

EAST HAVEN

School opens Little Free Library to inspire, stay connected



Lisa Reisman / For Hearst Connecticut Media

Jillian Jack's second-grade class at a ribbon-cutting ceremony for Little Free Library outside East Haven's Tuttle Elementary School. Below, the Little Free Library was dedicated recently.

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By Lisa Reisman

EAST HAVEN — To maintain connection with students when the coronavirus pandemic closed schools in March, Tuttle Elementary School Principal Chris Brown asked students to paint rocks and drop them off at the school.

Those rocks now form the base of Little Free Library Charter No. 102688, which opened last week at a ceremony outside the Prospect Road building.

Retired librarian Jean Williams, who funded the library through Donors Choose, a nonprofit that allows individuals to donate directly to public school classroom projects, cut the ribbon on a crisp autumn

“The presence of books, physical books, matters,” she said. “If books are around, it’s more likely that someone in the household will pick them up.”

Superintendent of Schools Erica Forti

day with the roughly 25 in attendance bundled up in winter coats.

The birdhouse-like structure, which was assembled and installed by custodian Joe Mortali, is among

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the roughly 100,000 locations in all 50 U.S. states and 108 countries worldwide where the miniature lending libraries have popped up, according to littlefreelibrary.org.

Through them, more than 165 million books have been shared.

It's part of a 2009 initiative inspired by "take a book, leave a book" collections in coffee shops and public spaces. Its mission is, its website states, "to inspire a love of reading, build community, and spark creativity."

For Brown, an avid reader, the exercise in creativity amid the challenges posed by the pandemic did not end with the painted rocks back in March.

Another was the livestream of the ceremony on a large-format display in 12 classrooms, as well as for the school's remote learners, with just one group of students in physical attendance.

"There was no way to socially distance 260 kids for the event," Brown said. "Safety is the priority."

There also was the decision to situate the small-scale lending library outside the building.

"We started a little free library inside the school [in September 2019] and there was a great response," said second-grade teacher Jillian Jack, another bibliophile who spear-

headed the project. "Then when the pandemic hit, we saw the potential for one outside the building for our remote students to enjoy and hopefully feel a little less remote."

Having access to books in order to get kids reading is "both key to success and a constructive way to escape what's going on in the world right now," she said.

"It's also about our community," she said. "Many of our teachers grew up in East Haven, we live in East Haven. We want our community to succeed in every way."

Superintendent of Schools Erica Forti stressed the crucial importance of reading and books.

"The presence of books, physical books, matters," she said. "If books are around, it's more likely that someone in the household will pick them up."

With the new realities in education brought on by the pandemic, that's even more vital, it seems.

"Research shows that even one shelf of books in a home affords children a discernible advantage going forward over those in a bookless home," she said.

For Brown, it's even more simple.

"Bottom line is, we want to stay connected with our kids and whether it's with painted rocks, or something else, we're going to continue to invent new ways to get there," Brown said.



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Retired librarian Jean Williams, who funded the Little Free Library at East Haven's Tuttle Elementary School, at a ribbon-cutting ceremony.