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Little Free Libraries in Lamorinda

By Amanda Kuehn



Donna Pickthall accepts book donations at her "Something for the Weekend" booth at the Orinda Farmers' Market. Photo Ohlen Alexander

If you park your car outside 67 Loma Vista Drive in Orinda, walk up to the bright red box roughly 5 feet tall and 3 feet wide at end of the drive, nestled between two baby evergreens, and crack open the door you'll find three shelves of books, ranging from Amanda Foreman's "The Duchess" to Don Freeman's "Corduroy." At the bottom of the base, a plaque reads simply: "Take a book, return a book. Little Free Library."

The Little Free Library (LFL) Project started in 2009, when Todd Bol of Hudson, Wis., built a model of a one room schoolhouse, filled it with books and put it on a post in his front yard with a sign reading "Free Books." It was so popular that Bol built two more. LFL's started popping up throughout Wisconsin, and with the advent of the LFL website in 2010, the movement went national. By the end of 2011 there were 400 LFL's across the country. As of January 2014, there are over 15,000 LFL's worldwide, each doing its part to create "a gathering place where neighbors share their favorite literature and stories."

The Lamorinda area boasts two such spaces: Donna Pickthall's box on Loma Vista Drive and Bobbie Preston's book lantern at 1307 Larch Avenue in Moraga. Pickthall and her family moved to Los Angeles from London four years ago. "I couldn't have made L.A. my permanent home," Pickthall commented. Shortly after moving to Orinda, she recalled thinking she'd found "the most amazing neighborhood with just the most lovely people." Pickthall considers the LFL to be "a gift; a sort of thank you to the community for accepting us."

Pickthall heard about LFL from a fellow member of the Lamorinda Moms group. "I Googled it and there wasn't one [in Lamorinda]. And I just decided, yeah, I'm going to do this." Pickthall's LFL was built by her father and made to look like an English phone kiosk. She keeps books for younger kids at the bottom, adults on the top. Her LFL is registered through the project's website and officially opened last October.

"Initially, it was just nice that the kids in the neighborhood used it," said Pickthall, who has been amazed at the number of books that have cycled in and out of the box. Now six months in, "It's actually very self-managing."

Bobbie Preston is still waiting to see some real action with her LFL, which has only been out since April. An avid gardener and advocate of literacy, Preston first read about LFL's in a gardening magazine. "They're quite big on the East Coast," she said.

Preston kept it simple, buying a large outdoor light lantern, mounting it on an old kitchen stool and setting it near the curb. "A lot of people walk and run on Larch," she noted. "I hope people will see it, and get in the habit of taking a book and leaving a book." Preston filled the library with "a little bit of everything," including high brow, low brow and children's books. "I find it very hard to give up books without giving them away," she said.

Preston hopes her LFL will facilitate community.

"In Texas, we sit on the front porch," she said. "In California, having a sense of community can be hard." She also hopes that the LFL will encourage literacy. "I think reading is incredibly important."

You can get involved by visiting your local LFL and donating to its collection. (Pickthall will also take donations at "Something for the Weekend," her baked goods booth at the Orinda Farmers' Market). You can also start an LFL of your own. You can even purchase a ready-made structure through the website.

Once you have your LFL put together, "make it official" by registering through the LFL website. LFL will send you a steward's packet and charter sign. Your library will become a part of the global network connecting readers to books and people to their communities.



Moraga's Little Free Library on Larch. Photo Amanda Kuehn



The Little Free Library in Orinda. Photo Amanda Kuehn

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