

Freecycling: Converting trash to treasure

By Esther Baird

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Last summer I suggested that parents unite to redistribute their oversized and underused plastic toys. I recommended some system that involved signal flags if I recall. A friend remarked, "You know Esther, www.freecycle.org already does that — except they are online and you don't have to create, umm, special flags."

So I checked it out. Sure enough I found a huge virtual sidewalk of stuff that people no longer want but are happy to give away — for free.

The mission of freecycle is to create a "worldwide gifting movement to ease waste and . . . reduce the burden on landfills." All it takes is a Yahoo account and an email and you too can swap unwanted debris.

I joined the Beverly group and started clearing our garage. We easily got rid of four chairs and a decent — though weathered — cat carrier. But I wasn't convinced that I'd get any takers for the queen-sized box-spring. Not a mattress mind you, just a 10-year-old box-spring that had spent the last two years in our garage due to the perpetual clash between our staircase and our beds.

Within half a day of posting it, I had over five offers. I replied to the first person who emailed me. If she could pick it up, it was hers. 'She' turned out to be a student and arrived, along with her brother, in a car that was maybe half the size of the box spring. At least they brought some twine. I assumed any staircases in their lives were bigger than their car.

It was while they enthusiastically heaved the box-spring onto the car roof that I noticed the nest of spiders in the lower right corner.

I have never seen spiders like this in New England. They were quarter-sized and inky black. I actually wondered if I had imported them from Australia last year upon our return — Australia being home to the world's most deadly spiders. Even more worrisome, they were skittering down the sides of the small car — already under assault from the massive box spring — and fanning out across my sidewalk. I screamed and did a panicky little jig. But the brother remained calm and brushed them off as they came out. The sister — the one-to-be-sleeping-on-the-box-spring — looked skeptical but resolute.

I fretted, "Are you sure you want to sleep on that? I'd feel awful if you got some rare spider bite. Maybe we should just haul it off to the dump."

But they convinced me that a few spiders were no big deal; that they'd probably blow off on the highway. I eyed two that had crawled into the car's interior dashboard. The sister whacked them with a rolled up magazine and gave me a promising smile. With that they rode off, box spring teetering on top and spiders trailing behind.

While that exchange was remarkable to me, my CD case offer proved that truly anything can find a home. My husband, in a fit of organization, emptied all of our CDs into one massive storage booklet. The remaining plastic jewel cases — with the band and lyric insets still in them — took up three huge trash bags. It felt like a long shot but I posted on freecycle. "Offer: 300 or so CD jewel cases with band insets still in them." I was mildly embarrassed that some stranger might witness the musical collection we'd accumulated over 15-plus years. We had good stuff but we also had bad, bad stuff. From old school rap to big hair 80s Christian music, from Michael Bolton to — and I cringe to type this — an aerobic exercise remix of The Phantom of the Opera, our musical history came with the deal.

Remarkably I had multiple inquiries for the old plastic cases. Really!? Why!? What could anyone possibly want with 300 empty CD cases? I'll never know. I gave them away to the first responder. He picked them up off my porch while I was running errands.

I have no idea if he'll make a collage out of the insets or perhaps melt the cases down into a fabulous sculpture and I don't really care. The beauty of freecycle is that once it's gone, once someone takes your plastic children's picnic table covered in butterfly stickers, or your five boxes of old Pet Fancy magazines, or, say, your spider infested box spring — it's gone. The burden on the landfills, and to our attics and basements, is reduced with nary a signal flag in sight.

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