For the people, by the people

Little libraries can build community and a love for books.

By ISABELLE TAFT

OME parents buy a dog or cat when their children leave home. When her son Jack Gavron heads to college next month, Mindy Fox will get a library.

The library, a handbuilt wooden box decorated to look like the family’s Craftsman-style home, already sits in Fox’s front yard in the Land Park neighborhood of Sacramento, California, but Gavron is the primary steward. When he built it for his senior secondary school project earlier this year, he set up a community of approximately 15,000 Little Free Library stewardships worldwide, and nearly 30 registered in the Sacramento area.

Gavron says neighbours, classmates and friends love the library, which took him months to build. He estimates that his library attracts at least one visitor a day, and it has sparked conversations and led to an outpouring of donated books.

“The main goals for the Little Free Library are to get a general love for reading and books,” he says.

The Little Free Library project began in 2009, when a man from the state of Wisconsin named Todd Bol built a model of a one-room schoolhouse, filled it with books and placed it in his front yard in honour of his mother. Bol built several more and gave them to friends and family members. Gradually, the libraries gained fans eager to establish their own. By 2011, Bol and friend Rick Brooks had set up a website (littlefreelibrary.org) to share information with aspiring Little Free Librarians worldwide.

Today, Bol, Brooks and volunteers act as coordinators for the growing global network of Little Free Libraries. To start a library, simply build or buy a sturdy, weatherproof container. Mount it securely in an accessible place and fill it with books.

The organisation’s website urges building librarians to check with their local jurisdictions about where they can legally place their project.

A nine-year-old boy in Leawood, Kansas, recently made headlines in US newspapers when he was forced to remove the library from the end of his family’s driveway. The Leawood City Council voted recently to stop enforcing a zoning regulation that bans such structures on front lawns.

Anyone can take a book from a Little Free Library, though patrons are encouraged to leave a book behind as well. Stewards like Gavron and Georgia White, who established her library in 2012, say they enjoy tending their libraries’ collections and seeing what others contribute.

White’s late partner, John Kizzir, built the miniature yellow house in June 2012. He died in October of that year. The couple dated throughout secondary school and college in Sacramento, but when Kizzir was shipped to Vietnam, White moved on. They rekindled their romance in 2010. A bench dedicated to Kizzir now sits in front of the little library.

White, who retired from her position as university archivist and head of special collections at California State University in 2001, says she gets to use her skills as a professional librarian to help people in the neighborhood discover new books and find free copies of titles they’ve always wanted to read.

“There’s a sense of purpose about it,” White says.

“There’s nothing more rewarding than sitting in here and seeing a grandmother and two or three grandchildren sitting on the bench, reading.”

Recently, 13-year-old Chloe Baker stopped by White’s Little Free Library to see what was new. Baker, a voracious reader, says she checks the library at least three times a week. Though she doesn’t always find books to take home, she loves the library and thinks its impact goes beyond books.

“I’ve noticed it kind of acts as a meeting place,” Baker says. “You can get to know people. White admits that the library’s offerings are lacking in that area and rushes inside to search among the hundreds of donated books she keeps in her spare room.

In a few minutes, White returns with three books she thinks Baker might like: the classic Black Beauty, an advice book for teenage girls by Maria Shriver and a nonfiction book about the people of Alberta, Canada. Baker takes home all but Black Beauty, which she had already read.

“I’ve still got the touch,” the not-quite-retired librarian declares.

In some neighbourhoods in Sacramento, Little Free Libraries stand in places that real libraries have closed.

Shortly after Rosalie Hangstrom moved to the town of Oak Park, California, in the early 1990s, McGeorge School of Law purchased the local library and closed it to the public.

“It always bothered me so much that neighbourhoods like this where people are the least able to get to a library, that the city didn’t feel the need to provide a library,” Hangstrom says.

When she heard about the Little Free Library, she said, “Well at least I can do my part!”

Hangstrom and her family set up the library in early 2013. Because she works as a school administrator during the day, Hangstrom doesn’t know who stops by her library.

“It’s a total mystery, that’s what’s funny about it,” Hangstrom says. “But I know people come because all the books will be rearranged when I check it.”

Meanwhile, Fox says she’s looking forward to caring for the Little Free Library when Gavron leaves. It’s easier to tend than a dog, she notes, and far likelier to provide fresh reading material. — The Sacramento Bee/ McClatchy Tribune Information Services

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