitive and memory decline.

And now for icing on the cake: young and middle-aged adults get a real kick out of the free bookmobile concept. We’ve seen it on their faces and heard it from their lips, the delight and amazement of discovering a valuable free service they had no idea existed. With no catch. Adults aren’t used to encountering that. We made sure our free bookmobile was a ‘no questions asked’ opportunity, unless people wanted to talk about it, which they often did. Here are some of the things they said:

*You don't even know how I feel right now. This is magical.*

*I got a book here last year that literally saved my dog's life. Now I call it my dog bible.*

*You guys are like my ice-cream truck.*

*This is a great thing, if not the best thing, to come out of civilization.*

*I love the bookmobile! It makes my heart sing.*

*I got a book last time you were here that I'm teaching my kids Spanish with. We use it all the time.*

*This is the most wonderful place I've been in.*

*Hey mom, every time I'm in here it's like my birthday!*

To state the obvious, basking in this kind of energy is a fabulous way to spend a day. Staff and volunteers thrived on board our bookmobile – it was a human-services dream come true. Our frontline crew experienced little to no burnout even after a decade on the job. The amount and quality of gratitude expressed was like an infinite well of renewal from which to draw.

There is actually a fourth, super cool aspect to a free bookmobile. You are utilizing a resource that has already been manufactured and is just sitting around. Think about it: books spend the vast majority of their existence gathering dust. So this is a terrific way to get value out of something already fully paid for, in terms of energy, materials and labor. Distributing used books is a green activity which encourages patrons to repeat the process, to share their bookmobile treasures with others after they are finished enjoying them.

Books are physically stable and don't need much maintenance. Books can be passed down from older to younger children within a family or given to friends. They gain character as they move through different hands and households. An inscription here, a forgotten bookmark tucked in there, perhaps a dog-eared page containing a favorite passage. Books can lead very long, productive lives and you should facilitate this gift throughout your community.

## **HOW WE DID IT:**

We knew very little of this as we started our project. My personal interest was simply to introduce my two boys, who were six and eight years-old at the time, to the joys of community service. I had begun to understand the importance of service by working for a homeless program in Petaluma, California. The work itself was powerful but I was even more impressed with the

level of commitment to good deeds demonstrated by much of the other staff. These were individuals who, above and beyond their day jobs, invested time and energy helping the less fortunate, often in settings that had nothing to do with homelessness. It was humbling to witness and suggested there was a certain perspective on life leading to such selfless behavior.

I had not been exposed to much of this as a youth. I spent a number of years in the scouts and I'm sure a few of our pursuits had a community improvement angle but I can't remember doing anything truly useful for others. In our troop the activities were mostly a path to learning skills and developing ourselves rather than investing in our neighborhood. I assisted a bit behind the scenes at my father's astronomy research and education nonprofit but that merely felt like obligation. Our family didn't go out to do volunteer work together.

I wanted to start a new tradition. I wanted my children to grow awareness beyond themselves, beyond their family members, beyond their friends. To learn about who was struggling and needed support to make positive changes in their lives. The person-to-person work with the homeless felt good and there was appreciation, a feedback loop for my efforts. I saw people making better choices, making progress. I wanted something similar for my kids, so they too would understand the impact of their efforts. I knew there would be very limited value in asking them to fill food boxes or do other types of labor that did not directly involve the beneficiaries. Children aren't as good at making those implied connections without seeing for themselves.

This led to a rather long period of searching and thinking about the right fit. It was not a simple quest. It turns out there aren't many volunteer opportunities for younger children that will have a significant impact and also generate visceral positive feedback. I talked to a lot of folks working in charitable communities, looking for ideas. Most wanted me to join their work even though it didn't seem quite right for my kids.

As luck would have it, several months later a friend told me about the conversion of an old bookmobile into a camper. All I heard was "bookmobile". I knew instantly we would collect excess books from wherever and drive around and give them away in random parking lots. I had an immediate calm confidence in this idea. I was sure anyone who liked books would be thrilled to unexpectedly encounter this funky homemade library. And I knew it would be a joy to execute even if we didn't get a lot of patrons. It would be fun and unique and make everyone smile.

I suppose it should have been no surprise to later discover the biggest benefit of all would be the relationships our family would grow through this process. We ended up meeting so many kind and generous people who wanted to join us, who wanted to get behind the concept and help it succeed. And who wanted to be our friends!

Being able to turn this venture into my full-time job two years later was another revelation. There were no clear signs our popularity would eventually skyrocket or that one could earn a modest

salary running a non-profit bookmobile. All of this would blossom later and, step by step, I became ever more grateful. Not only had my children witnessed the significance of community involvement but they had been part of a successful original project. They learned you can go from an idea popping into your head to delighting your friends and neighbors to actually making a living with a creative endeavor.

The ingredients? Both inspiration and perspiration.

## Chapter 2 – Surveying the Need in Your Area

Have you heard of a ‘food desert’? This is a region lacking healthful food options. Residents struggle to find fresh fruits and vegetables, unprocessed proteins, or other whole foods. There are also plenty of ‘literacy deserts’. These are places where library access is limited or nonexistent. Or maybe the quality of the library’s inventory is suspect, consisting of mostly older, irrelevant items that are never replaced due to budget issues. Perhaps there aren’t any nearby bookstores or the prices are beyond the reach of the general population.

Being an effective free librarian means prioritizing service to literacy deserts and other access-challenged populations. This doesn’t mean you can’t also visit more affluent areas or randomly pop up in some unexpected place on the map. In fact our program intentionally involved everyone, including those of greater means. But because we wanted to increase our overall impact, we spent most of our time reaching out to people with fewer resources.

So it’s important to survey, drilling down to the neighborhood level if possible. If you’re not yet familiar with the lay of your land, school administrators and county government officials may be able to help with education- and income-level assessments. Citizens already working within charitable clubs, such as Rotary or Kiwanis, will likewise have good information on regional differences in affluence. Start the conversation, then ask for another referral and keep networking outward to improve the quality of your data.

On the educational side, what are the literacy levels in your schools? In what ways are they encouraging reading? What is the quality, era, and relevancy of the books on their shelves? Would today’s children want to go anywhere near this material? Are they offering eager learners reasonable access to more engaging titles?

How about your public library system? How many branches are available and how often are they open? What is the quality of their stock? How often do they obtain new volumes, what does that budget look like and where do the new books come from? Can patrons request transfers from different libraries for pick-up? Will the library consider purchasing a book if requested?

Many libraries are transitioning away from printed books toward digital resources. While digital content may be inexpensive and convenient to distribute, we reject it as a replacement for paper, which has unique feel and utility. One example: sitting with a young child on your lap to share a special big-format picture book as they learn to turn pages, as they learn to use their imagination to animate the characters in their heads. If you agree, be sure to let your library management know your feelings on this.



How about bookstores? If you are lucky enough to have any nearby, how affordable are they to which segments of the population? Is that how new books are coming into your community? Are new books coming in at all? It may take a little sleuthing to answer this question.

Senior citizens of modest financial means are especially at risk of missing out because they may have mobility challenges. How easily are they getting to libraries? Do their apartment complexes have their own lending shelves, and if so, what kind of new material gets into circulation and how often? Are there senior centers nearby with quality books? What are the transportation options for getting there?

The idea is to overlay all this data onto a map of the area you want to serve. You don't have to do this all at once or all ahead of time. As you learn more, add the information to your map. You might even want to mark the locations of Little Free Library lending boxes and restock those as you make your rounds. The more you know about local resources and how the population uses them, the better your decisions will become about where to focus your time.

## **HOW WE DID IT:**

I was not thinking much about who was in need when launching our project. I was thinking THIS IS GONNA BE A BLAST! We popped up in towns near our home and the homeless shelters of my employer. Then we began to appear at special events, which really improved our participation numbers and spread the word that we were available by request.

I did initially research the public library here in Sonoma County, California, assuming they ran a standard lending outreach. They did not, and had not for many years. I was able to track down an archive of old library newsletters detailing their bookmobile routes in the 1970s and 80s. This was helpful in understanding where they thought the needs were at the time. Demographics related to income levels and population densities had certainly changed since then but we did take note of the smaller rural communities between libraries deserving our attention.

If I were to do it all over again, I would engage in a more formal assessment early on. Instead, information came to us more gradually as word of our activities spread and people working with children, the elderly, and other vulnerable populations contacted us to express interest. Only when I committed to the bookmobile full-time did my network grow big enough to consistently provide reliable data on where folks were most challenged for access.

Which is to say I waited too long to become professional about surveying the need. You can easily avoid the same mistake. Just start talking to those who have been providing local human services of any kind and build a contact list from there.

## Chapter 3 – Announcing Your Intentions and Enlisting Help

Spreading the word about your forthcoming effort accomplishes two things. It announces your intentions to the world, which may motivate you and others to follow through. Everyone's watching now, monitoring your progress. Are you doing what you said you would do?

This announcement will also generate interest and offers of assistance, which makes progress much easier. The biggest mistake I made over the entire duration of our program was not enlisting more support with the physical labor of book handling. I ended up with repetitive stress injuries as a result.

You should make the recruitment of a volunteer coordinator a priority. As the project founder or lead, you may be the coordinator for a while but at the very least, keep your eyes peeled for someone who would excel in this role. There are many other tasks you will need to oversee. Delegating volunteer recruitment and management will free up a lot of your time.

Let's presume you will be the coordinator at first. The classic exercise in identifying your network is a good place to start the search for prospective volunteers. Draw a number of small circles on a sheet of paper to represent the different aspects of your life through which you maintain personal connections. One circle will be labeled "family" and should radiate lines outward, like spokes from the hub of a wheel, each terminating in a name of a family member. Then you might have circles labeled "friends" and "work". Maybe you are part of a walking or hiking group and would draw a circle labeled "fitness". Add lines for all the people you know primarily through those activities.

Continue this until you have written the names of everyone you know well enough to ask for their participation. It doesn't yet matter whether you think they would respond well to your request, the idea is only to take a thorough inventory of your network. The circled categories are there to aid your memory so you don't accidentally miss out on a great prospect.

Then you can take a separate sheet of paper and start transferring names of top candidates, those likely to have at least a small degree of interest. If you like, you can organize this new list in categories with headers like "book source" or "muscle power" or "driver" or "builder/crafter". Just be sure to keep things open-ended when making your approach. The objective is to spark their interest and get them involved in any way possible. You could have a friend you think would be terrific at raising a little money but maybe what captures their imagination is the prospect of sorting incoming book donations. Your volunteers will last longer if they truly enjoy what they're doing. Let them choose their own job whenever possible.

Many communities are home to groups eager to hear you out. Service clubs like Rotary, Kiwanis, Active 20–30s and others are always looking for worthwhile endeavors to throw their energies behind. Even if you don't have a personal connection to any of these groups, they may let you come and talk about your plans. Time for a speaker is built into the meeting format of most clubs.

Aim to raise awareness of your worthwhile goals and open the door to participation. Keep in mind these groups also serve a social function for their members and thus might be available to perform a big job together for you on a scheduled day. Even if that doesn't match the pace of what you're doing, there is a chance individual members who hear your pitch will join up as ongoing volunteers. After all, these folks have already self-identified as being civic-minded by joining the club.

Some groups may additionally be willing to contribute modest funding toward your operation. This is more likely if you have a written proposal clearly outlining how those funds would be spent to achieve the goals. Most of these clubs focus their work on a specific geographical area so be prepared to emphasize the relevant anticipated benefits.

You should also search for any organization serving as a hub for volunteerism. It might be a dedicated agency named "Volunteer Center of ..." or it may provide this function within a broader organization, such as the local United Way or Community Action Partnership. They often screen candidates by interest and availability, making recruiting easier. Applicants usually have to complete a multi-step process to register and have thereby demonstrated some persistence. If you are fortunate enough to have a Community Foundation in your region, connect with them as soon as possible to inquire about resources and support.

Consider online matching, such as [Volunteermatch.org](http://Volunteermatch.org). Setting up an account and publicizing your opportunities through these types of sites is probably worthwhile but be aware that the follow-through rate tends to be lower when job browsers are able to send inquiries so easily. Eventually we created our own volunteer application in a fillable PDF format, which saved us time by filtering out candidates who weren't serious enough to complete and return it.

Don't forget to leverage your own social media accounts to call for aid, especially on hyper-local sites like [Nextdoor.com](http://Nextdoor.com). More traditional news outlets might even dedicate a section of their publications to volunteer solicitation or community activism. This worked out well for us, as we scored very productive initial publicity in our regional print newspaper before we had given a single book away.

Many schools have added a hands-on experience requirement to their curriculums in recent years. This could mean individual students need to accrue a number of service hours by the end of their term but it's not uncommon for a whole class or even an entire school to coordinate on a bigger venture. Think book drive! Youth make great ambassadors for book drives because they're

earnest and cute and adults want them to succeed. And the older kids get, the better they become at lifting and carrying things, which is also very helpful in the book business.

Cultivating relationships with any teachers who express extra enthusiasm is a great idea because they may be able to promote your project to new students year after year, providing you with a steady flow of labor.

If your volunteer roster doesn't initially grow as rapidly as you hope, don't worry about it. The ultimate way to advertise these opportunities is to execute the mission. Just start giving away books with the resources you have. If you invest energy and attention into providing a quality experience, the right people will notice and flock to join you. If you serve, they will come.

## **HOW WE DID IT:**

After telling my family about the free bookmobile plan, I came out to all my coworkers. They were both excited and encouraging. Since I already worked for a nonprofit, I even pitched a fiscal agency-type of arrangement to my immediate supervisor and the Executive Director. They found it intriguing but politely declined because the bookmobile wasn't a close enough match with their core mission to be added.

I contacted the Friends of the Petaluma Library. This volunteer group receives donated books from the public and sells them to raise money for the library itself. They let me scoop up everything left over at the end of their next sale. I didn't care that most of these volumes were old and shabby; I was thrilled to have my first big batch of inventory.

This proved fortuitous when I asked the editor of the Good Deeds section of the popular local newspaper to publicize my aspirations. To ensure I wasn't a kook she first requested a picture of me surrounded by books. No problem. She responded by running a big article in the community section of the print edition, complete with a photo of me and my two young sons with big grins on our faces.

The very next day a man who had seen the article donated an old surveyor's trailer to the cause. It was strangely ideal for our purposes: the hacked-off bed of a Chevy Luv compact pickup mounted onto a trailer, with a tall, watertight camper shell and rear barn doors. This rig was easily towed behind our family Suburban.

It still needed a way to display books, however, and the critical breakthrough was securing the assistance of a contractor friend of mine – a lucky personal connection. His specialty was artistic landscaping but he had enough experience with wood and metal to build permanent shelves into the trailer. Flooring and carpet completed the design, making it comfortable for kids to climb

inside to investigate. Rolling library carts for adults to peruse outside the trailer were purchased for us by a senior resources agency after our newspaper article ran.

One of my coworkers connected me with her friend who ran an engine modification shop. He had space for a book donation bin in his lobby and was enthused about the mission. It turned out his daughter was a huge reader and happened to be in the same elementary school class as my older son. We had our first donation site open to the public.

Off and running...

## Chapter 4 – Your Outreach Vehicle and Related Equipment

Now things get really interesting! You must determine how you will bring books to your patrons and what form the browsing will take. The ultimate in efficiency, portability and protection from the elements is the fully enclosed, walk-in style, purpose-built bookmobile. These tend to be expensive, however, and decent used models are scarce. You'll want to evaluate your options.

There are three ways to inject free books of choice into your public. The first way is to stock and restock nodes of access throughout the target regions. Installing and maintaining little free libraries is one example of this method. You will have little to no contact with the recipients because they access their closest node whenever it's most convenient for them. Your job is purely to ensure there is abundant high-quality material available at all times.

This style of program can also be accomplished by partnering with other organizations, such as schools, health centers, human service agencies, community centers or even for-profit businesses. You can set up a bookcase or other suitable structure inside the facility and keep it filled with books appropriate to their clientele. The staff there can facilitate the process and encourage participation.

These libraries are really easy to get started – you just need a little shelving or other display structure. Then you generate publicity and visit regularly to restock. A critical component is the designated on-site book manager. This person checks the display at least once a day and keeps things tidy, organized and inviting. Without this maintenance, bookshelves open to the public quickly become shambolic. Most people won't even approach to investigate if things are a mess, which sends the value of your project plummeting.

The second type of distribution is set up anew at each location along your routes. A common way to do this is with folding tables, erected indoors or out, with a selection of books on display. Modular units pre-filled with specific types of books can make this labor quicker and easier. Milk crates or similar bins will keep things organized as you move them between transport and table.

With a van or truck you might be able to utilize rolling carts instead of tables. These provide a significant efficiency boost as the books remain neatly on display as you move the carts off of and back onto your vehicle. They also boast a higher capacity than tables.

Like the first method, this system doesn't require a specialized bookmobile, and is reasonably compatible with virus-related (e.g. COVID) mitigation techniques. If you want to be extra cautious you simply create larger gaps between your displays. This isn't possible within the confines of an enclosed vehicle, where the only remedy for congestion is fewer people inside at a time.

The second technique allows good flexibility of location. You can offer books anywhere you can fit a couple of tables or carts. No need for an ongoing permission arrangement and space allocation like the first method. You can set up wherever there is foot traffic or you can partner with other groups during their special events or peak busy periods. Think storefronts, health clinic waiting rooms, farmers markets, or neighborhood parks on sunny days.

The main limitation of this scheme is the amount of physical labor involved in the constant set-up and take-down. Which also limits selection. And if you are outdoors, excessive heat or inclement weather can become a real problem. Even if you deploy a little pop-up canopy, wind and rain together will put the books in jeopardy. Outside browsing is possible but depends on a reasonable climate.

The third method involves going all the way with a genuine bookmobile and is highly recommended. Once you are fully loaded for the day, the labor is minimal because you simply let people in to enjoy what you have already neatly organized on the shelves. When you're finished at one location, you shut the door and drive to the next, increasing the range and duration of your service. Interior lighting lets you operate at night. And by being fully enclosed, your mobile library can keep on giving no matter the weather.

Search eBay Motors and Craigslist for "bookmobile" (there are websites that check all of Craigslist's local sites at once nationwide). And look up specialty-vehicle consignment firms online. You might get lucky. If you can't find a ready-made bookmobile at an affordable price, you can always build one yourself. In fact our organization did this twice; the details are in the chapter supplement below. Before you begin the search for an appropriate base-model to modify, there are a few priorities to contemplate:

- 1) Getting patrons in and out: Passenger buses were designed with this in mind. Other vehicle types will require configuration of user-friendly stairs, a gently sloped ramp, or other method simple enough for even mobility-challenged people to navigate. Not everyone will be stable or careful so anticipate the concerns: rambunctious kids, distracted adults who are already reading their books on the way out, damp and slippery stairs, elderly who start to climb in and then get nervous and want to turn around. The more foolproof you can make this path, the better. More convenient if it's built as an integrated (or mechanically deployable) part of the vehicle itself and not something you have to carry around and set up at each stop. Stairs should have relatively sharp lips, not rounded, and benefit from grip tape or other security measures. If you need a portable step for the ground level, make sure it's sturdy (our standard was a 300 lb. rating), highly visible and a big enough target for unsteady ambulators. Grip tape or a rubberized top surface is critical in damp conditions. Confirm that it can't slide away easily under load.

- 2) Utilizing sunlight: Most bookmobiles are equipped with interior lights but you would need an expensive set of modern batteries to use them all day without running a generator or diesel engine. The right type of body construction will allow you to avoid this noise and pollution by utilizing windows or translucent panels for sunlight. Our first big bookmobile, crafted by Maroney Bodyworks, featured a raised roof with skylights along the full length of both sides of the vehicle. Our second big bookmobile, which we built ourselves, was based on a box truck body with a semi-translucent fiberglass roof. This was a primary reason for choosing that particular unit. We did install LED strip lighting on the ceiling frame bars but only for night-time use, which our inexpensive auxiliary AGM battery handled easily.
- 3) The ability to maneuver and park: The longer the vehicle, the more difficult maneuvering will be. Towing a trailer that pivots on a hitch or kingpin adds an extra layer of challenge. If you plan to remain on well-traveled routes with decent infrastructure, such as in the city or suburbs, then snaking a 30+ foot truck around may not be a problem, assuming you have a competent driver. Think about your planned destinations. How tight are the streets and parking? Are there wider alternate routes? Through most of our operations we ran a 24' van, which was manageable in almost all situations, including narrow rural roads.
- 4) The suitability of the interior for installation of bookcases and other amenities: Once they're filled with books, shelf cabinets become very heavy and require appropriate reinforcement. Strength and stability in the mounting design is paramount. Depending on the vehicle suspension, shocks may be harshly transmitted directly into those bookcases, causing everything to bounce over even small bumps. A softer suspension is possibly superior in this situation but not so soft that it wallows excessively over irregular surfaces. Be sure to consider storage of extra books, such as a dedicated closet, both for restocking during your events and to receive donations on-site. Try to plan the flow of the foot traffic inside the unit and decide where your librarian and other volunteers will be stationed. A checkout desk is highly desirable. Can you install some permanent seating? Best if a crew member is perched near the entrance to answer questions from passersby, welcome people in, and ask patrons to watch their step on the way out.

*It's strongly recommended you carpet the entire floor with a relatively tight, durable weave.* This will absorb small amounts of water from shoes and virtually eliminate the danger of slipping. And it's much more comfortable for anyone who must kneel or sit to inspect the lower shelves – and for you when you are restocking. Low benches in front of the young children's sections make browsing friendlier for kids and parents. These are an integral part of the design of most manufactured bookmobiles and should be a priority (see photos below and Chapter 7: Displaying Books).



Don't forget signs to advertise what's happening. The folding sandwich-board type works well to deploy on virtually any type of surface and you'll want at least two of them to catch public attention from different directions. The initial goal is to engage people and get them curious enough to check it out. A little humor or whimsy is welcome here. You'll also want pre-printed business cards or flyers to help everyone learn more about your project, how to check your routes, and how to get involved.

## **HOW WE DID IT:**

After conceiving our plan and doing basic research, I concluded that I couldn't afford a purpose-built bookmobile. All the start-up money would come from the family bank account so I figured the best I could do was a cargo trailer. I was prepared to spend a couple thousand dollars and started checking inventory at dealerships.

The standard smaller models were tall enough for adults to stand inside without ducking and the rear walls folded down to make a ramp for entry. It would be straightforward enough to install shelving along all three of the other walls, and enough light would enter from the fully open rear to forego electricity during the daytime.

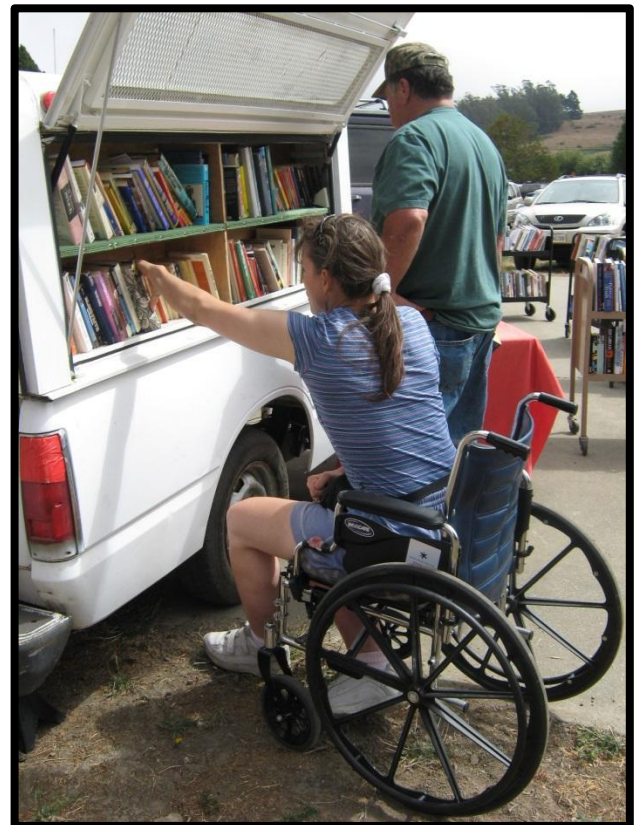
Prior to making a purchase we scored a big promotional article in the newspaper, which resulted in the donation of an old surveyor's trailer. This was actually the bed of an old pickup truck mounted on a trailer with a standard ball hitch. The camper shell featured an odd full-length hinged panel on one side that was screaming to be fitted with a two-row bookshelf for access from the outside.

After consulting with an intrigued contractor friend, we realized he could mount shelves inside and still maintain enough room for rolling library carts in a 2x2 pattern. He made it happen with ingenuity, hard work, and about \$500 in parts. We could hitch the whole thing to the family SUV, drive to our destination, deploy triangular jacks to stabilize the trailer, and then pull the big wooden "Free Books" sign from a hanging mount. This sign was reinforced with metal framing and a couple of big hooks for attachment to a horizontal bar on our modified bumper. This allowed us to use it as a ramp to pull the rolling carts down into our parking area.

The carts displayed books primarily for adults and teens. The trailer was then open for children to crawl in and browse material appropriate for their reading levels. Carpet made it very cozy and sometimes we added a big comforter. With space at a premium, we even turned the back of the outside-facing shelving into a magazine-style display for picture books.







We utilized this initial rig to run a combination of the second and third distribution methods. It featured both a small interior and outside displays. Using carts instead of tables allowed us to offer a much bigger selection of books and keep them better organized. This did put us at the mercy of the weather. We have plenty of heat and rain in Sonoma County but good fortune accompanied us on most service days, even in the middle of summer or winter. A donor provided a 10x10 ft. canopy, which helped in light rain without wind.

The arrangement was largely successful for about a year and a half. By that point, however, the physical labor of the set-up and take-down was becoming exhausting. Constant restocking was necessary to keep the carts full. Otherwise gaps from removed books caused the remaining volumes to lean over and make browsing difficult. And because the coming-and-going process was so time-consuming, we were usually limited to two locations per day.

It was time to trade up and by then we had our heart set on the authentic bookmobile experience anyway. I began checking third-party web aggregators to search all of the Craigslist sites at once. Before long a beautiful Maroney bookmobile popped up in a rural town in eastern Kentucky. It seemed absolutely perfect – low miles, beautiful oak shelving, skylights and great running condition. The price was almost too good to believe but I assumed the stars had simply lined up for us at the right moment.

The seller had purchased it from his local library after they ran into trouble maintaining their outreach program. His plan was to strip the interior and turn it into a fishing expedition vehicle. Fortunately for us, his elderly uncle bailed out once he saw how much work the conversion would entail and it went back up for sale. I didn't have any trouble raising the money from a small non-profit called Bread for the Journey and individual donor-advised funds at Community Foundation Sonoma County. Our regional First 5 child development agency also provided a mini-grant to cover related costs.

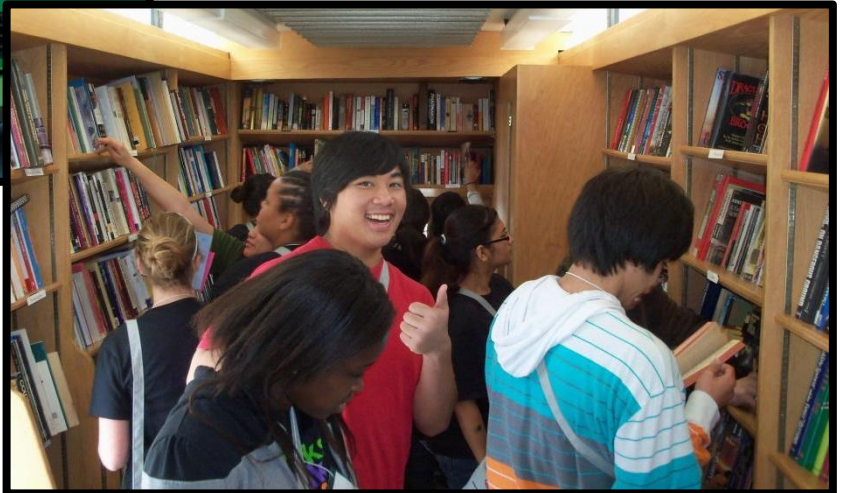
My wife and I flew out, made the purchase and drove it back to California. What an adventure! The truck performed almost flawlessly, just consuming a little bit of engine oil on the long, hot hill-climbs across New Mexico. I kept it topped off.

The Maroney was designed for exactly what we wanted to do. Tons of adjustable shelf space, a checkout desk, a closet for more books, even enough room for us to move the passenger seat into a 'librarian position' near the door and put in an additional bench from a small bus. This meant all four family members could go out on routes. We made a few other modifications over time, including an RV-style side awning and top-notch donated paint job to update the exterior with our own color scheme. High school art students joyfully added a beautiful mural.





Note raised roof to accommodate skylight panels



Fast forward nine happy years. We received a letter from the California Air Resources Board (CARB) indicating our vehicle was now out of compliance with new regulations for big diesels. There were very few options for remedy. Modifying or swapping out the engine, which didn't have modern pollution-abatement equipment, was estimated to cost about \$30,000. I figured we could modify a used base-model truck or bus for a total of \$40,000, which seemed to be the way to go considering we had put lots of miles on our Maroney and it had developed a persistent rain leak issue in the cab area. Meanwhile we were allowed a low-use exemption and could at least complete our basic public-access routes for a few months while we worked on a new rig.

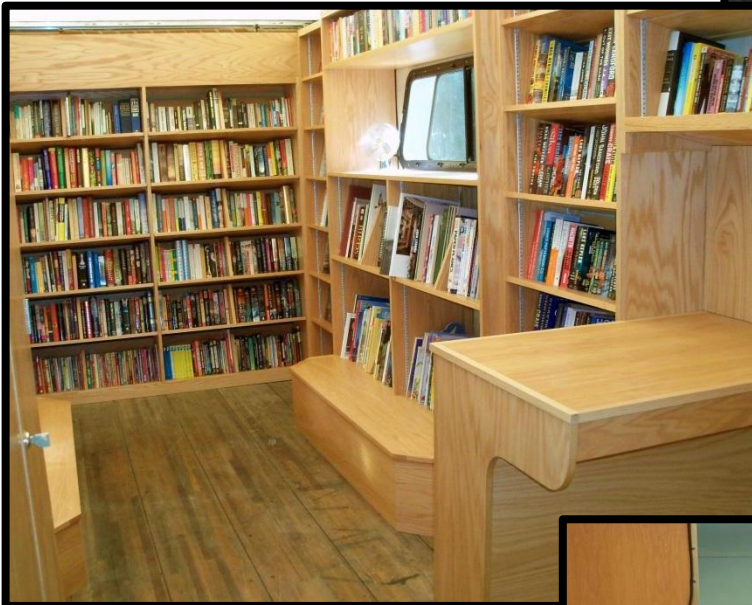
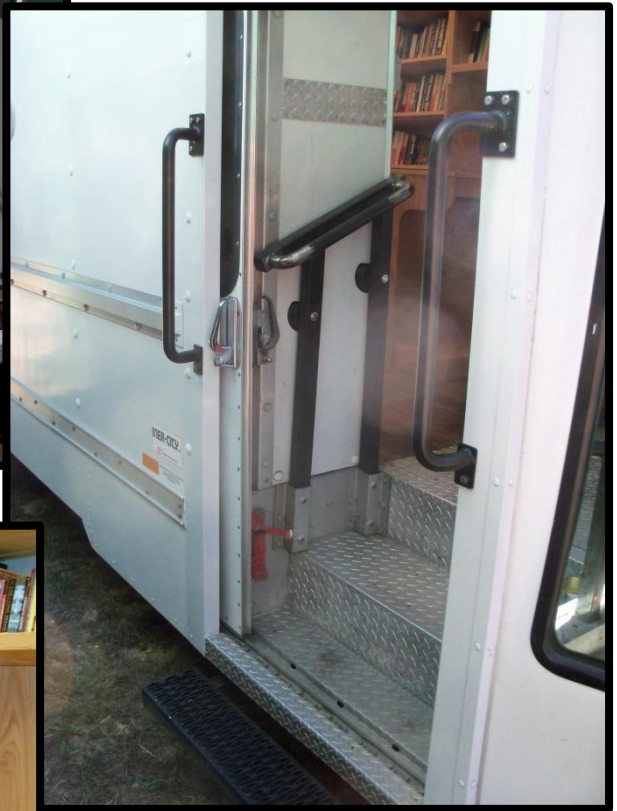
I started combing the ads again but no bookmobiles were available anywhere near our price range, even on a nationwide search. There was no sense in waiting and hoping for another miracle so I looked into used passenger buses and larger step-vans. A dealership in Los Angeles specializing in retired municipal vehicles was selling a bus that looked promising. Big windows ran along both sides to facilitate plenty of daylight as long as we didn't cover them up completely with bookcases. Plus the entry/egress was already integrated with steps and swing doors.

My wife and I drove down to see it. I suspect it had been a prisoner transfer bus because it looked like cages had been bolted around the seating. The floor was trashed and one of the wheels showed signs of a serious accident that had probably damaged the front axle.

Yet in another stroke of amazing luck, the same dealer had a shorter box truck with the right layout. Most box trucks are not suitable for bookmobile purposes due to the tall ride height, dark cargo area and lack of a reasonable patron entrance. This one was different. It had been a mobile welding shop outfitted with a semi-translucent fiberglass roof panel on the box, plus a couple of big windows. Crucially, it also offered walk-through access to the passenger side of the cab, a nice wide sliding entry door, and moderate-slope stairs. This is what you would see on a delivery-style step van, allowing easy passage up and down, in and out, all day long. The stock Ford Triton V-10 engine boasted plenty of power, even against the prospect of adding thousands of pounds of books. We purchased it on the spot.

Aside from building and installing all the bookcases, which were crafted by a local woodworker from my sketches, the modifications were relatively minor. We stripped out the giant generator and extensive wiring in favor of a simple AGM battery arrangement. This provided plenty of power for overhead LED lights (night use only) and a couple of fans to circulate air through the windows and keep things cool inside. Welders installed grab rails and a low exterior step for safe entry. Carpet was planned for comfort and anti-slip flooring. And we locked and ignored the rear rollup door, blocking it completely with shelving to create a new rear wall. Total price tag? Just under \$40,000.

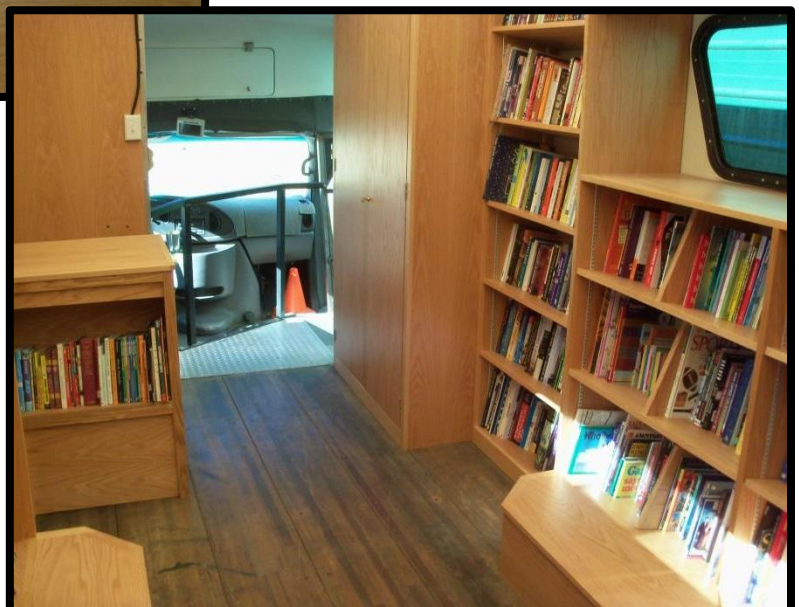




**PHOTOS TAKEN PRIOR TO  
INSTALLATION OF CARPET**

**Note centralized benches for  
young children and parents**

**Patron side of desk  
doubles as a shelf**



We ended up employing the first book distribution method as well, simultaneously with our ongoing mobile campaign. Leveraging a grant opportunity, we set up several community-based access hubs to reach more low-income people in the Sonoma Valley. Our 'mini lending libraries' were bookcases inside buildings that already housed other services, such as a homeless shelter or bilingual resource center. We did the initial stocking with first-rate material and then turned it over to our partners for maintenance.

**Family health clinic  
waiting room**



**Teen after-school center**



## Chapter 5 – Acquiring Books

Coming up with any old books is not difficult. You will be welcomed whenever you offer to haul away material that is worn, out of date or unpopular. These books fill shelves but will not engage or excite people. You want the highest quality possible in order to increase impact and grow your bookmobile's reputation. There is no better advertising than word of mouth.

In the beginning we accepted everything. It was an all-volunteer project with no set timeline and we had no idea what might come our way. In particular we lacked experience with adult fiction and weren't able to effectively evaluate it. This led us to initially collect numerous boxes of disappointments. Hopefully we can spare you similar wasted effort.

Though not exhaustive, this list of book sources covers every avenue we utilized in our 11 years of operation. It's roughly ordered by the quality you can expect to receive, from best to worst:

- 1) Brand new books purchased through premium outlets specifically for your program by supporters or members of the public
- 2) Brand new books purchased through discount outlets with funding you've gathered
- 3) Publisher overstock or donations
- 4) Gently used books solicited through book drives for your program by service clubs, civic organizations, church groups, individuals, book clubs, schools or employers
- 5) Advanced Reader Editions or Advanced Reader Copies (ARCs) from bookstores or individual reviewers
- 6) Gently used books from the general public
- 7) Library discards (quality highly variable)
- 8) Leftovers from yard sales or flea markets
- 9) Overstock from thrift stores
- 10) Leftovers from Friends of the Library (or similar) sales

11) Direct author donations

12) School library clean-outs

**1) Brand new books purchased through premium outlets specifically for your program by supporters or members of the public**

The ultimate is receiving a variety of brand new, high-quality titles purchased explicitly for your bookmobile. This can be accomplished in partnership with a friendly bookstore, and with robust promotion by on-site staff, is also a great way to spread the word about your service. See if the store is willing to discount these sales a bit. It shouldn't appear to be making full profit on your charitable purpose. You will probably receive mostly children's books because the public is more confident about which of those are wholesome or considered classics. And benefitting kids is an easier sell than benefitting adults.

**2) Brand new books purchased through discount outlets with funding you've gathered**

If you are able to raise money for book purchases, a number of discount outlets can help you stretch those dollars. Year after year we aggressively expanded our outreach to low-income children, ultimately outstripping what our usual passive donation channels supplied. We began our own purchasing to fill the gaps, chiefly to maintain a reasonable supply of toddler board books and early readers for preschoolers. Fortunately there are vendors geared towards supporting education-based programs. Here are a few we purchased from on a regular basis:

First Book – By far the biggest U.S. distributor of heavily discounted children's books to qualifying groups. First Book is a non-profit that receives large quantities of overstock from premium publishers and sells them at prices just high enough to cover their costs. Frequent sponsorship opportunities can lower prices even further. Some titles can be purchased in bulk for only the cost of shipping from their Book Bank. First Book carries volumes for all youth age categories but is a rare source of discounted quality modern books for tweens and teens/young adults. You must demonstrate you are a give-away (not lending) program when you register for an account.

All About Books – Specializing in affordable books for 0 – 5 year-olds, including a good selection of Spanish-language and bilingual material. Buying bundled collections can reduce prices even further and they send free bonus packs for every \$100 spent.

Usborne – Higher quality books (featuring top-tier youth nonfiction) at closer to retail cost. Our regional Usborne sales representative qualified us for a 50% larger order bonus once we reached

a certain price point, however, which made the entire package a reasonable value. Otherwise we would not have been able to afford the per-unit cost.

Little Hippo Books – High-quality toddler board books at low prices when purchased in bulk under their wholesale plan. Must first register for a wholesale account.

KidsBooks.com – A variety of titles that change often. Discounts can be large or small but it's often worth the time to check their stock for your specific needs.

Books4School.com – Same as above. A variety of titles that change often. Discounts can be large or small but it's often worth the time to check their stock for your specific needs.

### **3) Publisher overstock or donations**

Publishers must eventually dispose of their overstock and remainders. Be in touch to let them know what you're looking for and how it will benefit the community. This is a better pitch if you have non-profit status (even through a fiscal agent) because they get a tax benefit on the donation. But it's worth investigating even if you are not affiliated with a 501(c)(3). Occasionally publishers are willing to take the loss just to free up space in their warehouse. Sweeten the proposition further by lauding them in your promotional materials and social media.

### **4) Gently used books solicited through book drives by service clubs, civic organizations, church groups, individuals, book clubs, schools or employers**

If your program lasts a while, this method will likely become one of the mainstays for filling your shelves. Anyone can organize a book drive, whether it's a little girl and her dad going door to door or a big Rotary club leveraging their networks to bring in thousands of books. There really aren't any limits on how this is executed or who can participate. The individual or group feels proud of their accomplishment and everyone has a great time. Co-workers often enjoy a little competition to see who can bring in the most books, simultaneously building camaraderie and team spirit for their employers.

When you are approached with offers of assistance but don't have a task or role ready to assign, always suggest an independently managed book drive. This is a terrific way for kids to get involved. Many schools now compel students to perform community service and passionate teachers may organize their entire class toward a bigger goal. Even better if you can get a whole school to participate. This worked out very well for us on several occasions. Faith groups, too, are often looking for inspiring charitable projects to champion.

Affluent schools, churches and other organizations with greater means tend to have access to more of the latest popular books. Look for people on your team with the right connections to get this 'Robin Hood' style of collection rolling.

Give each benefactor group a heads up about packing the books flat (covers facing down) inside bankers boxes or copy paper boxes for easiest handling. Those sizes keep the weight of each box manageable and stacking books flat protects them from damage. Plus those box types typically have handle holes.

### **5) Advanced Reader Editions or Advanced Reader Copies (ARCs) from bookstores or individual reviewers**

Advanced Reader Copies are books sent out to stores and reviewers prior to official publication. The goal is to generate more interest in upcoming releases and encourage store managers to place larger initial orders. Publishers are also looking for feedback and select readers are responsible for proofing the spelling, grammar and punctuation. A reviewer or proofreader may learn of your bookmobile and want to contribute their ARCs once those tasks are completed. But you can be sure bookstores receive a lot of these and they aren't allowed to sell them. Inquire about becoming a regular recipient. Remember, it will be easier for them to say yes if you promise a consistent pick-up schedule to help keep their storage room clear.

### **6) Gently used books from the general public**

Ongoing donations from the general public will probably generate the most consistent flow into your inventory. We recommend you get started establishing book donation partner locations as soon as possible. Look for businesses in central locations with high foot traffic and broad hours of operation. Not only will it be easy for your supporters to access these spots but you'll also raise awareness of your bookmobile with highly visible collection bins and promotional signage. Early on we had good results at banks, many of which employ friendly staff and have extra floor space. With more financial transactions being performed online, however, and strict new corporate conformity codes that mandate branch lobbies be free of any non-branded items, banks are becoming less ideal donation sites.

Be creative in imagining who might welcome this partnership to receive books for you. Through our history we secured ongoing relationships with a gas station, a UPS store, and an engine shop, among other businesses. Though better for your advertising purposes, book bins don't have to be visible in the customer area. If staff are willing to do some carrying, they can store incoming

contributions out of sight until you retrieve them. We recommend you clear out your donation partners at least once per week and be responsive when they call to tell you a big load came in.

As long as you have the volunteer power to collect books regularly, better to have too many locations than too few. After several months you'll know which ones are working and which ones aren't and you can narrow it down to your top performers. Factors that typically affect donation volume include popularity of location, how well you promote it, and enthusiasm (or lack thereof) from the site staff.

When publicizing your drop-off sites, request boxes of donated books no larger than bankers or copy-paper sizes. As mentioned above, this will keep the lifting reasonable for your volunteers and donors alike. Plenty of folks would otherwise underestimate the weight until they're close to filling that giant moving box they've been trying to get rid of!

### **7) Library discards (quality highly variable)**

This refers to public libraries rather than school libraries. Most have a system by which they determine which books to pull out of their collection, typically based on frequency of circulation. The less often a book is checked out, the more likely it is to be removed. Of course this means you are probably pursuing less desirable material but this isn't always the case. Your patrons may include different demographics. Modern teenagers, for example, are not known for frequenting the library but the library is still keen on stocking titles to attract them. They may dedicate a sizable budget to these purchases and then it's quite possible they will cycle out of inventory faster than would other types.

Thus some discards might still be recent and relevant enough to consider, particularly if you are suffering from specific genre deficits in your collection. We picked up a lot of teen/YA books in great shape because they had only been read a few times. Our public library system was also a source of Spanish-language and bilingual material that had languished on their shelves.

### **8) Leftovers from yard sales or flea markets**

You never know what type or quality of you might find at a yard sale or flea market. It isn't usually worth sending volunteers to check out individual sales but it is a good idea for your team to keep an eye out if they happen to be at such an event. You're hoping to get lucky. If the books seem promising, ask the seller to donate any leftovers to your cause after the sale. They will take you up on this simply to dispose of the items.

## **9) Overstock from thrift stores**

Whether unsold thrift store books are worth the effort to collect is questionable. The quality is mixed and after the items have been on sale for a while, it generally means they are duds. But it depends on the store's location, donation flow and customer base. Maybe they don't get a lot of parents shopping there and end up with extra children's titles. Those would be worth going after. Or maybe they consistently receive more top-tier books than they can even display and will welcome an outlet for the excess.

We lucked into this situation. A popular thrift store chain near us was shipping thousands of pounds of excess books to a pulp recycler each month and one of the managers realized our bookmobile would be a better destination. We worked out an arrangement to search through enormous inventory at their warehouse as often as we were physically able. Though it was labor-intensive, we ended up with much better depth of material, especially in adult non-fiction. Their staff weighed our selected books on the way out and a generous donor paid the company the same per-pound price they would have received from the recycler. And the books stayed local.

## **10) Leftovers from Friends of the Library type sales**

In our area, Friends of the Library non-profit organizations receive book donations from the public (most dropped off at the libraries themselves) and sell them during multi-day events on a regular schedule throughout the year. Proceeds are used to support the library branches. The difference between this type of event and a yard sale is the customers, who are much more knowledgeable about which books are popular or profitable. It means the premium stuff is often snatched up in the first day or two and you may regret making arrangements to pick up their leftovers afterward. Making the situation worse is the easy availability of UPC readers that attach to phones and instantly determine how much a book is worth online. Amazon resellers and the like are now flocking to these events and cherry-picking the most valuable stuff. Not to read but to make money.

This method is mentioned here because there may be times when you're desperate for anything to fill your shelves, or you may find a particular regional sale that isn't always picked clean by the vultures. Some events now forbid UPC readers. As a rule, however, remainders from these sales are not recommended.

## **11) Direct author donations**

Approaches from homegrown authors with a few gift copies of their book are great. With a little luck, other locals will have an interest in the content. It's more likely, however, that the subject matter captivates the author rather than the general public, and there's a very good chance it has a self-published look or feel to it, which patrons tend to avoid like the plague. A friendly warning: don't accept significant quantities of these unless you preview them and feel really confident about their potential popularity among your audience. Instead you could gratefully accept one or two copies and let the author know your standard practice is to test-run items on your shelves before taking on quantity, due to limited storage capacity.

## **12) School library clean-outs**

Unless this is the library of an upper-tier school, the discards are likely to be bottom of the barrel. These are books kids haven't touched in years or decades, a situation that will not magically change when they are on your shelves. Children can sniff out old, irrelevant books a mile away and making them free does not increase their desirability. Stay away from these offers unless you are allowed to come with your own boxes and take only what you want. Then you can send an experienced sorter to grab any reasonable stuff, such as classic picture books, or fill gaps in your collection. You should invest the time to remove faded plastic dust jackets so the books don't appear quite as worn out.

NOTE: If your project grows and you want to sustain it, watch out for quality books leaving town. This is the opposite of what you want. The main perpetrators seem to be the individual resellers (mentioned above) who scour all local sale events, checking on popularity with their phones. They buy up profitable titles and eventually ship them to customers far away.

You also have to be on the lookout for entities appearing to collect books for a charitable mission. Unfortunately, business owners all over Sonoma County have allowed a particular corporation to set up large blue collection bins. You may see something similar in your area. These bins feature big, cheerful stickers on them, implying you are helping the needy. The wording is something like "Books for Charity" or "Get Involved – DONATE".

The fine print reveals these companies are mainly in the business of reselling online and pulping for profit (<http://www.donateoakland.org/do-not-support-list.html>). Some items they can't sell may actually make it to schools and other institutions but the value of those lesser books is questionable and our experience suggests it may be near impossible to become a recipient anyway. We followed their instructions and after weeks of messages and waiting, finally got a

return call and the promise of a big crate of children's books. The morning of our delivery their "driver" called to say his truck had broken down. Subsequent messages we left to reschedule went unreturned.

We recommend you attempt to get any boxes like these removed by informing the host property owners of the situation. You might even go to your municipal officials. A number of California cities have successfully banned them.

## **HOW WE DID IT:**

Our first big haul of books was the result of a standard networking technique: the informational interview. While we were building our bookmobile trailer, I sat down with the director of the library branch in Petaluma. He had fond memories of the now-defunct official Sonoma County Public Library bookmobile and told me all he could remember. He also connected me with the Friends of the Petaluma Library non-profit group. They were indeed happy to give me whatever books remained after their next sale. The Friends of the Sonoma Valley library were similarly quick to help. In fact Sonoma Valley already had a standard procedure in place welcoming any local charities to select books because their group always received many more donations than they could sell.

Over the years we were ultimately invited to collect leftovers from virtually all of the Friends of the Library groups in Sonoma County (each attached to an individual branch). We soon learned only a couple of these groups consistently yielded quality books for our shelves. The others meant well but their material just wasn't worth our time and labor.

Our first school-led book drive was likewise born of a networking connection. We had been looking for an artist in hopes of creating sandwich-board signs for our operation. A donor introduced us to a high school art teacher who was happy to paint whimsical imagery on plywood. She rallied the school's leadership to run a book collection for us as well.

Other collections began falling into our lap as word of our mission spread. Often we got the call when everything was done and ready for pickup. One teacher of a small middle school was in touch to report her students had not only gathered hundreds of books but moreover raised gas money with a bake sale. It was so charming! This event took place on campus during a school day, essentially kids selling brownies and cookies to each other.

These wonderful surprises kept coming and it spoke to the power of good publicity. Raising awareness of a worthwhile campaign will compel others to join you. Many of these enthusiasts learned about us through articles in the newspaper. These articles weren't a call to action. They



didn't say we were desperate for this or that, they just explained what we were doing and why. This touched a lot of people and a number of them were moved to help, in all kinds of ways. And the folks who showed up after reading stories about the bookmobile almost always turned out to be more motivated than those who found us by browsing volunteer match sites.

Eventually we got organized enough to take the initiative and ask certain schools to collect books. One of our backers had a personal relationship with her daughter's teacher at a top private school. This fellow ran the school's leadership club and our cause became a challenge for these students. On their first drive they came up with terrific books from their homes and additionally donated Scholastic Book Fair points, enabling us to order \$2,500 worth of new titles. Four years later, the entire student body participated in a quest to beat our previous biggest donation. Over the course of a couple months, these youth and their families brought in 9,023 books of remarkable quality. Everyone was proud of the effort and the kids loved keeping count as the drive came to a climax. They were thrilled when the headmaster followed through with his promise to dress in a banana costume when the goal was met.

Our United Way branch (United Way of the Wine Country) worked hard to collect children's books for us each summer. The labor was performed by both staff and their volunteer Women's Leadership Council, in coordination with a popular local bank. A few of Sonoma County's large employers usually joined this endeavor, with excellent results.

Other groups came through over the years, including book clubs, Girl Scout troops, churches and women's faith groups, Kiwanis, Active 20-30, Rotary and Interact clubs. We learned that any group meeting regularly can ask its members to bring a few books to the next gathering. One of the more unique events of this type was initiated by a Rodan+Fields cosmetics consultant. She hosted a successful drive at one of her sizable marketing events.

Several publishers, even a few first-rate national brands, were receptive to our direct requests for donations once we became an official non-profit organization. Some of these were one-time gifts and some became abundant recurring contributions. We were tremendously fortunate to forge a long-term relationship with a nearby publisher of books in Spanish for adults. They regularly received returns from bookstores, either unsold or very slightly damaged, and sent them all our way. Another publisher wanted to give us overstocked programming manuals which were going out of date. These held little appeal but a little exploration of their warehouse led us to the hidden gem: a book outside their normal line that hadn't sold very well. Soon we were stocking the fascinating Cooking for Geeks on our Food & Drink shelf.

## Chapter 6 – Sorting and Storing Books

As soon as you begin acquiring books, you will need a system to sort, organize and store them. It's a good idea to start with a plan for storage. An indoor solution is ideal to protect the books from moisture, dirt and extreme temperatures. You are hoping for conditions found in a library or bookstore: clean, dry, spacious and well lit.

Think too about access for your bookmobile. Best if you can park very close so restocking is quicker and easier. Is there is a covered walking route available between the vehicle and the storage for rainy days? How about restrictions on hours of access? Are there other activities going on at your planned site that would interfere with the book work? Should you purchase insurance, such as an accident policy, to cover any injuries to volunteers who will be lifting and handling books?

It's most convenient to consolidate functions and use the storage location for sorting new donations. This means enough room for a big table and plenty of light, preferably with the option of artificial illumination for evening work.

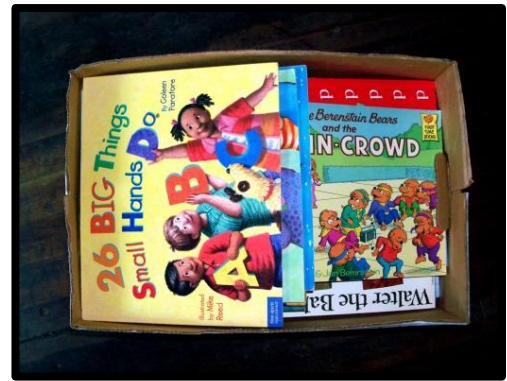
You'll want shelving units as soon as possible. Stacking boxes on the floor means unstacking them every time you want to access the lower boxes. And bending over to dig for books gets old quickly. It's easiest on your body if you can pull items from shelves at about hip level. A little higher and lower also work well but try to avoid shelving at floor level and above your head. Your total available space will dictate how tightly you have to cram everything in.

It's unlikely you will be able to store books upright on your shelves as they are in a library. This would require a huge amount of shelving and lots of busywork keeping the books tight and tidy as you remove the ones you need and try to find room for new ones. A more practical option is to store them flat in bankers boxes by category. As mentioned before, bankers size keeps the weight down and stacking books flat protects them from damage. The only other type we used were copy paper boxes, which are not quite as tall but significantly longer. These are great for chapter books arranged in a 2x2 grid, and for oversize items like cookbooks or picture books. Depending on exact dimensions, you can either place oversize books side-by-side in flat stacks (smaller) OR in one flat stack (larger) plus others standing tightly together upright on end to fill the remaining space and keep everything from shifting. See illustrations on next page.

# Copy paper boxes



Elementary school level  
chapter books in 2x2 grid



Picture books that  
(mostly) fit side-by-side



Oversize books: one flat stack plus more  
standing tightly on end to fill remaining space

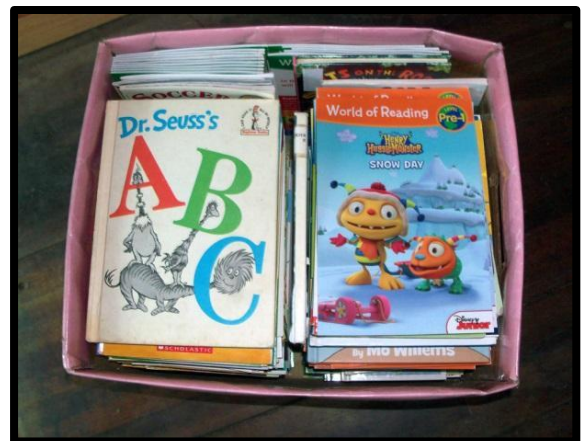


Hardcover stack plus two trade-size stacks  
plus standing hardcover for stability



Hardcover stack plus three pocket-size  
stacks plus standing hardcover for stability

# Bankers boxes



Early readers stacks side-by-side with thin  
hardcover book between them for stability

Eventually we built our own durable wooden shelving units to hold these box types two-deep for each category. Our units were wide enough for six categories in every row, with support beams in the middle and at both ends. Categories roughly corresponded with shelf categories onboard our vehicle though a few types were combined in storage because of the small number of those items. Popular genres, such as mystery and romance, commanded overflow space but we always tried to keep the best of our reserves at the front of each assigned slot for ease of retrieval during restocking. Lids aren't necessary on the shelved boxes unless your storage is exceptionally dusty.



**Floor-level shelf not recommended unless your book handlers are young and spry**

**Open-top slot label holders  
allow easy swapping**



Once we started purchasing or receiving multiple copies of the same title, we designated remote shelving to stack these flat on their covers without boxes (spines facing the aisle for quick identification). This saved time during restocking as we normally wanted the popular ones on board at all times. Having them in stacks allowed us to quickly grab one of each without manipulating a box. Plus we could conveniently determine our quantities at a glance and know when to order or request more.

So where to set up shop? You may be delighted to get an offer of unused barn or garage but it's important to inspect the area carefully. Depending on the roof, walls and floor type, moisture might very well be a persistent part of the environment. These also tend to be dirtier locations.

If you can't secure a suitable clean building, a high-end commercial storage container rental might be available. Standard freight container units are commonly available for purchase or rent but are NOT recommended. The Friends of the Library groups that used them complained about books deteriorating due to excessive heat build-up, water leaks in rain, and even humidity-related damage from 'sweating'. Sweating happens when moisture condenses in the container due to certain differences between the conditions inside and out.

If you have multiple choices for your sorting table, a comfortable height is probably the highest priority, followed closely by size, then strength and stability. Hip height is the target. Then go for the biggest possible surface area, which will make sorting much easier when things get busy.

You'll want to establish a standard routine, one that can be easily taught to new helpers. Proper initial sorting will save you lots of time and hassle later. It's ideally done with whomever on your team is most knowledgeable about book quality, hopefully accompanied by the person most aware of your current inventory. *The idea is to handle the books as few times as possible and get the superior ones into circulation quickly.* We recommend a three-step process.

**SORTING – STEP ONE:** In the first step, you'll get an overview of what kind of collection and condition you have received. Working with one box or bag at a time, unload all the books onto your sorting table. Take a brief glance to ascertain whether any have obvious damage, dirt, mold or are too ancient to be of interest. Then you can immediately slide those items into a discard box. You will always be filling a discard box on your table.

Keep a lookout for hidden gems during this step! Quite often we found a true classic or other treasure amongst a box of rubbish. Also consider whether a lightly soiled book might be worth cleaning. If you don't want to break your sorting rhythm in the moment, set dirty books aside in a separate pile for wiping down later. We didn't apply anything more aggressive than gentle detergent spray and paper towels.

Getting a feel for the entire contents of a box or bag can speed things up if you discover a set or otherwise similar items. A quick scan might be sufficient to determine condition and whether you want to keep them. We often received sets of elementary school level chapter books from the Magic Tree House or Nancy Drew series, for example. If they were in good shape we grabbed the whole stack and immediately placed them in the appropriate final category box on our shelves instead of handling each book separately. Or we would recognize something useless like

comically out-of-date children's science encyclopedias. *Swish!* Straight into the discards without further waste of time.

**SORTING – STEP TWO:** Once you are finished unloading, discarding any obvious refuse and handling any sets, you can proceed with the more thoughtful part of the process. The goal of the second step is to appraise each of the remaining books and assign one of three types: discard, immediate placement onto your bookmobile shelves, or reserve status for future restocking.

Discard means you won't ever use it. Assuming a book survived the initial condition check, this becomes a judgment call depending on genre, author, quality, recency, relevancy, cultural trends and general popularity. Don't worry if it's not immediately obvious which books you should be tossing out. Even if you and your volunteers understand the different genres, you may not foresee what will be in demand along your routes. We played it safe early on by holding onto virtually everything in good condition, just to make sure we had backup material of every kind. Over time we learned what was desirable simply by watching what disappeared from our shelves.

Immediate placements are books that are clearly as good as or better than what you currently have in the bookmobile and should be immediately stocked. Occasionally quality won't be as critical because you have very little in a particular genre and need to fill that shelf onboard.

Any books of middle quality, better than discard but not as good as immediate placement, should be kept as reserves for future restocking. For now, they will go by genre/category into the appropriate boxes in your storage. We found it efficient to first do all the sorting at the table and then switch our full focus to categorizing the books (see STEP THREE below). Otherwise you are wasting lots of motion – pulling and pushing your reserve boxes more often than necessary, and constantly turning between table and shelves.

*Here are a few rules-of-thumb to get you started evaluating books.* For adult fiction, well-known authors and more recent publication dates are positive signs. Fortunately there are plenty of wonderful stories that stand the test of time so you should also keep older books with titles you recognize and start tracking their popularity on board.

For more obscure books, check both front and back covers for mention of awards, sales volume or professional reviews. Most awards are notable though some have narrow eligibility and are bestowed by niche, genre-specific industry groups. Of the more general honors, the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize for Literature are top of the heap.

Sales volume might be indicated by a boast like “National Bestseller” at the top of the front cover. Bestseller lists indicate sales were high compared to other books for at least one week but this does not necessarily correlate to quality. It may indicate popularity (at that point in time) and is thus a positive factor of sorts. The New York Times bestseller list is the most prestigious, with the USA Today and Wall Street Journal lists featuring prominently as well. National Bestseller is perhaps the weakest endorsement, as it can be the result of temporarily strong sales from a single national outlet, such as Barnes & Noble.

It’s common for a book cover to state “New York Times best-selling author...” preceding the writer’s name. This says nothing about the book you’re holding, only that this author has achieved the aforementioned sales status with at least one previous title. This claim can then be made on ALL future books.

Positive professional reviews are the most reliable indicator of quality. Beyond the cover, these may also be found in the very first pages of the book. The trick is to examine who wrote the review for which publication. You can ignore comments from other authors as they may be doing a favor for a fellow writer (or friend). And pay little heed to reviews from Kirkus, IndieReader or BlueInk, which all demand a fee, suggesting they will skew positively. What you are looking for is excerpts from full reviews by professionals on staff at major newspapers or magazines. Examples of these respected publications are The New York Times, San Francisco Chronicle, Cleveland Plain Dealer, Chicago Tribune, Boston Globe, Seattle Post-Intelligencer, Christian Science Monitor, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Salon, Vogue and Atlantic Monthly.

If you are looking at reviews attributed to The Guardian, Independent, Daily Mail or Sunday Times, you are most likely holding a book first published in the United Kingdom. These novels almost always languished on our shelves. This is likely due to the significant language and cultural differences permeating the writing, making them feel somewhat foreign to American audiences.

Assessing nonfiction is a bit more straightforward. The key factors are *recent* and *relevant*. As humans discover, learn, and improve stuff, the new information makes it into books sooner or later. And some discoveries render older information completely useless, even if it was previously published in a widely respected treatise. Be skeptical of older books on finance, technology, or health/nutrition. Reflect on who has been in the news or made recent achievements when determining which biographies and memoirs to keep.

Kids tend to be really sensitive to recency of publication, if not necessarily recency of content. They literally judge books by their covers. Older cover art can be a big turn-off now that children are used to seeing amazing high-resolution graphics everywhere. This is significantly changing the



baseline for getting their attention. They look at the front of a vintage Henry & Mudge book and think it must be boring. In time we learned not to bother stocking certain titles unless they featured updated cover art, though every once in a while an adult would successfully encourage a child to pick up an ‘unattractive’ book with the promise of a great story.

Hopefully you have a parent or teacher of school-age kids on your crew to identify the general age-appropriateness of books. Otherwise there is a learning curve. We weren’t too strict about matching youth nonfiction to target ages because it’s often read with a parent (or is illustrated well enough to be compelling anyway, with the text mastered later). Matching levels is important for fiction, however. Here are the basics:

<b>0 – 3 yrs</b>	Sturdy board/flap/fabric books (and picture books to read w/adults)
<b>4 – 6</b>	Early reader books, w/level system on cover, plus simple picture books
<b>7 – 9</b>	Chapter books, w/gradually increasing vocabulary and decreasing font size
<b>10 – 13</b>	Advanced books, w/increasing length & complexity but safe/clean content
<b>14 – 17</b>	Teen/Young Adult books, w/varying complexity & potentially containing mature subject matter (e.g. violence, sexuality, abuse, drugs, suicide, etc)

For adults, relevancy is more imperative than recency. Relevant means the subject is popular or useful at the moment, or applicable to your patrons’ interests. For example, cookbooks are going to attract more attention than volumes about how to raise farm animals, especially if you’re headed to an apartment complex. Though it would be great if you have room on your shelves to display both. We always sought to dedicate space to relatively narrow topics and offer at least a small selection of weird stuff.

It helps to be in touch with cultural and technological trends. A recently published book for the elderly about how to use an iPad might be very useful. A book from ten years ago about how to build a great classical CD collection, not so much. This isn’t because classical music is necessarily losing popularity, it’s because even seniors are now taking advantage of the convenience of music streaming services. Topics in the media will also be relevant. You could expect increasing interest in virus-related science during a pandemic, for example. Or a demand for Black History if there are widespread protests against racial inequality.

We did engage in occasional censorship during the selection process. We never tossed out material because it didn’t match our political or religious beliefs. The targeted books typically fell into one of two categories: hate speech or glorified sexual abuse. We destroyed any nonfiction that incited hatred or was openly prejudicial based on sex, race, ethnicity, etc. We also drew the line above anything clearly sensationalizing rape or other abuse. This content was mostly found in



the more extreme graphic novels. These look like comics but are commonly longer, use thicker paper and a book-like spine binding. Be sure to flip through each graphic novel you receive before deciding which are suitable for your public.

Trying to establish a standard for maximum violence in text-based adult fiction would be both challenging and time consuming. Plenty of popular genres contain graphic violence, including Mystery, Horror and True Crime. Indeed, it seems like every new Suspense story is trying to push the boundaries on how shockingly brutal the villain can be. Whose standard would you use, anyway? Your crew might have five different ideas of what should be censored. Don't worry, most readers of these categories know what they're getting into. If you're really concerned, you could put up warning labels near those shelves.

Eventually every book needs a decision. If it's a keeper, you'll put it into either the immediate placement bin or reserve stock bin. For these tasks, we recommend purchasing sturdy, lightweight plastic bins with comfortable handles, similar to postal bins. They hold up to the constant use much better than cardboard boxes and provide larger capacity without becoming unwieldy.

Anything else goes into a discard box. This is a good use for the non-standard box types in which you will inevitably receive donated books. If you use only bankers and copy paper sizes within your operation, employ anything else for outbound discards. That will also save you a lot of labor flattening and recycling.

So, where to take your discards? Most thrift stores will accept them for attempted resale but if you don't think they are worth giving away, the store probably won't find many buyers. Unloading on them merely shifts the burden. Search out organizations that will actually benefit from your outflow and keep it away from the landfill. At the very least, the paperbacks can be recycled, though professional pulp facilities go all the way by detaching the stiff boards from hardcovers, too.

We discovered our local Goodwill Industries would attempt to sell our better discards but even if we were passing them nothing of real value, they could properly recycle it. They had a working relationship with a paper pulping company paying four cents per pound for those bulk books. Considering Goodwill employs individuals with disabilities, this was a win-win-win situation and we recommend trying to find something similar.

**SORTING – STEP THREE:** This is the aforementioned shift from sorting at your table to categorized distribution. Once you have completed steps one and two with all your current donations, bring

the immediate placement bins into your vehicle and arrange those books on the appropriate shelves for display. Whenever you have more volumes than will fit on any given shelf, make room by pulling off those sitting untouched the longest. These removals can either join the discards or reserves depending on how much material you currently have for that genre.

Then take your reserve bins to your storage shelving and put each book into its appropriate category box. This is easier to do at the end of the same work session as the sorting because your memory of the initial examination will be fresh and help you quickly determine the correct categories.

### **HOW WE DID IT:**

Our first storage was donated by a neighbor in my rural neighborhood who wasn't using much of his garage. I set up a flimsy bookcase in the corner and wooden pallets on the gravel floor for overflow. This structure didn't have a foundation or concrete pad but I figured pallets would at least keep the books cleaner. Alas, heavy rains in winter raised the groundwater level, soaking the gravel. Enough moisture filled the air to start infiltrating the books, making them soft and flexible. Some of the piles shifted and slid to the ground. There the books acted like wicks, pulling water up from the gravel. Hundreds were lost in a day or two before I returned and saw what happened.

Seeking much more security, we rented a 23' steel container from Endeavour Storage Solutions in Fremont, CA. Their unique design featured conveniently larger dimensions than a freight container, an elevated wooden floor, and double-door entry at both ends. The unit proved to be completely watertight and did not sweat. Though the steel walls retained heat once the sun had been on them for a while, we reduced problems by positioning our container in a relatively shady spot. Endeavour seems to be a regional company but you can examine their website photos ([endeavourstorage.com](http://endeavourstorage.com)) and check if anyone in your area rents a similar product. Endeavour also sells containers so it's possible you could have one delivered long distance for an extra fee.

Our container afforded space to install three of our custom bookcases shelving units along one side and two more units plus a seven-foot long wooden massage table along the other side. The massage table turned out to be the perfect height for sorting newly donated books.

The evolution of our sorting process is discussed in detail above but the best single piece of advice is this: learn proper body mechanics and don't overdo it. Repetitive motion injuries and gradual joint deterioration are common in the book-handling business – follow current medical

advice on mitigating these risks. Ask the physically capable volunteers to do more of the lifting, or rotate handling duties regularly. Try to have the knowledgeable minds present for the choosing but not necessarily for the manual labor.



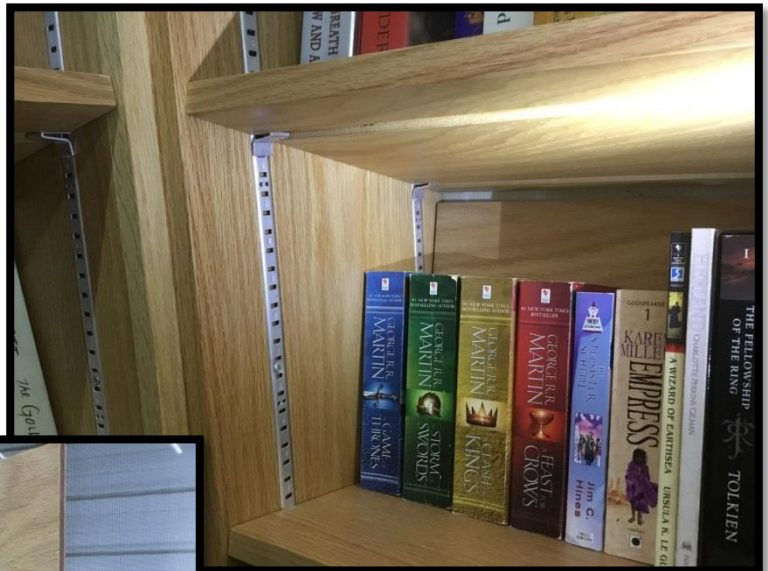
The interior of our storage unit. A seven-foot wooden massage table worked well for sorting (right); shelving along both walls filled all other available space. The unit opened at both ends for extra light. Note also the list of category codes posted above the table to help new crew members get up to speed.

## Chapter 7 – Displaying Books

*(Note: This chapter benefitted by actively combining the instructional discussion with HOW WE DID IT. You will find those personal notes integrated throughout and therefore this chapter's supplement contains only a list of the shelf categories we utilized.)*

If your bookmobile will be a conversion then you get to design the shelving from scratch. This may sound a little daunting but with a measuring tape and the help of an experienced cabinet maker, you can figure out what will fit nicely into your space.

The shelves should be slanted slightly upward. This keeps books from sliding onto the floor each time you turn the vehicle at more than 10 mph. Therefore each shelf is not simply a support piece but must have its own lightweight vertical backing piece as well. These can be slipped into standard cabinets as long as ladder-type bracket structures



**Shelf removed from cabinet to show thin vertical backing board**

are installed. The rear of the shelf rests on clips or pins positioned one level below the front clips, creating the slant but keeping everything firmly braced.

Keep in mind that younger children read large-format picture books so you will need some taller, deeper shelf space down low. These shelf types are also appropriate for elementary school level nonfiction,



such as the masterfully illustrated DK and National Geographic books on nature, animals and science.

A helpful element is a seating area for parents and young children to browse and read together. Ideally this would be somewhat out of the way of general foot traffic. Creating a family-friendly nook in one corner is an option, as is dedicating the lower half of your back wall to little kids. This allows older youth and adults to access the rest of the bookmobile without disturbing a sweet, impromptu story-time. Benches likewise serve this purpose, allowing an adult and child to sit to one side without blocking a central walkway others use to get fore and aft.

If you have acquired a pre-built bookmobile, hopefully there is already provision for these little gatherings. At the very least you want a spot where toddlers and preschoolers can explore their books without worry of being stepped on. Having the young child section up front, for example, would likely be a disaster. Everyone entering would need to gingerly work their way around the tots on the floor. And people who don't feel steady on their feet might peek in your door and decide that trying to maneuver past those kids is too risky. If you have no infrastructure enhancements for children and their parents, the default solution is to put their books in the far back.



**Taller, deeper shelves for picture books and other oversized items**



**Benches allow for relaxed reading together**

Our first big bookmobile, the purpose-built Maroney, came with carpeted benches in the center of the vehicle along either side. Tall, deep shelves were built into the cabinets behind these benches so that's where we put many of our picture books and the aforementioned illustrated youth nonfiction.

We dedicated the entire rear wall below the window to toddlers and preschoolers. Small, cubby-like shelves held board books, and a wide, spacious display contained a broad selection of early readers.

By design we left enough room to mount five or six of them magazine-style, with their covers facing outward. For these teaser books, we made sure to highlight a variety of both popular mainstream characters (e.g. whatever was hot from Disney) and older beloved series such as Curious George, Frog and Toad, and anything by Dr. Seuss.

Below the early readers we stocked a huge selection of hardcover picture books. Enhancing the sense of privacy here was our closet door to one side, essentially functioning as a back-support wall, which encouraged parents to read with their child by setting up in the corner. This worked as long as they were aware of any other kids trying to access that section. Only occasionally did we have to prompt them to make more room.



Above the window we placed both fiction and nonfiction for teens. During open public-access hours, teens were our least frequent visitors so this greatly reduced the overall foot traffic in back. At high schools our patrons were almost exclusively teens but since there weren't any young children present, there was no conflict.



**Generate interest and fill gaps with 'facing' books**

Let me again emphasize the importance of displaying some of your books 'facing,' with the covers easily visible. This is a great way to quickly engage youth into the process and you will attract even reluctant readers if you show off your most interesting material. It was routine practice for us with board books, early readers and picture books. We also lured a lot of older kids into the sports and animal sections this way.

But it's actually an excellent technique for any shelf once books begin leaving and gaps open up. Find a book that

represents the genre well, or features an especially intriguing cover, and turn it flat like a magazine. Most find this more attractive than a continuous row of spines and we received frequent compliments on our presentation. First check those covers, which virtually everyone will see, for controversial imagery, such as firearms, violence or gore, overt sexuality, and provocative symbology.

You can achieve the same benefits of facing by standing up a few of your prime titles on the checkout desk, windowsills, or anywhere you have unused flat space. These highlighted items add a nice visual variety to liven up the entire setting.

A checkout desk is extremely useful. First and foremost it's a spot to convene with your patrons and chat without getting in the way of others' browsing. You'll be explaining the free bookmobile concept often and folks will want to tell you about what they like to read.

The desk is a great place to display your promotional material with details about your routes, your website address, and how to get involved as a donor or volunteer. Printing up custom bookmarks with basic program information is highly recommended. It's quite inexpensive to get quality, glossy-coat bookmarks in bulk from online companies such as Overnight Prints. Many outfits even have online design tools and you don't have to be artistic to get started.

Our most dedicated volunteer decided to create beautiful custom bookmarks out of thick scrapbooking paper. She cut each page into standard size bookmarks, rounded the corners, and then adorned most of them with stickers or heat embossing. We gave them away along with the books. These were extremely popular with both children and adults, serving to remind them later of their delightful encounter with us. We stamped our logo and website address on the backs.

Other items for your desk could include a donation jar for cash contributions, information about your major donors or other local service organizations, and extraordinary books that might be tragically overlooked if they were sitting on a standard shelf alongside everything else.

As described above, it's critical a portion of your shelving accommodates oversized books but even better if they are all height-adjustable. This is fairly standard on quality cabinets and should be a requirement if you are buying or building new ones. We ended up making several height adjustments over the years in order to shift categories around, and occasionally we even added a shelf by shortening all the others in that column.

Another essential flexibility is quick-change shelf labels. These facilitate visitation to a variety of populations in a single day while maximizing your offerings for each. The idea is to start the route

with the ideal configuration for your first stop but bring boxes of other types of books in your supply closet or driver area. The reserves might be different youth reading levels, extra foreign language titles for certain neighborhoods or adult schools, extra mysteries, romance and history for seniors, and extra teen fiction for high schools. After serving one population, you can pull some of their stuff off the shelves and restock with books more appropriate for your next stop. Then switch the labels and presto!

We're not talking about converting half the vehicle, which could easily get exhausting. You can achieve good results with a few carefully chosen shelf swaps. When serving child-only locations, for instance, try creating large contiguous zones of appropriate books with a goal of quickly orienting them to their choices and smoothing the flow of bodies. The younger they are, the simpler it should be. Our visits to preschools were efficient in large part because, prior to arrival, we converted two big adjacent sections of shelving to material solely for their ages. This meant we could spend more time on the really fun part, the interactive story-time prior to the book choosing (see Chapter 8 for more information on school visits).

Though there are a variety of shelf label systems available we decided to make our own on laminated card stock with heavy-duty Velcro backing. This was a time-consuming process but the resulting plasticized tags were relatively soft and flexible, guaranteeing no child would get cut if they fiddled with them. The characteristic noise Velcro makes when separating was another advantage, letting us know if a kid was surreptitiously removing labels.

Here's the process: make a template grid in a word processor, fill in your category names, and print it on card stock with a decent quality inkjet. Slice the labels neatly using a table-top paper cutter, then slide them into a laminating pouch with enough margin around each to seal properly. After laminating, use scissors to cut each label from the plastic sheet, again leaving a decent margin. Then press strips of fuzzy-sided industrial-strength Velcro onto the backs of the labels.

Your labels can now be quickly affixed on each shelf edge where you will have already placed a strip of the stiff side of the Velcro. These stiff strips rarely wore out or peeled off of our oak shelves. It was a good long-term solution.

Now which labels to put where? Assuming your default setup will be for the general population, here are a few considerations on category layout. The guiding principal is children's books go on the lower shelves and books for adults go on the higher shelves. Even taller kids are much more flexible than adults and most have no problem bending over or kneeling on the floor. In fact, lower levels work fine all the way up through middle-school ages even though these books should



be stocked on different shelves than the elementary age volumes. Only for the teen/high school population do you need to start placing books at adult height.

If you are planning on serving large numbers of school children on a regular basis, timing becomes a factor. The wider you spread multiple shelves of the appropriate types, such as chapter books, the more kids you'll be able to host in each group. Spreading the choices horizontally instead of stacking them vertically creates more space for multiple bodies to get close to the books. (We recommend those shelves be contiguous, however, for ease of orienting each group of kids to their appropriate zones.) This generates a huge advantage when you are trying to serve 100 children at an aftercare facility. If you can usher in groups of six kids instead of four, you can give everyone more time and still finish up before closing.

Depending on your category placements, it might work well to bring on a variety of ages at the same time. If the children will be occupying different browsing spots inside your vehicle, you can accommodate more of them. And if it's an entire school or summer camp or other high-volume location, don't forget to bring back-up books. You don't want the final groups of kids to encounter a much smaller and less desirable selection than the initial groups. We cleared off our desk at these stops to display even more facing books, flat on their backs, appropriate to the current age(s) being served.



**Additional chapter books easily perused on our checkout desk**

A note on youth category names: children can be sensitive to how their books are labeled. If you go with the common school lingo "Chapter Books," for example, you will turn off kids who think they are too old or too advanced for them, even though they might not be. Chapter books in fact cover a relatively wide range of difficulty but a child may feel they are risking embarrassment if they look there.

Our solution was to build on the "Early Reader" nomenclature. Early (or "easy") readers are designed to be the first books kids can read by themselves, offering short, simple sentences in a large font. The difficulty is indicated by number, with 1 being the easiest and 3 or 4 being the most challenging (some publishers go up to 5 but these are essentially chapter books). We never

encountered children who worried about being seen as an early reader. Reading on one's own was a big accomplishment, a badge of honor, and we kept that label.

The more complex early readers lead smoothly into beginning chapter books, which we called "Middle Reader". This succeeded as a much less aversive term to cover all youth fiction targeting approximately 7 – 8 years of age (2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> grade) up through 9 – 10 years (4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade). These books are for elementary school kids so the term should not be confused with "Middle School".

Our middle school-age fiction was instead labeled "Advanced Reader". This signified an increase in vocabulary level, grammatical complexity and overall length. Advanced Reader books might also contain more mature themes and limited (non-graphic) violence but it is very important you separate these shelves from the ones displaying Teen and Young Adult titles.

You'll need to develop standards for where this boundary is drawn. For us, anything with realistic or graphic violence, drug use, sexual themes, suicide, gang activity, or abuse of any kind would not be eligible for the Advanced Reader section, even if it was written for a middle school age. Some of these books might make it onto the Young Adult shelf, which was up high in a different part of our vehicle, ensuring kids couldn't stumble upon it while browsing the safer storylines placed down low.

Thus the progression goes Toddler (board and flap books) > Picture Books (largely designed to be read with a parent or sibling) > Early Readers > Middle Readers > Advanced Readers > Teen Fiction > Young Adult. We purposefully located the Advanced Reader shelves directly above the Middle Readers, enabling children a quick shift to more suitable material if their original category guess turned out too easy or too difficult.

The bulk of our general youth non-fiction was divided into either Science & Nature or 'other' but we did maintain separate sections for kid-level Art & Music, Sports, Humor and Español. Due to low supply, we dedicated only one shelf to non-fiction specifically for teens. Of course all the rest of the non-fiction was also available to teens, as long as it wasn't extremely technical or specialized. Occasionally we conducted a brief vocabulary test at the exit door to make sure someone's ambition wasn't completely outpacing their reading level.

For adults it makes sense to place the most popular categories at the most comfortable height. We observed this to be a range between a person's waist and eye level, using an average adult height of 5'7". Experiment with what works best for your patrons.

We noticed, for example, that Westerns and books on Philosophy or Politics were much more likely to be selected by men, so we placed them higher. Conversely, the Crafting and Romance genres were appreciated mostly by women, so we put those a little lower. We made sure to put any intense violence and sexual content as high as possible, especially our Horror/True Crime and Adult Only material. We still had to keep an eye on things but at least most youth couldn't casually grab these and open them up to something potentially disturbing. Most of the graphic novels passing the basic censorship test (see Chapter 6) were still too graphic to be in plain sight. We kept them up front with our crew for perusal upon request by anyone with an apparent age of at least 21 (or with their parent's permission).

A wide, sturdy stepstool was kept on hand for any adult who wanted to reach the top shelves. Our tight carpet weave made this a pretty stable operation, as did the grippy, textured top of the stool, but gauge for yourself the risks of elevating your clientele. An alternative solution is to have one of your taller onboard crew members retrieve items for shorter individuals. Because we had no wheelchair lift or ramp, our staff also brought books in requested categories out to the curb for anyone unable to climb our stairs.

We estimate 2/3 of our total adult outflow was fiction and 1/3 was nonfiction. This was even more skewed in favor of fiction for younger readers, up until high school, at which point it balanced closer to 50-50. This is not to say you should initially dedicate 2/3 of your shelving to fiction but you can observe how this trends and fine-tune as desired.

It's helpful to quickly refer new visitors to sections they will enjoy browsing. We arranged one side of our bookmobile to display almost entirely fiction and the other side nonfiction (remember the rear was mostly for younger children). This gave us a very easy way to orient anyone who came on board. We intentionally positioned the most popular adult categories near the front, reducing congestion down the narrow center aisle of our vehicle. Over time we observed the most popular genres to be Thriller/Suspense, Mystery, Women's Fiction, Classics, and general literature (the popular and prize-winning books of the moment), which we called Featured Fiction.

How many different categories you display will depend on how many shelves you have, what type of patrons you'll be serving, and your available inventory. We used common library or bookstore genres as a starting point and tweaked their allotted space over the years. For example, we originally devoted two shelves to Classics but they began disappearing rapidly once we started visiting high schools on a regular basis. That section had to be cut by half to reserve some of our good stuff for upcoming routes in the days ahead. Classics were too expensive to

purchase on our budget so we were at the mercy of incoming donations. We eventually learned to be more specific about our needs when soliciting books from the public.

So what categories will you start with? Check the supplement below for a list of the ones we used in a bookmobile with an interior length of 16 feet. The shelving went from floor to ceiling on both sides and additionally covered a five-foot wide rear wall, minus the window and closet. Our list might be a good starting point, adapted for the size of your vehicle. A smaller rig means fewer, broader categories. For example, Self-Help & Relationships could be combined with Health to form a Mind, Body & Fitness category. If you have room for more categories, you might want to separate History from War, and further still, History could become American History, Ancient History, Black History, etc.

It's okay to have catch-all sections for items you just aren't sure about, or that you want to showcase away from their traditional genres. Our Featured Nonfiction shelf was handy for these purposes as well as for promotion of high quality overstock/duplicates from any other category. Our Featured Fiction section similarly worked this way but ended up holding all of our non-genre literature as well. Looking back, we could have broken this up with separate labeling for the latest publications versus old favorites.

## **HOW WE DID IT:**

On the next page are the labels we ultimately settled on for our shelves. Remember that it's appropriate to split up certain nonfiction categories into different sections for youth versus adults, especially Art & Music, Science & Nature, Español, Humor, and Sports. Due to limited supply, the rest of the kids' stuff went onto a general Youth Non-Fiction shelf (though distinct from the Teen Non-Fiction). Note too the Oversized catch-all, covering both fiction and nonfiction, which was necessary in order to keep all other shelves at efficient standard heights.

The children's category distinctions are explained in the text above. Animal Tales are Middle Reader fiction specifically about animals. Education & Academics contained textbooks (check carefully for recency/relevancy) plus titles about education itself. We also found it useful to place duplicate science textbooks on both our Teen Non-Fiction and adult Science & Nature shelves.

<b>Toddler</b>	<b>Science &amp; Nature</b>
<b>Picture Books</b>	<b>Biography</b>
<b>Early Reader</b>	<b>Poetry &amp; Short Stories</b>
<b>Middle Reader</b>	<b>Classics</b>
<b>Advanced Reader</b>	<b>Historical Fiction</b>
<b>Teen Fiction</b>	<b>Education &amp; Academics</b>
<b>Young Adult</b>	<b>Oversized</b>
<b>Youth Non-Fiction</b>	<b>Gardening</b>
<b>Teen Non-Fiction</b>	<b>Food &amp; Drink</b>
<b>Horror &amp; True Crime</b>	<b>Business &amp; Finance</b>
<b>Self-Help &amp; Relationships</b>	<b>Reference</b>
<b>Special Reference</b>	<b>Culture &amp; Travel</b>
<b>Humor</b>	<b>Westerns</b>
<b>Art &amp; Music</b>	<b>Holiday</b>
<b>Foreign Language</b>	<b>Animal Tales</b>
<b>Women's Fiction</b>	<b>Sports &amp; Games</b>
<b>Inspiration &amp; Friendship</b>	<b>Staff Picks</b>
<b>Spiritual &amp; Religion</b>	<b>Thriller &amp; Suspense</b>
<b>How-To</b>	<b>History &amp; War</b>
<b>Health</b>	<b>Adult Only</b>
<b>Audio &amp; Large Print</b>	<b>Politics</b>
<b>Building &amp; Crafting</b>	<b>Philosophy</b>
<b>Fantasy</b>	<b>Romance</b>
<b>Science Fiction</b>	<b>Mystery</b>
<b>Featured Non-Fiction</b>	<b>Featured Fiction</b>
<b>Español (para adultos)</b>	<b>Español (para niños)</b>

## Chapter 8 – Planning and Promoting Routes

Where will your bookmobile go? This depends on your goals. If you have surveyed the need (see Chapter 2) then you have begun mapping out populations who would benefit from free books. We will assume you plan to reach all types, aiming for those who are challenged for access. If your project will focus exclusively on a certain demographic, such as K – 5 schools or senior citizens, you can skip ahead to that discussion.

Serving the general public is a lot of fun. Anyone who randomly encounters you for the first time will likely be amazed. Adults in particular develop habits and routines which tend to inure them to life's novelties. If they value reading, your bookmobile can surprise them in a profound way. And when they learn there is no catch, no hidden cost, they may feel something magical is happening.

These are the interactions that can quickly build support for your efforts. And make your day! Be prepared to tell the story of what you're doing and how it got started. Make sure you have at least a flyer or bookmark with contact information. Even better if it's specific about how they can find you again or get involved, and where they can bring book donations.

There are two types of locations for reaching the public: permanent sites and events. Permanent sites always have potential foot traffic – think shopping centers, mass transit hubs, parks, apartment complexes, popular restaurants or food trucks, downtown corridors, homeless shelters, etc. Events are anything planned ahead to attract a crowd. Of course you want to consider the expected atmosphere and how many would-be readers are likely to attend.

**PERMANENT SITES:** The keys to success at high foot-traffic locations are choosing the most appropriate days/times and the precise positioning of your bookmobile.

Even at busy locations there will be a premium window of opportunity. Usually it's obvious. You'll want to be at a shopping center with lots of restaurants during meal times. The park will be much busier on the weekends during nice weather. Scout ahead at different hours to check it out or talk to those who work and live nearby.

If you want to serve families, your best bet is normally weekends and early evenings. Hopefully your on-site crew members are available at these times and you may want to keep this in mind when recruiting. Some libraries are closed on Sundays and this creates an opportunity to fill that gap on 'family day,' when many clans like to go out as a group. Parents will be thrilled to bring

their kids to the bookmobile for a leisurely browse after brunch or church. And you will be proud to facilitate a loving activity children and their caregivers can share without expense – and without video screens.

Exactly where you position your bookmobile is often crucial. We quickly discovered that literally each foot closer we were to the flow of foot traffic, the more visitors we attracted. This was especially important for engaging those unfamiliar with our service. At a distance everybody will glance over but multiple questions will arise in their minds. Is it really free? What's the catch? Do I need a library card? Will I have to sign up and give out my info? If it's really free, are the books junk? Do they have appropriate books for my kids? Will I have to return them later?

You should be close enough so folks can investigate and answer these questions without much effort. So they can peek inside or ask the librarian about the system. And if children are driving the curiosity, it will be harder for parents to say no if the bookmobile is right in front of them.

There is an art to securing the perfect spot. Rarely will you enjoy complete control over your placement but if you have comparable options, study both visibility and safety. Regarding visibility, think about the flow of traffic and where people's eyes are focused. Think about potential visual obstructions, such as parking that is empty now but might fill up later. Deploy at least two lightweight sandwich-board type signs facing different directions to advertise what you're offering. Use a large font size and get right to the point: "Stop for great FREE BOOKS!"

Regarding safety, check specifically for vehicle traffic nearby. Streets and parking lots are dangerous places. Patrons exiting the bookmobile will probably be thinking about the wonderful experience they just had rather than how to dodge the car driving by your access door. In this scenario, try to create a safety zone by parking your vehicle whereby people will have at least a few meters of space, inaccessible to cars, when they enter or exit. For example, you could park the bookmobile at a 60° angle across multiple empty parking spaces to create a safe zone inside the 'triangle'.



**Diagonal parking to create a triangular safe zone**

When things are really tight near traffic, be sure to allow a reasonable amount of room for other drivers to maneuver around your bumpers. If you don't, someone will eventually hit you or complain, and you want to avoid both situations. Assume drivers have below-average skill when deciding how much buffer is appropriate.

Which brings us to getting permission to be there in the first place. One option is to choose your spot, start giving away books and see what happens. If a property manager or store owner comes out to investigate, be extremely polite and give them a tour. Seeing your operation in person may generate more sympathy than if you cold-call them ahead of time, which makes it really easy for them to say no. Business owners can be very protective of their customer parking but you might mitigate this tendency if they feel like partners in your project.

**WARNING: Prior to launching your service you should obtain liability insurance to protect yourselves and the owners of the properties on which you operate!**

Once you have identified popular sites through testing, create a regular visitation schedule. The more consistent you can be with the time and day of the week/month, the easier it will be for your regular patrons to return. They will also have a much simpler task recommending you. Word-of-mouth is terrific and allows the person advertising for you to answer all those questions that inevitably come up.

Other forms of effective promotion abound. Social media seems to reach the furthest these days and even though heavy phone users may not be readers of paper books, they probably know those who are and can help you spread the word. Their networks often include children and senior citizens, two of your prime target groups.

Contemplate the range of demographics each social media outlet tends to host. Hyper-local hubs like Nextdoor are great for announcing your availability. A consistently updated Facebook page, Instagram account and Twitter feed are good ideas, in part because these can be checked by your fans through an internet browser without installing the apps or signing up, and in part because their user bases are quite broad. Post your schedule on a dedicated webpage as well. There are many inexpensive options from companies that make it extremely simple to design and maintain a basic website from any computer.

Most print media, notably the free rags, offer a section for event listings. Community services like yours might qualify for no-fee insertions but if not, don't be shy about contacting them directly to



see what's possible. You may even get one of their writers to come see what it's all about. If not, be patient. Publicity in the local news will grow if you become known for a quality operation.

Posters in high traffic areas like coffee shops and fast-casual eateries are often effective promotion. Target anything popular in the relevant neighborhood. You could further boost turnout with flyers at libraries, apartment complexes and senior centers.

Try informing families through the nearby school districts. This method is not as effective as it used to be because the notice will probably be limited to a small listing within a long digital newsletter. You might convince them to hand out paper flyers if you provide the correct quantity in the appropriate format and languages. This could be especially worthwhile once per year (perhaps at the start of the school term) to raise general awareness and then you can transition those families to your other means of communication about routes, donations, volunteering, etc.

Seem like a lot of effort? It will be at first because finding the best methods for your particular destinations compels experimentation. Assigning the role of dedicated Neighborhood Promoter is highly recommended. This person should have decent knowledge of their region (or be willing to research it) and oversee the execution of appropriate promotion. They can even recruit their own helpers to make it a team effort.

Stay in touch with these Promoters and increase efficiency by diligently correlating which approaches led to which outcomes. At our peak we had a different volunteer Neighborhood Promoter for each of our regular monthly stops, all supervised by a single staff member.

**EVENTS:** Special events are opportunities to serve lots of people in a relatively short timeframe. Our biggest daily tallies were always achieved in conjunction with festivals. The event organizers handle the publicity, making your job simple – show up prepared to give away LOTS of books.

At first you will have to reach out to these organizers to request entry. As long as space is available there is a good chance to secure a free reservation because of the value you provide. Let them know about driving in and note the dimensions of your bookmobile. This will often place you in a special vehicle section or at the end of a row of standard booths. Also make them aware of any time constraints if you can't stay for the entire duration. They may accommodate an early departure but it's less likely a late arrival will be allowed due to the potential disruption. Once your service is better known, you may receive unsolicited invitations to join various occasions, and naturally count on requests for your return to annual affairs that worked out well.

Most events with large crowds will produce plenty of patrons but some gatherings are better bets than others. Anything popular with families of young children should be successful, particularly if there is a nature, culture or education theme. Even if the activities are based purely around entertainment or a holiday, many parents will bring their kids over to your bookmobile in hopes of scoring a new bedtime story or chapter book. Fundraisers for non-profits or community programs tend to bring out cheerful folks who enjoy reading. See the supplemental section below for a list of gatherings we attended regularly.

Events focused on food, alcohol and/or loud music may not be worthwhile. Aside from the potential demographic mismatch, there are significant challenges inherent in serving individuals who want to browse books while eating or intoxicated or being subjected to high noise levels. Your crew may spend a stressful evening trying to enforce your rules instead of encouraging people to discover a new author.

You might consider access when choosing events. If there is an entrance fee, that will exclude those who can't afford it. If the site is only reachable by car, that will exclude persons without a ride. There's no unwritten rule stating you can't attend these events. It may achieve one of your outreach goals or raise awareness of your bookmobile during the early days. But it's something to ponder if you have limited resources.

Your foremost resource is your books and they can fly off the shelves very quickly at a festival. We recommend you set the limit to one book per person on these occasions, at least until you can observe the impact on your supply (our non-event limit for the general public was three per person per day). There is also the essential issue of book quality. Your book manager will gradually develop a sense of premium versus average versus low-end material. How much of your premium will you tender on any given day? How about to this population? In which categories?

It's critical to look ahead on your schedule and retain what you need to complete those upcoming routes. A conservative approach would be to mix in a very limited number of your finest books on event day so you won't have any problems next week during the school visit in a disadvantaged neighborhood. But then if you put the rest of your new early-readers up for grabs at the school and they completely disappear, what will you bring for your regular stops the following weekend?

Balancing the outflow of books is a skill that develops with experience. It's based on detailed knowledge of what you have in reserve, an intuition about what's headed out the door on various routes, and a feel for what is probably arriving soon through your donation channels. That crucial second element, the intuition about outflow, will improve over time. Hopefully your book manager can make a long-term commitment to the project.

Just remember: a single event can devastate your supply of books if you aren't careful about what and how much you are offering.

Expect a higher workload at busy gatherings. You'll want more staff and volunteers present to split up duties and rotate shifts. If your bookmobile is enclosed, it's helpful to have a team member managing the line outside and making sure everyone is safe going up and down the stairs. This doorperson can explain the system to waiting patrons so they can immediately jump into action when it's their turn, reducing delays for everyone else. Stationing a sturdy table outside gives everyone a spot to leave their food and drinks. Be sure to keep wet wipes on hand for little ones who have been eating Cheetos.

Another vital role during any rush is straightening books and restocking shelves. It's normal for young children to leave things messy when they're finished but this is not the presentation you want greeting the next set of visitors. While the doorperson holds the line for a minute, another team member can straighten everything, mount reserve books, and turn something eye-grabbing into a facing position (displaying the cover) to fill space. The adult shelves require this attention too, but not nearly as often.

If you're ambitious and have a big crew, you could plan your own event centered on literacy or whatever, and invite other appropriate groups to join. This involves a lot of planning and labor but if you represent a service club or other non-profit you may already have the relevant experience. It's an opportunity to set things up exactly how you want them. But mind the first three rules: location, location, location!

**SCHOOLS AND RELATED:** Schools and their related aftercare programs are where you can make a big impact on local literacy. As discussed earlier, we feel that typical efforts to boost reading are becoming even less effective as digital media continues to penetrate the minds of ever-younger children. Your fun and unique bookmobile can push back against this scourge.

There are several ways to serve school populations and we discuss them here in order of ascending age. Your visits to daycares, preschools and transitional kindergartens (TKs) can be highly interactive if you arrange to perform a story-time prior to book selection. Most teachers appreciate lively guests in their classrooms. Story-time also gives you a chance to introduce yourself and your bookmobile, explaining what you do and why to an unusually rapt audience.

Put some thought into your story selection and performance. It may seem like a simple task but there is definitely skill and art behind successful storytelling, beginning with the choice of book.

Ideally the tale is not too long, so you don't lose the children with shorter attention spans, and features large illustrations that can be seen from the back rows. Your dynamic narration and different voices for the characters can bring it all to life. By keeping the kids' attention throughout, you build momentum and excitement for the main event, the trip out to the bookmobile when everyone gets to choose their own stories to take home.

Children younger than second grade will probably need assistance choosing appropriate titles. As mentioned in the previous chapter, we facilitated this process by temporarily stocking adjacent low-height shelving with suitable material. Once we corralled everyone into the correct area, staff, teachers and volunteers could insert themselves to help kids learn how to evaluate the books. And how to count the ones they had selected. And to make sure they didn't reach up to start pulling down the thick novels.

When serving an entire elementary or middle school (or corresponding aftercare), you won't likely be able orient the children in each classroom ahead of time. One method is to ask the principal or other senior staffer to organize a detailed visitation schedule in advance. Then you can park in front or on the playground and hopefully each teacher will promptly lead their class out for their students' turn inside.

A good rule of thumb for these big crowds is to figure one minute per child plus an additional five minutes for the transition between each class. Each child actually gets a reasonable five minutes to pick their book because they enter the bookmobile in groups of five. We almost always allowed the preschoolers three books each but time and supply constraints tighten things up when serving hundreds across a larger campus.

Give every child your promotional flyer or bookmark. This is a great way to rapidly spread the word through families who could become regular patrons on your public routes, as well as ambassadors of your awesome project.

Though it sounds surprising in the age of smartphones, we had lots of success at the high school level. This was voluntary, open browsing during lunch break and often meant a vehicle full of intrigued adolescents throughout. While the interests of elementary and middle schoolers were heavily weighted toward fiction, high school students liked to investigate everything. Our crew was inspired by this enthusiasm in teenagers for such a broad array of subjects. We highly recommend this type of outreach, hopefully with school staff promoting it beforehand and making a reminder loudspeaker announcement at the start of that lunch period.

**SENIOR SITES:** Seniors who enjoy reading will be thrilled to see you at their housing or day program. It's vital to obtain the support of the relevant site manager, who can not only pass out flyers and ensure it's on everyone's calendar, but probably knows who will be most interested. Since activities schedules are customarily published monthly, set your visit dates with as much advance notice as possible so you make it onto the official listings.

If the site manager is not helpful, you can still get started with basic permission to be on the property. Plan to stay for a while and network with the folks who come see you. There's a good chance you'll encounter a key tenant who is enthusiastic and well connected. Ask them to go knocking on doors or making calls. Then they can be your advance promoter for future visits.

Some residents will require a friendly nudge when you arrive due to memory deficits, whether you are on their calendar or not. And some residents will need assistance getting in and out of the bookmobile if it has stairs. Be prepared for the physical part of this process and the extra time it involves. Minimize the chances of problems by positioning your vehicle on level ground in a central location as accessible as possible. The manager may even give you permission to park in a spot that's normally restricted.

Those who aren't able to climb inside can be served curbside. Ask what type of books or authors they like and bring them a selection from your shelves to inspect outside. Or use your phone to take a picture of books available on the target shelf and show it to your patrons.

## **HOW WE DID IT:**

Excitement was high the day we finally put the finishing touches on our trailer and filled the shelves of our rolling carts. It was already late on a Sunday afternoon though, limiting us to a jaunt into the little rural town down the hill. Getting permission to park along the main row of shops was no problem because there was hardly anyone around.

But as soon as we opened up and erected a couple rudimentary hand-drawn signs, the public magically appeared, as if they had been waiting in the bushes. The unique appearance of our rig and library carts probably stoked the intrigue. What could this be? Everyone who glimpsed us came over to check it out. We served 54 people in those first few hours! It was a very proud moment for our family.

The original idea was to focus on the rural parts of our county, which are numerous. We figured there would be less interest in cities due to the easy library access. Looking at our mostly

weekend availability, we chose small towns on the outskirts for those initial visits. Because our set-up and take-down demanded a fair amount of labor, we usually scheduled only two stops per day. It was challenging to pack many boxes of spare books into our Chevy Suburban while preserving enough room for my boys.

Our early attempts definitely suffered from lack of promotion and a bit of naïveté about how far people would be willing to divert from their routine walking paths. We weren't going in totally blind, however, because I had been in touch with one of the county's ex-bookmobile librarians. She sent me old newsletters detailing routes they maintained through both inner cities and rural areas until the whole program was shut down in the mid-1990s.

It made sense to get more formal with our plans and these documented destinations seemed like a good starting point. We assumed they had refined their list after trial and error and understood the region. In due course we confirmed the wisdom of the sites but it took even longer to realize how important precise parking spots would be to our success.

The timing of our visits was another principal factor. We worked hard to meet the needs of the residents and developed a reputation for consistency, promoting our website for information about the next visit. We standardized many locations onto a monthly schedule, making it easier to spread the word and boost attendance.

We posted regularly to our Facebook and Twitter accounts. Facebook definitely made it easy for fans to link to us and otherwise share our information but I'm not sure how much mileage we got from Twitter.

In the early days we occasionally had a spare afternoon and decided to go visit a park without any advance notice at all. Just something random popping up for whomever was fortunate enough to be around. Luck was on our side because most of these worked out really well, happily surprising the bystanders. We called this "guerilla community service".

The first formal events we attended were volunteer fire department fundraisers and farmers markets. The hosts were happy because we boosted their value, especially for children, and we were happy because our audience was guaranteed. We weren't paying too much attention to the quality of the books back then as we were new to evaluating them. As long as we had enough stock, we were on the road as often as possible. The first time our supplies ran short was a real wake-up call, though, and we immediately put extra effort into securing additional public donation sites to facilitate our increased flow.

Then we started dabbling inside cities and discovered the residents were just as excited about us as those living out in the countryside. The experience was totally unique. Climbing inside our little clubhouse for a browsing adventure was vastly more fun than using the standard library. Kids lit up when they discovered the novelty of our mobile operation. It was the excitement of what might be on the shelves and the guarantee that any treasures you found were yours to keep.

Momentum built rapidly as we made ourselves available for visits to small schools and more events. We fine-tuned our exact parking spot at each location to maximize our visibility to the foot and vehicle traffic. Every once in a while we were denied permission to work in our desired position but more often we were able to negotiate a productive compromise.

Occasionally an upcoming event seemed like a great match but we were unable to communicate with the organizers. Undeterred, we showed up anyway and asked to join in. It was hard to reject us when we were already there, ready to give away quality books. In the rare instances we were turned away, setting up outside the event perimeter gave us access to the crowd anyway.

Over time our reputation blossomed and we were invited to more events than we could attend. Our student outreach commenced with preschools but once word spread that we were available for any type of educational institution, we pretty much had our pick. These visits became more and more successful as we got better at sourcing and organizing age-appropriate material in good condition, including the purchase of brand new books from bulk outlets.

Senior sites were correspondingly central to our efforts from the beginning. We parked right in front of low-income senior apartments and program sites. Staff were thrilled to connect us with their residents. We tried a portable wheelchair ramp but it was heavy and difficult to manage. And though it never tipped over, it did wobble due to the steep incline angle, making everyone anxious. We eventually decided to leave it behind and serve patrons curbside as needed.

We worked hard to cover the entire county, skipping only the smallest of hamlets. Some of our grant funding compelled us to visit specific places on a schedule but we never excluded a region solely because we weren't receiving dedicated funds for them.

Ultimately we crafted a customized approach for each of our regular locations. We designated a new volunteer position as a Neighborhood Promoter. This person focused on learning how to communicate our upcoming availability effectively throughout their region, often generating their own email- and call-lists of motivated helpers. Examples of these frontline partners include a school administrative assistant who faithfully inserted our upcoming dates into the parent



newsletter, and a veterinarian who printed flyers and reserved his customer parking spots for the bookmobile's monthly arrival.

**SAMPLE COMMUNITY EVENTS WE ATTENDED:**

Volunteer fire department fundraiser breakfasts/dinners	Other non-profit fundraisers (Kiwanis, Junior League, cancer research, etc)
Farmers markets	Cultural celebrations
Food bank distributions	Christmas tree lighting ceremonies
Family resource fairs	Other holiday festivals
Back-to-School/Open House events	Parades (gathering at end of route)
Gang prevention awareness events	Art festivals
Children's health fairs	Senior health/wellness fairs
Disability services celebrations	Nature education festivals
Kids day fairs/Día del Niño	Earth Day festivals
Summer lunch programs	Senior lunch programs
Early literacy fairs	Foster families celebrations
Summer/sports camps	Head Start class inaugurations
Outdoor theater events/festivals	Independence Day/4 <sup>th</sup> of July events
Mellow/acoustic music festivals	Kindergym/Preschool graduations

## Chapter 9 – Fundraising

This is a short chapter on a big subject. The following pages merely describe the types of fundraising that helped us grow from a bare-bones, volunteer-only project into a stable program with a \$100,000/year budget employing several staff part-time. Many other texts cover this topic much more thoroughly and if your financial needs grow, don't hesitate to consult professional guides such as Fundraising for Social Change by Kim Klein.

If you plan to sustain your effort you will eventually face the question of official non-profit status. This status broadens your range of potential donors and fundraising activities dramatically because it reassures everyone there's some fiscal management oversight in place. There are multiple ways to approach this and it may not involve all the work of becoming your own non-profit entity. This topic is covered later in the chapter.

First things first: What is your objective? Are you looking to run your bookmobile occasionally when you can get volunteers together? Or are you planning to become consistently available to various underserved areas? How many people would you like to reach and how often?

If you're not sure, run the numbers multiple ways. There is obviously the initial capital outlay on the bookmobile itself. But once you have a vehicle outfitted, getting started should be relatively inexpensive. You're just looking at gas, maintenance and a few supplies. As long as you are successful in pulling together donated books and cheerful volunteer labor, you could follow the low-budget model indefinitely.

When your ambitions grow (or gas money becomes tight), make sure your patrons have an easy way to donate funds to the effort. A clear jar on your check-out desk can collect cash during your stops. Perhaps leave a few bills in there from the previous outing to show others are donating. We even kept a back-up jar on board in case the first one filled up.

We were careful not to imply that a donation was expected. Though our jar was an obvious presence on our desk, which also displayed free handcrafted bookmarks and information about our organization, we never mentioned it to anyone who didn't ask. Keeping in mind our highest purpose was to get great books into the hands of the access-challenged, we focused mostly on low-income persons. It was extremely important to us that everyone left the bookmobile feeling like the whole experience was a gift.

This means you should leave the cash jar at home when visiting certain locations, such as schools and other direct-service events where your audience isn't likely to be able to contribute. You can

always keep pre-printed, self-addressed envelopes handy for anyone who asks about sending you a check later.

At your open events, much of the public will want to make small contributions, to help you perpetuate the bookmobile experience for others. Ideally you will be ready to accept electronic transfers as well as more traditional currencies. There are devices that enable your phone to swipe credit cards on-site, like the Square Payments plug-in. And the number of direct digital transfer services, such as Zelle and Venmo, are growing fast. Try to set up these accounts ahead of time so you never have to divert a donor to a less preferred method – and risk getting nothing.

Naturally your website needs a way to receive online donations. PayPal is the most recognized credit card processing but competitors now abound. The cost, commonly a percentage of the gift plus a flat fee, is a key factor in choosing between them but moreover study the ease of completing the transaction. Donors will appreciate a quick and minimally-invasive process. Make trial runs with whatever interface you are considering. Reject any service that is unnecessarily complicated or requests too much personal data.

If your project is part of a larger organization, like a Rotary or Kiwanis Club, you should think about allowing website visitors to donate exclusively to the bookmobile rather than to your general fund. This may not require a separate bank account as long as your treasurer is carefully tracking different income streams. It's imperative to assure your donors their contributions will be used strictly as intended. Make that clear on your site.

While being respectful of your donors' time and privacy, try to gather some type of contact information for future fundraising. The more, the better, but avoid requests that may seem invasive or arbitrary. Collecting physical addresses can be a real challenge. One way to obtain permission to send postal mail is to offer your donors a tax-donation receipt letter. Printing and sending them is time-consuming but will build your mailing list more quickly.

Email addresses are easier to gather but digital solicitations are easier to ignore. Much easier. In fact, email software now automatically diverts many of these messages as promotions or spam. A portion of your audience will never even see them come through. Email contact tends to work better as a conduit for the latest news about your good deeds or for calls to action, such as a request for volunteers or for various types of book donations. This doesn't mean you shouldn't utilize your e-list in your funding drives, only that you shouldn't expect much response until your subscriber numbers are very large.

Postal-mail appeals should be sent on a regular basis, at least once or twice per year. The traditional holiday season is a good bet because many are in the habit of making year-end charitable contributions. You can also tie a campaign to the frequency or types of effort you're mounting. We ran a second annual postal 'ask' before summer because we were gearing up to

serve thousands of kids at their recreation and lunch sites. Our solicitation letter explained that contributions would help prevent the typical summer slide in child literacy levels.

Once you go in search of larger sums, much will depend on the level and breadth of philanthropy currently engaged throughout your community. Here are various sources to weigh up:

- Individuals: Generous local residents are the great unknown. Relationships built with them could yield a stable source of annual revenue or even relatively large gifts for general operations and/or capital projects, such as the initial bookmobile acquisition. Part of the challenge is finding them. If you have a Community Foundation in the region, it's a great place to inquire. They should know the landscape of who is currently funding what and may have a donor-advised fund system channeling money to the causes their members care about. Much better to have non-profit status (see below) before asking individuals for big checks because they usually receive tax benefits.
- Dedicated fundraising events: Planning and executing your own fundraising event is often labor intensive. You'll want lots of highly motivated volunteers at hand. It's a great way to meet potential new supporters so put effort into acquiring their contact information. The event format is wide open – let your imagination run wild. Improve attendance by offering something fun and/or unique. Effective promotion will likewise be key to boosting turnout. You can raise money on-site with any number of options: door/gate fees, food and drinks, silent auction, live auction, activity tickets, fund-a-need requests, etc. Whatever the setup, make it easy for your guests to simply write a check or put extra cash into a jar. Does not require non-profit status.
- Business groups: These groups could be based around a single industry or comprised of various business leaders. Their motivation is commonly rooted in stewardship of their community, the environment, their employees and families, their image, etc. This often means they are willing to invest in social/educational projects. May or may not require non-profit status.
- Service clubs: This includes any Rotary, Kiwanis, Active 20-30 or other charitable clubs. They may already have a process to evaluate requests for funding or volunteer labor but if not, don't be shy about approaching them, especially if you're willing to speak at one of their meetings. By and large these groups sponsor projects expressly benefitting their geographical purview and often do not require non-profit status.
- Corporate giving programs: Employees of larger companies may be able to automatically deduct money from their paychecks to divert to your organization. Or you may receive matching funds from their employer when they make a personal donation, doubling the gift. United Way specializes in managing these types of giving programs so be sure to check in with them. Some corporations (e.g. Target & Kohl's) maintain ongoing mini-grant opportunities for public-benefit projects, typically in the amount of \$1,000 or less. They

could additionally be a source of volunteer labor, though this may be limited to a job a group of their staff can perform together over a day or two. Almost all of these options require non-profit status.

- Local foundations: These are traditionally established to distribute funds for projects matching a specific focus or beneficiary group. The money could originate from any number of sources, such as bequests, windfall profits, or annual fundraising by the foundation itself. Often the principal assets are maintained and only the investment income is available for distribution under a grant application process. Fortunately a free bookmobile fits into several different public benefit categories. In some cases it's helpful to further structure an application toward serving a particular age group. Usually requires non-profit status.
- Local government grants: Certain city or county government agencies have flexibility in how they allocate their budgets to accomplish goals. Even state funding can be funneled through gatekeepers (such as your regional First 5) to boost residents' health, educational opportunities, or overall quality of life. These grants aren't always widely publicized so researching what's available could pay off handsomely. May or may not require non-profit status.
- Crowdfunding campaigns: This is a powerful tool for bringing lots of individual donors together to accomplish a big objective. Though your stated purpose for the funding can be almost anything, these campaigns tend to be more popular if there is a compelling outcome at stake. You can optionally build even more confidence in the effort by employing an 'all or nothing' modality. This means donors make pledges but don't actually pay unless the overall fundraising goal is met, assuring everyone you should be able to follow through with your promises. Does not require non-profit status.

If your bookmobile is initially successful and your group plans to persist, you'll want to consider pursuing the fundraising benefits of becoming a non-profit organization (NPO). It's possible to bring in enough income to maintain a modest operation without it but you will be ineligible for various sources of major support. Perhaps more importantly, you will receive significantly less money from fewer individual donors because Americans are accustomed to the reassuring oversight NPO status implies. They also appreciate the potential tax deductions allowed by giving to causes with official IRS approval.

Here's the good news: you can receive many of the benefits without securing your own NPO designation. There are two forks down this simpler path: 1) negotiating a fiscal sponsorship agreement with an existing NPO that allows you to use their status for your own fundraising, or 2) becoming an integral part of a larger organization committed to sustaining and investing in your program long-term.

In the first type of arrangement, funds designated for your endeavors flow through the existing NPO (which should have a similar or related mission) subject to standard legal obligations under state and federal law, and their own bylaws. They make those funds available to your program and maintain ultimate financial control in cases of disagreement on intended purposes. The NPO may take a small percentage (typically 5 – 10%) of your unrestricted income in exchange for their accounting and other back-office work. This fee must be waived for certain grants if the granting entity prohibits or discourages such diversion of their funds.

We resolved to seek this type of non-profit partnership early in our history, knowing it would boost our status with the public and make us eligible for significant grants. Fortunately the publicity around our launch and strong subsequent results brought NPOs unsolicited to our door offering assistance. We were blessed with sequential fiscal sponsorship agreements that kept us rolling smoothly for our first several years (see this chapter's supplement for details).

As with most partnerships, the keys here are shared values or goals, good communication and clear expectations. In particular, your sponsorship contract should delineate the responsibilities of each party and a course of action should any of those not be met. Expect to make a relatively detailed report on your work at least quarterly. You shouldn't be micromanaged by the NPO's board or Executive Director as long as you are keeping up your end of the bargain. You will also want to outline a simple path for terminating the relationship, enabling you to return to your previous situation if necessary.

In the second type of arrangement, your program is fully absorbed into another NPO. No distinction exists between the two entities and your labor force likely becomes employees or volunteers of that NPO. Your vehicle and equipment become their assets and all activities become their responsibility. This is not something you would enter into casually unless you are giving up the effort entirely and hoping they can keep it alive.

Ideally you would feel very confident the NPO's management team has the enthusiasm, commitment and infrastructure to shepherd the mission toward outcomes at least as good as you were achieving on your own. If they will be employing your crew, they don't necessarily need the expertise up front. They can learn from you over time. Best if they understand and agree about what kind of budget and staffing will be necessary over the long haul. Then when your original program leadership finally moves on, new personnel can be smoothly slotted in without a reappraisal of the whole effort.

Creating your own official non-profit organization brings both total control and full responsibility to your plate. The benefits are obvious but in evaluating this path, research the time and work

involved. Forming a corporation in your home state probably isn't too thorny and, for a hefty fee, you can hire a lawyer to complete the complex initial IRS application. This won't absolve you from forming and maintaining a board of directors, however. Nor from your fiscal reporting duties and other ongoing paperwork demands.

Once you receive an IRS determination letter and federal tax ID number, you have the green light to go after big money. Larger foundations and high level government entities will welcome your grant applications if you have NPO status. Wealthy individual donors will take your proposals much more seriously. If you haven't already, this is the occasion to introduce yourself to funding matchmakers like Community Foundation and United Way.

Other NPO leaders in the area may also help you navigate your funding landscape. It might be wise to first network with groups which aren't seeking sponsorship for the same project category (i.e. literacy, education). They could view you as competition. There are limited dollars available for each charitable cause and similar NPOs may be reticent to identify their methods and sources (though this information is normally available within their public tax filings). Better to inquire of established organizations with unrelated missions about who provides resources to local NPOs. Then you can start building the relationships that will eventually lead to relevant donors. It's a process.

Online search tools specializing in grant opportunities allow you to cast a wider net. Don't neglect these. Foundations don't always advertise their funding work effectively. Recruit an internet savvy individual for your team who can utilize these tools for research. You might even be able to hire a fundraising specialist for limited consultation to get you started in this arena.

## **HOW WE DID IT:**

We used all of the methods described above, including a crowdfunding campaign to net almost \$35,000 toward the construction of our third bookmobile. That particular effort benefitted from our long-standing reputation and timely publicity in the highly regarded local newspaper.

At our inception we enjoyed a streak of good fortune. Our outreach plans hit the press before we gave away our first book and the executive director of a small Santa-Rosa based NPO, the Literary Arts Guild, contacted us with an offer of support. This organization's main activity was hosting an annual book festival and their board of directors loved the free bookmobile concept.



All the personalities seemed to mesh and we drew up a very simple sponsorship contract that worked out great for a few years until they ceased business. I reported to them quarterly and they were so enthusiastic that they ultimately didn't charge any fee on our income. Our relationship flourished as we each valued the focus, dedication and integrity of the other party.

Shortly before they disbanded we were approached by the Sonoma County Public Library Foundation (SCPLF) with a similar proposition. They appreciated our creative work and were looking to boost their visibility and standing. We needed continued NPO status to bring in operational funding. It was a good match and we were proud to run their logos prominently on the bookmobile. We distributed literature about their mission, promoted county library use and appeared at their events.

This was a more active partnership than with The Guild, with detailed reports submitted to SCPLF on a monthly basis. When challenges appeared, we relied on the strong relationships we had forged to resolve them and keep moving forward. After five productive years together our program made a modest donation toward their mission in lieu of an ongoing income percentage fee, but it's quite likely they had already spent a larger sum on our tax filings preparation. We had boosted each other's efforts with a spirit of shared values.

Ultimately we decided to expand our activities beyond what was reasonable for SCPLF to accommodate. The popularity of the bookmobile meant we were receiving many more requests for appearances than we could manage. We planned to secure our own permanent headquarters, run multiple vehicles simultaneously, and hire a full-time development director among other new staff. It was time to establish our own NPO status and fortunately the IRS accepted my self-written submission on the first attempt.

In the midst of our drive to raise capital for the expansion, COVID-19 hit. The county health officer shut everything down and even after restrictions later loosened a bit, executing our service would have demanded dramatic modifications. Gone would be the casual browsing inside the confines of our bookmobile interior. We'd be stuck out in the weather again, books would have to be cleaned after handling, and so on. The other option would have been distribution of pre-assembled book bags or otherwise eliminating the freedom of choice that made our venture special. Without enthusiasm for these changes, we discontinued the program. Perhaps we should have just returned to the original formula – rolling library carts and a trailer.

Now a few years later, we've learned enough about mitigating the spread of viruses like COVID that we feel the interior format is viable again. You might allow fewer people inside at a time,

require masks, or implement other strategies. At least we now know handling items others have touched is not a large risk.

Our crew has since moved on to other occupations but we sincerely hope you will bring a free bookmobile to life in your community!



## AFTERWORD – Just Try It

No doubt you still have questions and perhaps some concerns about how it will all work out. My advice is: try it, you'll like it. Actually, you'll probably love it.

When our kids got older and no longer rode along as much, my wife and I continued to drive the bookmobile's weekend public-access routes together. Because it was such a feel-good, relationship-building activity, with plenty of smiles and excitement throughout the day, there was literally no place we'd rather have been.

Getting started should be the same: it's all about having fun in good company. In the beginning, don't worry about how the public will respond or if you faithfully followed every suggestion in this guide. Just do a little *building*.

**Build your first book collection.** Once you announce your intentions to friends and family, you WILL receive books. As long as you have a place to store them, keep collecting until you feel confident the quality and variety will appeal to your initial target audience. We gathered books for months before hitting the road.

**Build your contact list.** Everyone who expresses interest in your project should be noted. Get used to asking a simple question: "Is there some way you could help me succeed?" Listen to their thoughts before jumping in with a specific request.

**Build your momentum.** Do something productive toward the goal each week. Make this a habit by consistently reviewing your progress on a specific day (e.g. every Friday). Try to work directly toward that first goal without getting sidetracked on related but nonessential issues.

The recommended first goal? Execute one book give-away at a promising location, hopefully assisted by people you like. All you need is a table and some milk crates filled with books. If you have a good time and the patrons enjoy your effort, you may never look back. But feel free to schedule one service day at a time. Keep it low pressure. You can always ramp things up later.

Please don't hesitate to be in touch. We'd love to hear about your endeavors and are happy to provide additional advice or encouragement. Best way is email to [glen@sonic.net](mailto:glen@sonic.net). We can also be reached at (707) 520-4536. Our website is <http://freebookmobile.org>, featuring many photos and videos of our program in action. Cheers!

