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POLITICS/ELECTIONS

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DEATHS

OPINIONS

COLUMNISTS

BLOGS

ENTERTAINMENT

TRAVEL

LIVING

LIGHTER SIDE

VIDEO/PHOTOS

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CARS

JOBS

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MORE CLASSIFIEDS

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Web networks add to neighborhood connections

By Erin Brereton | Special to the Tribune

Living in Springfield during the week and his new River North condo on the weekend, Ted Constan, 28, found it hard to make friends.

He signed up with MeetTheNeighbors.org, a neighborhood-based social networking Web site, in early 2005—but didn't meet many new acquaintances.

After setting up his MeetTheNeighbors account, Constan tried another, more general site—Yelp.com, an online community where users in cities such as Chicago and Boston post reviews of local businesses and ask each other advice.

Constan was considering joining a kickball team through a league but decided instead to respond to a Yelp member's post soliciting new players.

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"The fact that I knew some of these people via their reviews and contributions in the [Yelp] forums, I felt it would be good to meet them in person," he says.

The team led to a number of new friendships. Constan and other members now get together regularly on the weekends, attend parties together and meet for lunch.

Sites such as MeetTheNeighbors and i-neighbors.org are free to use and allow residents to create or join groups for neighborhoods like Roscoe Village or specific high-rise buildings. The sites offer a forum for users to discuss community news, plan block parties, offer local restaurant recommendations and more—if enough residents sign up.

According to New York-based founder Jared Nissim, 35,

MeetTheNeighbors originally promoted itself though Craigslist.com ads. It now relies on users to spread the word with fliers they can download and print from the site.

"We do the best we can to give people the tools to [promote the site] themselves," Nissim says. "But it doesn't happen unless someone on the ground says, 'I will put some energy into trying to make this happen.'"

For safety, MeetTheNeighbors asks users to keep their last name and unit number private. The primary contact for a neighborhood is responsible for additional security measures. "That person has the ability to remove people who don't belong [on the site]," Nissim says.

David Kadavy, a 29-year-old Web designer, also used Yelp to find new Chicago acquaintances.

While living in San Francisco, Kadavy created a recurring free event called Flatmate Meetup to connect potential roommates.

Before moving from San Francisco to Chicago in July, he planned a similar event in Chicago to locate a place to live—and asked for venue suggestions on Yelp.

The gathering helped Kadavy find a three-month, short-term lease in the West Ukrainian

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Village/Humboldt Park area.

"I got a feel for the neighborhood, and where I wanted to live later," says Kadavy, who now lives in [Wicker Park](#).

Some Chicago community groups also are utilizing social networking sites to recruit new members and publicize events.

Youth for Positive Neighborhood Development, a community-based organization working to prevent school violence, added a Facebook.com profile in 2007.

"Students are already on [Facebook](#) and [MySpace](#) .com," says YPND Communications Specialist and Youth Organizer Samuel Ryan, 20. "It's part of their life, so it's a lot easier to get students engaged."

YPND, which currently works with the Centers for New Horizons, a Bronzeville social-service agency, used Facebook to promote a 2008 peace march and rally on May 31, attended by 45 to 50 students, Ryan says.

"[Facebook] really makes our life easier," he says. "Student leaders could just invite people, which quickly populated the turnout."

Social networking sites only work if they attract enough users. With plenty of sites to choose from, competition is tough—which may be hurting neighborhood-centric sites that aren't as well known as Facebook or MySpace.com.

In addition, it can be a challenge for neighborhood-based sites to stay current because users often move, making neighborhood contacts obsolete.

"A lot of people in Chicago live in [River North](#) one year, [Bucktown](#) the next and move to [Wrigleyville](#)," Constan says.

However social networking sites can help residents find activities, a place to live, or expand their group of friends.

"Once you open up the lines of communication between neighbors, anything goes," Nissim says. "It can transform a building from a place where people don't know their next door neighbors to a place where people have a specific community."

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