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Tait on Eight: GozAround connects volunteers with those in need

BY CAM TAIT, EDMONTON SUN

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Let's call him Gentle Ben, an on-line social conscience.

Ben Block parked his four-year law career to start a new website which matches volunteers and community needs. GozAround.com entered the cyber world last summer when Ben saw community need.

"I decided there needed a better way of connecting volunteers," says Ben, a 35-year-old born and raised Edmontonian.

"We have Facebook for our social network and LinkedIn for our professional network.

"But we don't have anything for our community network."

Ben used his own resources to hire a developer to design the website before it was launched Aug. 20 of last year. In

December he started splitting his time between managing the website and his south side law practice.

Slowly and surely GozAround.com has gathered momentum. The website now has 1,300 volunteers signed up, 140 charities are listed and gets an average of 30,000 page views a month.

On May 1, Ben left his law practice to run GozAround.com on a full-time basis connecting people and needs.

"It takes a matter of seconds for a volunteer or someone with the need to create an account and sign up," says Ben.

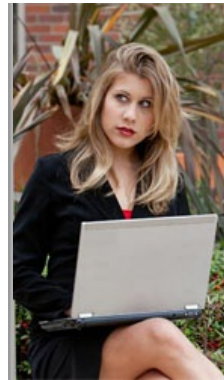
The results have been impressive.

A woman who was in an abusive relationship signed up. Her daughter's birthday was approaching and the mother expressed concern about hosting a birthday party.

"Someone saw it on GozAround.com," Ben says. "They baked a cake, bought balloons and took them down to the hotel to give the little girl a birthday."

And it works fast. Chrysalis is an agency which works with Albertans with disabilities and posted volunteer request.

"Two hours after the initial post, I saw on Twitter that the Chrysalis volunteer



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"We'd like to come up with a point system to let people know how much they volunteer. We want to make it a fun thing," says Ben.

Most of the matches have been in the Edmonton area. But with the wide cast of the internet, folks from Calgary, Ottawa and California has used GozAround.com.

Ben's eyes start to twinkle and then a wide smile crosses his face.

"I would like to see this thing go globally," he says.

"And with the power of the internet, it could."

Yes, indeed it could. But there's work to do.

The website has several advisors, including Dr. Bob Westbury who has decades of charitable and volunteer experience.

Ben says a few "angel investors" have recently stepped forward to help GozAround.com get to the next level.

Besides Ben, GozAround.com has two employees and one contract worker.

"We've set GozAround.com as a for-profit-business and we have every intention to make it that way," says Ben.

There's many ways to celebrate the work and vision of Ben.

He had first-hand experience of volunteering with the Canadian Diabetes Association, the Mustard Seed and others. He knows the power of on-line participation, and he has married them together.

In the end, the community will be richer for it. Ben says GozAround can help with the simplest of requests.

"If a senior needs a ride to a doctor's appointment, we can help," he says.

And with Seniors Week starting Monday, what a great idea.

(Cam Tait is the special advisor for Challenge Insurance.)

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