



College kids know thrifty and nifty

By Craig Wilson, USA TODAY



Trixie Encomienda, 17, is a freshman at the California Design College in downtown Los Angeles. And though she'll be commuting her first year from nearby Cerritos, she's ready to share an apartment with friends next year. She already owns her own bedroom furniture.

"I actually got the whole set for 80 bucks," she says proudly, referring to her two Victorian side tables, a headboard and wardrobe.

Encomienda is a thrift-store junkie. So much so that Savers (also known as Value Village) thrift stores recently named her a "ReDesigner" in a contest it holds in search of young shoppers with a "gift to thrift."

"It's all good," says Encomienda. "The pricing, everything. Plus it's helping the environment. We're keeping things in circulation."

Encomienda is not alone in passing stuff around. Thousands of college students are returning to school, looking for not only a place to sleep but a place to sit, too.

And maybe a slightly used polyester suit. But more on that later.

After Christmas, the back-to-school shopping season is the second-largest consumer-spending time of the year. It is estimated to total \$18.4 billion this year, according to the National Retail Federation's 2007 Back-to-School Consumer Intentions and Actions Survey, conducted by BIGresearch.

But more and more college students are asking the same question: If we need stuff to go back to school, why pay full price for it? Tuition is expensive enough.

"The number of college students shopping at thrift stores has been increasing drastically over just the last five or six years," says Cindi Forslund of Seattle's Goodwill. "It's mainly because today's college students are committed to reuse and recycling. It's cool for them."

It's also a cool way to find something just a tad bit different.

As Encomienda says, "Sometimes you just get sick of what you see at the mall. The only way to find something unique is at a thrift store."

Many students also say they like that non-profit thrift stores accept donations, turn around and sell the items, then use the profits to help those less fortunate than the college kids who shop there.

Not that the price isn't right.

A sofa, for instance, goes for about \$40 at the Salvation Army Store on Erie Boulevard in Syracuse, N.Y., just down the hill from Syracuse University and nearby LeMoyne College.

"They often come in groups, and if they like it, they know they have to take it now," says Maj. Kevin Schoch of the Syracuse store. "They know we don't have another like it in the back."

Do they worry about the design?

"They absolutely do *not* care," he says, laughing. "If it will make it through the end of the year, then it works. It doesn't matter if it will coordinate with anything else."

We're talking old-fashioned practicality here. Decent goods for good value.

"Equipping a college student doesn't have to be a wallet-draining ordeal," says Adele Meyer of the National Association of Resale & Thrift Shops.

'Brimming with treasures'

"Resale stores specializing in furniture, small appliances, bedding and accessories are brimming with treasures to furnish dorm rooms on an affordable budget."

Linda Montemayor, manager of the Savers store in Austin, home of the University of Texas, says her shop is hopping this time of year.

"It's expensive here in Austin, so students try to find reasonable prices," Montemayor says. "They come in here throughout the year."

That includes those looking for dresses. Guys looking for dresses.

"Lots of guys come in here around Halloween and for frat parties, looking to find the perfect dress," she says.

Over the last few years, the vintage-clothing section at most thrift shops has become the most popular corner with college kids.

"I started coming here three years ago, and I used to be thrown off by it," admits Raphael Castelmezzano, 19, a student at the University of Guelph in Ontario and a ReDesigner for Savers thrift stores.

This summer he worked at the Savers store in Burlington, Ontario, something he now calls "a dream come true."

"As I got older, I realized it's the best place to find anything unique," he says. "All fashion starts on the street."

His back-to-school finds: vintage T-shirts and '80s-style sunglasses. White.

Castelmezzano says all his college friends shop for their apartments at thrift shops. "It's kind of ridiculous how inexpensive things are here."

As is often the way with all consuming, the early birds get the best stuff. Students at the University of Colorado-Boulder, for instance, often don't even let the furniture get inside the Salvation Army store there.

"Some just hang around and wait for the truck," says Jim Armstrong, director of retail at the Boulder store, six blocks from campus. "Some years as the trucks pull in, the students just bid on the sofa before they even get it into the store."

Many thrift shops advertise on campus calendars, offering \$5 off any purchase of \$25 or more.

At the Boulder store, everything is 25% off for students on Wednesdays, and everything is 50% off on the Saturdays the UC Buffalos win the football game. (Something they didn't do very often last year.)

Few, if any, thrift shops deliver, but for college kids, that's often no problem.

Students at St. Louis University didn't wait for a friend's truck to arrive to transport their \$65 beige sofa. They decided to just put it on their shoulders and walk the mile and a quarter back to their off-campus apartment.

"They came in to buy a couch and got tired of waiting for their friend," says Glennon Mindak, the store manager at the Salvation Army store between St. Louis and Washington Universities. "So they just carried it down the sidewalk."

Have sofa. Will travel.

The store is offering a 10% student discount through Sept. 15.

Kim Schmidt, area manager for Goodwill in New Jersey, says one of this year's most sought-after objects in the Pennsauken store is a floor lamp with five bendable arms.

"That's what everyone is looking for ... and then the usual. If we put out a couch, not in the best of shape, and we put \$5 on it, they'll buy it. It'll work for them for college." Such prices, of course, are the lure.

If there's the rare leather sofa on the floor, it can go for more than \$100; dressers sell for \$30 to \$60, and nightstands are as low as \$6. Mismatched plates and glasses go for spare change.

"It all depends upon the condition. They usually like to shop back and forth," says Schoch at the Syracuse store, meaning they come in often. "They know new things come on to the floor every week."

(Mondays are good shopping days because new stuff is donated over the weekends.)

And the best thing for the thrift stores is that some of the furniture is donated back in the spring and recycled on to the next batch of college students come fall.

This is especially true in Boulder, known as one of the USA's most eco-friendly cities.

"Everyone recycles here, and the students are very conscientious about it," Armstrong says. "I've seen some couches sold three or four times. They just come back in and are sold again in August. They circulate around and around."

Capt. Paul McFarland of the Salvation Army store in Hyattsville, Md., likes to look at it this way: "They just rent the stuff from us. They buy it in August and give it back to us in May."

To make it easier for students, McFarland's store parks a truck on the campus of George Washington University in Washington, D.C., at the end of term so students easily can donate the furniture.

About that suit ...

Schoch says the hottest item in his Syracuse store these days isn't furniture at all. It's polyester suits for the college man.

"It's the cleaning aspect," he says. "They don't have to dry clean them."

The price: \$20 a suit, often an '80s vintage.

"Why spend \$100 when you can spend \$25 or less for the same or higher-quality goods?" asks Meyer of the thrift association.

Like polyester.

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