

## A little free celebration of literacy

### *Cerebral Palsy of Westchester student donates Little Free Library structure to Pine Ridge Park*

By Sarah Wolpoff

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Cerebral Palsy of Westchester residency poets Ollie Lowery (left) and Claudia Tomkins perform at the Little Free Library dedication at Pine Ridge Park on Tuesday, May 18, celebrating the organization's donation to Rye Brook. Tomkins, through the voice of her puppet, introduces Lowery before she reads a poem about love and friendship. Sarah Wolpoff|Westmore News

For years, the Village of Rye Brook has been on the hunt—in search of a Little Free Library to install in a local park, according to Village Administrator Chris Bradbury.

“We kept searching for tag sales and flea markets and eBay, looking to make something out of to put a Little Free Library here. In the winter of 2019, we even found a big log in our

compost site. We found this massive log, and we’re like, alright, we’re going to take it, drag it down to our firehouse, carve it out and make some kind of library,” Bradbury recalled, and chuckled: “Lo and behold, when it warmed up in the firehouse bay, it turned out to have wood cockroaches—which infested the entire bay of our firehouse and we had to call an exterminator.”

So, when Cerebral Palsy of Westchester (CPW) representatives approached the Village with a proposal to donate one of the quaint take a book, leave a book boxes to the community, Bradbury called it “an ideal scenario,” because “clearly, we needed a little help.”

CPW, a Rye Brook-based facility that provides services, education and housing for children and adults with developmental disabilities, had a student in the organization’s BRIDGE School at Rye Brook who was inspired to build and donate a Little Free Library to the village for his senior project in 2019.

Elijah Roberts, who graduated that year and now attends college, worked with the CPW Adaptive Boy Scout Troop 535—a cohort sponsored by the Mid Westchester Elks Lodge—to plan and fundraise for the project. It finally came to fruition this year after unavoidable stalls associated with COVID-19 prevented a timely completion. On Tuesday, May 18, Rye Brook officials, CPW affiliates and local politicians gathered in Pine Ridge Park for a grand opening of the new installment, an event that ultimately manifested as a celebration of reading.

“I could take everybody’s toes and fingers and still not have enough to count the number of successful, interesting, creative and famous people who have said when they’re interviewed that what really inspired them was a book or books,” said County Legislator Nancy Barr at the ceremony. “They grew up in a rural area and read books about faraway lands that inspired them to travel and do great things. Or they read a book that inspired them to become a scientist or artist.”

The premise behind the Little Free Library is simple: it’s a box filled with shelves in a public place where passersby are encouraged to either leave books of decent quality they no longer need or browse and take a book of interest. Little Free Library is a nonprofit that seeks to build community, inspire readers and expand global access to books by promoting more stations. There are over 100,000 official Little Free Library stands across the world—including in Port Chester’s Lyon Park, where Girl Scout Troop 2127 donated a structure in August 2019.

And because literacy is for people of all ages, they’re typically used to share stories for both children and adults.

“It’s important to note that the goals of that program starts with building community,” Bradbury said. “I think there may not be a better example of a Little Free Library in Rye Brook building community than this one,

working with CPW. CPW is an amazing facility right here in Rye Brook. And this great example of partnership gets us learning more about this inspirational organization and will remind the community how lucky we are to have them here in the Village.”

Rye Brook staff were joined by local elected officials eager to hand out proclamations and students and employees who make up the CPW community. Every speaker had a book to donate to get the Little Free Library going.

Bradbury said the location, between the basketball courts and playground at the Mohegan Lane park, was intentional. It’s in the center of all the action—between trails typically used by adults and equipment often enjoyed by children—and will ideally encourage a variety of residents to use the new resource.

“As a division of CPW, the BRIDGE School serves a very special population of students,” said school Principal Barry Wasser. “However, in many ways, we’re just like any other school in the country, especially when it comes to our love for reading. So, we’re honored to be able to represent the school by places like this Little Free Library.”

Leslie Kimmelman, a children’s book author from Ardsley who has published over 50 books, made an appearance at the celebration solely due to her love of libraries—especially Little Free Libraries, “because they’re so adorable.”

She aims to promote reading, not just because it has tremendous cultural value, but due to the proven benefits it has for child development.

“Study after study has shown the importance of reading. The size of a child’s vocabulary has been found to be an excellent predictor of a child’s success,” Kimmelman said. “And interestingly, they’ve done studies that show a big vocabulary is not the result of households where there’s a lot of talking, though that’s always a good thing, but instead, they’re mostly a result of houses where there are a lot of books.”

More importantly than success, she said books are fundamental in helping children learn empathy. She referred to an expression used in the authorship world referring to mirrors and doors. Books act as mirrors because they reflect to readers something significant of their own experience—which is why it’s important for everyone to have books with characters they can relate to, regardless of background and ability, she said.



Because people tend to live in communities where neighbors are similar in culture and values, Kimmelman described books as having an equally important influence as doors—opening readers’ eyes to a world outside their own.



Describing her reasoning for donating a Scooby Doo book to the library, BRIDGE School at Rye Brook student Leah says, “I like this book because it’s funny and Scooby Doo always makes me laugh.” Sarah Wolpoff|Westmore News

“Last, but not least, is that books are just magical,” she said. “And especially this year, when we haven’t been able to go out and go places and have adventures and meet people, we just need to open the pages of a book and we’re off on the most magical adventure there is. I hope people take full advantage of this library and go on their own adventure.



Leslie Kimmelman, an accomplished children’s book author from Ardsley, reads aloud the beginning of “Bat and Sloth Solve a Mystery” before gifting the story to the Little Free Library. Sarah Wolpoff|Westmore News



On behalf of Congressman Mondaire Jones, Port Chester Trustee Joan Grangeniois-Thomas, who works as his district director, donates a book to the Little Free Library while County Legislator Nancy Barr shares a few words at the podium. Sarah Wolpoff|Westmore News