

Small thrift shops in Oconomowoc and Waukesha find a way to compete with larger stores



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If there is one thing that avid thrifters will tell you, it's that the hunt for bargains favors variety, including small stores that often add a homey touch.

But for operators of those small shops, the presence of larger competition represents a challenge, much in the same way a boutique fashion clothing store might struggle in the shadow of a major national retailer. It might be difficult getting enough donated items to sell. The limited availability of volunteers can limit hours of operation.

Sometimes, they can't make it, despite loyal customers. Circle of Friends, a longtime fixture in Elkhorn, closed its 2½-year-old Mukwonago shop in April, a scenario that marks the circle of life for thrift stores in a changing marketplace. The arrival of a Goodwill store in Mukwonago in 2023 was a factor.

On the other hand, some small thrift shops have met the challenge to remain relevant, operating successfully despite the presence of a large thrift store just down the road.

"We are blessed with many community conscious people who donate high-quality items to our shop," Julie Stockinger, Waukesha Service Club Thrift Shop co-manager, said in an email interview.

"Because of this, our customers have come to expect a shopping experience that can often exceed the larger format thrift stores. We have many repeat customers who frequent our shop."

Retail standards help thrift stores succeed

Thrift store operators realize that, despite their unique supply chain, the key is to create a shopping environment that people like.

Stockinger and WCS Thrift Store co-manager Kathy Cervenka said customers are accustomed to special sales and offerings at the store, which the Waukesha Service Club has operated on West Avenue just south of Sunset Drive since 2009. (The nonprofit organization has operated a thrift store since 1934.) It typically packs the store with current season clothing and shoes for all ages, plus toys, books, household items, vintage collectibles and, on occasion, art.

Beyond that, like any retail store, success comes from making the shop a welcoming and warm place. Stepping inside the Waukesha store reveals a store that's tastefully merchandised (the service club has two experienced volunteers that make that possible) and makes use of its space much like a mall store might. And the in-store volunteers keep the atmosphere friendly, the managers agreed.

"(Customers) are familiar with our courteous friendly volunteers who always go the extra mile. Some have even called our shop a boutique thrift shop!" Cervenka said.

In fact, one Oconomowoc thrift store puts "boutique" in its name, as a nod to its high-end donations. But Forgotten Treasures Resale Boutique, operated on the campus of Shorehaven nursing home and senior health campus by the Shorehaven Service League, doesn't merely rely on its product line to attract customers.

"Small thrift stores can't be everything to everybody," Sarah Williams-Berg, director of community relations for Shorehaven Service League, said in an email interview. "But they can provide an intimate, neighborhood feel, helpful staff and loads of laughter. Monthly specials, ease of access, plenty of parking, safe, clean environment and personal help is guaranteed."

But the Wisconsin Avenue store does cater to a selective crowd, as well. Thanks to donors who donate higher-end products and items with tags still on them, Forgotten Treasures can attract thrifters looking for something different.

"If I need a pink boa for a party, or a plant stand for my garden, it's usually there!" Williams-Berg said.

The store also benefits from the service beneficiaries: Shorehaven's residents, who both donate and buy items as part of their transition into senior living.

"Forgotten Treasures creates a shopping experience unlike any other," said Kris Gallert, Volunteer Services manager. "We are a go-to destination on the western end of Waukesha County. We pride ourselves on serving our customers, and raising funds to enhance our residents' lives."



Where does the money go from thrift shop sales?

The fact that the nonprofit organizations include the word "service" in their names is indicative of their function.

Shorehaven's service organization, which dates back to a volunteer program initiated by a group of women from Dr. Martin Luther Church in Oconomowoc in 1951, initially tried to aid Shorehaven residents in small ways, such as tending to gardens and canning vegetables for residents.

Forgotten Treasurers, which grew from an earlier Sellers Shop in the 1980s, became another way to raise funds to benefit residents. Proceeds from the store and other fundraisers have been used to purchase items such as buses, lawn furniture, Christmas trees, shade systems, chapel furnishings, pontoon boats, mobility chairs, fitness center equipment and therapeutic elliptical bicycles. Those funds also aided in the construction of the Service League Pavilion on the campus, Williams-Berg said.

For the Waukesha Service Club, which dates back to 1930, the mission from the start was "serving the sick and needy, and befriending the less fortunate of this community," Cervenka said. In addition to proceeds generated by the thrift store, the organization still raises funds to support individuals and organizations, on a grant basis, through sales from the WSC gift shop at ProHealth Waukesha Memorial Hospital.



Opening of Goodwill prompted closing of Mukwonago thrift shop

Of course, if the measure is pure square footage, the smaller thrift shops simply can't compare themselves to two large-format thrift shops, both tied to more broad-ranging nonprofit organizations: Goodwill Industries and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. The direct correlation between the demise of certain thrift stores and the presence of larger ones isn't always clear.

But, in one instance in Mukwonago, it was a factor.

On social media, chatter began shortly after the opening of a new Goodwill store in Mukwonago in February 2023 that Circle of Friends, which occupied about 30,000 square feet of space in the GreenRidge Center on the northeast edge of the village's central commercial district, was struggling with donations.

In a Facebook post in April 2024, Circle of Friends announced it was closing. "Over the time we have been opened we were able to raise hundreds for those in the community who were in need due to your generous donations and round ups," the organization said, noting the distribution of hundreds of winter coats and food cards, among its mission successes.

Sherry Leka, managing director of the Circle of Friends Mission, confirmed in a July 31 phone interview that the opening of the Goodwill store hurt in multiple ways.

"We knew going in there (in 2021) that we would be able to do very well and be able to give back to the community," Leka said. "The first year was really, really good."

But that investment in new space looked less rosy when, several months after its opening, Circle of Friends discovered that the village of Mukwonago was considering approval of the Goodwill store nearby. Such a reality earlier would have likely negated Circle of Friends' expansion effort, she acknowledged.

"We would have never had done that, because we know that they are the king of thrift stores — nothing against them whatsoever, they do what they do," Leka said. "But when you have a small name and you are not a large organization like theirs, there was no way we can survive."

Donations, for which the Circle of Friends store was well suited, dropped off once Goodwill opened.

"People loved our store, but they just tended to drift back over (to Goodwill), especially with their donations. If we don't have donations, then we don't have things for people to purchase. ... It was just devastating for us, knowing that we had to shut down that store, because we didn't want to," Leka said, noting the friendships she had built with Mukwonago customers.

The Elkhorn store, which has operated for more than a quarter century, remains open and has even drawn some of the Mukwonago store's customers.

Presence of Goodwill or St. Vincent de Paul doesn't always hurt

Then again, some small thrift shops find ways to co-exist with the big-name, big-space stores.

For instance, in Waukesha, Goodwill built its own store and donation center on Nike Drive after years of operating out of somewhat smaller, old retail spaces. And St. Vincent de Paul took the space vacated by Kohl's Foods on Sunset Drive — one of the last stores built by the grocer before it closed up all of its stores at the turn of the century. Oconomowoc, too, has Goodwill and St. Vincent de Paul in larger spaces.

But Cervenka and Stockinger hold no ill-will toward larger thrift stores. In fact, they said, Waukesha Service Club has a "work-friendly relationship" with St. Vincent de Paul, which operates its Sunset Drive store less than a mile away.

"We pass on items that are not salable in our shop, due to condition or style, and they pay us a nominal fee for fabric, purses and shoes," Stockinger said. "Those dollars are included in our profit and passed on to other programs in our area, keeping those items out of landfills."

Cervenka recognizes that St. Vincent de Paul has an advantage her thrift store can't match: the availability of volunteers to allow longer hours of operation. (Both Goodwill and St. Vincent de Paul are open daily, usually into evening hours. The Waukesha Service Club store operates from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Friday and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday.)

Williams-Berg said Forgotten Treasures also only sees a healthy relationship with the larger stores.

"The people that choose to donate to Forgotten Treasures love Shorehaven and the Service League's mission of enhancing lives of Shorehaven residents," she said. "The Lake Country community is a generous community, so we have never looked at Goodwill or St. Vincent de Paul as competition. In fact, we have a wonderful relationship with both organizations."

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