

# 'Thrift Shop Magic': How generations of volunteers keep Aspen Thrift Shop running

For 75 years, mothers and daughters have continued the legacy of giving at Aspen Thrift Shop

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Volunteers at the Aspen Thrift Shop pose for a picture during their Wednesday shift on May 8, 2024.  
Austin Colbert/The Aspen Times

For 75 years, the Aspen Thrift Shop has been a community hub, drawing all ages, income levels, and backgrounds to gather in the name of finding a bargain. While designer-label clothing distinguishes the second-hand store, its volunteers stand out even more. In fact, generations of women have followed in their mothers' footsteps by committing to biweekly shifts.

Carolyn Moore is a long-standing volunteer whose daughter, Cinnamon Hughes, began helping out in high school. As a third-generation helper, Hughes still works there, along with her mom. Hughes' grandmother, Alberta Moore, helped co-found the thrift store, along with Robert Marsh and others.

In 1949, the shop opened upstairs in the Wheeler Opera House a few hours a day, three days a week, to raise money for nurses' facilities at the old Citizens Hospital. Within five years, it had raised \$13,000 — \$170,000 in today's value. Now, it generates more than \$1 million annually, providing college scholarships and benefitting about 200 local non-profits.

"We do a lot of business because things have gotten so expensive," Moore says. "We see people who are moving to Aspen all the time. We can get them outfitted for a fraction of even what it would cost in Glenwood."

When she began volunteering 52 years ago, the shop only had about 10 volunteers; now more than 200 women staff it.

“It started as an all-women volunteer group because women wanted to make a difference,” says Treasurer Lynda MacCarthy. “Now, we pride ourselves on being all-women volunteers, making a difference. We run this million-dollar (a year) business without paid people (other than contract workers for book-keeping, maintenance, etc.). It’s kind of a miracle. That’s the magic of the thrift shop.”

Volunteers regularly reference the “Thrift Shop Magic,” part of which stems from a steady stream of donations. Ellen Walbert shared an example of a perfect match in *The Aspen Times* in 2019. She wrote about volunteers puzzling over the use of a “curious garment that appeared to have a medical purpose.” Just then, another volunteer walked in 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.”

Magic also occurs through the deep relationships volunteers form. Each biweekly shift requires about 10 women to sort, hang, and run the cash register.

“We don’t switch days because we get really attached to that day,” says Moore, who works on Thursdays. “Each day is a tight-knit group.”

“These teams become like little families onto themselves. They create a camaraderie among themselves,” says Bobbi Carson, volunteer coordinator, adding that daughters often end up signing up for regular shifts after watching their mothers volunteer.



Rae Lampe, Lynda MacCarthy, and Beth Wille all volunteer at Aspen Thrift Shop.

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wanted to give back after receiving student school supplies from the shop.

Teams stand by each other, celebrating birthdays, helping one another through illness and challenges, and even traveling together. Wille and Lampe's Tuesday night group has taken four trips, including sea kayaking in Mexico and biking in Portugal.



Tuesday evening team volunteers, left to right: Erica Murray, Susanne Morrison, Katie Viola, Beth Wille, Shelley Supplee, Tricia Johnson, and Rae Lampe. Rae Lampe/Courtesy photo

“It’s a huge social support system,” MacCarthy says.

While the women bond and share plenty of laughs, sometimes the work is challenging. Sifting through dropped off trash — rather than treasures — and dealing with difficult customers can take its toll.

“Sorting is hard work, and sometimes people steal,” MacCarthy says, adding that people have soiled the bathroom, as well. “But those are issues that every store has. I think, in general, we work hard, and people are tired at the end of the day, but nobody wants to give it up. We have five women in their 80s on our team, and they don’t want to stop working. It brings them social (opportunities) and purpose. We feel that we’ve made such a difference.”

Though she wholeheartedly acknowledges volunteers — generational and otherwise — she also honors everyone who donates gently used items.

“Without the generosity of this community,” she says, “none of this would happen.”

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