

Three Moms Make History

They've been championed in newspapers from New York to Los Angeles and by the American Library Association. Fêted in the Washington State capital of Olympia, they have turned school librarians into valuable, visible members of the public school system.

These hardworking advocates are Lisa Layera Brunkan, Susan McBurney, and Denette Hill, three Spokane moms.

Because of their efforts, the Washington state legislature recently passed an education reform bill that includes a permanent line item for school library funding—an achievement *School Library Journal* calls “one of the most successful campaigns in the history of libraries.”

The enterprise began with Lisa, who was devastated to learn that, due to district budget shortfalls, librarian hours would be cut in half at many Spokane elementary schools, including her children's neighborhood school. She quickly teamed up with Susan and Denette, and the three worked to raise community awareness and engage the school board.



Lisa Layera Brunkan, Susan McBurney and Denette Hill

The moms knew their own children would be fine in the long run, but were concerned that less-privileged children would be left behind—children without home access to computers and other skills they'd need in the 21st century. Quite simply, these moms wanted to level the playing field.

As a volunteer in the media center at her daughter's school, Lisa knew what a difference a teacher-librarian makes in students' lives. “A teacher-librarian is the only person in the schoolhouse dedicated to imparting the crucial 21st-century skill of information literacy,” she explained. “As the digital divide grows wider, the school library remains the one place that provides equal access to technology.” Thus, the trio went straight to work, blasting emails,

posting fliers and writing letters to the editor. They created an online petition and gathered signatures at bookstores and supermarkets.

Word spread fast; more than 900 Spokane residents signed the women's petition. Letters from prominent business leaders appeared in the local papers. Parents, teachers and librarians supported the trio before the Spokane school board.

Yet, despite these efforts, the school board voted in favor of the cuts. The trio was devastated, but Lisa called losing the local fight “the best thing that ever happened—they told us to ‘swim upstream’ to Olympia.”

Having learned in the process that library funding was a statewide problem, the moms formed a coalition, partnering with the Washington Library Media Association and other groups. They launched a statewide petition and developed a comprehensive Web site, FundOurFutureWashington.org, complete with a blog, research, testimonials and resources for taking action.

The women traveled back and forth to Olympia to meet with legislators, and galvanized hundreds of educators, parents and librarians. The petition they took to Olympia had 1400 signatures.

They were blessed by perfect timing at the state capital: a recently created task force was working to redefine basic education and develop a new funding structure for K-12 education. Looking for a long-term solution to the problem, the women reached out to members of the task force, hoping to have school library programs included in basic education. Addressing the short-term crisis, they drafted and submitted a supplemental budget request for \$54 million.

The trio connected with three key members of the Senate—Majority Leader Lisa Brown, Senator Rosemary McAuliffe and Senator Tracey Eide—all moms. Bills were introduced in both houses, and in February 2008, the Senate voted 49-0 in favor of emergency bridge funding for school libraries—an event that filled the Spokane advocates with joy. Recalled

Susan, “I was watching the vote take place, and just broke into tears.”

That's understandable; this success had come at great cost. The moms had acquired considerable credit card debt, turned a blind eye to dirty dishes and laundry, and seen how stressful their long working hours and separations were on their marriages and children.

Although the Senate bill failed in the House, a compromise was soon worked out, and the final budget included a \$4 million line item for library programs for the next school year.

The women aren't resting on their laurels, however; they want to see a solution at the federal level. And they are delighted that their work has inspired grassroots campaigns in other states; Oregon currently has legislation regarding school libraries in the pipeline.

Thanks to their efforts, future generations of children will be able to walk into public school libraries, because the doors are still open and the lights are still on.

Lisa Layera Brunkan was born in Chile, raised in the U.S., and did graduate work in Costa Rica as a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar. She is married to Rick Brunkan and worked as an executive recruiter before staying home with her three children. With Susan McBurney and Denette Hill, Lisa co-founded the Washington Coalition for School Libraries and Information Technology (WCS-Lit) to advocate for school library funding in Washington State. Lisa, her husband Rick, and their daughter Isabel are judges for the Mom's Choice Awards®.

Susan McBurney received a Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of Washington and has worked as a teacher of the deaf, a sign language interpreter, and a university instructor and researcher. She is married to Michael Gadd and has two young children. She continues her work as a sign language linguist, researching and publishing.

Denette Hill is a CPA.

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