

Guest commentary: 70 years of Aspen Thrift Shop magic

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Guest Commentary

The Aspen Thrift Shop was born in 1949 in response to a need for staff housing for the old Citizens Hospital, which was located in a Victorian home at the base of Red Mountain. It has been proudly serving the Roaring Fork Valley for the last 70 years, ever growing and changing locations several times over the years.

My involvement began with an off-hand comment from a friend: “You could be a great volunteer at the Thrift Shop. Maybe you should consider it.” Consider, I did, and 20 years later I am still there and marvel every day at the blessings it has brought to my life. What blessings, you might reasonably ask, can be found sorting through piles of old clothing, unexpected treasures and cast-off junk?

In the beginning, I was just sorting and hanging incoming donations, but as I slowly came to know the volunteers, generous donors and customers, I began to look forward to the twice-monthly shifts. Friendships form with women I would likely never have met. People I see every day around town are valued customers. The steady stream of locals delivering donations become the unsuspecting partners that contribute to the “magic.”

Fast-forward 20 years and I am fully committed and enticed by all things TS. I love learning of and meeting scores of other volunteers in our valley who are committed to making the world a better place. The Thrift Shop funds over 150 nonprofits in the valley as well as college scholarships in Aspen, Basalt and Carbondale. It is humbling each spring to read high school scholarship applications and almost impossible to choose the most deserving recipients. Above all, the process brings untold joy and optimism to get to know the committed and talented young people we are sending out to the world.

I particularly enjoy sharing countless stories of “Thrift Shop Magic.”

One of our board members created a nonprofit initiative as a direct result of networking she did for the shop. That valuable family-support program has served and will continue to, for years to come, the needs of countless families and individuals in our valley.

One morning, a group of us was inspecting a curious garment that appeared to have a medical purpose. At that moment one of our volunteers joined us and exclaimed in tears (and disbelief) that it was exactly what her young daughter needed to treat a serious medical condition. Not only was the item her size, but also very expensive.

One spring day we were becoming discouraged and tired, as we couldn't begin to keep up with the massive amount of donations. The faster we worked to process everything, the more cars pulled up to dispense more bags and boxes. I was just ready to beg mercy to the burly man who purposefully strolled into the back room with several large boxes. He didn't say a word but quietly opened the boxes to reveal a beautifully prepared four-course meal. We were stunned and thrilled that a local caterer would make such a thoughtful and generous gesture. He wouldn't tell us his name and left before we could properly thank him. Energy restored and spirits lifted, we made tremendous progress the rest of the day.

Remember when Boogie closed his iconic clothing store? After the final sale, he donated the remaining merchandise to the TS. The challenge was to remove all inventory in just three days. The amazing ladies of the TS managed to find a donated retail space in town, move every item of clothing and footwear, advertise, set-up, staff, and successfully pull off a “flash sale.” I love the memory of volunteers pushing garment racks through the quiet streets of Aspen early in the morning. The contrasting hilarious memory is of the frantic stampede that ensued when the sale began!

A large painting from the '70s of a couple on a motorcycle was donated for the Art Sale. The models looked familiar as did the setting, which appeared to be local. We had fun guessing at the identities of the beautiful subjects. Answers came soon enough when a longtime and well-known local man purchased the painting for his ex-girlfriend. They had continued to be dear friends and he gifted her the painting along with the memory of happy times. She succumbed not long after to a health issue she had battled for years.

On a rare occasion a disgruntled customer may become angry and abusive. The source of one such dispute is long forgotten, but the lovely woman who witnessed it is not. She immediately ran to Paradise Bakery and returned with cookies and muffins to soothe our rattled volunteers.

We often welcome men and women in need of community service hours to help at the shop. I was holding silent judgment of one unsavory looking young man covered with tattoos and piercings. Reservations were cast aside as I observed him hard at work. My heart melted, though, when I witnessed him playing Barbies on the floor with a volunteer's granddaughter. A valuable lesson I will never forget.

There are surely endless stories to be mined from the hundreds of volunteers who have served over the years. Speaking of volunteers, we have an incredibly diverse, talented, smart and energetic group of hardworking ladies. Among our ranks: retired and working teachers, nurses, journalists, restaurant owners, artists, executives, a rabbi, retired judge, geologist, ski pro, hairdresser, doctors, lawyers, etc.

It is truly magic that 140-plus women can accomplish so much. We all think we are right and we all do it a different way; that is magic indeed! Our numbers are impressive and well known; 70 years, hundreds of volunteers, millions of dollars supporting scores of nonprofits. What might be surprising is the news that the Thrift Shop continues to welcome new volunteers to ensure our future sustainability. The hope is to serve the community for another 70 years as we accomplish our mission: to sell donated goods at affordable prices, to make grants to other nonprofit organizations in the Roaring Fork Valley and to provide scholarships to valley high school graduates.

Thank you, Aspen Thrift Shop volunteers, donors and shoppers, for the magic and blessings you bring to my life. Perhaps this "love letter" will inspire a reader to join us. For more information, please visit <http://www.aspenhriftshop.org>.

Ellen Walbert is co-president of the Aspen Thrift Shop.