

Black Book Exchange adds nameplates to boxes, prepares for future growth

The Black Book Exchange, started in 2019 with the help of the Neighborhood Match Fund has been awarded a second match to keep up the project's momentum and good work.

The Black Book Exchange focuses on sharing the books about Black characters and by Black authors. Aarie Wade, Child Development Center Director at Baxter Community Center got the idea in 2019 when she realized the Little Free Libraries her children were using usually didn't have books that reflected her children and their culture.

In the first round of the project, Wade partnered with E'lla Luster Webber, a local artist and gallery owner at E'lla's Art Gallery, to have six boxes painted celebrating Black culture and literature. The boxes have been in use about six months, being put in the ground right before Christmas.

With this second match fund, Wade's focusing on purchasing more books for the boxes and working on setting up the boxes and book exchange to last. "We want to trademark and do more promotional stuff like website design. We're looking for someone to volunteer time on that," said Wade. "We plan to get the website done and work on getting all the current houses' metal nameplates. Right now it's just laminated pieces of paper on the houses and we need to make them more durable. We want to protect the project and trademark the idea. And also just get some more books. We are still getting book donations."

Wade says she usually receives at least one box of books at her house a month and recently received as many as three boxes in one week from donors.

Wade also says people are looking to sponsor houses and they are preparing for that. She plans to start a more robust donation campaign when people are less worried about coming out due to COVID. Community members can still support the project though. "You can donate money for books at \$tbbex on Cash App. Or to donate the books themselves, reach out through Facebook to schedule a drop-off.

Wade also says people or organizations can sponsor a complete box. "You'll get to put it wherever you want or we'll make suggestions. You can have a consultation with the artist and you'll get a package of 25 books and a dedicated nameplate with one touch-up paint job." Wade adds it's the sponsor's responsibility to refill the book house and maintain its value by having just Black authors.

The feedback from the community "has been beautiful," Wade says. "People post pictures online standing outside the boxes saying they got books out or are putting them back in. They are happy about the variety. There's stuff for teenagers and young children both."

Wade also says she hopes to help put boxes up in Latinx neighborhoods. Her children are Spanish speakers and have a hard time finding books in Spanish. Wade says when they go to the bookstore, there's only one row of books in Spanish for kids, not even a whole shelf, which she finds concerning considering how many Spanish speakers live in the greater Grand Rapids area. "I'm looking forward to expanding the idea, hopefully working with one of the Latinx organizations in town." She envisions a Black Book Exchange: Brown Box edition filled with the Spanish language books and maybe themed boxes for other cultures in the future as well.

"I can't even say how thankful I am for the city to support this. You know, people of color don't have the best things to say about the City of Grand Rapids as a whole, so for them to support a project for Black people and brown people says a lot."

Community members contact Black Book Exchange about sponsoring a box themselves or through an organization. Book donation drop offs can also be arranged here. For book ideas, "We Are LIT" has a list of suggested books on their website.