

Giving back by giving time at the Aspen Thrift Shop

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There are few Aspen businesses that have truly stood the test of time. The Aspen Thrift Shop, founded in 1949, is one of them.

"We like to think of the Thrift Shop as an Aspen institution," said Ellen Walbert, co-president of the board of directors. "It's one of those unique places that's always busy, probably because of what we offer and what we represent."

Indeed, the reason for the shop's longevity is likely the reason the shop exists at all: to give back to the community. All proceeds from sales at the Aspen Thrift Shop are funneled right back into the Roaring Fork Valley community.

Over the years, the Thrift Shop has given hundreds of thousands of dollars to local nonprofit organizations and Roaring Fork Valley high school students in the form of scholarships. Just this year, \$600,000 will likely be distributed.

"It's always impressive to see how much we are able to give back," said Diane Wallace, co-president with Walbert. "And we are so happy to be able to do this year after year."

But it takes a cadre of volunteers to make this formula work. The Aspen Thrift Shop, since its beginning, has operated with a solely volunteer staff.

Now, the ladies of the Aspen Thrift Shop — yes, only women are accepted as volunteers (though plenty of men pitch in with the heavy lifting and other tasks) — need more woman-power.

"The bottom line is we need more volunteers," Walbert said. "We haven't really had to put out an all-call for more help, but we now need to spread the word."

Toward this end, the Thrift Shop is holding its first-ever "official" volunteer recruitment event — an open house Thursday evening.

"We're hoping to have some fun, show the community what being a Thrift Shop volunteer is all about," said Wallace, noting that interested women need not attend the event to become a volunteer. Applications are accepted online, or just stop by and give it a try. "If you have a friend who volunteers, come try it out with her. Or, grab a friend and come together."

"Just spend a few hours with us and you'll see it's really so fun. The best job you'll ever have."

With 10 volunteers on duty at any given time, there are plenty of ways to help out. Among the jobs to be tackled: sorting donations, manning the cash register, styling the displays and windows, returning merchandise to the racks, helping customers and much more.

"We definitely try to offer volunteers jobs they like or have some expertise in," Walbert said.

And while all agree "working" at the Thrift Shop is great fun — volunteers are asked to commit to at least two shifts per month; available shifts are 9 a.m to 3 p.m., every day except Sunday — the current pool of volunteers just can't cover the demand.

Walbert said the sheer volume of donations has increased dramatically in recent years, as have the number of shoppers. And the seasoned volunteer staff is beginning to move in different directions as retirees choose to travel more, move away to be with family and other things.

"Not only do we need more women, we need more women from different demographics," she said, adding the target audience for new volunteers are women with time to give and a commitment to the community; mothers with school-aged children, young professionals and part-time residents. "The more diverse we can be, the better. It adds to the community focus to have a volunteer pool that mimics the community."

And since the gig is volunteer, there is some flexibility. If someone can't make their shift, they call on others to cover. The hope with the recruitment open house is to grow that pool so the Aspen Thrift Shop remains the iconic business it is today.

"We are ambassadors for Aspen in many ways," said Wallace, pointing out that the Thrift Shop's clientele ranges from locals to visitors to second-home owners, many of whom don't realize the money they are spending is going right back into the community until one of the ladies shares the shop's mission with them "So giving time by volunteering here is, in essence, giving back to the entire community."

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