

Take a stroll and grab a book; Little Free Library project comes to Oliver neighbourhood

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Last week, Annalise Klingbeil moved away to Calgary. But before she left, the writer and self-proclaimed "busy bee" gave our city some very thoughtful going-away presents.

In the coming days, Klingbeil's cohorts on the board of the Oliver Community League will put the finishing touches on 10 repurposed newspaper boxes, and then distribute them to different areas of their neighbourhood, which sits just west of downtown. The boxes have been repainted by community members ranging from professional artists to enthusiastic kids.

And inside, they're jampacked with books.

It's a local take on the Little Free Library initiative, which began in Wisconsin in 2009 and has since spread around the world. The organization estimates that there will be as many as 12,000 minilibraries registered and mapped out on its website by next year.

These libraries are designed not just to be places where neighbours can find their next bit of reading material, but also public meeting spaces that are both eye-catching and a boost to neighbourhood camaraderie and morale. They're usually placed under the watchful eye of a local business, or else an interested neighbour, who then volunteers to keep an eye on the stock.

Meanwhile, the philosophy behind Little Free Libraries couldn't be simpler.

"The tag line we put on it says, 'Take a book. Leave a book.' That's as simple as it is," Klingbeil says. "I mean, if you walk by and you want to take a book but you don't have (another one to put back), who cares? Next time you're walking by, put a book in. There's no physical signing out, or anything like that."

These aren't the first Little Free Libraries in Edmonton.

Joe Clare's handmade, red-and-yellow library has been catching the eyes of Strathearn residents since late last year. And there are so many of them down in Calgary that you can take a bike tour of the most notable ones - which is how Klingbeil first heard about them.

She's hoping that community spirit will transfer to Oliver, which has nearly 20,000 residents, many of whom live disconnected from one another in apartment buildings. But a lot of them are also walkers, which means they're the perfect demographic for the mini-library model.

"We're hoping to put them in places where a lot of people

walk by," Klingbeil says. "So even if it takes them 10 times of saying 'What is that?' before opening them up, that's fine by her."

Oliver's first Little Free Library box is already up and running outside the community league's hall (10326 118th St.). Another is on its way to a church, and the OCL is waiting for permission from the city to place three more in local parks. That leaves five remaining boxes without a home yet, and Klingbeil says she's hoping local businesses will come forward and adopt one.

She already has some strong community support behind her. Klingbeil says that when the OCL put out a somewhat last-minute call for Oliver residents to come help out with the painting of the boxes, more than 30 people showed up.

"People are pumped about it," Klingbeil says. "Jarrett (Campbell, the OCL president) posted the initial thing on the Oliver Facebook page, and he said it's had the most likes and shares anything on there has got, by far."

Other community leagues around the city have already got wind of the Little Free Library idea, and Klingbeil says that all are welcome to contact the OCL and figure out the best way of creating free mini-libraries in their own neighbourhoods.

If you don't have a bunch of old newspaper boxes lying around, maybe you can find a local handyman, like Clare in Strathearn, to build something from scratch.

An added benefit: so long as you stock the libraries properly, Little Free Libraries are that rare neighbourhood initiative that appeals to kids, the elderly, and everyone in between.

"I know Oliver, as a community, struggles with doing projects or events that appeal to everyone. So it works," Klingbeil says, smiling. "Books appeal to all ages." hingston@gmail.com twitter.com/mhingston booksinthekitchen.tumblr.com