

Ludlow Students Bring Books to Community with Little Free Libraries

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It all started with an idea about a book, and kids who needed a project.

The SOAR program (Self discovery, Opportunities and possibilities, Academic support and enrichment, and Readiness for the future) started last year at Ludlow High School in partnership with Navigo College and Career Prep Services. This program provides 7th, 8th, and 9th graders with fun and interesting before-school and after-school activities, as well as summer programs. Since last year was the first year for the SOAR program, Melanie Beccaccio, a program director with Ludlow Independent Schools, and three teacher/coaches brought the students together and brainstormed about what projects they could take on. Jenny McMillen, the college and career readiness coordinator for the district, had suggested Little Free Libraries, and the students liked the idea.

Little Free Libraries are popping up in Northern Kentucky communities, and are often tiny boxes filled with books that people can borrow from or donate to - with no sign-up or money needed.

"Thursdays are teamwork and problem solving days," said Beccaccio. "We wanted to introduce the opportunity to run a service learning process. Several kids really liked the idea, and when everything boiled down there were about five kids who stuck with it and wanted to make it happen."



Jacob Prather, who was a freshman when the project started and is a sophomore now, was joined by 8th grade students Luke Lack, Cassidee Paddock, Shayla Sheppard, and Ian Martinez.

First they had to research the subject, and Beccaccio said the students did a tremendous job.

"This is a great age to get kids thinking," she said. "They were running with it."

The students made up a presentation and then went to principal Travis Caudill, McMillan, and Superintendent Mike Borchers. When that went well, they talked about where they could put the libraries so that they would be accessible to the public. They settled on several businesses, including Wynner's Cup Cafe, which is owned by the mayor of Ludlow, Kenneth Wynn, and Subway, the Folk School Coffee Parlor, and the Ludlow Pool. The team of students presented to the businesses and all four businesses agreed.

"We settled on the idea late in the fall, and by the time the kids worked on the research, the presentations, and then made the presentations, it was spring," explained Beccaccio. "That's why they went for the pool as a location. They knew that over the summer kids don't read as much as they should."

It was a learning experience for the students. "I think it taught us teamwork," said Cassidee. "It was a good idea because it gives someone a chance to read a book without going to Covington. Some people don't have transportation, and they can just go to our little libraries."

"It taught us what the little libraries are, and it helps kids by letting them pick up a book and practice reading at home," said Luke. "It gives them a chance to find new words they can use." He grinned. "I personally think we could do more with our displays, like having paper there, or stuff people might need."

Jacob took a different perspective, picturing in his mind how adults could use the libraries. The libraries have books for kids and adults. "It will help people because if they need a textbook, or if they just want to get a book, they can," he said. Jacob's older sister is in college, and he thought about her needs. Jacob has a special-needs reading buddy, Kindred, whom Jacob reads to almost every day. Jacob admitted to having a special book that he really liked reading, *Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain, and he said he liked the idea of helping to provide books that could be special to other people.

The students were successful in creating their libraries but don't expect to see any of them become librarians when they grow up. Jacob would like to be a math teacher, while Luke thinks he'll be a lawyer, and Cassidee said she wasn't sure, but thinks maybe her future profession would have to do with the fine arts, since she likes drawing and writing.

Elizabeth Runnels, the school librarian and a coach for the program, said once SOAR gets started this year, the school wants to build on the project and do more maintenance.

"I think this project has taught the students project planning, responsibility, and teamwork at the very least," she said. "They have had to do the work, under our supervision, and they have had to go out and check on the stands very often. In addition, it has taught them to think about their community, and the problems that the people in the community might have in doing something as simple as having a book to read."

Beccaccio said she thinks the kids might be a little disappointed in the participation.

"If I had to guess, I would say their findings are showing not as much activity as they hoped," she said. "But the problem is largely getting the word out, and letting people know what Little Free Libraries are, and that they can borrow a book, or keep it, or bring a few more back. The big thing is that we are planting a seed, getting middle school students to think about literacy in the community. The students come because they want to come to this program. It is like a breeding ground for the future leaders in the community."

Anyone who would like to donate to the program can contact the school. Books can be donated to the High School Office or the board of education office.

Written by Patricia A. Scheyer, RCN contributor

Photo: Jacob Prather, Cassidee Paddock, and Luke Lack check out their Little Free Library stand at Subway in Ludlow. Not present are Shayla Sheppard and Ian Martinez.