

Shining a light on the Clothes Closet ? one of Aurora's best-kept secrets



By Brock Weir

Consider for a moment how good you feel getting dressed and looking good for a party around this time of year. Now consider how good you might feel helping others have the same feeling.

That is a feeling driving volunteers at Aurora's Clothes Closet, perhaps one of the Town's best-kept secrets. But a new partnership with a local clothier could help shine a light on that secret to a much wider audience.

The volunteer-run clothes shop, which is based out of the basement of Trinity Anglican Church on Victoria Street, re-sales donated clothing to the community at accessible prices. Proceeds from the sale goes right back into grocery cards, bus tickets and toiletries for organizations such as the ecumenical Welcoming Arms.

One such volunteer is Deb Clark, owner of Oakridge Outfitters. With a donation of some stylish winter clothes, blouses and other garments last week, Ms. Clark got the ball rolling on what she and the Clothes Closet hope will be an enduring new partnership. "This is to mark the beginning," says Ms. Clark. "Our businesses align and we saw opportunities where we might be able to support them from store fixtures, to bags, to donations. When it makes sense [we can] reach out to invite people to become more involved or to support them by bringing in garments that are in need."

The Clothes Closet is, in a way, responsible for bringing Ms. Clark to Oakridge Outfitters. She began volunteering at the Clothes Closet when she was looking for a change in her own professional life. Not satisfied with her then-current career, one of her fellow volunteers noted her passion and suggested she buy Oakridge Outfitters. In less than a week, the ink was dry.

"I knew one [business] was connected to the other, so I saw all kinds of reasons why that connection might continue," says Ms. Clark. "In this business, I am all the time in retail supply locations across the city and all the time where I am in a position where I might find value in some goods or be able to work inventory through my own business in such a way that can benefit as donations to the Clothes Closet. It all made sense to me. There are many people who make the Clothes Closet work well. I am just one more coming along and helping."

One such person who makes the Clothes Closet work so well is coordinator Diane Legault. On hand to receive Ms. Clark's donations last week, she welcomed the new partnership.

A volunteer with the Clothes Closet for just over two years, Ms. Legault says she became involved after looking for a way to get involved with her community. Her mother, when living in Ottawa, volunteered for a similar group for over 30 years and the possibility of following in her footsteps in York Region seemed like a good fit.

About six months into her volunteer work, the incumbent coordinator stepped down and after Ms. Legault found herself asking a lot of questions at their next meeting, she was suggested as their next coordinator.

"We try not to charge too much," says Ms. Legault. "We wouldn't charge \$40 for a coat because the people coming into our place aren't looking to spend that kind of money. The money we might charge for a good coat might be \$15. People can get really good buys if they are interested in picking through things! We get a lot of things that are still new and price-tagged and some things coming in that are in used and good condition. We have things that are coming in that people have bought and have never work, and

they're very pricy ? and we might sell them for seven or eight dollars.?

Adds Ms. Clark: ?It is a really important service, as well as for fundraising in this community since Goodwill is now gone. Within Aurora, it is an important location for many people. I have only been involved with the Clothes Closet for just over a year now, but it is quite interesting to see how many people are regular shoppers. It fits their budget, it fits their needs, and they are able to clothe themselves, their children and their family well.?

Diane agrees, noting that it is fun place to volunteer not only because of the volunteer base, but because of the regular customers who come in. You get to know them, their needs, and their tastes, and it is quite rewarding. While they have a full stock of clothing right now and aren't in immediate need of donations, more helping hands are always needed and appreciated ? even if it is ?someone who wants to come in once a month and help,? says Ms. Legault.

?There are different opportunities, whether people who just sort the clothes and people who work in the store,? she says. ?We're a fun group.?

When asked what makes the ideal Clothes Closet volunteer Ms. Clark jokes, ?One who doesn't take all the good clothes!? but says the actual answer is anyone who is interested in helping out the women who volunteer there ? and it is mostly women.

?If you enjoy clothing and getting dressed up, just imagine how great it is to be able to help a woman with a different budget put together a few pieces that work and send her on her way feeling great too,? says Deb. ?It's knowing that you have been able to be of help, it's a connection with women. They are enjoying that outing [shopping for themselves and their families], and they are enjoying finding quality and value all together. When you can be a part of helping make that happen, it is a happy occasion.?

The Clothes Closet is open Monday through Saturday from 9.30 a.m. to 11.30 a.m., with extended hours to 2.30 on Thursdays. They will be closed for the holidays from December 22 until January 2. For more information, call 905-727-6101.