LIVING

AROUND THE AREA

READING IN TO I

LITTLE FREE LIBRARIES

Book-sharing concept taking off with unique storage displays

By MELISSA MERLI
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The first time Susan Luesch saw a Little Free Library in Seattle, she fell in love with it.

After returning to Champaign, she "staged" her husband, Wally, and their son, Danny, on their reading bench near to the Little Free Library stand near their home in Champaign. The stand, which they three collaborated on and merged 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."

The couple also have a reading bench right next to the library, topped with short stories. "They're 99-year short stories," Luesch said, left over from the road in their home.

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

"We've had our first donation, absolutely delightful, and it makes us feel everybody who sees it," she said.

It encourages passing, "Everybody's friendly and positive about it. According to people who pass by, they're feeling the same thing."

Her Little Free Library story goes back to a meeting, too. As of this past Tuesday, 16 of them had left notes as the "guest registry" inside the little box.

Absolutely beautiful and wonderful to be on the neighborhood map together and creative.

Other Libraries

The Laurelhurst Little Free Library isn't the only panhandle free library on book exchange in the area. Champaign-Urbana is home to a dozen. Danville has at least two, and there are others in the area.

Among them, are Mike and Melissa Lehman, who built their People's Public Library at Green and Andrews Avenue in 2015.

There might be the first curbside free library in Illinois. Champaign, where a map shows locations of the many more than 46,000 registered "Little Free Libraries" nationwide. However, some who build Little Free Libraries say that most are set up at the Little Free Library website. Among them are Mike and Melissa Lehman, who built their People's Public Library at Green and Andrews Avenue in 2015.

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On Instagram (@news_gazette)

More local Little Free Library setups

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Wally Luesch, center, joins his husband, Wally Luesch, 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 merged 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."
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Lehman also designated the top shelf as a no-box for pamphlets, booklets and magazines about local organizations and attractions.

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

The beginning

The concept of roadside libraries dates back to 2009, when Todd Bol of Madison, Wis., built a model after a car was stolen. The first was a house for a television show. It was a tribute to his mother, who loved to read. He filled it with books and put it on a string in his yard. People came to read and leave books.

Said Bol, "It's like a free library, only better." Leaders of the Free Library movement were happy to say yes to the idea.

The library in Rockford, Ill., is a model of Tardis, the time machine in "Dr. Who." It travels the universe. It is made of scrap materials and left over blue paint, which was found in the garage.

Gift of adventures

Julia Magan Sullivan's family always expanded their minds through books. She was growing up in the Chicago suburbs.

"Reading was a fundamental part of my family's values," said the Danville resident. She installed a Little Free Library 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.

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

She does an extra step, posting information about her new additions to the Facebook page, and in the past few years, her Twitter followers have grown to over 1000.

Sullivan, whose nickname is Morex Morgan, received her library as a birthday gift in February. She has made it and other libraries to raise money for their theater group.

Sullivan is an assistant director of communications for the University of Illinois. She said the library is "an adventure" and "a gift of adventure." Sullivan said the library is "a source of joy." She said there was "nothing that makes me happier than to see a couple of kids pull up on bikes, pick something from the library and go home." She 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 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.

Nolan's Gaylord Artisan Little Free Library, purchased at discount from Gaylord, a library and school supply company, last price of $600, is likely much cheaper to make one. (People also have used old refrigerators or small refrigerators and newspaper boxes.)

Nolan's Gaylord came unpainted. A friend painted it to match the Nolan home, and Nolan went further, having two crow figures screwed to the roof of her little library, nicknamed "The Readers' Roost." She dresses the birds according to the holiday or season. She said the birds "are her children." She is a member of the Little Free Library Club.

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

"The other day a woman lifted a toddler up so the baby could pick a book, I said, "One day two little girls, grade school age, came by, 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 came.'"