Beyond Kiwanis: Internet builds new communities

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People shun clubs but use high-tech ways to connect

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VIENNA, Va. ï¿½ James Cudney manages three kids, frequent business trips and up to 15 homeland defense programs for a technology company. His wife, Elaine, works full-time at a top accounting firm and is active in a business club. He's a Cub Scout leader; she's the Scout pack treasurer. They go to church, attend community events and rarely miss school functions.

So forgive the Cudneys if they don't buy popular arguments that sprawl, mobility and the automobile have unraveled community bonds in American life. The Cudneys are as connected and engaged as they've ever been.

ï¿½But I would not be able to be involved if it wasn't for the Internet,ï¿½ says James Cudney, 41. ï¿½I wouldn't have been able to be the Cubmaster of Pack 152 without e-mail. I don't have time to do traditional phone trees and calendars by hand.ï¿½

Five years after sociologist Robert Putnam documented the decline of community involvement in his book Bowling Alone, a new spirit of civic engagement is flourishing, largely because of 21st-century technology. Cellphones, e-mails, instant text messaging and BlackBerries are helping mobile, busy Americans link up with neighbors on their commutes to work, in the middle of the night and on business trips.

ï¿½I was sitting in a hotel room in New York on a Sunday afternoon sending e-mails, having a real-time exchange, with (another parent and Cub leader), and he was in the

airport in Dallas,ï¿½ Cudney says. Issues were resolved without a meeting or even a phone call.

Technology, coupled with the rising number of families who have school-age children and retirees who have leisure time, is raising hopes that more Americans are again investing ï¿½social capital.ï¿½

ï¿½People are physically more connected to their community because of Internet use,ï¿½ says Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Internet & American Life Project, which researches the impact of the Internet on everything from families and communities to education, health care and politics. ï¿½People can give an increment of their time because the Internet is facilitating that.ï¿½

Civic participation is not creating more bowling leagues or boosting membership in traditional community groups such as the Lions Club or the Elks, whose numbers have dwindled for decades. Today's social capitalists are investing their time on their own terms.

ï¿½People are not members of the old hierarchy organizations,ï¿½ says Ronald Inglehart, professor at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research and president of the World Values Survey, which conducts surveys about social values and beliefs of people in several countries. ï¿½They have much looser ties but many more ties. Lots and lots of loose ties.ï¿½

Activists are using instant text-messaging to organize protests. MoveOn.org has become a big factor in liberal political organizing. So has MeetUp.com, which allows people to find others with common interests and then meet in person.

Many people don't get involved just to get involved. They often do it when they want to change something that affects them directly.

Stan Karson, a retiree in Arlington, Va., used to head a group that promotes corporate involvement in the community but never did much in his own community. Not until there was talk six years ago of building a high-rise condominium that would have obstructed views of the Washington skyline. Now, he's president of the RAFOM (Radnor/Fort Myer) civic association, which has become a potent political force in local planning and has an

active Internet network.

ï¿½You can't pick up the telephone and say, ï¿½Connect me with someone else who has a kid with leukemia,' ï¿½ says Howard Rheingold, author of The Virtual Community and Smart Mobs, books that document the global influence of the Internet and other technology on communities, political action and street demonstrations.

The Internet is ï¿½enabling people to connect with someone specifically in their neighborhood. ï¿½ It furnishes a kind of glue. People move from place to place and job to job, but they no longer need to lose touch.ï¿½

There are signs of civic engagement from:

ï¿½Kids and families. Children pull parents in to community activities. As school budgets tighten and extracurricular programs are slashed, parents are volunteering more time and money.

At Ocean Shores School in Pacifica, Calif., a kindergarten-eighth grade public school outside San Francisco, parents sign contracts vowing to contribute at least 95 volunteer hours every school year through the Parent Teacher Organization. They participate as classroom aides, help with after-school projects and special events and drive kids to field trips.

Parents' involvement is crucial in ï¿½low-wealthï¿½ school districts that are not poor enough to receive federal aid and not wealthy enough to count on generous donations and lucrative fundraisers, Principal Marc Lorenzen says.

The number of families with children under 18 rose by about 4 million to 36 million from 1990 to 2003, the Census Bureau says. Although the oldest baby boomers turn 59 this year, many had children later in life. About 15 million households of boomer parents still have school-age kids.

Sonita Stacker and her husband, Rick, didn't feel the need to get involved until they had two children. When their daughter was 18 months old and joined a tumbling class, they became active in their suburban community of Upper Marlboro, Md.

Sonita coached soccer for two years and created a network of friends through her kids' activities, from karate and flag football to peewee basketball. E-mails keep the connections alive. ï¿½We got the opportunity to meet other parents whose kids go to other schools,ï¿½ says Sonita, 40, a senior human resources specialist with the Treasury Department. ï¿½We would never meet them otherwise.ï¿½

ï¿½Community associations. Subdivisions are creating a form of community through homeowners' associations. In 1970, 2.1 million people lived in about 10,000 communities governed by associations, according to the Community Associations Institute in Alexandria, Va. Today, 54.6 million people live in 274,000 such communities. Many just pay dues. But in every community, somebody gets involved and serves on a board.

Jeff and Susan Sanders' Atlanta-area company, AtHomeNet, creates websites for homeowners' associations across the country. They started in 1998 and have 2,500 associations as clients. Their reach: more than 650,000 homes.

ï¿½It's a nice way for people to get a feel for their neighbors,ï¿½ Susan Sanders says. ï¿½People create little e-mail lists and get updates.ï¿½

When a major ice storm hit Pocono Pines, Pa., owners of vacation homes there who are scattered through the Northeast got instant damage reports and photos of their properties via their developments' websites. They also could check on retirees who live there year-round to make sure they were OK.

ï¿½Seniors. More than two of three Americans age 50 and older volunteered for an organized group in the past 12 months, according to an AARP report released this month. The elderly population in every state is expected to grow faster than the total population in the next 25 years.

ï¿½Megachurches. Between 1,250 and 1,500 churches attract 2,000 or more worshipers a week, almost double the number previously thought, according to research released this month by the Hartford Seminary's Institute for Religion Research.

Most megachurches cater not just to the spiritual needs of parishioners but to their desire for entertainment, companionship and community. They are generally racially and economically diverse.

ï¿½People drop out of religious life when they get out of high school and don't really come back until they get married and have children,ï¿½ says Scott Thumma, professor at the Hartford Seminary. ï¿½Megachurches are attracting some of those folks because they're not like their parents' religion. You don't have to sing 200-year-old hymns. You don't have to wear your Sunday best.ï¿½

Putnam says megachurches create a form of social connection by offering a multitude of smaller communities under one roof.

ï¿½The mountain bikers for God, the geeks for God, the small group for people who have breast cancer or whose spouses have breast cancer,ï¿½ Putnam says. ï¿½In the context of a very big organization, everybody feels connected to some very small group. If someone is sick, they'll bring them chicken soup. ï¿½ In some sense, they're replacing the Kiwanis.ï¿½

Volunteering is up among young people. Recent University of California surveys of college freshmen show a rising interest in politics, public life and citizenship for the first time in decades.

The 15-year-old Teach for America program is getting record applications from top college graduates willing to bypass jobs in law firms and Fortune 500 companies to spend two years teaching in low-income public schools. About 17,000 applied for 2,000 jobs this year, four times the number who tried in 2000.

Jeremy Robinson, 23, graduated from Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Ind., on a full-ride scholarship and was offered a job at Saks Fifth Avenue in New York.

ï¿½Taking that entry-level job so that you can get coffee for somebody a couple of years and maybe get a foothold to some track in higher management isn't all that appealing,ï¿½ he says.

He decided to join Teach for America and work with inner-city children at Harper High School in Chicago. Annual salary: $36,000.

It was ï¿½a way for me to have an immediate impact,ï¿½ Robinson says. ï¿½I know that

what I do every single day is valuable and meaningful, and that sustains me.ï¿½

In a sense, he's responding to Putnam's challenge in Bowling Alone: ï¿½Let us find ways to ensure that by 2010, Americans will spend less leisure time sitting passively alone in front of glowing screens and more time in active connection with our fellow citizens.ï¿½