

# Buy Nothing: Not 'about things'

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AMY CAVALIER



SHAWN DOWD/SDOWDPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Amy Cavalier thought her Beechwood neighborhood was a good fit for the Buy Nothing Project, a gift-based economy that links people living in a relatively confined geographical area. She started her neighborhood's group as an extension of her work.

**There's no money exchange, bartering or trades. Gift-based economy intends to foster a sense of community.**

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Amy Cavalier needed to clean her carpets, but she didn't have a shampooer standing in her closet. Seemed wasteful to buy one when, after all, how many times would she use it?

Her friends weren't any help. Cavalier could rent a shampooer, but she had a different idea.

She went to Facebook, posted on the Buy Nothing group she started last year, and asked if anyone had a rug shampooer she could borrow for a week or so.

She found what she needed — and more. Someone she'd never met who lives nearby offered to lend her the equipment.

"I'm getting to know my neighborhood better, and it's giving me an excuse to get out and talk to people," said 40-year-old Cavalier.

Which was the point when Cavalier thought her Beechwood neighborhood was a good fit for the Buy Nothing Project, a gift-based economy that links people living in a relatively confined geographical area. Buy Nothing draws the boundaries for each local incarnation and helps the administrators set up a Facebook group. Membership is open to adults within the borders, and they can use this connection to ask for help, to give or lend to each other, or to express gratitude for the kindness of others.

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## GIVE, LEND, SHARE

The Buy Nothing Project is a gift economy, meaning people who live in a specific geographic area can give, share or lend material possessions, or bestow the gift of their time and abilities. Buy Nothing groups are hyperlocal, meaning each ground is limited to adults living in a specific geographic area. To find a group, go to [buynothingproject.org/find-a-group](http://buynothingproject.org/find-a-group).

## Project

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Buy Nothing rules forbid exchanging money, bartering or making trades.

Variations on the theme exist, and other neighborhoods in the city, such as the 19th Ward, have their own recycle/send it forward circles.

Buy Nothing groups exist across the U.S. and the world. Membership in the Beechwood, Homestead Heights and Culver-Winton neighborhood has picked up in the spring and now tops 200. Others are forming in Irondequoit and Pittsford.

"People are excited about having a way to connect with their neighbors," Cavalier said. "It seems like it's just to share stuff, but it's really deeper than that. It's the connections people are making, getting to know each other. ... People are just feeling really good about giving back to their community by being able to share their things."

## Waste not

Cavalier started her neighborhood's Buy Nothing group as an extension of her work leading the Rochester Minimalists Meetup group. Both are about living with more intention.

"I feel like we waste so much money on things we barely use," she said. "... It sits in the corner and takes up space and reminds you of the money you spent or makes you feel guilty because someone gave it to you and you can't find a use for it but you also can't find the heart to part with it."

Cavalier said she wanted Buy Nothing to have a sense of community. Her geographical area includes some of the poorest streets in the city. "I didn't want it to be about things," she said. "I thought it would be about community outreach."

Cavalier posted for members to drop off nonperishable food at her house, and once a month she'll make a delivery to the blessing box at Covenant United Methodist Church on Culver Road. The first request nearly filled the cupboard that is in front of the church.

The Rev. Ann Kemper, senior pastor, said keeping the box filled with food, toiletries or other items people need is an ongoing task.

"It's wonderful our neighbors noticed it and participated," she said. "We always appreciate when the blessing box is used the way it was conceived. We don't believe giving is one-way. We receive when we give."

## Alternative to Craigslist

Mary McClelland, 35, and her husband ordered composted horse manure for their garden and wound up with a dump-truck-full. They couldn't use it all.

McClelland had heard about Buy Nothing from a friend in another state and checked the site to see if her North Winter neighborhood had a group.

She said she didn't want to deal with Craigslist, and thought Buy Nothing would be the perfect solution. She posted that if her neighbors wanted manure, to come and get it.

"It was a super-positive, easy experience," she said.

"That's one thing that keeps



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Amy Cavalier, administrator of a Buy Nothing group in the Beechwood, Homestead Heights and Culver-Winton neighborhood, takes donated food last month to the blessing box at Covenant United Methodist Church on Culver Road in Rochester.

it mellow," McClelland said. "No one's haggling or feeling slighted. If you don't want what someone has, you ignore it."

McClelland said that with no expectation of anything in return, "People are really sharing. We all end up helping each other."

McClelland said neighbors of all ages came by — some middle-aged and some, she said, "my mom's age." Among the younger neighbors, one brought a child the same age as her son.

"They started running around the yard and playing," she said, which led to setting up a play date.

"I did become friends with some of my neighbors. We decided to get together over the summer."

## Overcoming old advice

Shakespeare wrote "neither a borrower nor a lender be." Four hundred years later, some still take that to heart.

"I think a lot of people are afraid to ask for things," Cavalier said. "I think it might be a challenge for some people to admit they need something and can't afford it."

On the other side are people who are reluctant to share. "I suppose you do have to get rid of some type of ownership to share," she said.

Adam Mitchell learned about Buy Nothing from Cavalier when she came by to welcome him and his girlfriend to the neighborhood. He used the site to give away ferns, including some to Cavalier for her backyard. He also picked up some cat dishes and treats.

"The generosity factor is huge," said Mitchell, who checks the site just about every day. "I think there's also an environmental impact to this. This means a lot of stuff that's useful isn't ending up in the trash."

Mitchell said it's getting easier for him to part with things.

"You feel good. 'Hey I just made someone's day,'" he said.



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Cavalier posted for neighborhood Buy Nothing members to drop off nonperishable food at her house, and once a month she'll make a delivery to the blessing box at Covenant United. The first request nearly filled the cupboard in front of the church. The Rev. Ann Kemper, senior pastor, said that keeping the box filled is an ongoing task.

"That's got its own reward."

Justin Re found out about Buy Nothing from friends who were going to pick up plants from someone they didn't know. He said it sounded strange at first. But after the concept was explained, he decided to start a group for his Irondequoit neighborhood, where he has lived for about five years.

"I think this will help me get to know them more," he said. "Lending things to people, you get to know people."

Re, 33, a strength and conditioning coach, said he and his wife, Nicole Hushla Re, are trying to avoid buying things they rarely use.

"It's great for the stores," he said. "But it's a waste. If you can have the community come together and start sharing things, it'll work out a lot better."

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