

ITSY-BITSY LIBRARIES

Freestanding book exchanges are cropping up all over America. Here's how it started and how you can get involved

Small, weatherproof structures began appearing alongside homes, stores, and bike paths in 2009 in Hudson, Wisconsin. Packed inside, free to anyone needing a good story, were books for children and adults. Since then, the Little Free Library – a neighborhood book exchange created to promote a sense of community, literacy, and the love of reading – has grown to 15,000 outlets in 60 countries. It's one of the largest library networks in the world, surpassing philanthropist Andrew Carnegie's total of 2,509 libraries.

Co-founder Todd Bol created the first Little Free Library as a tribute to his mother, a teacher who had loved books and encouraged reading. As the number of libraries grew, people began discovering the small book-containers on their way to work, the market, or school, and something else happened – they began to redefine communities.

"We've been told we are a revolution in neighborhood conversation. Neighborhoods get excited about the libraries," Bol says. "I've seen people squeal and hug the libraries when they find them. We have a need to be part of a physical community, but there are so many things in our daily lives that distract us and end up pulling us apart. This gives neighborhoods an opportunity to work together for something that's useful to everyone."

Stewards of the Little Libraries are encouraged to create each structure from repurposed materials using green building techniques, but



Newest trick in the book? Todd Bol built the first little library as a tribute to his mother, placing it in his front yard filled with free books. Word spread rapidly. Today, the grassroots movement promoting literacy and a love of books has gone global.

the design is up to them. Some are decorated as log cabins or schoolhouses. Others, like a handful of libraries in New Orleans, are made of wood from Hurricane Katrina debris or decorated with Mardi Gras beads or designs of Louisiana flowers. Libraries are also available for purchase on the organization's website (littlefreelibrary.org) for those who'd prefer to fast-track their project.

A Google map on the website pinpoints each library by its physical address and GPS coordinates. With an honor checkout system, community members share their favorite books with their neighbors while discovering new ones for their reading pleasure. A resident of Algiers, Louisiana, across the Mississippi River from downtown New Orleans, Linda Prout recalls going on vacation and wondering if she'd return home to an empty library. "People usually

leave bags of books on my porch if the library is full. When I got back, I was happy to see that plenty of books were packed into the library."

Prout's experience with the Little Free Library she gave her husband for Christmas in 2011 led to her involvement with creating more for neighborhoods in New Orleans. "Since Katrina, people have become very proud of their neighborhoods. Many were nearly lost," Prout says. "When we install the libraries, we get feedback on how important the sense of ownership is to the community."

An enthusiastic cheerleader, Bol keeps in touch with an increasing amount of stewards of the Little Libraries and encourages them to act as mentors to those who want to duplicate their efforts. He offers libraries for essay contests, visits dedication ceremonies across the country, and travels to speak to groups interested

INSPIRATION

in literacy and community building.

His love for the project is contagious. More than a handful of experienced stewards readily offer their advice, not only to new stewards, but also to educators, philanthropies, and school and city libraries. Philomena Jones is a teaching artist fellow with Big Thought, a Dallas organization working to develop programs using the arts, creativity, and imagination to address youth development and academic achievement. "In one middle school, we have a program that incorporates Minecraft, a computer game focused on building, exploration, and managing resources," Jones says. "The book is symbolic of power in Minecraft. I've seen some of the kids that don't have books at home begin to bring their younger siblings to the library and mentor other students after participating in the program."

My husband and I found our first Little Free Library in the Bywater neighborhood of New Orleans, and decided to create one of our own. Our library will be placed outside our kayak business on the beach in Half Moon Bay, California, and will

be made of a patchwork of reclaimed wood. We intend for the mix of books for children and adults to suit not only kayak clients, but also the crowds of people that walk past our spot on the California Coastal Trail. While our Little Free Library is currently under construction, the book donations from eager family and friends have already begun.

It's an aim for many Little Free Library stewards to curate their book collection. "You begin to know your community and your neighbors," says Lisa Lopez, a library steward in El Paso, Texas. "It's fun to find things that fit their interest."

"I'm impressed that this movement was started by non-librarians, and that it's become so big," says Michael Stephens, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the School of Library and Information Science at San Jose State University, California. Initially introduced to Little Free Libraries by a student, Stephens is now a steward of a library in his home community on a lake outside of Traverse City, Michigan. "I've seen families visit the library, as well as kids on scoot-



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— Todd Bol,
Little Free Library co-founder

ers, and one young man who drove up at 11 p.m. one night just to show his girlfriend," he recalls.

One of the young neighbors who frequents Stephens' library, 14-year-old Cassidy Henshaw, has been using the Little Free Library since it opened. "Whenever I have a friend out to swim at our cottage, we always check out the library to see what books are in it," says Henshaw, whose mother helped Stephens build the library. "I like it most for the variety of books and that there are new ones every day. I think the community enjoys that, too." Henshaw recently made a video about how the neighborhood children use the book exchange, winning third place in the Little Free Library Film Festival.

One of Bol's many inspirations is Martin Luther King Jr.'s response to the question "What would you do if you were to die tomorrow?" King responded, "I would plant seeds." Not content to rest with the seeds he's already planted, Bol's next goal is getting a Little Free Library in every small town in America and all around the world.

Jill Robinson has written for the San Francisco Chronicle, National Geographic Traveler, and American Way.



"We've located the source of that funny noise you've been hearing."