



Shopping for a cause

Some nonprofits support their efforts by running thrift stores

By BERNADETTE STARZEE

Last month, the Barkin' Basement Thrift Shop celebrated its grand opening in Port Jefferson. The 300-square-foot store, which is not actually in a basement, sells gently used furniture, home accessories, clothing, bric-a-brac and other donated items, and is operated by Save-A-Pet, an animal rescue and adoption center in Port Jefferson Station.

Save-A-Pet knows from experience how a retail store in a high-traffic location can help its bottom line while getting the word out about its mission. In May 2009, the organization opened its first store, Castaways, also in the heart of the bustling village. Castaways enjoyed a profitable first year, according to Dori Scofield, president and founder of Save-A-Pet.

"We have been trying to think of different ways to generate revenue, since relying on donations is not working out too well in this economy," Scofield said. In addition to selling merchandise like T-shirts and refrigerator magnets that contain messages about

animal rescue, as well as pet supplies such as gourmet biscuits, toys and leashes, Castaways always has a few cats and dogs on hand that are available for adoption. "People feel good about buying something from the store, and it allows us to talk to a greater number of people about animal rescue," Scofield said.

The "feel-good" factor of helping a good cause, along with the opportunity to snag a good deal, are powerful draws for thrift shops, making them successful ventures for several Long Island nonprofits. But operating a retail business is not without challenges.



As with any other retail business, location is vital to a thrift store's success. When it moved from an out-of-the-way spot in Wainscott to a prime shopping center in the heart of Bridgehampton last year, The Retreat Boutique went from "barely breaking even" to being a major source of income for The Retreat, an East Hampton-based organization that provides shelter and services to victims of domestic violence.

"It's true what they say, that a location makes a business," said Jeffrey Friedman, executive director of The Retreat. Located in an 1,800-square-foot store in Bridgehampton Commons, the boutique benefits from foot traffic from neighboring stores that include King Kullen, T.J. Maxx and Panera

Bread.

According to Friedman, The Retreat Boutique has also benefitted from a “tremendous discount on rent” from its landlord, Kimco Realty. “We approached them and they were open to making something work with us,” Friedman said. After The Retreat Boutique moved into a store that had been vacant, Staples was interested in occupying the space. “Kimco found another space in the center for us,” Friedman said. “They have been very generous and committed to us.” Friedman added that the store gives back in its own way by bringing foot traffic from its loyal supporters to the shopping center.

When Save-A-Pet was looking to open its first store, Scofield searched for a donor that would provide discounted rent, but to no avail. However, she noted, while the rents in Port Jefferson are high, it’s worth it to be in a location with a heavy concentration of shoppers.

Options for Community Living Inc., a Smithtown-based nonprofit servicing Long Islanders grappling with mental illness, HIV/AIDS and/or homelessness, opened the Options Thrift Shop in Lake Ronkonkoma’s business district nearly 20 years ago.

In 2005 and 2006, the store earned profits in the neighborhood of \$14,000 per year, according to Diana Arens, executive director of the organization. The store has been closed since suffering a fire in 2007, but it is expected to reopen in the early fall, with new sidewalks that should

make it more inviting to walkers, Arens said.



The nonprofits interviewed for this story have enjoyed a steady stream of donated merchandise to offer for sale. “People love to donate things to a good cause, and it’s a way for them to recycle,” Arens said. “We’re anxious to get back in there. We had about 30 customers a day, and the community relied on the store for low-cost items like back-to-school supplies, clothing and baby items.”

When the newly renovated Options Thrift Shop opens, Arens said she wants to develop some specialty items and perhaps create a corner for designer items that will carry higher price tags. “I want to be more strategic with how we stock our inventory,” she said.

Its location in the tony Hamptons area has helped The Retreat Boutique acquire high-end merchandise, including one-of-a-kind furniture pieces and designer clothing, jewelry and shoes. “People notify us when they’re having an estate sale, and they often donate some pretty unique items,” Friedman said. “Especially with the downturn in the economy, people are looking to get a great deal.”

A great deal does not necessarily mean

low prices. For instance, according to Friedman, The Retreat Boutique may sell a gently used \$5,000 sectional sofa for \$1,000, or designer shoes that originally cost \$700 for \$150. “We received a donation of beautiful statues which are worth about \$15,000, and we’re offering them for \$5,000,” he said. But there are also plenty of lower-priced items, like designer blouses for \$10.

“With the following we have, people know they can come back every week and find new things,” Friedman said. “We get donations every day.”

According to Scofield, prices at the Barkin’ Basement are kept low to keep the merchandise fresh. “We don’t want people to come in the next week and see the same stuff on the shelves,” she said. “We use a yard-sale mentality to price our items.”

Sometimes, the stores get too much inventory or the wrong type of donations. To clear out excess inventory, the Options Thrift Shop would occasionally have a bag sale, in which people could stuff a bag for a set dollar amount, such as \$5 or \$10. The Retreat Boutique has a relationship with other nonprofits, to whom it passes along donated items that are not appropriate for its store or for its clients.



Launching a new store takes a lot of time. “The initial set-up consumed

me,” Scofield said of Save-A-Pet’s two stores. But once the stores are up and running, they are often operated mostly by volunteers.

The Retreat Boutique, for instance, has three paid staff members in addition to about 12 volunteers. “We have a small staff of volunteers who are very committed to helping us out,” Friedman said. “At times when the store is crowded, handling the volume is a challenge for us – but that’s a good problem to have.”

Save-A-Pet’s stores are manned mostly by volunteers, as well. “We couldn’t do what we do without our committed volunteers,” Scofield said, noting that the organization is always on the lookout for more like them. “Finding quality volunteers who follow through and are consistent is difficult,” Scofield said, noting it’s especially challenging to get volunteer help on weekends.

When the Options Thrift Shop was open, it had a steady stream of long-term volunteers from a nearby parish, many of whom are eager to get back, Arens said. The shop was also staffed by Options residents with mental illness. “The volunteers got to know our residents, and they like them,” Arens said.

To design and stock Save-A-Pet’s new stores, a core of committed volunteers rolled up their sleeves along with Scofield. “When you have like-minded individuals with a shared passion pitching in, you can get a lot done,” she said.