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Posted on Wed, Sep. 30, 2009

Mirror, Mirror: A resale boutique when and where it's needed



By Elizabeth Wellington

Fashion Columnist

There is little need to wander around Spring Garden Street just west of Broad. This is a neighborhood you hustle through, double-parking to drop in and out of pizza joints, Dunkin' Donuts, and Saladworks.

Still, Sheri Cole opened her 5,000-square-foot women's resale store, the Wardrobe Boutique, at the unlikely intersection of Spring Garden and 19th Streets this month. The executive director of Career Wardrobe - the local nonprofit well known for providing appropriate clothes for women transitioning from welfare to work - thought it was a good time to expand its offerings to anyone looking for fashion bargains.

After all, her 10 years of experience collecting bags of suitable suits in a variety of sizes by a bevy of designers showed Cole that not all donated outfits work for her target clientele all of the time.

For example, she says, she can't give a spring suit to a woman who needs an outfit, like, tomorrow. But she can sell a trendy warm-weather piece to a working woman trying to pinch her pennies.

"If it's appropriate right now then we *give* it to our clients right now," Cole said, making it clear that Career Wardrobe's top priority is to continue helping nearly 7,000 women secure free back-to-work ensembles, as it has done for 15 years.

"But we get a lot of clothes that aren't in demand right now or things that may be too casual for interviews, so we figure why not sell them. . . . We aren't going to turn a huge profit, but we hope this helps with our cash flow."

So far, so good. In its first week, the Wardrobe Boutique brought in \$3,500 in sales, Cole said. That's pretty significant for a store that sells clothes way below market value. A Dana Buchman

suit - gently worn - that sells new for a couple of hundred dollars in regular retail stores is available at the Wardrobe Boutique for \$60.

The goal is to make \$100,000 to \$150,000 in sales a year. All of the proceeds will go toward paying for salaries, operating costs, and training programs that Career Wardrobe clients get for free, Cole said.

Until now, Career Wardrobe kept its clothing collection in its office at 12th and Chestnut Streets, but the only women who shopped there were participants in the nonprofit program. By opening the Wardrobe Boutique, Career Wardrobe gets higher visibility and expands its message to those women who already may have jobs but still need help with their professional attire. The store also helps market the need for donations and is an additional drop-off point.

The store opened Sept. 17 to a bit of fanfare with four opening parties held for business partners, donors, and the residents of the Art Museum neighborhood. Anchorwomen at nearby CBS3 had their own special day to shop. (Chunky jewelry, donated by Joan Rivers' jewelry company, turned out to be a big hit.) Mayor Nutter and Citizens Bank president Dan Fitzpatrick attended the ribbon-cutting on grand-opening night.

As for its location, signs point to the positive.

Seven mannequins, all donated by the Eileen Fisher apparel company and clad in classic Chanel tweed jackets and tailored Hervé Bernard pantsuits, lure in about a dozen shoppers a day. Many of these women are on their way to government jobs or classes at nearby Community College of Philadelphia. High school students from Masterman also have come in to check out the place.

"One of our goals is to be in an area that was being revitalized and to be part of that," Cole said of the area, where Center City blends into North Philadelphia. The boutique is not far from a stop on the C bus route, which runs from North to South Philly along Broad Street. "We see part of our audience as being students and any woman who needs to shop on a limited income."

And that's really all of us at the moment, isn't it?

Bad sales in the high-end sector have translated to good news in the resale world. According to data from the Michigan-based National Association of Retail and Thrift Shops, 64 percent of resale shops have seen a 31 percent increase in sales from the second quarter in 2008 to the same period this year. The association also reports that 78 percent of stores saw an increase in new customers in the second quarter this year compared to last year.

"The resale industry is flourishing during this economic crunch," said Adele R. Meyer, executive director of the association. "We are experiencing more of a need for it than ever before."

The Wardrobe Boutique - based largely on a concept store created by the national nonprofit coalition Women's Alliance, where Cole served on the board - has two full-time employees, including a former Career Wardrobe client. Eventually, Cole wants the store to serve as a training ground for women who want a career in fashion retail.

On a recent trip to the Wardrobe Boutique, it was the shoes that first caught my attention as I repeatedly returned to a pair of red patent-leather peep-toes that were too big for me. A teeny, tiny Diane von Furstenberg wrap was my style, but it would barely fit my pinky. Just my luck.

That's not to say there wasn't a lot of variety in size and style - the boutique includes both a plus-size section and one where high-end designers are housed.

However, as with all resale/consignment shopping, you can't sit on your find. That perfect piece that fits you today may not be there the next day, or the next hour even - so you buy it or lose it.


And that need-to-commit reality is why resale works, no matter what neighborhood it's in.

The Wardrobe Boutique is located at 1822 Spring Garden St. Store hours are 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays. Call 215-568-2660 or go to www.careerwardrobe.org.

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