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## Free, feisty and green

Freecycle gives landfill a breather

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Got stuff you want to get rid of that someone else could put to good use? Want something that someone else might not need anymore?

Have I got a deal for you.

If you have a computer and a little patience, the 3,300-member TallyFreecycle group is waiting for you to join its Yahoo-based "gifting" network.

TallyFreecycle is part of a growing international movement that began in Arizona five years ago. The Freecycle Network now claims more than 4 million members worldwide who are part of 3,500 community organizations.

The idea is straightforward: Keep stuff in play for someone else, at no charge, thus preventing it from winding up in a local landfill.

Household items are the norm. But one local member recently gave away two old cars.

You know the saying, one person's trash is another's treasure. More importantly, the national organization estimates its "globally local" groups are keeping more than 400 tons of stuff — believe me, it's not all junk — out of landfills *daily*.

"The guiding principle is that everything be free with no strings attached — a sort of grand cyber-curbside," Freecycle ([www.freecycle.org](http://www.freecycle.org)) says in an online news release.

The Tallahassee group even allows members to post pets for adoption — although that remains a topic of debate.

"If I can allow the life of a dog to be saved by posting it on Freecycle," reasons 25-year-old moderator Mickey Damelio, "it keeps it from having to go to the animal shelter."

Otherwise, the rules are simple: No advertising. No "gifting" of anything illegal, nor any firearms, drugs, alcohol or tobacco products. And be respectful online or you might get booted, as a few have been.

I'd never heard of the group until one of its members invited me to a meeting last month.

I got on TallyFreecycle's radar because of the public-school recycling initiative that Greenovation (now Sustainable Tallahassee) launched last year as part of our drive to promote "green" economic development in the capital city. I brought along a recycling expert: Nancy Paul, the former superintendent of the Leon County landfill and now the general manager of Marpan Recycling.

She told two stories that caused jaws to drop.

When she worked for the county, a furniture company in town, which she declined to identify, had a bunch of unsold models that were being discontinued — as she described it, a truckload of "brand-new, still-in-the-plastic-wrap sofas, chairs, love seats, etc., enough to fill several living rooms."

Rather than donate the furniture, store managers told their driver to take it to the Apalachee Parkway landfill where, according to county policy, employees were required to add all that perfectly fine stuff to the waste stream.

Another time a plumbing contractor dumped a sparkling new tub/shower enclosure and other plumbing fixtures because they'd been ordered in the wrong colors.

What a waste.

It's illustrative of what a throwaway society we've become, and how we're rapidly burying ourselves in stuff that really shouldn't be destined for the trash heap.

Damelio, who teaches visually impaired kids in the Leon County school district, got involved with TallyFreecycle two years ago. By then it already had been operating as a Yahoo group for two years. Now he and his wife, Melissa, a nursing teacher at Tallahassee Community College, are regulars.

"She's the biggest junkhead of the two of us," he jokes, although they've given away far more stuff than they've acquired, including items from their wedding reception and an old lawn mower that about 100 fellow Freecyclers offered to take off their hands.

Damelio says Freecyclers are a demographically diverse mix, but generally can be divided into two groups: people who are thrifty and also see an opportunity to help the environment, and those who just want to "de-clutter" their space.

Some are passionate about being "a good steward of our planet," like Tonya Chavis, whose e-mail handle is solartea. Chavis, a lawyer for the Department of Business and Professional Regulation who arbitrates condominium disputes, lives in the "intentional" in-town Day Star Community. Day Star residents share a commitment to conservation.

"It's very consistent with my belief system," she says of Freecycle.

Chavis joined about two years ago and got rid of stuff she no longer used, including a wardrobe of clothes that didn't fit after she lost a lot of weight.

"I didn't like the idea of it going to the landfill," she says, "and I wasn't really interested in holding a garage sale."

For Damelio, moderating the sometimes rambunctious bunch of online "gifters" isn't all fun and games. He guesses he spends 10 to 12 hours weekly on the task, and occasionally he's drawn into a nasty spat. One, he says, involved a business owner and a Freecycle who brought their offline fight online. Damelio resolved it by banning them both.

"I've tried to run Freecycle like a democracy," he says, "but sometimes it has to be run like more of a dictatorship."

Even if Damelio occasionally has to act like Mussolini, Freecycle does good work by helping to sustain our little piece of earth. Thanks, Freecyclers.