

Is it junk or treasure? Freecycle Kitsap site is a virtual smorgasbord of odds and ends.

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BREMERTON

Wendy Sailor has dispatched of a crock pot, a deep fryer, an electric barbecue grill and yarn of all colors.

Catharina Gould gave away packets of Kool-Aid, CD towers, two Christmas trees and an old computer operating system that "makes collectors giggle."

While the gifts these Bremerton residents give away are worlds apart, their passion for "freecycling" unites them. Both are part of the Yahoo! group Freecycle Kitsap County, a Web site forum that allows users to advertise unwanted gadgets or ask for coveted treasures.

Unlike some sites, none of the items sell. They are all free.

"Some of it is stuff that sometimes you just wanted out and you would probably take it to the transfer station," said Sailor, who has been a group member for two months. "But the thing is that when you do this, you meet the person who's taking it and usually it's somebody who really needs it. And someone who really needs it but doesn't have the money can take it off of my hands."

The Yahoo! group (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/freecyclekitsapco>) has more than 2,700 members. It is part of the worldwide freecycle movement.

Freecycle works like Craigslist.org, which also posts free listings under its "For Sale" banner. Members of a group can write posts under the headings of "wanted" or "offered." You do not have to be a member to see the posts or contact the user about setting up a pick-up time.

"Each time you put something up, depending on what it is, you get two or three responses," Sailor said. She said she uses Freecycle Kitsap County because she can immediately get something out of the house before it becomes junk. But she has had people stand her up come pick-up time.

Freecycle officials emphasize that Web forums are not just a way for people to find free stuff. Rather, they help promote smart consumerism and conservation.

According to Deron Beal, who founded the international freecycle network in 2004, freecycling ensures that less waste winds up in landfills.

"I'm a passionate geek about reuse and recycling, so any way we can empower people to reuse, the environment is much better off," Beal said.

Beal said a study by the state of Iowa calculated that freecycle groups keep more than 300 tons a day out of landfills.

"There's a 20-to-1 ratio between the raw materials used to make our goods and the actual goods," Beal said. "If you want to make a huge environmental impact, reuse is definitely the way to go."

Gould, 32, from Bremerton said she first heard about freecycling from a friend at work. She has been using it for more than a year.

"Conservation is an important cause for me," Gould said.

And you don't have to be donating large items, like Gould's Christmas trees, to participate. Gould once saw someone post Camel cigarette "Camel Cash" dollars they no longer wanted to use.

"I really like to see people get rid of even tiny little things that are of use to people," Gould said. "It's kind of the beauty of freecycle."

Another part of freecycle's appeal is the adventure of finding diamonds in the rough. "It's really this neat little stock market," Gould said.

Kitsap freecyclers also use a Yahoo forum called Sharing is Giving (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/SharingIsGiving_KitsapCounty-WA). Sharing is Giving has about 160 members. Its posts range from a woman named Ashley trying to find a home for her cat to a woman named Dori's plea for someone to save four yellow, orange and brown '70s-style window treatments.

The Kitsap County Reusable Materials Exchange, sponsored by the Washington State Department of Ecology and Kitsap County, also provides freecycling opportunities. Its Web site (2good2toss.com/kitsap) has more than 3,200 members. Most items on the site have asking prices but some listings, such as one for a seven-foot server rack posted on Feb. 12, say their goods are for donation only.

The Yahoo! group Kitsap County Cheapcycle (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/KitsapCountyCheapCycle/>) provides freecycling opportunities, as well, but typically carries posts that ask for money, member Myrna Smith said.

Smith, a 58-year-old from Port Orchard, said she thinks freecycling sites provide a good community service. Smith also uses Freecycle Kitsap County and has exchanged with a family looking to restock on plates and silverware after a fire destroyed their home.

Critics say freecycling results in less donations for Goodwill or Salvation Army stores, whose proceeds go to fund job training and other community-oriented programs. But Smith said she does not buy that argument.

"If you don't have the money to buy it, it's better this way," she said. "You're sharing with others and helping the same as Goodwill does."

Smith said the person-to-person contact required to exchange goods promotes community spirit. Freecyclers tend to go out of their way to help people, she said.

Smith, who started freecycling in Montana three years ago, has had a couple drive out to her home to deliver a washer and dryer because she could not pick them up. Later, she befriended a Navy wife whose husband departed on the USS John C. Stennis after she gave her twin parakeets.

"We've gotten together and we try to do things with one another a couple times a month to help keep her spirits up while he's gone," Smith said.

Before joining a local freecycle group, experts recommend you check out www.badfreecycler.info to be sure people you are giving goods to are not reselling them for profit.