

This **copy** is for personal, non-commercial use. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution you can: 1) Use the "**Reprint**" button found on the top and bottom of every article, 2) Visit reprints.theygsgroup.com/dailyherald.asp for samples and additional information or 3) **Order a reprint of this article now.**

Article posted: 3/22/2014 8:01 AM

More Little Free Libraries popping up in suburbs

More free mini libraries are popping up in suburbs

By Russell Lissau

This summer, hikers at two Lake County forest preserves will find something new and unusual at the end of special trails -- outdoor libraries.

The decorative boxes full of books will be the suburbs' latest Little Free Libraries, as part of an effort that began about five years ago and has expanded across the nation and the globe.

The Ryerson Woods preserve near Riverwoods and the Greenbelt Forest Preserve near North Chicago were chosen for the take-a-book, leave-a-book public collections.

Little Free Libraries already can be found in Cary, Elgin, Glen Ellyn, Highland Park, Naperville and other suburbs. They're in parks and on front lawns and at street corners.

Typically maintained by volunteers called stewards, the weather-resistant containers -- they can look like houses, animals or any other object that can hold books -- simultaneously help build community and literacy.

"I can't tell you how many times I've been in the front yard or mowing the lawn and people come up and say 'Thank you, thank you,'" said Third Lake resident Brian Smith, who's had a Little Free Library at his home for about two years. "It's such a worthwhile project."

Started in Wisconsin

The first Little Free Library was erected in 2009 in Wisconsin, according to littlefreelibrary.org, the official site for the nonprofit group that launched the hobby and sells the structures.

A model of a one-room schoolhouse, the initial library was a tribute to the builder's mother, a former teacher who loved reading. The owner filled it with books and put in on a post in

his front yard. The idea caught on, and soon thousands of them were built in the U.S. and around the world in countries such as India, Ukraine and Honduras -- and the number grows every year.

Altogether, more than 15,000 Little Free Libraries exist today, co-founder and program consultant Rick Brooks said. That doesn't count libraries that haven't yet been registered with the group, or those that are independently built from scratch.

"Now, about 75 percent of them are built by the people themselves," Brooks said. "It's like a new American craft."

Nature, books linked

The libraries planned for Lake County are the result of a public and private partnership.

The Vernon Area Public Library in Lincolnshire, the Waukegan Public Library, the Lake County Forest Preserve District and a nonprofit group that supports Ryerson Woods called the Brushwood Center are teaming up for the project. A group called the Leave No Child Inside North Chicago Waukegan Network is involved, too.

Organizers are calling the projects Trail Tales, and the miniature libraries are only one part.

Bilingual signs resembling book pages will be added to the trails, said Sophia B. Twichell, the Brushwood Center's executive director. Families, teachers and students, Scouts and other visitors will be able to follow the story as they explore the trails.

"We love how it links time in nature, physical activity and literacy," Twichell said.

A Libertyville family has donated \$10,000 for the project, Twichell said. Grants have been acquired, too.

"In a perfect world, we'd secure enough funding to be able to offer a new story each season," Twichell said.

The little libraries will be located at the end of the trails, like buried treasure in countless literary adventures. And just like those trunks of pirate booty, organizers think they're sure to make the people who discover them very, very happy. "We hope it will encourage new audiences to visit the forest preserves, as well as providing another reason for people who do use the preserves to return," Twichell said.

'A give and take'

Brooks estimated more than 100 Little Free Libraries operate in the Chicago area.

Glen Ellyn resident Jenny Fischer has had one at her house on the 0-100 block of Muirwood Drive for about three years.

Before she heard about the program, Fischer used to leave books with notes for strangers on park benches, on supermarket shelves and in other public places.

"I've always been one to pass books on," said Fischer, an employee at The Bookstore in Glen Ellyn.

Resembling a small cabin with a glass front, Fischer's library holds about 40 books.

"At first when I put it up, people were a little hesitant," she said. "But now I think people in town are familiar with what it is."

Fischer's library has visitors nearly every day, and she likes to keep her library stocked with books for kids and adults. But since it's a trade-based arrangement, she finds a variety of books left behind, including mysteries and religious titles.

"It's definitely a give-and-take," she said.

Third Lake's Smith loves that aspect of his Little Free Library, too.

"(It) has become truly a community library," he said in an email. "We have seen people out on walks stop and leave with a book, we have seen folks drive to the LFL and pick up and drop off books. Even our mail carrier will stop and swap a book as she delivers mail."

Smith and his wife, Kathy, received their little library as a gift from their son, Sean, in 2012. They painted it green and gray to match their house on the 200 block of Seafarer Drive.

To make the station even more inviting, they put a bench next to the library to encourage people to stop, sit and browse.

"The Little Free Library has so far exceeded our expectations," Smith said. "It has been a labor of love to maintain it."

That's certainly the case for Elgin resident Rich L. Jacobs, who has a Little Free Library at his house on the 800 block of Douglas Avenue.

His display is a miniature, British-style telephone booth perched atop a post. He's dubbed it "London Calling."

"It's quirky and fun and cool," Jacobs said. "It's a great conversation starter ... and it adds to the vibrancy of our wonderful neighborhood."

Jacobs said he's received some top-notch book donations from visitors. One, however, surprised him.

"When former basketball player Dennis Rodman was in the news a few weeks back, someone donated his autobiography to my library," Jacobs said. "It did not take long for someone to borrow that book."

A natural partnership

The library at Ryerson Woods will be stocked with nature-related materials that had been part of the Vernon Area Public Library's collection.

"We'll include books for a wide range of age levels ... as the Trail Tales is meant to attract families." Twichell said.

Although the little library won't be ready for several months, the library already has a small collection of books ready to stock the box.

"I am delighted with how naturally this partnership came together and excited for the opportunity to provide library services in a nontraditional setting like our local forest preserve," library spokeswoman Catherine Savage said.

Vernon Area library staffers and volunteers will run periodic nature-book drives for public donations, Savage said.

The first such collection is planned for April 26 at the Vernon Township office, 3050 Main St., Buffalo Grove. But they've got enough books already to stock the library for its debut.

Brushwood's Twichell said she's thrilled to have the support of the library and the other agencies working on the project. She can't wait until the trail and the library are ready for the public.

"It's just such a glorious thing to think that people will leave a forest preserve not just with a nature experience but with a book in their hands," Twichell said.