

Local time exchange offers a new community service

Posted: Sunday, March 27, 2016 8:00 am

At the risk of being melodramatic, Katy Locke's dream did come true. And that's how the Monadnock Time Exchange was born.

A time exchange, or time bank, is a community service that involves people performing tasks for others — and reciprocally having tasks done for them — strictly based on an investment of time. Someone may perform two hours of yard work, and in return receive two hours of baby-sitting from another member in the database.

First, a little background. Locke has been a longtime champion and protector of the natural environment, a former organic gardener in north-central Vermont, a leading voice in Transition Keene Advocates. That's a group formed in 2010 whose mission "to face the growing threats to our community's quality of life due to the interconnected challenges of peak oil, climate change and an unstable global economy."

The group's intent is to seek ways "to collectively transition to a more resilient, sustainable and just local economy and way of life."

For instance, on Thursday it will host a writing webinar featuring Claire Miller of the Toxic Action Center, a New England-wide group that focuses on ways to clean up industrial pollution and ensure healthy land use.

Locke, who works at Deep Roots Massage in Keene, has always been a steward of the land. Born in Philadelphia, her own itinerant journey has a Goldilocks parable about it. She spent considerable time living in the Boston area ("a little too urban for me") and many years in Vermont ("a little too isolated"). She moved to Keene in 2004, the longest she has lived in one place, and has no plans to move.

"This is the right fit for me," she says.

Locke has always operated in the grass roots conservation realm. She went to the University of Vermont and earned a master's degree in 1996 from Antioch University New England in elementary education, with a concentration on science. She's always been interested in social justice, always been environmentally conscious.

The dream came in May 2012, as she awoke one morning.

The idea of people helping people in a cooperative has always appealed to her, and that's when it struck. "I literally woke up one morning and heard a voice that said, 'time bank!'" she says.

By coincidence, that evening Locke attended a workshop run by Linda Hogan of Maine, who is a founder and social architect of a time bank network called hOurworld out of Portland. They chatted for a while, "and that's when I really got revved up about time banking," Locke says.

Time exchanges aren't unique. Time Banks USA, with its headquarters in Washington, D.C., was born in 1995 and supports community time exchanges around the country. About 150 formal time banks exist in the nation.

In 2003, community activists in Antrim, Hancock, Bennington and Frankestown formed People's Service Exchange. In recent years it has expanded with a new director, new initiative and new website under the hOurworld umbrella.

The time exchange synopsis is actually quite basic: "What can I offer? What do I need?" The Monadnock Time Exchange — it goes by MTX for brevity — has about 60 members, who perform a variety of tasks as endless as their imagination: yard work, baby-sitting, pet-sitting, transportation, computer help, cooking, knitting, bicycle repair, energy work, even Reike. Locke herself accepted grief counseling through the exchange when her father died in 2014.

The database is like a central hub — members don't trade hours directly with each other but can perform services with anyone in the network.

Recently joined MTX member Gerhard Bedding, 87, of Keene was so impressed that he wrote a letter to the editor touting its value, particularly to senior citizens who have skills and time to offer.

Locke emphasizes that MTX is not a bartering arrangement, where parties agree to an equal exchange of goods. Rather, time is currency: one hour equals one hour, in recognition that time itself is the commodity, she says. No money passes hands.

Getting it off the ground wasn't simply a matter of declaring it open for business. The database had to be established along with a support network, and that took time.

A steering committee was first formed in the fall of 2013, and several of its members, including Locke, attended a weekend training session in Providence, R.I., hosted by hOurworld. Locke then drafted a Collaborative Service Initiative proposal that was accepted by Antioch.

Thus, a team of four Antioch students launched a feasibility study to see if the area would be receptive to a time exchange. Locke has high praise for the students, saying they were the catalysts that truly got it going, right down to the design of a working model.

"They spent many hours, the four of them, they really led the project based on my proposal. They were amazing," Locke says.

That set up a soft launch at the Keene Unitarian Universalist Church in March 2014, in conjunction with the church's own series on economic justice. That was followed by a pilot phase, again assisted by an Antioch intern.

MTX opened for formal membership in October 2014 with about 25 members and celebrated its first birthday last October. It has its own board of directors and two part-time employees: Locke as executive director and Susan MacNeil as membership coordinator.

In addition to individuals, MTX recently launched an organizational partnership with area businesses. The Keene Unitarian church and Badger Balm of Gilsum are its first members.

Anyone can sign up through its website at monadnocktimeexchange.com although some steps are required to become members, such as learning how to use the database software. MTX

regularly holds orientation sessions for new members, plus other functions such as monthly potluck dinners and workshops on various topics.

Also, weekly updates, twice-monthly newsletters and upcoming events are sent to members online.

Locke says the goal for this year is to continue to grow its membership. So far, it's worked out exactly as she had hoped in her dream.

"What I like about it is at its core it's about bringing people together, about sharing untapped resources," Locke says. "Everyone has gifts, everyone has needs and everyone's time is precious."