

HCC Latinx club debuts Little Free Library at Kelly School

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



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.

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A third-grade teacher and her students look over the selections in the new Little Free Library at Kelly Elementary School.

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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 neuro-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, perhaps at other schools or even outside barbershops.

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

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