

# Aspen Daily News

Published on Aspen Daily News Online (<http://www.aspendailynews.com>)

Getting thrifty with it

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Celebrating 65 years, the Thrift Shop of Aspen is a recycling center that pays

During a bustling morning a week before Christmas at the Thrift Shop of Aspen, a customer was eyeing an ornament to buy, and that's when the price negotiation began at the counter — "That's a Baccarat, so it's \$25," announced volunteer Judy Schramm.

Although the price was too steep for the gentleman, the item was likely snapped up quickly since Baccarat Christmas ornaments are priced at \$100 and up.

Hand-me-downs take on a whole new meaning at the Thrift Shop of Aspen, where for more than six decades an army of volunteers known as "the ladies of the thrift shop" have sorted through hundreds of thousands of items donated by locals and second homeowners. Whether it's clothing, housewares, books, art, toys, lawn furniture — you name it — the thrift shop has it all.

"I feel like we are the department store for Aspen," said volunteer Lynda MacCarthy, who also serves as the treasurer on the nonprofit's board of directors. "You can buy anything here."

The real treasures might not make it to the floor of the thrift shop, since their value can reach into the hundreds, or thousands of dollars. Those gems are typically sold off premises.

For instance, a volunteer came across a first-edition copy of author Ken Kesey's "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," with the editor's notes marked up inside. It is currently with a book dealer in Carbondale, and it's estimated to be worth between \$5,000 and \$8,000.

Board co-president Diane Wallace recalled a painting that was donated. The volunteer who handled it thought it was valuable so she went to a local art gallery and the representative there said he had sold that piece previously. He sold it again and split the proceeds with the thrift shop.

Wallace also noted the \$150 she found once in a Fendi bag. MacCarthy said another time a volunteer discovered two diamond earrings and rings in a pair of boots. When no one answered an ad placed in the newspaper seeking the rightful owner, the jewelry was appraised and sold.

Board secretary Ellen Walbert said there was an instance in which someone had dropped off some Louis Vuitton bags. The volunteers debated about whether they were real or not, so they went to the local retail store and found out that not only were they real but that they were part that year's collection, and subsequently worth hundreds of dollars.

While those discoveries are frequent, the day-to-day donations come in the form of bags of clothing and other miscellaneous items that can reach into the thousands each day. The volunteers sort through them,

decide what's sellable and offer them to shoppers at affordable prices.

This year, the thrift shop doled out close to a half million dollars of its proceeds to community organizations and local students for college scholarships. The thrift shop's total contributions this year were \$487,895, distributed to over 100 local nonprofits and nine students in the Roaring Fork Valley. College scholarships alone accounted for \$50,000 this year, and hundreds of items are donated in-kind to various organizations.

"The only way that we can stay in business is because of the generosity of the community," said MacCarthy, adding that \$3.5 million has been raised in the past 15 years. "It's such a heartening thing that it all goes back into the community."

### Celebrating 65 years in 2014

Charitable giving is the foundation on which the thrift shop was established in 1949 by a small group of Aspenites looking to raise money for what was then called "Citizens Hospital," located at the base of Red Mountain in an old Victorian house.

The thrift shop raised under \$1,000 the first year in an effort to hire a third nurse and build a third floor. The thrift shop eventually branched out, and began funding other community causes, like the Red Brick School that now houses the Red Brick Center for the Arts. The thrift shop was instrumental in starting the first kindergarten and the first hot lunch program for the local school. For many years, it supported only the hospital and the school but eventually the thrift shop began to support the local ski club and other nonprofits.

The thrift shop was first located on East Hopkins Avenue across the street from the present location. As business grew, the store hopped around town — in the Armory (now City Hall), and then for years at the Wheeler Opera House near the alley. The store has been in its current location between the fire station and Peaches Cafe since 1983. It temporarily moved while the fire station and thrift shop were being rebuilt a few years ago. The nonprofit pays \$10 a year in rent to the Aspen Fire Protection District.

Before the new building, longtime board member and volunteer Carolyn Moore recalled that the old store was so small that they used to have meetings in the bathroom.

"You can think in the bathroom," Wallace joked.

Moore, who has volunteered at the thrift shop since the 1970s, said in the early years the operation needed three volunteers a day. Now, the store has 10 working every day.

While the board has kept up with the growth by bringing in more volunteers and managing far more money than it ever has, it has largely remained the same.

"We've tried not to change a lot," Wallace said. "We try to be horizontal."

### Making the magic happen

There are more than 100 volunteers who work one shift every other week, and the store could use more — especially young women, said Walbert, adding the youngest volunteer is in her mid 40s.

"The magic of the thrift shop is that there are 128 of us and we all think we are right," Walbert joked, noting that the organization, the store and its people are all part of an organic recipe that works.

And no one is in charge, MacCarthy offered.

“It’s on the honor system. ... All of our volunteers are honest,” she said. “When we find something, we want to brag about it, not steal it.”

The women volunteers — there are no men — consider themselves to be a family, and look forward to their day of work with each other.

“My day is better than your day,” Walbert pointed out to MacCarthy and Wallace during a recent meeting this month. “Every day has its own personality.”

Sisters Polly Whitcomb and Marcy Balderson have volunteered on the same day for 30 years.

“We can catch up” with each other, Whitcomb said one day last week when she and Balderson hauled bags in from the alley and sorted through the donations in the back of the store.

An organic organization from start to finish

Because of the volume that comes in daily, it’s up to the volunteers sorting in the back of the house to decide whether items are worth putting on the floor. Inventory gets winnowed at the whim of volunteers. Not every piece gets tagged, so the price of any item is up to the cashiers in the front, based off a basic pricing list.

“We wing it,” Moore said with a smile.

Perhaps the most formal aspect of the organization is the distribution of the grants. Nonprofits apply for a grant online and then the request is vetted by the thrift shop’s grants committee. Once a month the committee and board members meet on the third floor of the Elk’s Club and representatives from nonprofits seeking money give a presentation. Money is doled out each month.

“It’s so democratic,” Walbert said. “Anyone who shows up gets to vote.”

Anna Wille, a 20-year-old Colorado State University sophomore and an Aspen native, is the recipient of the thrift shop’s good will. She received a \$5,000 scholarship to pay tuition for two semesters. She didn’t find out she had gotten the scholarship until her high school graduation ceremony.

“It was a huge honor,” she said, adding she is studying biology and hopes to be a doctor. “Obviously, it was a huge chunk of change. ... This helps me get there so much more.”

Aspen’s first recycling center

When the thrift shop began 65 years ago, it was as close to a recycling center as one could get in those days. Volunteers today say that because of the no hassles drop-off system and the generosity of the community, tons of material has been diverted from the landfill.

“We’ve been recycling before anyone ever knew what it was,” Walbert said.

Because of the volume that comes into the thrift shop, they can’t take all of it. About half of what’s donated locally goes to a recycling management company in Denver called Cycla LLC, where it’s used in various ways.

Moore said everything that’s done at the thrift shop is done in equal parts and because of that, it runs

effectively and efficiently.

“I think the federal government could take a lesson from us,” she said.

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Polly Whitcomb sorts donated clothes in the back room of the Thrift Shop of Aspen on Wednesday

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