

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

KOLA NUT TIMEBANK: BUILDING COMMUNITY, ONE HOUR AT A TIME

LAURA FLANDERS: Many of us struggle with bills, financial burdens and having too much to do all the time. Some of us also feel unvalued and that our skills aren't appreciated at other times. What if there was a way to deposit time into an account and share skills with your neighbors in a way that met a range of our needs and theirs without involving any cash? Since 2017, a project in Chicago has been offering people a chance to do exactly that, a blend of mutual aid, community organizing and kind of block party with a purpose. The Kola Nut Collaborative has been introducing timebanking to neighborhoods across Chicago. Mike Strode is the founding coordinator. He sees Kola Nut he says, as a way to work hyperlocally in neighborhoods, while simultaneously building towards a national solidarity economy. What's a timebank? A solidarity economy? A Kola Nut? Stay tuned as we find out. But before we go to my conversation with our guest, Mike Strode, here's a piece created for us about his work by the good people at Meerkat Media Collective. Check it out.

MIKE STRODE: Hi, my name is Mike. I am the founding coordinator of the Kola Nut Collaborative. It's a service that allows people to use their time as a type of currency in order to get their needs met. What I understood of economic justice and solidarity economy as a practice is that people are trying to implement things like worker cooperatives or food cooperatives as aspects of economic justice. And those are probably some of the hardest things to lift off the ground. But a timebank and being able to connect with other people around their offers and needs is a very simple, tiny thing that you can do just with the neighbor next door. Timebanking is trading time as a currency. And what that means is that someone who has an hour of time to share with another person in the form of a skill, such as teaching someone how to ride a bike, they go into the timebank, they find someone who is requesting that service, or they offer up that service themselves. They're able to earn an hour in their timebank account. The person who received the service would have a deduction from their timebank account. Only thing required inside of the timebank is an hour of your time as the currency. So that's what timebanking is for you. And this offers and needs market is just a way that we get people into the experience of timebanking, like it was money, like it was a currency. So I co-facilitate the Offers & Needs Markets shifting people to actually thinking about what is the practice of timebanking in your community and in your organization where people are actually in the experience of if I was in a timebank, what would I offer to someone in this room? And what do I need from the people in this room? So what is the Offers & Needs Market? The Offers & Needs Market is 90-minutes to two-hour session that allows us to think about what are the skills that we have to share with each other, like cooking jerk shrimp, like household budgeting. What are the things that we have to share with

other people, and what are the things that we need from other people? Usually when we're doing the solidarity economy 101, the primary question we ask people is, what values would you prioritize in a world that you think is fair, just, and equitable? And usually when we have that exercise, there's a matchup. A lot of people want to have a fair and equitable world. A lot of people, you know, want to participate in the decisions that affect their lives, and a lot of people want to help other people. What I've been able to garner from participating in this space is just the importance of bringing these different elements together. So the timebanking is a really important part of getting people to understand what they have to offer and what they need, and how that connects to other people in their space. And the cooperative is a next evolution beyond sort of that general comradery, reciprocity and connection with neighbors. And so for me, the timebanking is really important. It's the seed of being able to build the type of communities that we want, build the type of lives that we want, to be able to be the people that we want. Well, so timebanking is the vehicle for all of these collective aspirations and needs that we have.

LF: So welcome, Mike. Thank you so much for joining us here on the program. You say in that video that timebanking to you is the seed of being able to create the kind of communities that we want. Can you elaborate on that? What do you mean?

MS: Yes. So for me, timebanking is essentially this very low-level form of collaboration, cooperation that allows people to build towards more complex collaboration and cooperation. So what I see timebanking as doing at its base most basic form is mapping assets in communities, developing reciprocal networks of support and care and communities and network weaving within communities. Timebanking allows us to say, here are the things that I have as skills and capacities and gifts that I'd like to offer inside of the community. And then it also encourages people to name their needs, name the things that they need to show up more fully in community and be able to match-make between those things. So it becomes this sort of nugget of more complex collaboration and cooperation to come.

LF: In that video, you have a lot of people gathered in a space and they're doing things with Post-It notes. Can you talk us through it a little bit?

MS: So we were facilitating something called an Offers & Needs Market. And what that does is it invites people in the room to intentionally reflect on what are the things that I have to offer in support of this community? And it could be things that are directly related to your profession, if it's buying or supplying, or it could be something else because sometimes Jamaican folk dancing, I spent, you know, about 18 months as a semi-professional Jamaican folk dancer. It could be that that's a point of connection and a point of intersection, and it's the seed of a deeper relationship. And so the Offers & Needs Market invites them to reflect on what they have to offer, reflect on

what they need, and then begin facilitating ways to meet each other's needs with the offers that are already in the room.

LF: I want to get into how you got into all of this, but perhaps just to clarify for people what timebanking actually means.

MS: Timebanking at its essence is using time as a type of currency. So using an hour of my time that I might spend providing a bike riding lesson to a child in the neighborhood, or teaching a neighbor how to use their computer or helping a neighbor organize their garage. So using an hour of my time as a type of currency, I go and support someone with the skill that I have named in the timebank. I earn an hour in the timebank, and then I'm able to spend that hour on something that I need. You know, perhaps it's, you know, massage services at, you know, a local business, or perhaps it's some other exchange that I might, you know, need within the timebank. But ultimately it's me being able to use my time as the currency of exchange that we use to meet our needs and to access things.

LF: And everybody's time is worth the same?

MS: Every hour is worth an hour. Absolutely, every hour is the same. And that's really important because we want to drive home the idea within timebanking that every skill, every type of work is necessary and useful. In fact, redefining work is the core value of timebanking. So ultimately everybody in a community is meaningful and everybody does valuable work.

LF: And why Kola Nut?

MS: The kola nut, so the kola nut in West African Igbo culture is, it's a nut of exchange, a nut of hospitality. So it has both, you know, real communal value. You can exchange kola nuts for things of real value, but it also has this sort of social and cultural value. And so ultimately the Kola Nut is about having currency that has both value and values underneath it.

LF: Well, that seems to run throughout your work that there's actual need being met. There's a value being exchanged, but there's also a core of values that go well beyond the individual project that you're involved in. Not to say that the Kolo Nut Collaborative isn't important to the people who are using it, it is, but you are very clear that this is about building a society that is different from top to bottom, east to west. Can you talk a bit about what it is to be part of a solidarity economy? Because that language while it's used more in other parts of the world, it's not so familiar to Americans.

MS: It's really about community self-determination. So communities want to be self-determining. They want to have some, you know, political control over what happens in

their community. They want to have some social control, and then they want to have some level of economic autonomy or economic independence. And so the combination of those things along with sort of this larger community stewardship, you know, how we steward things together collectively, these are the sort of elements of the solidarity economy. And solidarity economy is grounded in a few values that, you know, that we like to make sure that we name, which deals with solidarity, equity in all dimensions, participatory democracy, ecological stewardship, or, you know, and so these are things that, and pluralism, right? We want to make sure that everyone feels that they can show up in the solidarity economy. So for me, the solidarity economy is really dealing with how does my community meet its needs? Does it have decision making autonomy and authority and how those needs get addressed. Does it have the ability to make decisions about the things that affect our lives? You know, these are the core of the solidarity economy for me. And the timebank is just one way that we can experiment, you know, with how we get those needs met and also be and participate in the doing that meets those needs.

LF: On a very concrete level, a lot of people got a new sense of what they needed and what was available to them at the local level. During the Covid pandemic when people were practicing social distancing and perhaps not engaging in the economy that they normally engage in, going to work and so on. What did you discover there at Kola in that period as you emerge from it, perhaps, will there be lessons that you think, you know, endure?

MS: So one of the things that I discovered is that grief is necessary and grief is valuable. And one of the things that I was grieving was that I really, really wanted the timebank to be something that was alive and thriving at a moment of crisis like this. And I was like, why can't I, why can we not be ready for this thing? And the thing is nobody was ready. Governments weren't ready. Systems we thought should be ready, were not ready. There was no level of readiness that we can attain at this level, you know, that could meet this moment. But what we could do was what we did, you know, people showed up, mutual aid groups begin doing things just like we had been espousing in the timebank since 2017.

LF: And how far do you think we are as a society from a solidarity economy? I often find it helpful to kind of contrast for people, well, this is how we could do it, or this is how it happens in a timebank or in a solidarity economy, versus this is how we operate our economy now.

MS: Solidarity economy is a post-capitalist framework. And so ultimately we are still in capitalism. it's an evolving framework, an evolving system. And so until we rest ourselves from capitalism, we will continue to be very far from the solidarity economy. But what we do have, and what I share with my colleagues in terms of thinking about solidarity economy is that we do have communities that already exhibit these values of solidarity cooperation, mutualism, participatory democracies, equity. We already have social movements that have these values at the core. And so ultimately it's just about continuing to foster collaboration between those social

movements, continuing to push in the political spaces where resistance is happening, continuing to push in societal spaces where resistance is happening and moving slowly along. It's about the solidarity that we have with each other. And it's about the fact that recognizing that we are all in the community trying to meet our needs, trying to engage with our political officials to get those needs met. And so those are things that, you know, I think are, that show us the way towards the solidarity economy.

LF: There are people trying to live in different ways across this country all the time, creating pockets of alternatives. What is it that directed you to commit your life to this kind of work?

MS: In my adulthood, I encountered the Healthy Food Hub, Dr. Jifunza Wright-Carter, Fred Carter. And I was able to work with them around developing the Healthy Food Hub model at the Betty Shabazz International Charter School. And in that model, I saw people coming in here trying to figure out how can I be in deeper relationship with the people who grow food? How can I learn more about the food system and also how can I support the people who are all in this room that are in relationship with this particular organization and entity with me so that we can all, you know, all grow and all thrive. And so ultimately the Healthy Food Hub for me was the seed of an experiment, a 10-year experiment in what the solidarity economy looked like. I spent a lot of time working the front end and, you know, working the register, but also while I was working the register one day, I just, you know, said I need some music here. Like, I mean, I need a little bit of joy in this time. It can't be standing on my feet. So I brought in music and it became a thing that just was part of the Healthy Food Hub. We were co-creating a social experiment together in that pace and people were in relationship and you would have elders who would come into this space and they would shop for about an hour and then they would sit around for the next three hours talking to other people because they needed someone to connect with. In that space, pre pandemic social isolation was still present and it is still present now. So for me, the experience of the Healthy Food Hub was the experience of what I want to have in a solidarity economy. And I've effectively spent most of my time after that trying to recreate that feeling.

LF: And for those who think that timebanking sounds an awful lot just like barter, is it?

MS: The important thing about timebanking is that it's specifically about exchanging an hour of time for an hour of time, right? You know, it's specifically about exchanging time, barter, you can exchange lots of things. You can exchange time, you can exchange goods, you can, you know, there are all sorts of things you can barter, but timebanking is really about some, it's about for and actually this is the real seed, right? It's sometimes about some people who get heavily compensated in the money economy deciding that they will take less compensation to show up for another person. And that might be a thing that you might need to do because ultimately we're trying to build this network where it's not just about you exchange, you acquiring more in terms

of currency, but it's about the relationships that we're building because those relationships are the seed of possibility that allow all sorts of other things to happen.

LF: It seems to get at the very heart of value, of what do we value? How do we put value on things? Value we imagine, or we're trained in our capitalist economy to think is a fixed thing. It's fixed to how much profit is produced or how much distance is covered. You name it, it's a fixed thing. And what I hear from you and what I've heard from people experiencing the timebanking practice is that it changes all the time. What's valuable to you in one minute might be not valuable to you at all in the other, obviously you don't need snowplowing in the summer. But at a deeper level, our needs change, our values change, and this kind of embrace of flux and change seems in and of itself kind of counter to the way that we think about our economy.

MS: Yes. And it's really about recognizing that there are some things that are immeasurable and so we should just complicate all of the measurements. We should complicate all of the metrics. We should recognize that yes, value does change all of the time. And so the value of being in community, the value of being in relationship, the value of being part of a neighborhood association that can be in relationship with a store owner and that can build good connection there. These are all things that are really hard to measure by the standards that we currently use. And so let's figure out some new standards.

LF: We just came out of an election in the runup to which the midterms of 2022, people were asked to express their degree of concern about the economy. And every time I saw that question on polls, I thought, well, what economy are they talking about? As you look at the US and you do this work all over while you're based in Chicago, I know that you're teaching nationally. What do you see? Where do you think we're at and how would you describe the US economy? And then I guess I should ask you, are you concerned about it?

MS: I am less concerned with sort of the economy as a sort of writ large notion or as this thing that can be measured. But I am concerned with the ways that we build relationship because for me, those relationships are the economy, right? And we can build equitable relationships, we can have equitable workplaces that, you know, ensure that where people go to meet their income needs are not places that are exploitative, are not places that are harmful. We can go and build places in our community where people, you know, can get their sort of local needs met. So these are all ways that I'm thinking about meeting the economy or about the health of the economy. When I think about what a healthy economy looks like, those are the things that I'm focused on. I'm focused on those worker cooperatives. I'm focused on participatory budgeting. I'm focused on sort of on equitable political relationships and equitable social relationships. And so I am not as concerned.

LF: So how would somebody go about setting up a timebank where they are? Could they on their own in their neighborhood listening or watching this today?

MS: Well, the important thing is you can never do anything on your own. The notion of sort of the lone entrepreneur funneling out on the boat, you know, is impossible. So we get together by community. And so starting a timebank involves you actually being in community, find another person, and then the two of you find one more person and then you keep spiraling out into maybe you've got seven people and they're in a room and you can do something like an Offers & Needs Market. You can do something like a gathering with a purpose. You can have a gathering where you can talk about what are the things that you all need in that room and what are the things that you have available in that room. And that can be the seed of it. So it won't stop there, right? You know, you still have to continue to think about who else is not in this room or who else have we not been in communication with. So once you have those folks together and you have maybe that sort of, we call it, you know, that Kitchen Council or the Kitchen Table or whatever, you know, advisory council to start that timebank, then you can build a platform. But for me, the platform is not as important as the people. We start with the people. Then there are places like Timebanks.org where you can go and get support with building out your timebank platform. But you know, ultimately the people are the important part of this, you know, when we're developing the timebank.

LF: And how many people do you have involved in Kola Nut right now?

MS: Kola Nut currently has about 120 members, you know, and that's a relatively small number compared to Chicago population. And the other sort of secret of timebanking is that at any given moment, maybe there are only about 10% of the people who are actively participating. But the goal is really to have this infrastructure available because you never know when sort of activity in a timebank is going to ramp up, you know? And so at the start of the pandemic, I got more calls than I could manage about people who were trying to figure out like how can we use this timebank to meet the moment? And so but the goal was not necessarily to continue sort of trying to build out the timebank alone. The goal is to develop facilitators and folks who can facilitate these processes in their community. Because if we have people who are doing this already in their community locally, then getting them to the platform is a much easier step.

LF: Have you seen your community change as a result of the Kola Nut Collaborative?

MS: The change has been that people, more people are adopting these practices. And even the sort of work that I've done with the Post Growth Institute around training Offers & Needs Market facilitators, we've now had about 40 facilitators in Chicago go through this Offers & Needs Market training process. So that means there are 40 people who are using timebanking practices in their communities, in their organizations. And even if that hasn't netted to additional

membership in the timebank, it's netted to the practices spreading. And the goal is for the practice to spread, we'll figure out a way to kind of, you know, get folks to build on the platform.

LF: Well fancy that, cash might not be king. Connection might be, just a thought.

MS: Yes.

LF: Let me ask you the question that we ask our guests at the end of most episodes, Mike. And that's the question about the story the future will tell of now. What do you think will be the story that the future, I don't know, 25, 50, 100 years hence tells of this moment?

MS: There are many people across the world who are experimenting with what the future looks like. There are many people who carry the memory of what the future looks like from their past, from the ancestral traditions. And so the combination of those folks who are harvesting from the ancestral traditions, the combination of people who are experimenting in this current, in this present moment will mean that what we will have is we will have a realization. We had a realization at some point, perhaps in the next 10 years, let's just call it a decade. We had a realization that we had everything we needed in this current moment from the past and from the present. And that we were able to locate that in this moment of crisis just like we were able to locate in that moment of crisis around the pandemic, that mutual aid was the way forward. We will locate inside of these other systems that are moving into crisis, that we have the seeds of what we need to move forward and manifest a different way. And so I think that's what the future will tell of us.

LF: All right, Mike Strobe, thank you so much for joining us. It's really been a pleasure to have you on the Laura Flanders Show. Good luck.

MS: Thank you very much, Laura.

LF: The economy. How often do we talk about the economy as if we only had one. In the 2022 midterm polling, a lot of Americans were asked about their opinions of the economy and how was it fairing about their concerns? It wasn't an option really to answer that they thought the economy was doing great or doing damage or they'd like a different kind of economy in their lives. But if what Mike Strobe, a Kola Nut Collaborative says is true, a whole lot of Americans during the Covid-19 pandemic found non-capitalist, non-contractual, non-cash based ways of meeting their needs. And many of them seem to have stuck. It seems to me, in fact, that we have now more than ever, many economies in our society. Don't get me wrong, capitalism is still the driving force, but think of all the things we do for care, for love, for need, parenting, raising children, a whole lot of teaching. And what about public media? I'm not asking for money, I'm just pointing out we put it out for free. And some of you give back because you care. You don't

have to, to receive our content. Many economies, that's what I think we have in this country and in our programming, we try to focus on more than one. We'll keep doing it. And if you want to hear my full conversation with Mike Strobe, you can through a subscription to our free, no contract, podcast about which you can find out more information at our website. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. I'm Laura, thanks for joining me.

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