

## Seven decades of Aspen Thrift Shop magic

Chapman Croskell, Aspen Daily News Staff Writer Feb 10, 2019



The Aspen Thrift Shop is always buzzing with activity from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily with an endless supply of donated goods coming in the backdoor and sold out the front.

Craig Turpin/Aspen Daily News

Everyone who has lived in Aspen for a while has probably heard it at least once:

“Hey, where did you get that cool item?”

“The thrift shop! It was so cheap!”

It's hard to believe locals have been saying it for 70 years.

The history of the Aspen Thrift Shop dates back to 1949, when it was established to help support nurses who were living and working in the “citizens' hospital,” based out of a home at the base of Red Mountain. According to the website for the shop, it helped the Red Brick school, which now houses the Red Brick Center for the Arts, and also helped to start the first kindergarten in Aspen.

Eventually, the thrift shop began supporting the Aspen Ski Club and it has now become one of the biggest sources of grants and scholarships in the Roaring Fork Valley.

The shop has been located in many buildings over its 70 years, including the armory that's now home to city hall and the Wheeler Opera House. The current location next to the fire



Aspen Thrift Shop co-president Ellen Walbert and fellow volunteer Lynda McCarthy pose for a picture during a shift at the store Thursday morning.  
Craig Turpin/Aspen Daily News

station started in 1983, and was only displaced when the fire station was upgraded and rebuilt, with a new space for the thrift shop.



"We can do it!"



One of the many things that makes the Aspen Thrift Shop unique is its all-women, all-volunteer staff. Ellen Walbert and Diane Wallace, the shop's co-presidents, said that the staff of women is a longtime tradition that just stuck. Walbert and Wallace, who are both celebrating 20 years volunteering with the shop, said that women were the ones who had the time during the day to volunteer during the mid-20th century.

"They had the time and the desire to do it," Walbert said. She added, laughing: "I don't think any of [the men] want to work that hard. They're afraid of us. We're OK with that."



Volunteers spend most mornings sorting through donated goods. The thrift shop is not a recycle center; items that are not salable are shipped off site at the thrift shop's expense, cutting into funds donated to community causes.

Craig Turpin/Aspen Daily News

Another unique aspect of the shop that has roots in its history is its hours. The shop closes at 3 p.m. every day, and Wallace said this is likely because the women who originally ran the shop had to go pick up the children from school after volunteering. The tradition has stuck around mainly because of the amount of work the 140 or so volunteers, who have two shifts a month, have each morning going through the large quantities of donations the shop gets daily. However, the shop is open from 4:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. the first Tuesday of every month, and is run by a special group of workers, which the co-presidents said is made up of mainly legacy volunteers.

"Every day is a little different," Wallace said. "Everybody rolls differently on their day. Call it thrift shop magic."

This idea of "thrift shop magic" is something that keeps coming up. It sometimes seems to refer to the shop's ability to give people exactly what they need, like the volunteer who found a medical device her daughter needed in the donations one morning. Other times, it has more to do with what the shop gives back to its community.

## Giving back

In addition to the many great deals that can be found in the walls of the Aspen Thrift Shop, the organization also gives back over 80 percent of its profits in the form of grants and scholarships. That amounted to more than \$600,000 in 2017. The list of grant recipients includes over 200 nonprofits ranging from education groups and the arts to environmental and community supporters. The shop also gives out \$75,000 in scholarships to graduating Aspen, Basalt and Roaring Fork High School students each spring.



A well-worn tennis racquet awaits pickup and sorting in the backroom receiving area by the staff at the Aspen Thrift Shop on a recent morning.  
Craig Turpin/Aspen Daily News

"The community is so incredibly generous," said Walbert. Wallace added, "We try and take care of people who need it."

When an apartment building in Basalt flooded in October, the shop allowed those affected to come and take what they needed. The shop will also donate children's books to schools and offer other in-kind donations. In addition, the shop has an art sale in July hosted by the Red Brick Center. The co-presidents said that people will line up for the sale, which has "art for everybody, whatever you can afford."

## The big seven-oh

Anyone who is expecting the Aspen Thrift Shop to throw a big party for its 70th birthday has missed the point of the shop's goals entirely. Instead, the ladies at the shop are trying to raise awareness of the shop and get more women involved, especially younger women.

"We'd love to have a party, but we'd rather spend that money on another grant," Walbert said. "We want to dispel the myth that we're crabby old ladies."

Both Walbert and Wallace said that they'd like to get more young women working in the shop, to bring new ideas and help the shop secure its sustainability. Although they don't know the median age of the current volunteers, the two pointed out that a general fear of getting credit card readers might be an indication.



To help with promotion, the shop will be hosting a “bag sale,” which reaches back far in the history of the shop. For three days at the end of February, customers will be able to fill a bag at the shop for a set price, which could help folks get some great deals. The goal of the bag sale is to get the shop as empty as possible so the volunteers can close for a week for a deep clean.



The creative staff at the Aspen Thrift Shop add levity and a dash of whimsy to the mannequins in the storefront windows, all from donated items.  
Craig Turpin/Aspen Daily News

As part of their outreach this year, the ladies of the thrift shop also want to remind the public of a few things. The first is that the shop is ultimately retail, not recycle. They need things that are in good enough condition to be sold, not items that need fixing to be properly worn. The shop's biggest expense is sending items to the landfill, which is why they have a gate in the back of the shop to prevent dumping.

However, they will take any item in good condition, and if they do not have any room for it they have a deal with New Horizons Thrift Stores in Pueblo and Canon City, who are happy to take the extra donations.

The second issue they want to address is the rumor that volunteers take all of the “good stuff.” Walbert and Wallace said this simply isn’t true, and most of the volunteers eventually realize they don’t need any more stuff. They cite that “thrift shop magic” and encourage people to come and experience a little of it, when one man’s trash really does become another’s treasure.

## Looking forward

For a thrift shop that donates 80 percent of its income, 70 years might be a long time in a place like Aspen. But here the Aspen Thrift Shop is, having survived moves all over town and a changing world, yet it seems content to stay the same within.

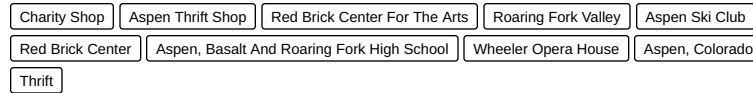
So, next time people think of the thrift shop, maybe they should think less about the Gucci and Louis Vuitton they might chance upon inside, and instead the good that the shop does the community. And maybe they should help to bring some of that good themselves.

“The more time I spend here, the more I absolutely love it,” Walbert said. “It’s so rewarding to know that you can work in one location and know that you’re donating all over”

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## Tags



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