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## **Three Spokane Moms Save Their School Libraries**

### **How three women from Spokane saved their school libraries and created an advocacy model for the rest of us**

*By Debra Lau Whelan -- School Library Journal, 9/1/2008*

One of the most successful campaigns in the history of libraries actually happened by chance, over an order of tofu pad thai. In May 2007, Lisa Layera Brunkan stopped by a Thai restaurant for lunch on her way back from teaching a yoga class at a nearby Air Force base in Spokane, WA. It was there that she picked up a copy of the weekly *Inlander* and saw a photograph of Ginny Pounds, the school librarian at Roosevelt Elementary, where Brunkan's daughter Isabel was a second grader. The accompanying story reported that Pounds, a 17-year teaching veteran, was about to have her hours slashed by the cash-strapped school district.

The news hit Brunkan hard. As a volunteer in the media center, she saw firsthand the difference Pounds made in students' lives. "The library is one place in the school that's dedicated to providing the skills that are so central to the modern age," says Brunkan. And without certified librarians heading them "our children were going to be riding an apple cart on the information highway."

Ten days later, Brunkan found herself testifying to the board of directors of the Spokane Public Schools. "I am here representing concerned citizens of Spokane who oppose any further cuts to librarians," she told them. "We cannot afford to cut our information specialist." But her words had no impact.

From that day on, Brunkan went from a concerned citizen to a grassroots activist. "It was a cause I couldn't ethically turn away from," explains Brunkan. But she had to act fast. In three months, the board would decide whether or not to halve the hours of 10 elementary school librarians to offset a \$10.8 million budget shortfall. While the savings amounted to a measly \$350,000, a drop in the bucket compared to the district's \$293 million budget, it would be the third significant cut to Spokane's hard-pressed media centers over the span of four years.

So the former executive headhunter immediately reached out to Susan McBurney, whose son Owen was a classmate of Brunkan's seven-year-old son, Jack. Denette Hill came aboard a few weeks later, when Brunkan, a neighbor and friend, asked her to review the massive school budget to see if there was any wiggle room to avoid cutting the hours of the full-time librarians. "Lisa never misses an opportunity to recruit someone," says Hill, a CPA who at the time was in the middle of a yearlong hiatus from work.



And that's how the dynamic trio began: Brunkan, the great researcher with exceptional people skills, McBurney, the master organizer with a Ph.D. in linguistics, and Hill, the numbers lady with fantastic business acumen. "We were like a three-headed monster," says Brunkan. "Each of us brought a different strength to the table."

They went straight to work, blasting emails to everyone they knew and talking to neighbors. They launched an online petition, and gathered signatures at supermarkets, coffeehouses, and bookstores. "We were so dorky," laughs Brunkan about those early days.

Then they trained their sights on attracting the top library gurus: Mike Eisenberg, Keith Curry Lance, and Gary Hartzell, who became their mentors and fed them with the latest research about the importance of librarians to



The dynamic trio (from left):  
Susan McBurney, Denette Hill,  
and Lisa Layera Brunkan  
Photograph by Rick Dahms

student achievement.

Word spread fast. Hundreds of Spokane residents quickly signed the moms' petition. Editorials and letters from Senator Lisa Brown (D-Spokane) and local business leaders appeared in the *Olympian* and the *Spokesman Review*. Soon after, librarians, teachers, and parents were addressing the school board in a powerful show of support for their teacher-librarians.

But despite these efforts and the signatures of almost 900 supporters, on August 8, 2007, the school board voted in favor of the cuts.

That September, Pounds took a full-time librarian job at nearby Hamblen Elementary, and JoAnn Moquist replaced her as a part-time librarian at Roosevelt.

"It was devastating," says Brunkan, who cried over the outcome. "After the bad news, we didn't mention the L-word for a month."

Most folks would have called it quits after such a defeat. So why did these three moms keep going? Brunkan says the motivation stemmed from the discovery that this issue was actually a statewide problem: other school districts across Washington were slashing media specialists' positions and hours. Last year, the Federal Way School District axed 20 librarians and the year before, Darrington cut two. The Granite Falls School District also eliminated library positions to balance its budget, and now Spokane was reducing hours. "We knew the system was hemorrhaging," says Brunkan.

Even so, they didn't have to get involved. McBurney's two kids, Nora, five, and Owen, seven, went to public schools that were unaffected by the cuts. And Hill's three boys, Ethan, 10, Henry, 15, and Spencer, 17, attend the elite, private St. George's School. All three women live in lovely homes in the South Hill area, and all can afford to be stay-at-home moms. "That smacks of privilege right there," acknowledges Hill, who went back to work last March.

What drove them on after the board's decision, they say, was a sense of injustice that some kids were developing a broad range of 21st-century skills while others were not. "As mothers we felt we couldn't turn away from the fact that so many children in need would be further marginalized," explains Brunkan. "So we asked ourselves, 'Could we just do nothing?'" And their answer was no.

That sense of battling unfairness was the glue that held them together over the next few months, and a major reason why their campaign avoided the blame game. "The three of us made a pact that this would not be negative in any way," says McBurney, adding that the moms sincerely believed that the Spokane school district made its decision because, as Superintendent Nancy Stowell says, "We didn't have another place to take the money from."

Christie Querna, then-president of the Spokane school board, went further, telling them that the district's hands were tied because the state wasn't funding school libraries. To get money for library programs, the threesome would have to take its argument upstream to the state capitol in Olympia.

Sitting around Brunkan's kitchen table last November, the moms decided their expanded mission required a name to give it an identity and at the same time reflect the diverse coalition they were assembling. That's how the Washington Coalition for School Libraries & Information Technology was born.

"When we lost the local fight," Brunkan says, "We said we're not going to do this unless anyone else cared. So we cast our net out, and the net came back overflowing."

They enlisted the help of the Washington Library Media Association to spread the word, posted on Craigslist.org community boards, and reached out to various media outlets. Soon after, they unveiled one of their most powerful tools: a comprehensive Web site ([www.fundourfuturewashington.org](http://www.fundourfuturewashington.org)), complete with a blog, research, testimonials, and ways to support the cause. In less than two weeks, 1,400 people across the state signed their online petition.

"I have jokingly referred to them as the "Network Moms," says library researcher Lance, who sensed from the start that the trio was creating something whose influence would extend far beyond their state's borders. "They galvanized parents and other school library advocates in a way that hasn't been done before." In the process, they also created a blueprint for other groups around the country to follow—and a Fund Our Future Oregon and Fund Our Future Arizona are already up and running.

The trio's timing was near perfect. The Washington state legislature had recently created a joint task force to identify key deficiencies in the state's basic education program that might require new ways to fund them. Redefining basic education in the state was long overdue—the last time was in 1977, way before technology entered the educational landscape. So the moms put all their energies into persuading the task force to include library services under the new, expanded definition of basic education—a move that, if adopted by the legislature, would all but ensure permanent funding for media centers.

"Since school libraries and information technology have never been a part of that definition, they were always ripe for being cut," McBurney explains, adding that once libraries were identified as "core and central to the educational mission of a school," they'd be safe from the chopping block.

As promising as this sounded, it still could take years before the task force completed its work and lawmakers adopted its recommendations—which would do nothing to immediately help those librarians back home who had their hours reduced.

But as luck would have it, the Spokane moms got a great tip. Between faxes and phone calls and late nights in front of the computer preparing for their presentation to the joint task force, someone had mentioned that the state legislature was convening a short session from January to March 2008 and that the mothers should apply for a supplemental budget request.

"We had no idea what that was," says Brunkan, pointing out that the group often acquired knowledge on the fly and always followed leads along the way.

If lawmakers could OK a supplemental budget, school libraries across the state could obtain immediate funding. But approving new money midway through a fiscal year is tough and typically reserved for emergencies, like natural disasters—not for school libraries. Granted, it was a long shot—but if approved, the stopgap measure could help restore media specialist programs in Spokane and the rest of the state for the 2008–2009 school year.

The three women asked for \$54 million. "We didn't know what the hell we were doing," says McBurney, but it made people take notice and "put us on the map with key legislators." Suddenly everywhere they looked, lawmakers were seeing the faces of McBurney, Brunkan, and Hill walking the capitol hallways and schmoozing with just about everyone.

"Often we tell our constituents to come on over and get involved, and you never see or hear from them again," says Steven Caine, a legislative assistant to Representative Skip Priest (R-Federal Way), who befriended the three women, often reminding them to eat and letting them store their purses and papers under his desk. "But not these ladies, they showed up."

In fact, the moms are still paying off large credit card bills from all those flights to Olympia, car rentals, phone bills, printer cartridges, and trips to Kinko's. And even though there have been small donations and some proceeds from selling T-shirts to help cover expenses, they're still more than \$12,000 in the hole, says Hill.

But even more important, they were willing to make huge personal sacrifices to take their cause to the state legislature. Those frequent plane trips to Olympia and those hellish work hours that sometimes lasted till dawn were taking a toll on their families—and the women themselves. Take for instance, the time that Brunkan broke her toe while going down the stairs in the middle of the night to finish some campaign work. "Lisa was losing herself," says her husband, Rick, about those sleepless nights and round-the-clock devotion to the cause. "She wasn't at her best."

Houses didn't get cleaned, dishes didn't get washed, and laundry piled up. Days would go by without a shower or a change of clothes. Jack begged his mother to "let the bad guys win and just give up." At times, the moms joked

that Rick—along with Hill’s husband, Stuart, and McBurney’s husband, Michael—had lost his wife, and the women wondered if their marriages would survive.

“I feel a sense of pain at what cost it’s been to our families,” says Brunkan. “When we were together we would cause anxiety in our kids because we were 100 percent in the library effort.” Luckily, McBurney’s mother was able to fly in from Minnesota to help out with her kids, while Brunkan’s parents traveled from Wisconsin and stayed for three months.

With reinforcements at home, the moms continued making trips to Olympia to cultivate relationships with Caine and other “gatekeepers,” which were just as important as the ties with the legislators. “Our staff talks to hundreds of people throughout the session,” says Senator Rosemary McAuliffe (D-Bothell), chair of the Senate Early Learning & K-12 Education Committee. “But what really helped was the fact that people in our office loved to talk to them.”

In between networking, the moms were busy building a citizen’s mandate, corralling city leaders, businesspeople, and ordinary folks to go on the record that libraries really mattered. They organized a daylong library summit and afternoon rally on the steps of the capitol, attracting close to 100 people, including big names like Eisenberg; Hartzell; the American Association of School Librarians’ president and executive director, Sara Kelly Johns and Julie Walker; and American Library Association President Loriene Roy.

About a dozen volunteer “community captains” representing urban and rural school districts across Washington also stepped forward to promote the cause. The group steadily built an impressive following: Spokane Mayor Mary Verner became the first elected official to formally join the coalition. The League of Education Voters became a partner. State Librarian Jan Walsh testified in support at a senate education committee hearing. Local business leaders, such as Don Barbieri, chairman of Red Lion hotels, wrote letters. And librarians, teachers, and even students statewide trekked to Olympia to show support.

“What was quite unusual was that there was no interest group” to help bolster their campaign, says Senator Chris Marr (D-Spokane), who warned the moms early on that they would face a difficult fight ahead.

As the capitol switchboard was bombarded with calls, and hundreds of letters and emails reached the desks of key members of the state House and Senate, legislators took notice. “A top-level Democrat called me and said, ‘Who are these women? I turn on my email and they come at me from everywhere,’” says Barbieri, who affectionately refers to the three moms as “pit bulls.”

By December 2007, education leaders from both houses agreed to sponsor a bill to fund school library programs.

Why were lawmakers willing to support funding for libraries when there were so many other causes competing for attention? From the get-go, they were persuaded that school libraries were one example of the neglect of educational programs that needed to be addressed. “There is great symbolism in librarians,” says Rep. Priest. “If you’re not funding school systems in a way that ensures that librarians are provided adequate funding, then we aren’t adequately funding education.”

Tactically, the trio honed in on three key members of the Senate—Brown, the senate majority leader, McAuliffe, and Senator Tracey Eide (D-Federal Way), the senate floor leader—developing relationships that paid off greatly in the end.

“We’re moms, too,” says Brown. “We’re moms who ended up in the legislature. I knew that was a strong partnership that would probably ensure success in the Senate.”

Another huge plus? They weren’t trained lobbyists, librarians, or any other special-interest group—they were just moms. “Five minutes of parent advocacy for school libraries can have more effect than five years of what might appear as self-serving advocacy,” says Lance.

Brown also believes that the moms’ efforts were given a real sense of urgency because, unlike professional lobbyists, they’re not paid to come back every year. “You don’t have the same sense of urgency as with a mother who’s pregnant,” says Brown, referring to Brunkan, who is expecting her third child in November. “The baby is

going to get born at some point, and I just don't want to tell them to come back next year."

Finally, the day they'd been waiting for came on February 13, 2008. Brunkan was sitting in the Senate gallery, while Hill was at home folding laundry, her eyes glued on the Senate vote about to take place on TV. McBurney, who was in Spokane with her kids, popped into a local library to watch the proceedings online.

The decision was unanimous. The Senate voted 49-0 in support of statewide school library funding.

"We were on cloud nine," says McBurney.

Even though the bill failed in the House, both sides worked out a compromise budget a month later that included a \$4 million line item for media centers across the state for the 2008-2009 school year.

"All of us had tears rolling down our cheeks," Brunkan remembers about the vote. "Huddled in a marble doorway in the capitol, I connected with Susan and Denette after the vote, and all we could say was 'We did it! We all did it! The grassroots movement worked!'"

That night, Brunkan flew back to Spokane to make sure she was there to wake up with her children and walk them to school the next day. When she got in, there was a homemade newspaper from Isabel waiting on her mother's very messy desk.

"Lisa Layera Brunkan who fought for school libareians won! The score was 49-0. Congratulations. She worked on this for a year. Thank you for saving school libareins! Thank you thank you thank you says school libareans [sic]," signed Isabel Brunkan, eight years old.

But the Spokane moms' work isn't over yet. There's another important deadline looming: the joint task force will submit its recommendations to the legislature in December and the trio wants to make sure that school librarians are included as essential to basic education.

"Our hope would be for school library programs to no longer be at risk and in danger of going extinct," says McBurney.

It's a very lofty goal, but some ranking members of the state legislature say that with their smarts and determination, the Spokane moms could have a shot at getting their way once again.

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### **Author Information**

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