

Big Visions for Little Free Libraries: Literacy and Community Engagement

Little Free Libraries are everywhere. Whether you encounter one on your neighbor's front lawn or at the edge of a cornfield, it is likely that you have seen one of the nearly 16,000 Little Free Libraries that are in place worldwide. In 2009 creator Todd Bol, having recently lost his mother, set out in his van to work through his grief. When he came home to Hudson, Wisconsin, he decided to honor his mother—a former teacher who loved books—by making a box to house books to share with others. He mounted the birdhouse-like box on a post on his front lawn and the rest, as they say, is history.

From this small act, an international movement—engaging individuals, families, neighborhoods, and entire communities—was born. (www.littlefreelibrary.org). The premise is simple: take a book, leave a book. The box to house the books can be any shape, size, or design. A quick tour of online images, via Google or Pinterest, reveals the sheer breadth and depth of creativity that individuals bring to designing and installing Little Free Libraries. The libraries themselves are relatively small, usually holding thirty-five to forty books, but their impact is enormous. These little libraries not only make everyone smile, they get people excited about reading.

Little Free Libraries are no longer just personal, individual undertakings; they are now part of large-scale, planned projects that are effective tools for community engagement in cities and towns all across the country, with powerful stories of collaboration and success. These large undertakings address head-on the issues of low literacy, lack of access to reading materials, and neighborhood unity. They bring together public libraries, school districts, businesses, nonprofits, community government, health-care providers, individuals, and anyone else who wants to jump on board. And they are effective—change is happening in communities that are using this tool to bring

literacy materials to every block in town. This national movement showcases efforts of a single school librarian in El Paso, citywide collaborations in Minneapolis and Cleveland with school and public libraries, and an innovative project involving library school students in Syracuse.

EL PASO, TEXAS: TAKING OWNERSHIP

Lisa Lopez is a school librarian who knows that getting books into the hands of her students in the traditional way—through library checkout at school—is not enough. She knows that her high-poverty, low-literacy students need more. They need to become book owners, and in order for that to happen for her students, something needed to change in her community.

Lopez began in 2011—with a Little Free Library inside her school building, created with supplies from a crafts store and decorated by her students. In three short years, the project has grown to a whopping sixty LFLs, which have become a vibrant literacy network. In 2013 Lopez was awarded the *Library Journal* Movers & Shakers honor for her work with Little Free Libraries.

With help from Todd Bol and Rick Brooks, founders of Little Free Libraries and also named Movers & Shakers in 2013, Lopez was able to reach out to nonprofit groups in her community, including the El Paso Public Library Association, the Department of Public Health, the Parks and Recreation Department, and a local technical college. Together these groups have helped to build and place LFLs on neighborhood streets, in parks, and in fifteen public health clinics across the city of El Paso.

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According to Lopez, El Paso is one of the least literate cities in the nation, and this network of Little Free Libraries has given children in that community the experience of book ownership. Children in El Paso now have the freedom to take a book of their choice from a Little Free Library and, in turn, can leave a book for others. Little Free Libraries are a constant, sustaining behavior support for the extension of literacy from “something that only happens in school” to “something that is a way of everyday life in my neighborhood.”

SYRACUSE, NEW YORK: FROM PHONE BOOTH TO BOOK SOURCE

Recognizing that some residents of the Near Westside neighborhood of Syracuse did not have easy access to their local public library, the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University, in conjunction with the Near Westside Neighborhood Association and the School of Visual and Performing Arts, established a project in 2012 to design, build, and place LFLs in this community.

These LFLs are unique—a repurposing of old public telephone kiosks, designed and built by students in the School of Visual and Performing Arts. Collaboration and community involvement bring together donors of books, neighborhood residents, and stewards (LFL caretakers). From the beginning, the project was not in competition with the public library; rather, the public library was part of the “branding” of the project. Every book donated to the LFL through the university project bears a stamp or sticker directing the reader to the public library, and a specially designed bookmark is put inside each book.

The vision of the project from the start was that the Little Free Libraries would connect patrons to reading and lead them to the public library for more reading materials, according to Jill Hurst-Wahl, director of the Library and Information Science & School Media Programs at Syracuse.

While this is a relatively small collaborative project (five LFLs are planned and, to date, three have been built), it is a useful model and embodies a unique concept—a Collection Development Policy created by a Syracuse University iSchool summer intern, which is made available to stewards as a guide to help them stock the LFLs and manage the influx of books donated through numerous book drives (Syracuse Collection Development Policy and SYR-LFL Blog are located at: littlelibraries.syr.edu/).

According to Hurst-Wahl, the public response to the book drives was “amazing. . . we were overrun with books.” Volunteers and a summer intern helped to sort, stamp, and rebox the donations into small diverse collections that could be handed off to LFL stewards. While the university played an important role in setting the project in motion, it is the individual stewards that live in the community who keep the project alive. From the start the vision for this project was hyper-local—to provide a tool for the community that would make access to reading materials easy for residents and provide the opportunity for individuals in the community to watch over the structures and maintain the collections. This small network of LFLs in Syracuse is in constant use, and the project is an excellent example of the kind of positive, successful change that can happen when local institutions collaborate to put the tools of literacy within easy reach of everyone.



Mother Earth with Library Science students Darren Glenn and Erin Lee at the first LFL on Gifford Street, Syracuse, NY



Rick Brooks, one of the founders of Little Free Libraries, with Jill Hurst-Wahl, director of the Library and Information Science & School Media Programs at Syracuse.

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA: A LIBRARY ON EVERY BLOCK

From the very beginning, the vision was grand: Little Free Libraries on every block, connecting parents back to schools in low-income areas. The vision took shape two years ago during a conversation over coffee between Melanie Sanco, director of Resource Development and Innovation for the Minneapolis Public Schools, and Todd Bol, co-founder of Little Free Libraries. The vision is becoming a reality called Books Around the Block.

With the help of volunteers from AmeriCorps VISTA, the Minneapolis Public Schools created a blueprint for designing a large-scale LFL project, sustainable over time. Working from the proposition that literacy is a community issue, this project engages everyone in the change process—from the local Rotary and Lions clubs to publishers, businesses, nonprofits, neighborhood associations, schools, parents, and individuals. The Little Free Libraries themselves are built through donations of time and money. Individuals who want to become stewards (caretakers) of an LFL can apply to the program. Individuals, community groups, publishers, and writers donate books to seed and sustain the LFLs.

According to Olivia Quintanilla, an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer for the project, LFL stewards in low-income neighborhoods receive extensive support. For the first year of a new LFL, an organized warehouse of books is available for stewards to “shop” for books to resupply their LFL. Some LFLs become completely self-sustaining before the end of that first year—the “take a book/leave a book” philosophy having become such an integral part of the community’s use of the LFL that stewards no longer need to rely on the warehouse for a constant supply of books.

To date the program has placed sixty-one LFLs in its target neighborhood, with hundreds more having been built by community groups and individuals in the Minneapolis area. The Books Around the Block website provides information about how the program works and is a great starting point for any group interested in creating a large-scale LFL program (rdi.mpls.k12.mn.us/littlefreelibrary). Books Around the Block has also created a complete Program Guide for creating a Little Free Libraries program in your community, complete with an appendix of fillable forms that can be customized. Both documents are available on the ILA website at www.ila.org/committees/best-practices-committee.

According to Millie Stulberg, another AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer, the purpose of the project was to change the culture of literacy in low-income neighborhoods and generate excitement about books. Parents are an essential part of the program; those who are stewards or caretakers are highlighted in the school newsletter and become neighborhood superstars. The project has been so successful, there is a waiting list of stewards ready for the next wave of Little Free Libraries.

One of the goals of the Minneapolis project was to “saturate” low-income neighborhoods with books—and they are well on their way to accomplishing this goal. Another goal was to be an emerging model for other urban centers to replicate.

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Karin Bernal, Media Specialist at Green Central Community School, Minneapolis, MN, installing an LFL.

A neighborhood installation in Minneapolis with Ann Luce, Breton Fine (son), Mindy Fine, (bottom left to right) Natalie Johnson, Ariah Fine, Adyra Fine (daughter)

CLEVELAND, OHIO: PUBLIC LIBRARY LEADERSHIP

The Cleveland project began in 2012, with a single Little Free Library built by the late Bob Cheshire, a community member and founder of the nonprofit Third World Books. This single library spawned a series of feature articles in the local press and a community-wide drive for donated books. When Cheshire passed away unexpectedly in 2013, local journalist Margaret Bernstein stepped in to fill his shoes as organizer of the project, and what began as a ground-floor, grassroots movement has become an enormous community undertaking to help the children of Cleveland succeed in school.

In 2011 the state of Ohio enacted legislation called the “Third Grade Reading Guarantee,” which requires that all third graders achieve a rating of “proficient” or better on a state reading exam in order to advance to the fourth grade. Recognizing that a high percentage of children in low-income areas would fail the test, individuals and groups in the city of Cleveland responded with a unique plan: engage the community in building a network of Little Free Libraries to support families and children who face the problems of low literacy and low student achievement.

Adapting the model of Minneapolis’ Books Around the Block program, Cleveland plans to create a citywide network of Little Free Libraries, placing one in close proximity to every K-8 school building. Each LFL will be supervised by a steward trained in parent engagement. Ideally each library will be “stewarded” by a parent from the local school.

Excitement to sustain the program is built into the plan: training for stewards, prizes for families that read the most books, grand opening ceremonies for new Little Free Libraries, and stipends for stewards who meet monthly targets for parent engagement (see the project’s Facebook page for videos, ideas, and inspiration for a large-scale project: www.facebook.com/littlefreelibrarycleveland).

According to Bernstein, seeing the children of Cleveland succeed in school has spawned an “all hands on deck” approach. Cleveland plans to utilize all of its resources—businesses, nonprofits, government, and any other entity willing to participate. The project is now called the Little Free Library Cleveland Movement, and central to this project is the Cleveland Public Library.

Felton Thomas, director of the Cleveland Public Library, says that the Little Free Library Cleveland Movement gives the public library the opportunity to be visible in every single part of the community. This opportunity will create more readers, and more readers mean more public library patrons. Thomas says the public library’s involvement is geared to do everything possible “to make it easier for parents and children to get a book and bring it home.”

The public library has installed three Little Free Libraries of its own—one directly in front of its Walz Branch, another inside a grocery store, and a third in a neighborhood. Little Free Libraries in Cleveland will be stocked with public library brochures and library card applications. There are even plans afoot to conduct public library summer reading programming (weather permitting) on-site at Little Free Libraries. Thomas sees the Little Free Libraries as a direct link to patron use of the public library.



Felton Thomas, director of the Cleveland Public Library, at the LFL in front of the Waltz Branch Library

The coalition of partners in the Cleveland Movement is a mix of individuals and institutions, all working together toward a common purpose under an infrastructure developed under Bernstein’s leadership. According to Thomas, the coalition has both structure and freedom for its members. One structured goal of the partnership is to create a resource for restocking the LFLs along the lines of Cleveland Kids in Need (a nonprofit that collects, organizes, and makes free school supplies available to Cleveland teachers: <http://clevelandkidsinneed.org/>), while at the same time the partnership wants individual coalition members to have the freedom to bring their own best resources and creativity (time, talents, community connections, and money) to the project for the benefit of all schoolchildren.

With a target of one hundred LFLs by 2015, there are twenty LFLs built and installed to date. Cleveland has only just begun the process of creating meaningful literacy support for low-income children in its neighborhoods.

LFLS IN ACTION: BETTER LIVES, BETTER COMMUNITIES

According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, nearly 22 percent of all children in the United States (more than 16 million children) live in families with incomes below the official federal poverty level, and a total of 45 percent of all children in this country live in low-income households.¹ The effects of poverty on literacy and learning are well documented; children who live in poverty often have slower language development (often due to poor nutrition), more childhood illnesses (resulting in higher absenteeism from school), and little access to books at home or in their communities.² Children in poverty consistently score well below their peers on standard measures of student achievement,³ and children who grow up in poverty will, as adults, complete fewer years of schooling, earn less money, work fewer hours, have more health problems, and need financial assistance from the government.⁴

Stephen Krashen, author and expert on literacy and language acquisition in children, says there are three important things communities can do to help bridge the achievement gap for children from low-income families: focus on food, health care, and books.⁵

School libraries would seem to be the obvious place for children in low-income neighborhoods to gain access to books, but the sad truth is that between 2007 and 2011, the number of school librarians in the United States fell steadily each school year because school library programs across the country have been cut and school library budgets decimated.⁶

Children living in high-income communities have more books in their homes, schools, and neighborhoods than children living in low-income communities.⁷ For children living in poverty, families often lack access to the basic transportation needed to get to the public library, and books are expensive—making them inaccessible for the people who may need them the most. This one simple tool—the book—makes all the difference in the world for all of us. Yet access to books for those in poverty is an elusive commodity.

Individuals, neighborhoods, and whole cities have found that powerful, sustainable change can happen in low-income communities when everyone comes together to make books easily accessible. Community engagement using Little Free Libraries is a reality that is making a difference, bringing what Felton Thomas calls a “peer-to-peer touch” to a literacy initiative that fosters neighborhood unity and responsibility for getting books into the hands of the people who live on each block. When a child can walk down the street to choose a book, take it home and read it, and return again for another, that child has been given one of the essential tools she needs in order to learn and grow. From the existing examples—in El Paso, Syracuse, Minneapolis, and Cleveland—it is clear that making books accessible with Little Free Libraries is a practical, pragmatic, and effective solution that can transform the lives of every child in every family in every community. ■

¹ “Child Poverty,” *National Center for Children in Poverty*, <http://www.nccp.org/topics/childpoverty.html>, accessed 4/20/2014.

² Anthony Cody, “Stephen Krashen: Children need food, health care, and books. Not new standards and tests,” *Education Week Teacher*, May 10, 2010, http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/living-in-dialogue/2010/05/stephen_krashen_fix_poverty_an.html, accessed 4/20/2014.

³ Cody, *ibid.*

⁴ “Poverty FAQs: The Long Reach of Early Childhood Poverty: Pathways and Impacts,” *Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University*, available at www.developingchild.harvard.edu, February, 2010.

⁵ Cody, *ibid.*

⁶ “Public libraries weather storm; school librarians under siege,” *ALA State of America’s Libraries Report 2013*, www.ala.org/news/state-americas-libraries-report-2013/introduction, accessed 4/20/2014.

⁷ Cody, *ibid.*, and see articles under subheading, “Poverty and access to books.”