

Time as money

TimeBanks bring together communities around mutual service | *Susan Olasky*

On a recent Saturday morning in suburban Detroit, 15 neighbors gathered to paint Don and Tere Turner's basement. Dressed in paint-splattered sweatpants and jeans, they trooped down the stairs, introducing themselves to strangers and greeting by name people they already knew. Cans of paint, rollers, brushes, and paint pans were on a drop cloth in the middle of one room. Craft paper protected the red tile floor in the second. Frank Selinsky, a retired Ford engineer who had helped lay that red tile, handed out assignments, and within minutes people started painting.

The painters and the Turners are members of the Lathrup Village TimeBank, a community group that provides a way for neighbors to give and receive services. The website for TimeBanks USA explains, "For every hour you spend doing something for someone in your community, you earn one Time Dollar. Then you have a Time Dollar to spend on having someone do something for you." Give an hour, get an hour.

Community organizer Kim Hodge founded the Lathrup Village TimeBank as a way to get to know her neighbors and build community: "Bottom line is we need each other. We need connections in neighborhoods." In 2008 she began the TimeBank in her geographically compact suburb—it's a mile square with 4,500 residents. Now more than 120 persons, ranging in age from 8 to 90, are members. That includes about 20 children, who offer services like cooking meals, babysitting, teaching someone how to use FaceBook, and pulling out dandelions.

TimeBanks encourage everyone to contribute, regardless of age or professional training. It doesn't matter if you donate a professional service or cookie baking: An hour is an hour. Hodge calls TimeBanking a great equalizer. While parents painted the Turners' basement, children gathered in the kitchen, decorating sugar cookies made in advance by Tere Turner. For the hour they spent glazing cookies and piling them high with mini marshmallows and M&Ms, they each earned an hour. That's because the cookies were for the potluck lunch that followed the painting.

Clearly, TimeBanking isn't the way to organize an entire economic system, and those trying to impose such things on a large or small scale have failed badly. In a market system people pay more for highly skilled work because it is scarce. TimeBanks, though, fit a voluntary middle niche between the market economy with its payment for services, and the family and church, where people care for each other out of love and commitment, without expecting a return.

TimeBanks work best in geographically defined areas where people live close enough to each other to give and receive services readily. Although TimeBanking's founder, Edgar Cahn, was a man of the left, TimeBanking works well with the new conservative localism. It fights the professionalization and governmental usurpation of services that Americans once accomplished through private and charitable action.

Proponents of TimeBanking stress its benefit in building community. The Lathrup Village group schedules monthly group activities, followed by a potluck. Newcomers come and meet other members for the first time,

an important step in developing trust. Although the Lathrup Village TimeBank doesn't do background checks, some do.

Phyllis Edwards is executive director of Bridging Communities, a Detroit nonprofit that provides services to the elderly; it also hosts a TimeBank. She regularly schedules community events—neighborhood clean-ups and volunteer appreciation banquets—to help build trust between the elders in her program and other TimeBank members. TimeBanking allows Edwards to attract and make better use of volunteers and offer more services to her clients. The elders often bank hours by sewing, baking, knitting, or making phone calls. They can spend their hours on computer classes taught by neighborhood young people. With the help of the TimeBank, her elder clients aren't only recipients; they are assets, using their skills to benefit others.

TimeBank supporters tout other intangible benefits. In England, a medical office in Rushey Green noticed that many patients came to the clinic for physical ailments but were also lonely and isolated. The office set up a TimeBank in 1998 that now has 800 members. A video on YouTube features users talking about its benefits: "People I can go and see to learn to crochet . . . A friendly society . . . Sharing time and sharing skills." TimeBanking shows less "productive" people—the elderly, the sick, the disabled and young—that their lives still matter and they can contribute to neighborhood flourishing.

Kim Hodge tells the story of an 8-year-old boy in her TimeBank who offered to cook a spaghetti dinner. Hodge and her husband signed up and bought the groceries. At the end of the day the Hodges received a tasty spaghetti dinner. The boy's mother said later, "This is what I got: A child focused on a task. A child who was proud to contribute to the community. A child who was engaged with his dad, who helped him cook the meal."

Beata Alghabra has been a member of the Lathrup Village TimeBank since 2008. She offers Arabic cooking classes to members. In return, she uses the services of an elderly member who hems her sons' pants. She said her two sons, who were upstairs decorating cookies, would otherwise be home watching cartoons on a Saturday morning. Instead, through the TimeBank, "They've become involved in the community and have met a lot of amazing people."

Many people are reluctant to ask for help, but TimeBanks help overcome that resistance because they emphasize (as Partners in Care in Maryland explains) "parity, not charity. . . . People earn the help they need by participating." Those with credits in the bank use them.

Hodge has now founded the Michigan Alliance of TimeBanks. She works with volunteers from 18 communities, most of whom have never started an organization of any kind. She meets once a month with the group, helping them go through the basic steps: setting up a steering committee (in TimeBank lingo, a Kitchen Cabinet), developing mission and vision, deciding about dues and liability issues, and setting geographical boundaries.

Phyllis Edwards of Bridging Communities compares her life now to what it was: "We hired services to do everything. We didn't have to know our neighbors. To know your neighbor, to know your community, that's priceless."