

Time Dollars

A Currency that Creates Community

An Interview with Auta Main

Interviewed by Jane Gerloff



Auta Main is executive director of New England Time Banks (formerly Maine Time Dollar Network). She has owned and operated two small businesses in southern Maine, in addition to her involvement with

various community development and social entrepreneurship endeavors. She is also director of the neighbor-to-neighbor division of Time Banks USA (formerly the Time Dollar Institute), where she and other Time Dollar pioneers from around the country are working with Dr. Edgar Cahn, the founder of Time Dollars, on developing a national network of time banks.

MTM: How did the first Time Dollar network get started in Maine?

Main: A number of years ago, Edgar Cahn, then a civil rights lawyer in Washington, D.C., had a heart attack at age 44. There he was, a lawyer who was used to working 80 hours a week, lying in bed needing all sorts of help—feeling useless, and missing community in his life. His wife and children were helping him, and he had insurance, so he was able to pay people to take care of him; but as he lay there he wondered: What does somebody do who doesn't have insurance or money? And how does somebody make a personal difference in the world when they're working 80 hours a week in their job and using just a little bit of who they are? We've become a society of disconnected people and we often don't know our neighbors, let alone trust them. He developed the Time Dollar concept as a way to keep people engaged in helping each other and in making a difference in our world. In the 1980s he began writing and speaking about the idea.

It happened that Richard Rockefeller heard Edgar speak at a conference. Richard had already invested a lot of his money in environmental issues, and it occurred to him that people aren't going to take care of the environment until they begin taking care of each other. He saw Time Dollars as a way to make that happen. Richard brought the concept to Maine in 1996. We launched a pilot Time Dollar exchange in Portland's East End in 1998. Richard continues to be an active participant, board member, and funding supporter.

MTM: How would you describe the goal of Time Dollar networks?

Main: The goal of Time Dollars is to rebuild the core economy of family, neighborhood, and community, which is

Definitions

Complementary currency

A means of exchange other than conventional money, used in local communities to link unmet needs with unused resources. Complementary currencies do not have interest, and elicit cooperation rather than competition among users.

Time Dollar network or time bank

A system of currency in which exchanges are made based on time rather than money.

fundamental to our existence. The broader vision is about social justice and systemic social change. As we swap services with each other, we become interconnected. We get to know our neighbors. We get to access services we may have never accessed before. It's a way of bridging diverse populations of people that just never would have met each other otherwise. We're changing the face of communities. It's wonderful work.

It's a lot about money, and it's a lot *not* about money. One of the core values of a Time Dollar network is equality: one hour equals one hour, regardless of the service. With Time Dollars it doesn't matter if you're giving a health exam or if you're mopping somebody's floor. What matters is that we come together as human beings, sharing the things we know with each other. We have members that might watch someone's dog for two hours and earn two Time Dollars, and in exchange for that have acupuncture or chiropractic work.

MTM: Could people get all their necessary services, like medical and dental care, through Time Dollars?

Main: I love that question. At the first



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARY KOCOL

When More Than Money board member Mark McDonough heard about the concept of Time Dollars, he immediately recognized it as a highly effective strategy for promoting social justice. He decided to devote the next ten years of his life to building the time banking movement. He is currently co-CEO, with social entrepreneur and Massachusetts Institute of Technology senior lecturer Andrew Wolk, of Time Banks USA.

In a Time Dollar network, when you offer your time to fulfill some need in the community you receive a credit of Time Dollars in exchange, which means that someone else will perform a service (or give you something) to fill a need or want of yours. For example, you might go get groceries for a neighbor and receive two hours' worth of Time Dollars. You can then use those Time Dollars to "purchase" a good or service that you want.

Your act of helping out your neighbor is not charity. It contains a built-in reciprocity. You receive something back from someone else in your community, whether or not it's the neighbor for whom you bought the groceries. It's the built-in reciprocity that makes Time Dollars an innovation in social service. It's not based only on the idea, "I need you." It's based on the idea, "We need each other." Time Dollars give everyone a way to give to and receive from others in the community. In doing this, Time Dollars help build community in the original sense of the word. As Bernard Lietaer has pointed out, the word "community" comes from the Latin word *cum munere*, which literally means "to give among each other."¹

—Mark McDonough

¹ "Creating a Giving Culture, An Interview with Bernard Lietaer" by Pamela Gerloff, *More Than Money Journal*, Issue 34, "The Art of Giving," Fall 2003.

open house we ever had in Maine, a woman came up and said, "I'm going to quit my job because I feel like I could do everything with Time Dollars. This is just so much more wonderful to me [than using regular money]." We said, "Not yet, not yet!" But I truly hope and think that there may well be a time when that *could* happen because, increasingly, people are buying into the Time Dollar idea. The truth is, we live in a capitalist economy and there are healthy things about capitalism. We're not trying to get rid of it in any way. Time Dollars are another way of connecting people, accessing services, and at the same time valuing the skills that *everyone* has to offer.

MTM: If I'm a member and need something, do I have to accumulate Time Dollars before I can use them?

Main: We tell people that it's fine to go into debt with Time Dollars. What we're doing is building social capital, so if people go into debt doing that it's a pretty healthy thing to do!

Having said that, at any given time we have less than 5% of our members in Time Dollar debt. Reciprocity is key. We don't want 300 of our members being givers and 300 being receivers—that would defeat the whole purpose. Everybody gives and everybody receives. There's a huge lesson in that. Our social

[Time Dollar networks] permit people to do things that they would never do for cash. "A retired bank president would never mow a sick person's yard for money, but he'll do it for Time Dollars," Cahn [author of *No More Throw-away People*] says. "Market wages incorporate status hierarchies. Ask yourself if you would ask your mother to accept market wages to go next door to clean up a neighbour's house. Then ask yourself if you would have the same reservations about asking her to go over and help a sick neighbour by cleaning up and accepting Time Dollars so that Granny, living across town, could be picked up and taken in to the doctor. Price is not the issue. It is status. To accept money for such a task implies one has accepted the market status defined by the wage."

—"The Dollar that Does Not Want to Be Money" by Richard Douthwaite, www.feasta.org/documents/shortcircuit/index.html?sc3/timedollars.html

service delivery system is set up so that we have thousands of passive receivers who don't feel good about being passive receivers. Time Dollars provide them the opportunity to give back. They all have wonderful skills that, for one reason or another, are not in demand right now in the market economy. Both receiving and giving back seem to be something that most people enjoy. Of course, many of us have learned that it's better to give than to receive, so some of us have had to learn how to receive, and Time Dollars have given us that opportunity.

MTM: Does the Time Dollar system get in the way of the kinds of natural, neighborly things that people used to do for each other without expecting any remuneration?

Main: A couple of members have said, "I've been doing this my whole life"—and that's true; a continued on p. 16

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lot of people still do neighborly things for each other. One member said she loves Time Dollars because it helps her place a value on neighborly exchanges. For example, it used to be that when her neighbor helped her put up a ceiling fan, she was never quite sure how to value it; she always felt as if she still owed him. But with Time Dollars, when someone does something for her, it feels clearer to her where they stand with each other.

Even so, some members just get to know each other really well and they don't want to charge each other Time Dollars. In those cases, we still try to get them to do a Time Dollar exchange, because we're trying to keep track of all the social capital we're building in neighborhoods. We'll get people to just call it a wash. For instance, in companion care situations where people have become really good friends and now they go to the beach together, we give each person a credit and a debit, as a way of recording that an exchange occurred. The question hasn't come up too much, though, because usually we're building connections where they don't already exist.

MTM: Do you have any "Time Dollar stories"—interesting experiences you would like to share?

Main: We've had two babies delivered for Time Dollars by midwives who are members—including all the pre-natal visits.

We also had a Time Dollar member that got married to another Time Dollar member. They did their entire wedding for Time Dollars (about 400): the justice of the peace, a nice bed and breakfast inn for the wedding and reception, and all the catered food. The bride and her mother both had their hair done by a Time Dollar member, and another member taught the couple ballroom dancing. It was just incredible. It would have cost \$5,000 or \$6,000 at a minimum.

MTM: Can you give Time Dollars to other people; for example, as a wedding gift?

Online Resources**ACCESS Foundation**

Provides a support network for people interested in advancing complementary currency theory and application.

www.access.dreamteamtech.com

Center for Community Futures

Offers a how-to guide for running your own community currency program.

510-339-3801

www.cencomfut.com

Local Exchange Trading System (LETSsystem)

Has an online manual of the LETSsystem approach to developing a local currency initiative.

www.gmlets.u-net.com

New England Time Banks

(formerly Maine Time Dollar Network)

Gives tips, forms, and other resources for starting a Time Dollar network.

207-874-9868

www.mtdn.org

Time Banks USA

(formerly the Time Dollar Institute)

Provides resources and information for

starting a Time Dollar network and lists regional coordinator offices so you can find a network near you.

202-686-5200

www.timedollar.org

Print Resources**"Creating a Giving Culture: An Interview with Bernard Lietaer"**

By Pamela Gerloff, *More Than Money Journal*, Issue 34, "The Art of Giving," Fall 2003.

Discusses the impact of money systems on society.

The Future of Money: Creating New Wealth, Work, and a Wiser World

By Bernard Lietaer

(Century, 2002)

Provides an analysis of current monetary systems, as well as information for starting your own complementary currency.

No More Throw-Away People: The Co-Production Imperative

By Edgar S. Cahn

(Essential Information, 2000)

Shows how and why Time Dollars support and build community, and how they operate as a force for social change.

"We have
what we need
if we use
what we have."

—Edgar S. Cahn

Main: Absolutely. Time Dollar gift certificates are very popular, especially around the holidays.

MTM: How successful have you been in getting people of higher income levels to participate—especially to offer professional services that would otherwise be expensive?

Main: Initially, it wasn't our intent to specifically recruit professionals. At the

beginning we thought of the network more as neighborly. But we listened to our members, who said they really wanted health care and other professional services. Many of our members are the working poor. They're making too much money to be eligible for many free services, but they don't get health insurance through their jobs. So we decided to target healthcare professionals and market to them.

But it takes a certain amount of altruism to participate. Not everybody is going to join. I talked to an accountant who said, "Why would I do this? I pay \$10 or \$20 an hour for someone to clean my house, and I make \$87 an hour." Joining just didn't make sense to him. The group of physicians, acupuncturists, midwives, and chiropractors that have joined—and we have more than 50 now—want to be connected to their community in a deeper way. Some physicians who have joined have shared with others their experiences of how it's working for them. Professionals often

Core Values

As related by Mark McDonough

There are four core values on which a Time Dollar currency system is based:

Assets/Equality—Everybody is an asset. Everyone has something to give. Each person's time is valued equally.

Reciprocity—Time Dollars create reciprocal transactions. When you give your time, skills, or expertise, you are automatically entitled to receive time, skills, or expertise from someone else. A reciprocal, relational exchange is likely to occur.

Redefinition of work—In a standard money economy, work is generally considered to be anything that the market will pay for. A Time Dollar system allows us to redefine work as, basically, anything that it takes to build a healthy society. There is a lot of caring to be done in our communities. With standard monetary systems, we often don't have a way to pay for it. Time Dollars give us a way.

Social capital—Just as building an infrastructure of bridges and roads is important to building a community that works, creating an infrastructure of social capital—that is, social interactions among community members—is also important. It is the fabric of interactions in a community that creates healthy communities.

join now because of referrals from other professionals.

MTM: Do you run into any particular challenges?

Main: There are two big challenges. One is that people think they have nothing to offer. Oddly enough, most people undervalue, rather than overvalue, what they can do. But as we go through a list of possible offerings with people, they immediately see that they have lots to offer.

The other challenge is getting people to ask for what they want. For some reason, most people who join want to give instead of receive. They do want things, but they're reluctant to ask for them.

MTM: I've been told that one of the reasons the Maine Time Dollar Network has been so successful is that you have had regular funding. Would you comment on that?

Main: It's absolutely true. We did a survey of all the Time Dollar programs started across the country and found that about 30% of them had folded because they received a grant for two or three years' worth of funding, and at the end of that time couldn't scurry up the money to keep it going.

It's vitally important in those first three years to have a coordinator, even if only part time. That person brings in the community partners, recruits and engages members, and coordinates and tracks exchanges. We are working on a sustainability plan for new Time Dollar communities that would ensure that the members take over ownership of the Time Dollar exchange after three years. We think it's very do-able, though we haven't proven it yet.

MTM: If people want to start a Time Dollar Exchange in their community, what can they do?

Main: They can contact New England Time Banks if they are in New England. We are the first regional hub in what will be a national network of time banks coordinated through Time Banks USA (formerly the Time Dollar Institute). We provide a kit to help get started. We have already helped 11 Time Dollar communities get started in New England, with another 22 interested in launching during the next year. People from other parts of the U.S. may contact Time Banks USA for assistance. [See sidebar, p. 16, for contact information for these organizations and other resources on Time Dollars and complementary currencies.] ■