

news



At your service: tomato seedlings and a unicycle were among items brought to the Streetbank launch at St Paul's, Hammersmith, last week

Website launches neighbourly lending

by a staff reporter

A NEW website, which aims to turn neighbours into friends through lending everything from a cup of sugar to garden tools, has been set up by a Christian businessman.

Sam Stephens, who is 32, co-founded the website Streetbank with his friend Ryan Davies in the hope of re-establishing stronger relationships between neighbours. The idea came to him when he borrowed a pint of milk from his own neighbour in Fulham, London.

"I became good friends with my downstairs neighbour through lending. It started with a pint of milk

and then graduated to some chairs, and then I borrowed his laptop. After that, we took down the dividing walls of the garden and shared it. Then I saw someone in the street cutting hedges. We don't have any hedgecutters, and I just thought: what if there was a website for lending? On my street, there are 95 homes, and what is the point of 95 hedgecutters that only get used once or twice a year?

"Later, we were to realise it wasn't just lending; it was giving away all of that stuff we have lurking about in our house that we don't really need. So in some ways Streetbank is a shared attic."

Mr Stephens tested the website in his area for several months before launching it at his church, St Paul's, Hammersmith, last week. So far, Streetbank.com has nearly 1000 members, who are swapping and lending household goods and sharing skills.

Mr Stephens, who runs a recruitment consultancy for NGOs and charities, said: "I am constantly surprised at the people who sign up. There are lots of City types who earn lots of money who have joined.

"But the people who have really caught the vision are predominantly women, in places where there is some degree of community spirit left. There is an element of trust there in these areas already; so it builds support more quickly. That's not to say it won't in other areas, but it may take more time."

He was brought up in a village in Hertfordshire, in an active community in which his parents were heavily involved. He believes passionately that the internet — despite being so often attacked for encouraging superficial or inappropriate relationships — can be used in a positive way.

"Streetbank uses the internet to encourage people to meet face to face through swapping. So often, people

don't have the courage to go up to a neighbour on the street and ask for help: they worry about the response they will get.

"We want to rebuild a sense of community that, I think, is still there under the surface. It doesn't take a lot for it to emerge. People are more affluent now, and that makes them more independent: if you are poor, you depend on others more. I want to encourage people to hold on to their things less tightly, and see that sharing what we have is exciting."

New users of Streetbank can enter their postcode and find out how many people in their area have registered and are offering items to lend or share.

Trust has paid off so far. Mr Stephens says: "We've had no bad experiences yet. I suspect some things have been given back in a less-than-perfect state, but we haven't had complaints, and no one has nicked anything. It is about taking a social risk, and sometimes people can let you down. But we think these are risks worth taking."

"What motivates me is the picture of how we should live in Acts 4 ['Those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ... and it was distributed to anyone as he had need:'] It's an exciting vision, and I hope this is just one step forward."

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