

# St. Albert Gazette

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## **Out of the closet**

**An entire industry is dedicated to giving your clothes a second life**

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If you're like most people, you clear out your closet once or twice a year, throw your discards in a bag for charity and forget about them, content some other local person will soon be sporting your threads.

However, your old Dockers may do more sailing after leaving you than they ever did when you wore them. That's because much of the clothing charities collect is funnelled into the multi-million dollar trade in second-hand clothing, which sees garments baled and shipped around the world.

"There's a whole other layer to the industry that's not just the do-gooding. It's profit-based," said Kathryn Chandler, a professor of human ecology at the University of Alberta.

Many Edmonton-area charities help finance their operations by collecting and selling old clothes, and St. Albert is prime territory for them.

**Who does what**

The St. Albert-based LoSeCa Foundation accepts used clothing at its headquarters in Campbell Business Park. It sells about 70 per cent of the clothes in its thrift store, with the proceeds used for programs to help people with developmental disabilities.

The rest is donated to Prince Charles Elementary School in Edmonton or turned into rags and sold in-store, said co-ordinator Marina Miletic.

The Salvation Army also collects donations it sells in its thrift store or donates to the needy. Some clothes are sold as rags. The rest, less than one per cent, go to the landfill, said thrift store manager John Berrisford.

The St. Albert Salvation Army is independent of the organization's Edmonton locations, which are part of Salvation Army National Recycling Operations, formed in 1995 to more readily compete with for-profit thrift retailers, its website says.

Goodwill Industries has one collection centre in St. Albert that averages 35 to 40 donations per day. Items go to the organization's Manning Crossing store in Edmonton's northeast.

"They mean a lot. They help keep this store going," said regional manager Donna Costa.

Half to 90 per cent of donated clothing is suitable to sell, Costa said, while the rest is baled and shipped to Third World countries.

Goodwill uses revenue from clothing sales to finance job training for people with disabilities.

### **More options**

Value Village is a major purchaser of used clothing, contracting local charities to supply its stock. The chain has three suppliers in Alberta, all of which collect in St. Albert.

The Canadian Diabetes Association has three bins and a home collection program in St. Albert. Last year their St. Albert bins collected 128,210 pounds of clothing that sold for \$50,130, or about 39 cents a pound.

"Our St. Albert locations actually do really well for us," said spokesman Richard Dimitriou.

The Cerebral Palsy Association of Alberta offers home collection and two bins in St. Albert. The bins combine for about 140,000 pounds of clothing a year, said business manager Marianne Fox. Clothing collection throughout Alberta nets the organization \$500,000 to \$800,000 a year, about half its annual revenue.

"The mere act of somebody putting a bag of clothes inside one of my bins, that's them helping somebody with cerebral palsy," Fox said.

The Alberta Association for Community Living is another non-profit that collects in St. Albert to supply Value Village. The organization helps children and adults with developmental disabilities.

### **"Too stupid to give up"**

It's not easy for a new organization to establish itself in the used clothing business, as Bill Farrell can attest.

A retired RCMP officer, Farrell started a private company about four years ago to collect clothing to raise money for the Royal Alexandra Hospital Foundation. He wanted to help the hospital because a former colleague received care there after being shot.

After a rocky start finding a buyer, Farrell hooked up with Big Brothers Big Sisters in Kelowna. Every week he personally trucks them his clothes, which the organization re-sells to Value Village.

He has 68 bins, and estimates that his lone St. Albert bin collects 100,000 pounds of clothes a year. He's hesitant to discuss revenue but says he's not making a living yet.

"It's been a struggle since I started it," he said. "It earns enough for the trucks to go out and do it."

After reviewing his financials together, he and the hospital foundation have agreed that he'll contribute \$3,000 a month to the foundation this year.

"I think it's very fair given that all the costs and all the risks are being borne by Bill on the collection side," said foundation president Andrew Otway.

Farrell's great hope is for Edmonton to get a new Value Village store. The chain pays the best rates and treats its charities well, Farrell said.

Although his organization is theoretically a for-profit business, Farrell views it more as a humanitarian effort aimed at improving care in the hospital.

"I wanted to do something good," he says earnestly. "I'm too stupid to give up."

### **Value Village**

Value Village seems to be the prized catch for used clothing collectors that lack their own stores.

The Bellevue, Wash.-based company is the world's largest second-hand retailer, with more than 200 stores and annual sales of \$600 million.

Value Village sells roughly half the items it receives and ships unsuitable items to developing countries and material wholesalers for recycling, according to a fact sheet the company sent to the Gazette.

Value Village sometimes gets a bad rap for profiting from donations but charities really benefit from the partnership, said Fox of the Cerebral Palsy association.

"We promote our relationship with Value Village because we can wind up contributing back to our programs a lot more money on an annual basis than if we were running our own thrift

stores," she said.

### **Just another industry?**

Trade liberalization in many developing countries in the early 1990s brought expansion in the global second-hand clothing trade, which grew from \$207 million U.S. to \$1.5 billion from 1980 to 2001, according to United Nations' statistics.

The United States is the largest exporter, with Value Village, Goodwill and the Salvation Army being major suppliers.

These organizations typically collect more than they could ever sell, so much of their clothes never see a store rack, but are instead baled up without being sorted, said Karen Tranberg Hansen, a professor at Chicago's Northwestern University who is a recognized expert in the field. These bales go to brokers who sort the clothes by type and repackage them for sale to wholesalers around the world. Africa, Asia, Europe and some Middle Eastern nations are the most common destinations, Hansen said.

North American charities that sell used clothing use rhetoric about giving and helping to shroud the true economics at work, fearing the public will find fault with the system, Hansen said.

But such reactions fail to consider charities do actually make money in the process, she said.

Much of the negativity in the West is tied to the belief that used clothing imports harm the textile industries in developing nations, but many of these nations are actually large textile producers, and consumers in poor countries like to create a personal look with used clothes, Hansen said.

Her first-hand research in Zambia revealed the second-hand clothing trade creates many jobs and provides affordable options to consumers.

"Some of whom desire very highly to get these garments because there's a lot of choice," Hansen said.

Chandler of the University of Alberta also cautions against being too judgmental.

"There is good and bad to eve