Fair trade

op A LETS trade
into full swing in
on the NSW
oast.

phy by Nick Cubbin

ld-fashioned system of bartering is thriving in local ibourhoods, where savvy community traders (magazine rs included) use their skills and time as "currency" to goods and services. By Helen Hawkes.

I'm off to Terrigal, on the Central Coast of NSW, to see Janice, 60, a former fashion designer who wants some gardening advice. Her 28-year-old daughter, Genevieve, who has recently had a baby, is after a pedicure. I am a qualified permaculture design teacher, so I'm up for helping with the garden and, as for the pedicure, I'm very popular in my local exchange trading system (LETS) group for my work with feet.

When I arrive, Janice offers me a cup of tea before we get down to serious business – talking about compost, broad beans and sun pattern – then I plunge Genevieve's feet into a steamy bowl

ented with neroli oil. As I file and polish, her four-week-old son, Xavier, while her old daughter, Jaguar, lobbies vocally to ny toes painted pink.

ext visit, Janice, who runs a dog-grooming equests a pedicure, and I want to bring for a grooming session. I bill her 60 "shells" ncy used by our LETS scheme to trade services.

a non-profit system and shells exist only as an online "accounts" system. These are from one member to another after each ndividual transactions or at LETS trade days. (Annual membership is $10 and 10 shells or $20 and 20 shells, depending on each person's financial situation.) Prices are agreed between members but the rough guide is 20 shells per hour (no matter whether the service is legal advice or gardening) and each shell is equal to about $1.

The first LETS system was developed in 1982 by Canadian Michael Linton, who believed the real wealth of a community lay in the skills of its people and that conventional money didn't usually reflect this. Today, almost 200 LETS groups have been established in Australia (www.lets.org.au), with more than 800 operating worldwide.

It was my friend Sabine, a talented textile artist in her 60s, who suggested I join the LETS network in 2006. Sabine teaches rug-making and enjoys trading fabrics, clothes and household goods she no longer needs at swap days. Anyone can join LETS – young, old, professionals, tradespeople, sole parents, small business operators, craftspeople, people with disabilities, the unemployed, children, even journalists. Members range in age from their 20s to their 70s and our Central Coast group is a melting pot, from Anne, a 30-something psychic reader to 33-year-old secretary Korina Ivatt, who makes her own natural household and beauty products. →

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AID IN KIND

eryone needs a little pampering and this trade y at the Kariong community hall, on the Central ast, has been organised for LETS members to dge. Bookings for yoga, Hawaiian massage, eology, psychic readings, facials and pedicures e flooded in, says secretary Korina Ivatt – the -themed day is the most popular event to date. ve been put on foot duty and the day passes in a blur, as I do six pairs of feet, including those Ivatt's 92-year-old nanna, Margaret, who turns to have the most immaculate feet of the day. ash and massage feet, trim and polish toenails, catch up on community and family news. The buzz of trading is all around me and curious siers-by pop in and out to see what's going . Ivatt has worked hard to get membership mbers up and preaches the benefits of our eme to locals. Fifteen new members sign up, ch is a record for our Central Coast group. People tell me that they don't know what y'd do without LETS when they want a babysitter or to treat themselves to something, a massage, that they would probably not be e to pay cash for," says Ivatt.

NSW Central Coast LETS secretary Korina Ivatt (below left) with son Zachary at trade day; Noreen Ross, of Umina Beach, carts her wares including books and home-made fudge.

ther goods and services on offer include: guitar on; computer assistance; bookkeeping, word cessing; massage; furniture renovation and rug- ing classes; Spanish lessons; home maintenance; s' clothing; home care and child minding; pick-ups deliveries; budgeting advice; and tree lopping. We get to do what we like for others and can ask neone else to do the things we don't like or can't nage ourselves," says 70-year-old Brita, who does ne sewing and alterations and, in return, has oyed massages, carpentry services, computer istance and home-made food.

Since joining LETS two years ago, I, too, have olved massages, as well as obtained chemical- cleaning products, borrowed books and "bought" clothes, shoes and herbal beauty treatments. I've also eaten home-made chicken stew, ice-cream and jam. Oh, and I have had someone pack up my house when I moved, which was heaven.

Being a bit of a spendthrift, I've also acquired a few garage-sale-like items that I could have done without at swap days. These aren't the kind of events where you can pick up a second-hand Chanel handbag or vintage designer clothing. Rather, you might find a pair of handmade leather sandals, some pre-loved T-shirts or passed-down kitchenware.

So many lemons on your tree you can't give them away? Bring them to trade day. Still got nothing to swap? Make a cake or some spaghetti sauce, or whatever you cook best, and barter with that. On trade days, the aim is to earn and spend shells and to get to know other people in the group, says Korina Ivatt, who is married to Hieden, a 37-year-old schoolteacher, and has two children, Olivia, 5, and Zachary, 2. The most successful members, Ivatt adds, are those who regularly buy and sell.

Petra, 44, a university student and mother of two, trades goods at sales days, while her daughter offers babysitting. "We spend our shells on pet grooming, accountancy, farm-fresh produce and massages. My daughter buys like crazy at trade days. She has no spending limit – her reward for all her hard work."

LETS members also take part in working bees; five to 15 members may descend on a house to prune trees, tidy the garden, paint, or do whatever's needed, in return for shells and a slap-up morning tea. It's an old-fashioned idea but a great way to get work done as part of a community group.

With rising food and petrol prices, this type of exchange system – not just of low-cost services but of goods, too – is becoming increasingly popular (Central Coast numbers have risen from 24 to 200 in 18 months). But the LETS concept is not just about saving money; members thrive on the sharing and sense of community the system engenders.

Sarah, a wedding and children's photographer, agrees: "I love children but hate housework. I can babysit for another member while somebody who loves cleaning can help me out. I also love that I can offer my photographic services to people who can't use a camera and that I can then ask someone to come and help me change the oil in my car.

"It's not just economics or trading off unwanted jobs," says the 24-year-old, a new member. "I love the community spirit."

Michelle, a mum in her late 30s, has approached me about some gardening advice and a pedicure. She's had trouble with her clay soil and her vegies aren't taking off the way she'd like. Michelle and her husband, Dimitri, 34, have a large property in Wamberal and hope to grow enough fruit and vegetables to feed the entire family, which includes their three children, Oliver, 12, Kaia, 4, and Arion, 2.

After a tour of the front yard, we chat about the local area – the couple moved to the Central Coast from inner Sydney and Michelle misses the cultural aspects of living in the city – and about her plans to take a dance class, also through LETS. It turns out that she and Dimitri run a Montessori school and are offering programs to LETS members.

Before I leave, Michelle loads me up with chokos and lemon grass from her garden. She waves a cheery goodbye and I promise to see her soon and to call to check how her garden is going. I feel like I'm slowly making a network of new friends.

Later, back in my office, I put aside things I no longer need for the next trade day. I also go through the list of LETS offerings to see what I can book as a treat. I email a member about reflexology and toy with the idea of art, circus or self-defence lessons. I check my account and see that I have earned 122 shells and spent 959 since I joined the scheme. I still have 267 shells to spend – time to get trading. ●