

# So Much More Than a Box of Books

**K**ay Stoffels has been around books nearly all her life, working for decades as a librarian before health issues forced her to retire. So the idea of putting a dollhouse-size library in her own front yard naturally appealed to her, except for one thing: the price tag.

“Money isn’t very plentiful, and I couldn’t afford to do it,” said Stoffels, 72, of St. Paul, who suffers from severe scoliosis.

When Stoffels learned she could set up a library for free, she was thrilled. Since December, she’s had a weather-resistant box stationed near her sidewalk, housing a variety of books, from romance novels to historical fiction to mysteries. And in spite of the “awful winter” that has kept her homebound, Stoffels said the tiny library has received plenty of use and helped her feel less alone.

More than 40 such libraries have been donated throughout Minnesota—destined for older residents and volunteers who work with them—thanks to a \$70,000 grant that AARP Foundation awarded in 2012 to the nonprofit organization Little Free Library.

Since cofounder Todd Bol of Hudson, Wis., hatched the take-a-book, leave-a-book idea in 2009, more than 15,000 Little Free Libraries have popped up worldwide, including about 1,550 in Minnesota.

“Stewards” typically purchase the diminutive structures—prices range from \$175 to \$1,000—or build their own and fill them with books they want to share. Neighbors can take a book to read or leave one behind to share with others.

“Little Free Library seems to have an uncanny ability to open conversations with all generations,”

Bol said. “It’s connecting with the community, and at the end of that connection is a book.”

The AARP Foundation grant enabled Little Free Library to create its Friends Through the Years program, which aims to combat isolation among older people by locating the small libraries in places that foster connections between generations.

## Finding best locations

To find those places, Little Free Library and AARP Minnesota teamed up with local agencies. Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota donated 15 libraries to Minnesota Senior Corps volunteers, who mentor children or help older adults live independently. Nine unfinished libraries went to the St. Paul-based Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, bound for the

homes of aging adults and caregivers. Little Brothers-Friends of the Elderly is matching 20 more libraries with isolated adults, including Stoffels.

“Social isolation is tough. When you’re home alone, you don’t really know your neighbors because you don’t go out much,” said Sandy O’Donnell, director of program services at Little Brothers-Friends of the Elderly. “But you can always talk about books. It’s a great way to start a conversation.”

Stoffels loves her beige-and-blue library. She writes notes to neighbors about it and keeps a close watch over which books come and go. People are more apt to take paperbacks, she noticed. Somebody left an entire pile of Agatha Christie novels. She’s read half a dozen books so far that others have left in her box, including a history of one-room schoolhouses.

“It’s always fun to see what’s new or see a book that I know is good that’s gone,” she said.

Bol said he believes the intergenerational model can spread: “We know we can get this to grow, and we have phenomenal momentum.”

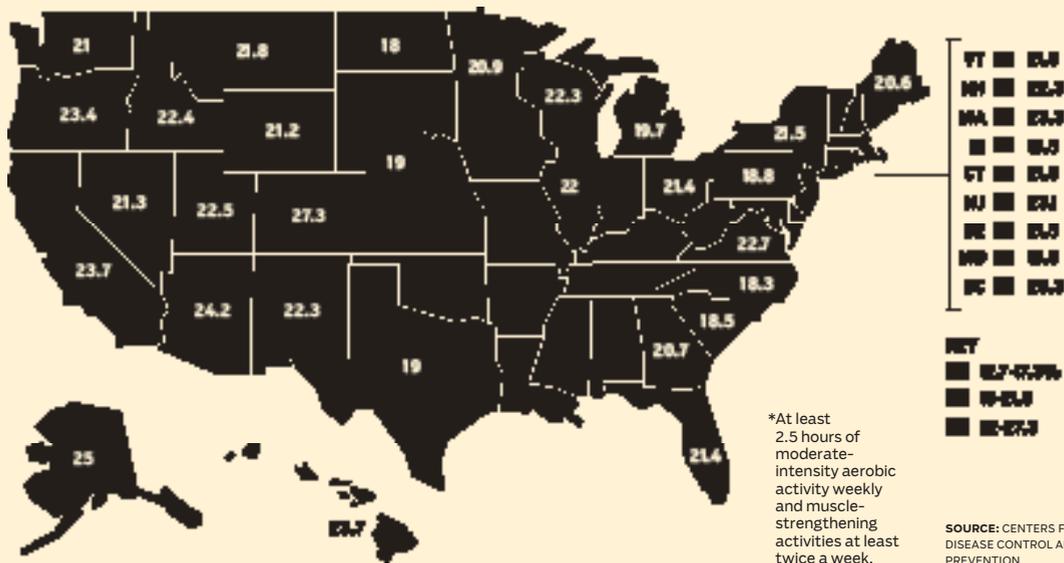
To see about getting a miniature library or to find one near you, go to [littlefreelibrary.org](http://littlefreelibrary.org).

—Pamela Schmid

## Databank USA

### Physical Exercise

Percentage of adult residents who met exercise guidelines\* in 2011.



## Honor a Volunteer

Volunteers age 50+ are making a difference in their communities. Say thanks by nominating a stellar volunteer for the AARP Andrus Award for Community Service. Forms are due June 1. Go to [aarp.org/andrus](http://aarp.org/andrus).

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