

Community barter

Residents maximize resources and grow friendships through TimeBank

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Gardening comes naturally to Janet Johnson of Sterling Heights. Perming her own hair does not. If plans to organize a Sterling Heights/Utica TimeBank come together as seamlessly as they did in Lathrup Village and, soon, Ferndale, Johnson may be able to swap one service for the other.

"In this economy, everybody's looking for ways to reduce costs and maximize resources," said Johnson, who lost her job last March, dug up her yard and planted rows of vegetables for donation through the Seed to Feed program. "We're learning that we need each other." In a nutshell, time banking connects unmet needs with untapped resources.

One member makes killer chocolate chip cookies. Another does Web design. A third may provide transportation, baby-sitting or handyman services. Each member's time counts equally. After making a deposit in their local TimeBank, participants are eligible to request the service of their choosing.

"Time banking is based on reciprocity: Members are expected to give and receive help," according to Kim Hodge, co-founder of the Lathrup Village Timebank. "We don't need to try and live by ourselves."

Instead of bartering, or exchanging services one-on-one, the network connects people of all abilities, explained Michelle Foster, whose TimeBank group in Ferndale recently elected a board of directors and is positioned to get off the ground shortly.

"We've limited our group to residents of Ferndale and Pleasant Ridge for convenience sake and in order to develop a neighborhood connect," Foster explained. "If it gets too big, trust issues develop. The point is to get to know people and develop camaraderie." Many participants get involved specifically to get to know their neighbors.

"I was looking for a test partner," said Hodge, adding that monthly group projects enable members to get to know each other and provide non-threatening opportunities to develop personal connections. "I now have several. Time banking really does pull citizens together. It builds community."

As a result, neighborhood game nights, potlucks and other low-cost, low-tech social events have ensued. A recent group project involved painting one member's living room. Eight members turned out and the project was completed in 45 minutes — not including the potluck that followed.

"Once you meet someone in person through a group project, it's a lot more comfortable to go to their home, or invite them to yours," explained Lathrup Village TimeBank member Monique LaBenne.

Many interested individuals worry they have nothing valuable to offer, said Hodge, who established the Michigan Alliance of Timebanks and serves as its executive director.

"I've had people with master's degrees say: 'But what can I do?' " Hodge said. "Can you talk? Can you visit with someone coming home from the hospital, or provide a caregiver with an hour of respite service? Can you cook or bake or read or sew or drive? Then you have something valuable to offer."

"That's the beauty of it," LaBenne echoed. "You don't have to be a journeyman plumber to participate. Any skills will do. And the sense of accomplishment is huge."

According to TimeBanks USA, the national organization that oversees more than 300 TimeBanks in 22 countries, the concept promotes social capital over financial capital: "more love, less stuff."

"The types of services offered are not the typical market services one gets paid for in our (market-driven) economy, according to the Web site. They are the mentoring, nurturing 'village' services such as cooking, teaching, minding children and elders, gardening, light home repair, transportation, etc."

Related examples of Lathrup Village trades include: teaching another member how to prepare an authentic Middle Eastern meal; preparing an East Indian meal. Surprisingly, getting members to cash in on their contributions is often challenging. "Time banking attracts givers, not takers," Hodge said. LaBenne is a case in point. She puts several hours a week into maintaining the group's Web site and walking members through the software program that links people and services.

"I have to admit, I have a hard time asking for help," said LaBenne, who joined about a year ago after getting laid off from her IT job. She did ask one member to sew a zipper into a dog bed for her, and last fall another member helped her plant a garden to attract Monarch butterflies. The exchange was mutually rewarding. "I never would have met this woman otherwise," LaBenne said. "Historically, she knows the stories about Lathrup Village the rest of us want to hear. I know we'll stay connected as long as I live here."

Similarly, handyman extraordinaire Cort Storer of Lathrup Village never worried he'd be overwhelmed with job requests. "The calls come in spurts," said Storer, an industrial sales engineer who works out of his house. "Sometimes I'll get three in a week, then a few weeks will go by before I get another." In exchange for patching fences and fixing toilets, Storer has received help installing software and tailoring for his "6-inches-too-long blue jeans."

Every member of the greater community, including the youngest and oldest, are encouraged to get involved via youth gardening, as mommy's helpers, as tailors, cooks, historians and needle work instructors.

Inspired by the promise of guitar lessons, 11-year-old Cole Skory volunteered to prepare spaghetti dinners for members, complete with garlic bread and salad. Older brother Brian Skory, now 18, helped launch the group's Web site in exchange for movie theater transport.

The four Skory children even pooled their volunteer hours to "hire" another member to rake leaves — a household task their parents had assigned to them. "I give them credit. They got creative with that one," said their father, Brian Skory. "It's always more fun to help other people do chores at their house than do them yourself at home."

Time banking isn't for everybody, Hodge is quick to point out. "Some people get caught up on the concept that every member's time is of equal value," she said. "Others feel they don't have it going on if they can't do it for themselves. Others really don't want to get to know their neighbors."

After reading an article in a national magazine about time banking more than a year ago, Sterling Heights' Janet Johnson contacted Hodge. Since then, husband Jim became ill and her intentions to organize a Sterling Heights/Utica TimeBank were put on hold.

Now that her husband was recently declared "cancer-free," Johnson has revived her board of directors and is in the process of recruiting interested members. "There's a washer in my kitchen sink that needs changing," said Johnson, who looks forward to volunteering her rototilling services. "I know it's not rocket science. It's just something I've never done before. It would be a lot less time consuming to utilize the expertise of others."

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