

I am an American We are One Nation HE STARTED A READING REVOLUTION

Wisconsin man brings neighbors together with his Little Free Libraries

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Each week, this USA Today series will introduce you to an exceptional American who unites, rather than divides, our communities. To read more about average Americans doing exceptional things, visit onenation.usatoday.com.

Todd Bol

Location: Hudson, Wisconsin **Age:** 61 **Profession:** Co-founder and executive director of Little Free Library

Mission: To build small boxes for books called Little Free Libraries throughout the globe

More info: littlefreelibrary.org



MARK HOFFMAN/USA TODAY NETWORK

Little Free Library co-founder Todd Bol is shown with the first library he made in Hudson, Wis.

Todd Bol is changing lives one book at a time.

What started as a project to recycle a garage door — by turning it into a small book repository in the shape of a one-room schoolhouse to honor his late mother — has morphed into a global phenomenon, scattering book filled Little Free Libraries like literary dandelion seeds.

After noticing folks stopping at his garage sale spent more time checking out the library he installed in 2009 at the end of his Hudson, Wisconsin, driveway, Bol began thinking bigger, giving away 30 Little Free Libraries to friends and family.

Anyone can put up a Little Free Library anywhere and attach a small sign that says “Take a Book, Leave a Book.” Anyone registering his or her library on the nonprofit’s

website gets a free “Little Free Library” sign in the mail, and the location is noted on an online map.

“The real key of the Little Free Libraries is people say they meet their neighbors through their libraries. It’s an extension of their front porch.”

When Little Free Library became a nonprofit in 2012, several hundred libraries had popped up in many states and a handful of countries. The goal was 2,510 libraries, one more than the number of Carnegie libraries. But Little Free Libraries exploded in popularity. Last November Bol attached the 50,000th Little Free Library sign to a library at a homeless shelter in Santa Ana, Calif.

Little Free Libraries are in every state in America and 70 countries.

Bol leads a staff of 14 in an office park in the western Wisconsin community where kits and libraries constructed by local craftsmen are sold online for \$225 to \$360. The nonprofit’s Impact Fund helps provide no cost libraries to communities. Construction plans are offered free online. Many people decide to make their own or donate their creations.

Bol travels frequently to spread the Little Free Library gospel. A few days after an interview, he flew to the Philippines for 2 1/2 weeks to help with efforts to install thousands of libraries.

“Everybody deserves to read. I see Little Free Libraries as a movement to bring people together,” said Bol.

Q&A WITH TODD BOL

What does it mean to you to be an American?

To me it’s what you give back. I feel it’s not what you accumulate and what you have but how you give back to society and culture. A very important thing for me is to ask the question — not it takes a village to raise a child but how am I part of that village?

What moment touched and motivated you to launch this effort?

What touched me to launch the Little Free Library was just how my neighborhood got so excited and thrilled. It was like a new baby or a new puppy. They were thrilled by it. It was something they had never seen. What we did is we put them out there across Wisconsin and Minnesota, and it took off. It’s been in the media. It’s delighted people around the world.

What gives you hope or what concerns you?

There’s an old saying that you don’t think clearly with clenched fists. I believe too often in America right now we’re angry and we’re spending time and energy about where we disagree. What is wonderful about Little Free Libraries that gives me hope is it brings neighborhoods together. It brings a commonality of improving literacy within the neighborhood, and they connect. I see that people are more concerned about connecting and being together and building a strong community than I see dissension. I believe dissension is too often emphasized and it’s not really who we

are. Little Free Libraries are more about who we are, that is, connecting neighborhoods and making neighborhoods better and making every single child and adult better. I think Little Free Libraries push a ray of hope on us that is more representative of who we are.

What do you hope to accomplish through your efforts?

What I believe is that everybody has a right to read. You may not be able to change your city or your town, but you can change your neighborhood. What we're hoping is that Little Free Library acts as a spark in that neighborhood to step up, change your neighborhood, make it better ... It's starting that, and it's happening all across the globe. I just hope it accelerates more and more.