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Giving Away the Store - Without the Store

By Chris Lavin



Items are displayed at this recent "Free Swap" in Canyon. Photo Chris Lavin

swap in Canyon. She's lived all over the country, but beginning and ending, so far, here in Lamorinda. She is a young but ultimate ambassador of recycling.

"It's what we should do!" she exclaimed as she rearranged shoes at the swap. "But oh no, this looks kind of junky." Someone into shoes would not have used that word. Shoes are shoes, and seldom are too organized at a swap.

The problem with the swaps is, or "a" problem is, you can leave anything you want but take something else back home, too. You can leave stuff, pick up stuff, either or neither. An eager attendee might end up with more than he or she brought. At the end of the day charitable volunteers haul off the detritus to Goodwill.

At this summer's swap, a myriad number of belongings were put out for review. A live chicken changed hands, within one minute of arrival. Thankfully the original owner had offered printed instructions: "One year old. Refuses to go inside at night. Lays one white egg a day but good luck finding it. Gets along well with cats and dogs." At last report the chicken had been successfully confined and was laying regularly without protest or signs of distress. A plan was being hatched to let it again free-range, but opinions were myriad as to the success of the plan.

Other cast-off belongings at the Canyon Post Office included a complete Boggle game set, a lamp cast in the form of a chicken, a casserole dish in the shape of a pepper, lots of kitchen gear that could be packed for kids going off to college like mugs and French presses, books, a toaster, candle holders, and many, many, cute shoes, if you happened to be a lady's size 8.

The idea of swapping belongings has deep roots. People used to trade services or goods all the time. It used to be called bartering. Give and take. Now with a plethora of goods and in an age where landfills are teeming, the idea of actually reusing other people's goods might be starting to gain a resurgence. The Patagonia catalog featured a story about free swap with a deft thought about how the "thrill of shopping, of buying, simply can't hold a candle to such a primal sensation" of getting something for free. How true.

"It's what we should do," Riley said. "A lot of this stuff is simply beautiful. It would be a shame for it to go to waste." She looked at a beaten-up baby's all-wood high-chair with a removable tray that was left over from a previous swap. It looked like oak. One could envision children gone before, and children to come.

Just when you find you have too many salt shakers, the disposable ones left over from the camping trip that you added to the ones you recently unpacked from mama's nice antique things to the ordinary ones you had already, you find, well, you have too many salt shakers. You may even be one of those people who watch the "Hoarders" show on TV. You start to wonder about yourself.

And that is why there are people like Jamie Riley in the world. She lives in Canyon, and regularly over the years she has organized what she calls "Free Swaps," an event where people are alerted beforehand (by way of her beautifully hand-painted billboards) that they may and can de-clutter their lives and homes by purging extra stuff, clearing counter and closet space, and giving stuff back to the world.

"Everyplace I've ever lived that I loved had these free spaces," said Riley, at her most recent

"I need to sand that down," she said.
It will be gorgeous.



Jamie Riley with some of her wares Photos Chris Lavin



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