

RETIREMENT LIVING

Deposit an Hour of Time, Reap Big Returns

WHEN DORIS Feldman, 81, goes to the bank, sometimes she makes a deposit and sometimes she makes a withdrawal. Only her wealth is not tallied in dollars, but in the services she provides to her neighbors and the help she gets from them in return.

Feldman, who lives in the Bronx, is a member of a “time bank” run by the Visiting Nurse Service of New York. Three-fourths of the 150 members of

the time bank are over the age of 50. With a time bank, if you spend an hour doing something for someone else, you earn a time dollar, which can be exchanged for an hour of assistance.

Feldman is teaching English to another time-bank member, a 69-year-old woman from the Dominican Republic who helps Feldman with her household chores. Feldman also edits the time-bank newsletter and teaches cooking and art. She’s writing a novel, and other members have offered to type up her writing in a computer.

The time bank reminds Feldman of her childhood, when the doors were always open and community connections were strong. “If we needed something, we could ask a neighbor just as easily as our own family,” she says. “And in return, my mother would bake a cake for the neighbor.”

Time Banks Growing in Popularity

The Visiting Nurse time bank is one of more than 100 in the U.S., and the numbers are growing, says Edgar Cahn, founder of TimeBanks USA (www.timebanks.org; 202-686-5200). Typical services include home repair, sewing, meal preparation, and respite or child care. But some time-bank members help others plan weddings, groom dogs, provide massages and teach theater. All time dollars are valued equally, whether it’s an hour mowing grass or providing legal advice. No actual money is exchanged.

Time banks range in size and complexity. There are small, informal time banks, made up of a handful of neighbors. On the other side of the spectrum is St. Louis’s Member Organized Resource Exchange, a 4,000-member, nonprofit group with a paid staff. Most time banks use online software that enables

members to find out about the types of services that are available and to offer services that they can provide.

Some time banks are started by small clusters of neighbors,

but others are organized by existing groups, such as retirement communities, religious organizations or social-service groups. The Visiting Nurse Service started its Community Connection Time Bank in December 2006. Its director, Mashi Blech, had started one of the nation’s first time banks, in 1987, in Brooklyn.

One service that Blech’s members provide is transportation to doctor’s appointments and grocery stores, a particular help to elderly members. “When I first described that we were going to send strangers to peoples’ homes in New York City, people said, ‘Are you out of your mind?’” Blech recalls. But the time bank screens and checks the references of all its members to ensure safe and appropriate matches, she says. Her time bank, as well as others, often has monthly gatherings for members to get acquainted.

If you are interested in starting or joining a time bank, visit TimeBanks USA’s Web site. Check its directory to see if there’s a time bank in your community. The group sells a start-up kit for \$49.

Blech notes the time banks, besides providing needed services at no cost, bind communities across ethnic, age and socioeconomic lines. “Strangers have become neighbors, neighbors have become friends, and friends will become extended family,” she says. And it’s a way to enable retirees not only to remain in their homes, but to thrive in their communities. **K**

—LEAH DOBKIN

