HOLYOKE – Third-graders at Kelly Elementary School cheered for the opening of their new Little Free Library Friday (Oct. 15), a community project developed by students from the Latinx Empowerment Association at Holyoke Community College.

The Little Free Library kiosk is mounted just outside the main entrance at the school, where the students gathered with their teachers and representatives from HCC and community groups for a ceremonial ribbon-cutting marking its debut.

The project was led by HCC alum Alexandra Santiago '21, former co-president of the Latinx Empowerment Association – also known as the LEA Club – and Miren Neyra Alcántara, LEA Club president, who cut the red ribbon together.

“So, the way it works, you take a free book, and you read it, and if you want to, you can bring it back and put another book in there,” Santiago told the students. “Or, if you really

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HCC student Miren Neyra Alcántara, president of the Latinx Empowerment Association (LEA Club) on the left; and HCC alum and former LEA Club co-president Alex Santiago (HCC Class of 2021, now a student at Westfield State, after the ribbon cutting. Both live in Holyoke.
liked the book, you can keep it. There’s no issue with
that.”

Each book includes a special bookmark and a list
of fun reading exercises written in both English and
Spanish.

The club held a book drive earlier this year and
collected more than 200 books. More donations are
expected soon from the Eric Carle Museum of Picture
Book Art in Amherst.

“Alex is the one who came up with the idea,” said
Alcántara, who lives in Holyoke. “We wanted to do
something to build community and to increase literacy.
We wanted kids to have access to books that they saw
themselves represented in, so we chose bilingual books,
books that dealt with race, LGBTQ topics, and neu-
ro-diverse topics, so we really hope you enjoy it.”

LittleFreeLibrary.org is a national nonprofit that
promotes free public book exchange sites throughout
the country. Little Free Library supplied the box for
the LEA Club, and students from an art class at Kelly
painted it.

Over the past few years, Little Free Libraries have
become a common site (there are some 90,000 alone
registered through the national group), but Santiago
notes that while there are a few in the Holyoke
Highlands, there were none in the Holyoke Flats, one of
the poorest sections of the city.

“As a resident of the Flats I believe that children
who live here don’t have enough access to books that
represent them and their experience,” said Santiago,
who is now studying at Westfield State University.

Alcántara said the LEA Club plans to expand their
Little Free Library project in downtown Holyoke, per-
haps at other schools or even outside barbershops.

“We hope there will be many more libraries to
come,” she said.