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Where All Work Is Created Equal

By TINA ROSENBERG



In Manhattan, Zu Dong taught calligraphy to members of the Visiting Nurse Service of New York's Community Connections TimeBank, which lets people exchange services.

School went badly last year for José, Angel and Estefani. The 8-year-old twins and their 7-year-old sister are recent immigrants to the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan. In part because they didn't speak much English, late in 2010 all three were notified they were in danger of failing.

But their fortunes changed in January. They began going to the Fort Washington Library every Saturday for two hours of one-on-one tutoring from Elayne Castillo-Vélez, her sister, Sharon Castillo, and their grandmother, Saturnina Gutiérrez. The children had lost confidence and didn't feel that more hours spent with school books would produce anything, said Castillo-Vélez. "There were times when all they wanted to do was talk about their week," she said.

"But once we started working one-on-one it triggered something in them," she said. "They were enthusiastic." Castillo-Vélez would ask José's teacher what he should work on, and the teacher would write back — work on vowel sounds, or subtraction strategies. The children began to take books out of the library every week. Their grades improved. When June came, they all passed, and won certificates for academic improvement and achievement.

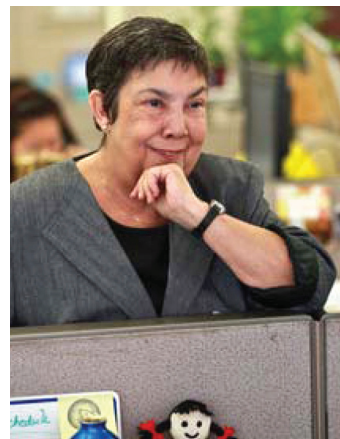
The two families met because of a bank — a time bank, where the unit of currency is not a dollar, but an hour. When you join a time bank, you indicate what services you might be able to offer others: financial planning, computer de-bugging, handyman repairs, housecleaning, child care, clothing alterations, cooking, taking someone to a doctor's appointment on the bus, visiting the homebound or English conversation. People teach Mandarin and yoga and sushi-making. Castillo-Vélez earns a credit for each hour she spends tutoring José. She spends the credits on art classes.

Time banks — more than 300 of them — exist in 23 countries. The largest one in New York City is the Visiting Nurse Service of New York Community Connections TimeBank.

It has more than 2,000 members and is most active in three places — Upper Manhattan (Washington Heights and Inwood), Lower Manhattan (Battery Park City, Chinatown and the Lower East Side) and parts of Brooklyn (Sunset Park and Bay Ridge). Members come from all over New York City, but exchanges are easiest when people live in the same neighborhood — like Castillo-Vélez and José.

There is something old fashioned about a time bank. Home repair, child care, visiting shut-ins and taking someone to the doctor are now often commercial transactions; a time bank is a return to an era where neighbors did these tasks for each other. But a time bank is also something radical. It throws out the logic of the market — in a time bank, all work has equal value. A 90-year-old can contribute on an equal basis with a 30 year old. Accompanying someone to the doctor is as valuable as Web design.

The idea comes from Edgar Cahn, a legendary anti-poverty activist. (Cahn and his late wife, Jean Camper Cahn, established the Antioch School of Law to train advocates for the poor, and were instrumental in founding the federal Legal Services Corporation.) In his book "No More Useless People," Cahn writes that time banks were a response to cuts in social programs during the Reagan years. Cahn wrote: "If we can't have more of that kind of money, why can't we create a new kind of money to put people and problems together?"



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Ana Miyares, the manager of Community Connections TimeBank, said that the program restores trust among new immigrants and helps them integrate.

Time banks also owe much of their development to Ana Miyares, who in the 1980s gave up a lucrative position in international banking to join the time bank movement in its infancy. She has founded time banks in various countries, and today is the manager of the Visiting Nurse Service's time bank. Miyares sees time banking a little differently than Cahn does. "I would like to see social justice — but in a different way, using social capital, energizing social capital to be responsible citizens," she said.

The value of a time bank during a time of high unemployment is obvious. It is a way for underemployed people to put their skills to work to get things they need.

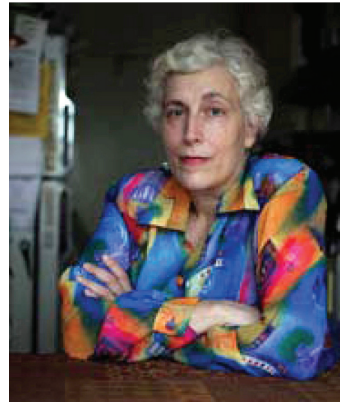
(During the Great Depression, a group of men living in a Hooverville of unaided sewer pipe in California began a barter exchange that eventually had 100,000 members.) Forty percent of the members of the Visiting Nurse Service's time bank, for example, have an annual income of less than \$9,800. Many time banks have a large percentage of members who are older and living on a fixed income. "The difference it makes to have a handyman come out and do a repair for the cost of materials could be the difference between being able to purchase medicine or not," said Barbara Huston, the president and chief executive of Partners in Care, a time bank based near Baltimore. "Getting a ride to the doctor and saving \$30 to \$50 in transport costs might mean being able to buy all their vegetables."

But a time bank it is more than a barter Craigslist. Mashi Blech, the director of the Visiting Nurse Service time bank, said that only 10 percent of members bother to consistently record the hours they put in. In what industry would 90 percent of wage workers not care about recording their hours?

Castillo-Vélez, for one, doesn't always record hers. She knows the Fort Washington Library well, because she used to go there as a child. Her grandmother is an avid reader in Spanish, and Castillo-Vélez inherited her love of books. Now a graduate of Stony Brook University, Castillo-Vélez tutors José because she remembers her own journey. "I know how it is to have to learn another language and have no one really there. I also overcame my shyness — sitting in class without speaking up. I saw myself in them," she said.

Several TimeBank members told me that activities gradually cease being services performed and become instead hours with friends. When Regina Gradess was 56, for example, she met Doris Feldman, who was 80. She began to drive Feldman places in her car. Technically, Gradess was providing companionship to an elderly woman. But that's not what it felt like. "I would take her to the duck pond, or a unique thrift shop, or libraries," she said. "We'd ride the bus to a museum and talk about all the architecture we saw. Every time I was with her we had tons of things to talk about. It was wonderful for me and wonderful for her." They saw each other at least every other week. When Feldman died in July at the age of 84, Gradess said she felt like she had lost her soul mate.

A time bank is a way to make a small town out of a big city — something especially important for retired people, who might go for days without human contact. The Visiting Nurse Service TimeBank has group gatherings — birthday parties, potlucks, trips — in addition to the work exchanges. A survey of members over 60 years old in 2009 found that 90 percent had made new friends, 71 percent saw those friends at least once a week, and 42 percent saw their TimeBank friends a few times a week. By overwhelming margins, the members reported that they felt more a part of a community, and their trust of others had increased — especially of other people who were different from them. The vast majority of pairings in the TimeBank bring together very different people — in ethnicity, income level, or especially, age; in Castillo-Vélez's family, her grandmother, mother, aunt, sister, brother, husband and sister-in-law also are active in the TimeBank. Many pairings also cross language barriers. Members speak 29 different languages, and for just under half the members, English is not one of them.



Richard Perry/The New York Times

Regina Gradess, a member of the Community Connections TimeBank, at her home. "Slowly, through sharing," she said, "friendships form."

Despite its size — or perhaps because of it — New York City offers people many different groups to join and many different ways to make friends. What makes a time bank different is that the purpose of the connection is ostensibly to give help — something that makes a lot of people more comfortable and confident. "I'm a shy person and I have a problem with receiving," said Gradess. Even if you happen to be the one receiving services in any particular transaction, you know you will be giving help to someone else.

Blech tells a story from an earlier time bank experience about

Betty, a member in her 70s who suffered from several serious medical conditions and had been the caregiver for her mother for 15 years. When Betty's mother died, "people were thinking now she'll be less stressed," said Blech. "I was concerned that she'd be depressed — she was losing her role in life."

Blech called one afternoon two weeks after the mother's death and found Betty very depressed. "Later, I found out that she had barely gotten out of bed in two weeks, and that the bottle of antidepressants she was prescribed was still sitting on her table, unopened," she said.

They talked for a while, and then Blech said, "I need you." Betty was a skilled crocheter. "I was going to an international conference and needed a baby gift," Blech said. Would Betty make a baby blanket?

"I don't think I'm up for that," Betty said. Blech asked her to think about it.

Five minutes later Blech's phone rang. "Should it have a hood?" said Betty. "How about a matching crocheted hippo or dog?"

Blech invited her to the next time bank gathering to show off her crocheting. She left with 10 orders.

This is a story many of us can relate to. People like to cook for others, to make things for others, to teach what they know, to use their skills to do a job for someone who needs it. People need to feel valued.

Tina Rosenberg is a Pulitzer Prize winning writer.