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Radical rummage

Give-some-take-some exchange has a bigger purpose

BY AUDREY VAN BUSKIRK

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It's a Friday night at the Sunnyside Family Swap Shop and Indoor Playground.

Careening breathlessly through five bright, toy-stocked rooms, about a dozen elementary school children are on the hunt, armed with paper towel tubes stuffed with cotton balls. Laughter bounces off the high ceilings as the billowy puffs hit their targets.

A pair of fourth-grade girls perch cross-legged in the swap room, picking through the 3- to 6-month bin of discarded baby clothes to find outfits for their build-a-bears. Others hide in a play tent and play "house while camping."

In the infant room, a couple of moms nurse babies and chat, one stopping to find a spare bib when the baby's shirt gets soaked through. On couches in the main room, parents and baby sitters page through books and magazines they've taken from the Swap Shop's library and debate taking home a big blue baby exersaucer.

Kids are making paper airplanes in the art space, and, as always, the stage has its share of young performers outfitted from the tub of dress-up clothes.

If you're looking for some good news in these all-too-depressing economic times, check out what's been going on over the past few months on the corner of Southeast 35th Avenue and Yamhill Street.

In a once decaying space in the grand old Sunnyside United Methodist Church, for 12 hours a day, six days a week, children now tumble through indoor play structures. Grown-ups gather for weekly meet-ups and companionship, and families of all shapes and sizes give what they don't need and take what they do.

"We're all craving community," says Karen Hery, 41.

The Swap Shop is one of her ways to satisfying that need. Hery is a living embodiment of the "Yes, we can" philosophy. Once a self-described Silicon Valley housewife whose young daughters had schedules rivaling the chief executives of Fortune 500 companies, Hery chose this inner Southeast neighborhood deliberately after a divorce prompted a life upheaval.

The idea for the Swap Shop germinated from a friend of Hery's in Massachusetts, whose neighborhood organized a community garbage dump that resulted in a goods exchange. She also took inspiration from Barnes & Noble, which had the once peculiar-sounding idea that a book store could thrive by serving coffee and offering comfortable chairs for people to read in.



L.E. BASKOW / TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Karen Hery and Castle Pair, 2, take a Slinky to its limits at the play space and community center Hery helped create inside Sunnyside Methodist Church. Members can help themselves to clothes, toys and supplies, leaving their own items for others to take.

Add in the mounting pressure on the planet caused by relentless consumption and accumulation of “stuff,” and Hery’s idea in creating sustainable community began to grow.

Clothes exchange was a seed

Two years ago, Hery organized a clothing exchange at Sunnyside Environmental School, where her daughters, now 6 and 9, attend class.

By Earth Day 2007, she’d expanded the concept into the Useful Goods Exchange, where, purely on the honor system, 500 people traded more than 5,000 items — clothes, books, toys, furniture and other household goods. (The second annual Useful Goods exchange will be held May 2-May 4.)

Anything not taken on the first day of the exchange was put into a rummage sale; funds raised from that provided seed money for the Swap Shop. Hery also made a personal loan to the project.

Then she went looking for a space for the indoor playground and swap. She didn’t need to look far. Sunnyside United Methodist, where Hery now worships, looks out over the school’s playground and ball field.

Built in 1920, the stone church was designed to serve 1,000 congregants and once functioned as a community center. While it still provides a wealth of important community services (a wintertime homeless shelter, twice-weekly free and open meals, and a public gymnasium), the permanent congregation has shrunk to fewer than 50 members, too few to make regular use of the lovely rounded sanctuary.

In stark contrast to the clean and sunny Swap Shop, organized with a plethora of neatly labeled bins and Ikea cabinetry, a tour of other parts of the building reveals peeling paint, water-damaged ceilings and loose screws.

But after spending some time with Hery, who calls herself the Swap Shop facilitator and coordinator — expressly not the director — one gets the feeling that if anyone can get the spaces fixed up, she can. Hery seems to have a unique gift for seeing a need and finding a way to slake it. She learned that Do Jump had a waiting list for its physical theater classes and suggested that the group hold sessions in the church’s underutilized, gorgeous gym. They’re starting this session.

There are some other empty spaces in the church in need of some TLC; Hery sees potential for live-work space for artists.

“It’s all a sacred space for community,” Hery says.

Let the games begin

Where others would have seen hopelessly damaged rooms, Hery saw possibility.

After agreeing to rent the space from the church, she formed a Swap Shop board, pooled resources for renovation and construction, and got to work last summer to make the rooms fit for everything from puzzle-building to patty-cake.

With 90 initial member families, the Swap Shop opened for “business” in October.

Members, who can sign up in the first month of every quarter, pay a \$25 joining fee and \$25 a month to belong (about what Hery says she used to spend on a visit to Barnes & Noble). They must agree to perform a small job (things like sorting donations, cleaning baby toys, building maintenance) and follow common-sense, preschool rules — clean up your messes, give as much as you take, and treat other members with kindness and respect.

Swap Shop members are generally effusive in admiration for what Hery has accomplished in such a short period of time. Some talk about the joy of finding others in similar straits to share with; others have more practical praise.

“The best part” says Denise Jorgenson, mom of 2 1/2-year-old twins Avery and Brody, “is if he doesn’t want to let go of the toy, he can take it with him.”

She comes to the Indoor Playground twice a week or so, often with her friend Jennifer Pair, whose own twins, August and Castle, are about the same age.

Jorgenson loves the paint area, “so I don’t have to worry about it in my house,” and frequently takes home clothes from the bins in the swap room, all carefully organized by age.

“And if you take them home and they don’t fit,” she says, “no worries — just bring them back.”

That’s just how it’s supposed to work, Hery says. “Parents can relax, kids can play and go home with something new.”

‘Swapping is a front’

Hery wants to save and refurbish the church building, but it’s clear that she’s starting something here that’s about more than bricks and mortar.

She wants to give neighbors a venue to share and to talk. She sends members frequent, gentle reminders to pick up what they take out, put in about as much as they take and be respectful of differences in parenting styles. She helps facilitate changes that members might be thinking they want, but are too bashful to articulate.

She recognizes her strengths as writing, talking, observing and gathering others’ ideas. And she, too, is full of ideas, like developing additional activities for older kids, providing specific arts and crafts projects, and encouraging ever more weekly meetings (current offerings range from a knitting circle to music and yoga classes to a specific time for working parents).

“Swapping is a front for what’s really going to happen. I created the space; it’s their job to fill it,” she says.

The board hopes to double the current membership to about 200 families. At an open house this Saturday, families can tour the space and sign up.

It’s not for everyone, Hery acknowledges. “Certainly not the germaphobic,” she laughs. But she thinks she’s made a space where incredible things can happen by finding solutions rather than dwelling on obstacles.

“I hope people let go of the how and focus on the why,” she says.

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