State Journal Register Exclusive: Little FREE Library rises again after arson attack

SPRINGFIELD, IL - Just over seven years ago, a Little Free Library in the front yard of Sarah Watson's home on Parkview Drive was purposefully torched, along with a bin of children's books beside it.

A local carpenter built Watson another freestanding library after reading a story about the fire in The State Journal-Register, but through a series of events--Watson's moving, the coronavirus pandemic and a renovation at her home First Presbyterian Church--it sat, unused.

Now, Watson, a former teacher and literacy instructor who serves as CEO and executive director for Looking for Lincoln Heritage Coalition, sees the library brimming with books--everything from a biography of Theodore Roosevelt to "The DaVinci Code" to a book examining Abraham Lincoln's connection to religion to children's books--outside of new meeting space at First Pres in downtown Springfield.

Watson's family held a dedication for it Sept. 27. It honors her husband, Chuck Watson, a bibliophile, local attorney and historian, who supported the Little Free Library effort and who died in 2017.

"It warms my heart," Watson told the SJ-R recently, "because, at the end of the day, I'm still that teacher who loves reading, loves to promote reading. Now we can combine that with all of the new people who are using the church and getting a chance to borrow the books, so I guess to me, that all does kind of come full circle.

"And it's got a good home."

'Access to books'
Watson recalled that it was around 5 a.m. Aug. 25, 2019, when a neighbor banged on her front door, telling her she needed to get outside.

"The fire trucks were already out there," Watson recalled. "The fire was pretty much out by the time I came outside."

Watson learned that Bryce Reynolds, then 22, who would be arrested by Springfield Police for setting the fire, was still in the neighborhood when she had stepped outside.

Reynolds would tell officers later that he attempted to physically damage the Little Free Library and when he couldn't, he burned pages of books in the library with a lighter.

After seeing Little Free Libraries all around the Springfield area, Watson decided the couple needed to have one.

A church friend of Watson's, Matt Pryor, built the original repository in 2016, deemed "Watson's General Store," and proved popular because it was on one of the main routes into Washington Park.
"We were also close to Owen Marsh Elementary School, so we always had a wonderful collection of children's books, novels, non-fiction, all sorts of books," Watson recalled.

Little Free Libraries, in general, she said, give people "access to books where they are and you give people access to all different kinds of books and materials.

"We didn't censor what went in there. Everybody has their own tastes in what they want to read and within broad limits, we were comfortable with that."

'Just a good soul'
When Tim Smith, a local carpenter, contacted Watson about building a new Free Little Library, Watson asked him if he could model it after the church, which he did after studying the design.

Once Smith finished the project, "we were in full COVID mode," Watson recalled.

The original plan was to put the library outside, but when First Pres launched its renovation over three years, "we decided, let's wait and see how this fits in," Watson said. "Once we got the renovation done, it seemed like this was the good place to keep it...because we're inviting so many groups to come in and use the church now."

Before a public open house on Oct. 18, First Pres pastor, the Rev. Susan Phillips, said the Little Free Library was "special, partly because it connects us with one of our members who was such a dedicated community servant...just a good soul.

"But also, the Presbyterian Church has for centuries been supportive of education and learning and inquiry and asking questions and exploring. For us to have the Little Free Library, (it's) a place where people can leave something they found inspirational and other people can take something they find inspirational."

Given the history, Phillips said its installation at the church felt "like a note of harmony, like it's one more iteration of this deep value that we hold, that we are all kin to one another, that we are we are all related as creation and that we support one another, that we care for one another, that we provide for one another, whether that's books in a Little Free Library or harm reduction supplies and birth certificates from the projects that are going on (here) to space where groups can meet for education or meals..."

Taking responsibility
According to an online docket entry, Reynolds pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge of criminal damage to property in late 2019.

He was sentenced to two years' probation.

Part of Reynolds' sentencing was paying $250 restitution, which went to Watson. "The parent and the educator in me respected that that was part of his responsibility," Watson said. "I didn't care about getting the money, but I think it was important for him to understand that he had destroyed someone's property and that it did have value and that he was helping restore that."

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