

NEIGHBORHOOD NEWS



Tezerash Menisher, left, and Almaz Gelaye, right, of Cafe Collage are organizational members of the DC Time Bank. They earn Time Dollars by offering the cafe's basement for community groups' meetings, and spend Time Dollars by receiving help with the cafe's social media. Cafe Collage is located at 1346 T Street, NW, and provides a quiet atmosphere and healthy food.

Putting Time on DC's Side

DC Time Bank Strives to Create Stronger Community

BY STEVE LLILIENTHAL

Greg Bloom of Northwest DC was looking for someone to help move some furniture. His wish was answered via the DC Time Bank webpage.

Winston Lofton answered Greg's request. The two spent a few hours pushing furniture around and becoming better acquainted.

Winston's help, writes Greg in an e-mail, made the "moving fast, easy and fun, while it otherwise would have been a daunting solitary task." Greg was pleased to become better acquainted with Winston. Winston expresses pleasure that the time he spent helping Greg move enabled him to "invest in...alternative currency."

No money was exchanged, but Greg's debt to Winston requires him to "pay it forward."

DC Time Banks' webpage describes time banking as "simply about spending an hour doing something for someone else in your community. That hour goes into the Time Bank as a Time Dollar. Then, you have a Time Dollar to redeem by having someone else do something for you. It's a simple idea, but it has powerful ripple effects in building community connections."

If you are looking for someone to help in your garden or someone to provide a lift for an elderly person who is home-bound or to provide some instruction on how to use Twitter, then the place to look is the DC

Time Bank webpage. Time banking is a different concept than barter which exacts strict reciprocity for the services. Time Banking expects recipients of services to "pay it forward" by helping someone else in need.

So the shut-in may pay back the lift by tutoring a child. The recipient of the lesson on using Twitter may reciprocate by teaching someone to bake.

It's a concept that has great potential to build a greater community in D.C., perhaps eventually helping to erase lines between transients and long-time residents and the East of the River/West of the River divide.

DC Time Banks has been making small - yet significant -- progress in becoming a real fixture in

Northwest DC life. With next to no money, the Time Bank has been able to sign up approximately 200 volunteers to exchange services on a voluntary, non-monetary basis. DC Time Bank founder Allison Basile hopes to pull together the volunteers this spring or summer to an outdoor event so people will get to know each other better.

Driving Basile, a graduate from the University of Maryland with a degree in economics, is her vision of a vibrant Time Bank in DC that engages the community and changes how services are delivered. Time Banks are already making a difference in a number of U.S. cities and the UK, and what is being done in Madison, Wisconsin and in New York City can make a difference in Washington, D.C. too.

Basile became interested in Time Banks after hearing Edgar S. Cahn discuss his idea at a campus program. She was inspired by his vision of creating a movement that places greater emphasis on people, not bureaucracies, and time, not money. Cahn, founder of TimeBanks USA and the co-founder of Antioch Law School (now the UDC David A. Clarke School of Law) has written books about Time Banks and views the organizations that exist nationally and internationally as spurring a "movement" to create stronger communities by increasing the participation of individuals.

Cahn does not see Time Banks as replacing professional social workers, but maintains the efforts of volunteers and the "pay it forward" philosophy will help service providers to build stronger communities. Cahn notes that Time Banks USA offers open source software which permits members of a local Time Bank to transfer their credits if they move to another community.

Not only can Time Banks build a community of sorts among DC's forever changing population of strivers in politics and government, Basile is clear that

DC Time Banks welcomes diversity in age, and older Washingtonians can certainly benefit in the giving and receiving of services.

Last summer, Michael Williams of Southwest DC managed a

neighborhood Time Bank in which local kids earned Time Bank hours.

Cahn, writing a post in August 2010 on the Clarke Law School webpage, profiled one of the participants, Anthony Jackson, then 20, who'd been in serious scrapes with the law, even surviving having been shot. Hooking up with Williams, Anthony started earning Time Dollars by helping out at a bingo game at a senior center.

"Once I get a job, I'll continue with community service...[W]hen I was in a wheelchair, people helped me. I like helping people," Anthony asserts.

When Cahn told a DC superior court that the failure to prosecute young offenders was unintentionally giving them a green light to commit more crimes, the judge urged him to develop a solution. Cahn's thinking led to a "Time Dollar Youth Court" in which teen jurors give the young offender a 'jury of their peers.' Jurors are teens and earn time dollars for their service and can sentence those judged guilty to community service, restitution, counseling, apologizing, or jury duty.

Dane County Time Bank serves as an inspiration to the members of the DC Time Bank. A recent Chanell3000.com story reports 1,700 Time Bank participants have exchanged 50,000 hours of service since the mid-1990s.

DC Time Bank hopes eventually to work more closely with organizations reliant on volunteer services. First, funding for a staff member to be responsible for organizing must be secured, and there is hope that will happen soon.

Cahn asserts that given the economic problems of the last few years, Time Banks are an idea whose time is arriving because "people are waking up" to the importance of civic engagement.

Steve Lilienthal is a freelance writer who lives in Washington, D.C. ●

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