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Bridging the generation gap brings benefits on both sides

Matching homeless interns with older hosts can solve problems for both.
Mark Gould reports

Sarah-Jane Marshall was excited about leaving Nottingham to work as an unpaid intern in the Houses of Parliament. She had arranged accommodation through friends, but, at the last minute, it fell through.

"I was stumped, so I got in touch with several London churches to ask if they had any parishioners who had a spare room and needed help with babysitting or domestic chores."

Her saviour emerged in the shape of Norma Bailey, who had just been told by doctors that she was too unwell to live alone. The 22-year-old lived with the 91-year-old for ten months, paying £40-a-week rent for a room in exchange for doing the weekly shop, cleaning and anything else that Mrs Bailey couldn't manage.

They got on famously. Mrs Bailey was introduced to the internet, so that she could make phone calls to her sister in America. She had a trip to Westminster Abbey after Ms Marshall discovered that a famous seafaring ancestor, the wonderfully named Sir Cloudesely Shovell, was buried there.

The idea of a matching scheme that tackles the desperate problems of isolation and lack of accommodation is

so obvious that it's amazing it didn't materialise years ago. Now it has: the

French-born London School of Economics graduate Milena Bottero has come up with Room for Tea, which matches homeless interns with "hosts" — older people with rooms to spare.

She has approached old age support and social groups run by churches and local authorities to recruit hosts. She also wants to involve intern-hungry industries and is in talks with Google about covering the cost of finding accommodation and paying hosts rent.

It's not before time. There are, according to a Chartered Institute of Personnel Development survey, 250,000 mostly unpaid interns in the UK who are struggling to pay for accommodation while trying to gain valuable work experience.

Research published by the Intergenerational Foundation campaign group, which aims to bridge the age divide, reveals there are 25 million empty rooms in England.

Many of them are in properties owned by single older people in desperate need of companionship. The charity Age UK estimates that one in ten older people suffers from loneliness so

intense that it is a serious health problem.

Interns will pay a yet-to-be-decided registration fee to be entered on to the Room for Tea website, where they and hosts can browse to find a match.

Employers will be asked to provide references confirming the applicants' intern status and that they normally reside outside London. Room for Tea then interviews both intern and host to ensure suitability.

"We are not going to offer rooms to people who want to party. And the fact

that we are vetting both sides means parents will also be reassured that their kids are staying with someone safe," Ms Bottero said.

She hopes to launch Room for Tea in April. In return for a rent of no more than £350 per month, interns will pledge ten hours of help a week —

anything from cooking a meal to mowing the lawn or helping with domestic chores. Or simply having a chat.

"We don't want people to think that is just a way of offering old people help — it goes both ways. Interns get an affordable room, but they will also be new to London so their hosts will be

able to offer their advice and knowledge.”

Room for Tea was developed in partnership with the design think-tank Future Gov with the help of an £87,000 award from the Keeping Connected Business Challenge — a competition set by the Design Council and the Technology Strategy Board to develop services to help older adults to stay connected.

Ms Bottero, 23, knows the problems interns face, having been an unpaid intern at an “environmental organisation” for five months. She had to take on a second job two days a week to pay bills. She borrowed the idea from *Parisolidaire*, which was set up in the

‘We are not going to offer rooms to people who want to party’

French capital in 2004. The scheme, run like Room for Tea as a not-for-profit company, has more than 1,600 successful *cohabitations*.

The former Labour cabinet minister Hazel Blears, who is campaigning for interns to be paid the minimum wage, has praised Room for Tea. She also backs the Parliamentary Placement Scheme, which offers internships and accommodation to people from disadvantaged backgrounds who would not normally get a chance to work for an MP.

The scheme, run by the Social Mobility Foundation, was launched last year with £200,000 of corporate sponsorship, which paid for ten interns aged from 20 to 55 to work for four days a week for an MP and one day in various departments of the House of Commons.

According to the foundation’s chief executive David Johnston: “Interns need cheap accommodation and it’s great for the people that host them.” His one caveat is that after a long working day, interns would not be expected to start “working” when they arrived home.

Ms Marshall says her experience was “fantastic... A lot of other interns were so jealous that I was in zone one and they were paying so much to travel.”

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER, PETER NICHOLLS



Milena Bottero, left, hopes to build on the experiences of Sarah-Jane Marshall