

Little Libraries share love of books

By Anne Murphy for Beloit Daily News | Posted: Friday, July 12, 2013 4:00 pm

“There are many little ways to enlarge your world. Love of books is the best of all.” --Jacqueline Kennedy

Although those are the words of President John F. Kennedy's wife, they very easily could have been spoken by late Beloit actress Colleen Burns whose memorial fund has assisted in the noticeably expanding Little Free Library program.

Burns might have changed “the best” to “among the best” as her love of theatre equaled her life-long love of books. For Burns, theatre and books were both invaluable tickets to education and enjoyment. But she clearly shared the sentiment of the First Lady who she grew up admiring for her devotion to furthering the arts and literature. And Burns' husband, Marty Densch, says his wife would be pleased to know that reading opportunities are in the spotlight throughout Beloit this summer.

The concept of the Little Free Library is to be a neighborhood book exchange to encourage literacy and the love of reading for people of all ages. Most often, each library is custom built to match the home or business where it is located. Look around Beloit and you will see how the Little Free Library Program has unfolded.

After graduating from Beloit Catholic High School in 1971, Burns earned a degree in theatre from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with an acting specialty. Before her death in June of 2011, Burns performed in musicals in Chicago and New York. Perhaps most proudly, as a strong believer in Regional Theatre, Burns spent much time acting and directing in the state, and at the time of her death was a founding member of Madison's premiere Forward Theatre Company.

Burns' Memorial Fund is helping in the expansion of the Little Free Library program in Beloit, and serving as inspiration for others to become involved in the program.

It was not much more than a year ago that the first Little Free Libraries made their debut here, after one of the program's co-founders was a guest speaker for the Beloit Rotary Club. Rick Brooks, Beloit College Class of 1969 and long time Madisonian, developed the concept with fellow Wisconsinite Tod Bol in 2009. The first Little Library appeared in Madison that year, leading the way for Little Free Libraries throughout Wisconsin, the country and beyond.

A committee was formed in Beloit to help establish a local program. Dr. Jane Fossum, who is on the committee, says she could not be more excited about the proliferation of Little Libraries thanks to the enthusiasm of individuals and businesses interested in literature and reading.

Within the last month, a Little Library was placed at the Rotary Center, which is not so little by

general standards and will hold many books for exchange, according to Dr. Fossum who said she is excited to help stock with donated books from her collection.

Marty Densch said the Little Free Libraries immediately came to mind when thinking of ways to invest in the community in memory of his wife.

”Supporting the Little Free Libraries in Beloit is such a perfect way to invest the memorial funds that were given in her name,” he said. “As all of our friends know, Colleen not only loved books and reading but especially loved sharing them once she was finished with them.”

It is in this spirit that the Colleen Burns Memorial Fund has just helped make possible the building and installation of four new Little Free Libraries in Downtown Beloit. According to The Downtown Beloit Association that is assisting with development of the program, the new libraries can be found at The Angel Museum, The Nest Egg, BMO Harris Bank and Blackhawk Bank. One also has been established at the home of Rick McGrath and Ana Kelly for their neighbors along Emerson Street and Sherwood Drive to enjoy.

Thanks to other individual and business interest, Little Free Libraries have materialized at McDonald’s, Bushel & Peck and Culver’s as well as at other locations around Beloit. El-Amin added that another library is planned for the Brunton Motors park area on the corner of Broad and Pleasant Street. Once all the Little Libraries are registered, they will be listed on the website at www.littlefreelibrary.org.

“We are so excited about this project,” Downtown Beloit Association Executive Director Shauna El-Amin said. “Once all of our libraries are registered, you will see them on www.littlefreelibrary.org along with all the other libraries installed around the world. We hope to encourage reading and get the community to support the 'take-a-book, leave-a-book' mentality that these libraries spark.”

All of this would make Burns extremely happy, emphasizes Densch, who is in the process of installing plaques on all of the Little Libraries funded by her memorial fund. Densch said he hopes that by identifying the funding source others will be inspired to donate too.