

AROUND THE AREA

READING IN TO IT



Heather Cook/The News-Gazette

Susan Laesch, center, joins her husband, Wally Laesch, left, and their son, Danny, on their reading bench next to the Little Free Library stand near their home in Champaign. The stand, which the three collaborated on and erected about two weeks ago, houses a variety of books for most ages. The Little Free Library, an idea started by Todd Bol of Wisconsin in 2009, carries the motto "Take a book. Return a book."

LITTLE FREE LIBRARIES

Book-sharing concept taking off with unique storage displays

By MELISSA MERLI

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The first time Susan Laesch saw a Little Free Library, in Seattle, she fell in love with it.

After returning to Champaign, she "nagged" her husband, Wally, and their son, Danny, to build one for the front of their home in the 1000 block of West Union Street.

All three of them came up with the design: a two-story box with an addition on the side for children's books.

They added other nice touches: antique-like brass hardware, tiny window boxes for faux greenery, and a good-sized bench right next to the library, topped with shingles. "They're 50-year shingles," Danny said, left over from the roof on their home.

They installed it just two weeks ago. Susan, a Realtor, is more than happy with the response.

"I've been thrilled, absolutely thrilled, and it makes me smile every day to see it lived," she said.

"It encourages reading. Everybody's friendly and positive about it. Anything to make people come together. There's so much negativity, it's nice to have something to smile at every day."

Her Little Free Library users must be smiling, too. As of this past Tuesday, 16 of them had left notes in the "guest registry" inside the box. One reads:

"Absolutely beautiful and wonderful to have in the neighborhood. Such talented and creative folks."

Other libraries

The Laesches' Little Free Library isn't the only roadside free library or book exchange in the area.

Champaign-Urbana likely has a dozen. Danville has at least two, and there are others in surrounding communities, among them Mahomet and Broadlands.

Many are registered at littlefreelibrary.org, where a map shows locations of the more than 30,000 registered Little Free Libraries worldwide.

However, some who build Little Free Libraries don't bother to register at the Little Free Library website. Among them are Mike and Maiko Lehman, who built their People's Public Library at Green and Anderson, Urbana, in 2013.

Theirs might be the first curbside free library in Urbana-Champaign.

A woodworker, Mike built theirs along with a small "browsing bench," a bigger bench, a garbage box and a hook for a bag or dog leash.

He added a solar lighting panel and a bulletin board on back.

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Heather Cook/The News-Gazette

Susan Laesch keeps a visitor log in her Little Free Library stand for guests to sign when they check out or return a book near her home on Union Street in Champaign. So far, 16 visitors have signed since the stand was erected two weeks ago.



To her knowledge, Julia Megan Sullivan is the first Danville resident to install a Little Free Library, with her version in the 1800 block of North Gilbert Street.

Melissa Merli/The News-Gazette

Michael Lehman's free library stand, which matches his home's exterior, features local pamphlets as well as books for people to check out on Green Street in Urbana.

Heather Cook/The News-Gazette



Barbara Nolan received this Little Free Library as a gift from employees at the Danville Public Library, where she was the long-time director before retiring last fall. Her box is in the 1400 block of North Franklin Street.

Melissa Merli/The News-Gazette

Leah Taylor sits through the mostly science-fiction and fantasy books located inside the Dr. Who Tardis Little Free Library built in her yard on Danbury Drive in Champaign.

Heather Cook/The News-Gazette



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LIBRARIES

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Lehman also designated the top shelf as a nuzbox for pamphlets, booklets and magazines about local organizations and attractions.

As with all little roadside libraries, people are welcome to take a book or pamphlet and return it later or pass it on to someone else or to another little library.

The beginning

The concept of roadside free libraries dates back to 2009, when Todd Bol of Madison, Wis., built one modeled after a one-room schoolhouse as a tribute to his teacher mother who loved to read.

"He filled it with books and put it on a lot in his front yard. His neighbors and kids loved it," according to littlefreelibrary.org. "He built several more and gave them away. Each one had a sign that said 'FREE BOOKS.'"

Like the Bol, Laesch and Lehman libraries, many are DIY — do it yourself — and often built with recycled materials.

A Tardis

A fan of "Dr. Who," Leah Taylor of Champaign built her Little Free Library as a model of Tardis, the time machine/spacecraft in which Dr. Who travels the universe. She used scrap materials and leftover blue paint she found in her garage.

"There are hundreds of Tardises because they're a perfect description of a book — an entire universe inside a bit of tree," said Taylor, a former computer programmer.

She belongs to the Little Free Library Facebook page for "stewards," or registered owners of Little Free Libraries. She's seen posts and comments about the structures falling victim to vandalism, graffiti and theft.

So far that hasn't happened to hers, in the 4100 block of Danbury Drive in west Champaign. People are taking and leaving books and leaving her Tardis unscathed.

Besides wanting to share her love of books, Taylor had a couple of other reasons for wanting a Little Free Library.

"Being out here, we are outside the park district and city. We have to pay cash for our library card," she said. "That, combined with the whole community-building aspect of it."

"If you put books out there enough, somebody's going to pick one up and expand their mind in some way, and that's the goal," she added.

Gift of 'adventure'

Julia Megan Sullivan's family always expanded their minds through books as she was growing up in the Chicago suburbs.

"Reading was a fundamental part of my family's values," said the Danville resident, who installed a Little Free Library this past spring in front of her home. "The library was home base on weekends for

me as a child. ... I love stories and reading as an adventure, and this library was a way for me to share that."

Following the "reading is an adventure" theme, she stocked hers with a hardbound copy of "Treasure Island," among other titles. And she recently added Dick Van Dyke's "Keep Moving," published last year. It was immediately taken.

She goes an extra step, posting information about her new additions to her Moxie's Little Free Library via its own Facebook page and through @moxieslittlefreelibrary on Twitter.

Sullivan, whose nickname is Moxie Morgan, received her little library as a birthday gift in February. Danville native Michael Howard and his drama students in Indianapolis had made it and other little libraries to raise money for their theater group.

Sullivan, an assistant director of communications for the University of Illinois Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, added the shingles, left over from the roof of her house, and painted it to match her house in the 1800 block of North Gilbert Street.

Hers also has gone over well and has not been vandalized — something she had feared might happen.

Instead, it's a source of joy. "There's nothing that makes me happier than to see a couple of kids pull up on bikes, pick something from the library and go home," said Sullivan, whose library stock is a mix of children's, young-adult and adult fiction and non-fiction.

She believes her Little Free Library is the first registered one in Danville. Barbara Nolan believes hers, in the 1300 block of North Franklin Street, is the second.

Nolan had received her Little Free Library as a retirement gift from her colleagues at the Danville Public Library, where she had been director for 37 years.

Hers is a Gaylord Artisan Little Free Library, purchased at discount from Gaylord, a library and school supply company. List prices hover below and above \$600, so it's likely much cheaper to make one. (People also have transformed coolers, small refrigerators and newspaper boxes into Little Free Libraries.)

Nolan's Gaylord came unpainted. A friend painted it to match the Nolan home, and Nolan went further, having two crow figurines screwed into the roof of her little library, nicknamed The Readers' Roost.

She dresses the birds according to the holiday or season. Mabel and Clarence are wearing beach gear now. In December, they become Mr. and Mrs. Claus.

Like other Little Free Library stewards, Nolan and her husband, David, believe little libraries build community, and they love seeing people check out their books.

"The other day a woman lifted a toddler up so the baby could pick out a book," Barb said. "One day two little girls, grade-school age, came by I said, 'This is a Little Free Library. The books in here are free.' They nodded and got their books and then went back the same way they'd come."