THIS WOMAN'S WORK

80 years of Woman's Exchange, quietly being awesome

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There is an unassuming shop on Church Street—a quaint consignment spot with charmingly decorated windows framing the front door. Perhaps you've gone inside to browse or purchase something. Perhaps you've only noticed it during your travels around town. But we're guessing you don't know the backstory of this place, and it's a fascinating one.

The Woman's Exchange of West Chester just marked 80 years at the same location at 10 S. Church Street in the borough. It is part of a nationwide network of such shops, which today, according to the Federation of Woman's Exchanges' website, counts 15 shops across 10 states, spanning from Greenwich, Connecticut to St. Augustine, Florida. The Woman's Exchange Movement was founded a bit closer to home, in Philadelphia in 1832, via the Philadelphia Ladies' Depository.

The concept was a simple one: to provide women with a place to sell either goods they no longer needed or their own handiwork—knitting, embroidery, and the like—to earn money without working outside the home. It was socially frowned upon for "genteel" women to work at the time, and the Woman's Exchange provided both a place for philanthropic women to help their less fortunate sisters, and for women who might be struggling the chance to earn money anonymously. The commissions charged were kept very low, so the sellers and consignors were able to realize a larger profit. In some cases, the philanthropic women who ran the exchanges were so devoted to the cause that they came to use the venues as tearooms and places to gather socially with their peers.

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Woman's Exchange WC Board Secretary

Women helping women—already a commendable mission in its own right—is elevated even further by the fact that Woman's Exchange shops are nonprofits, funneling the money they collect right back into charitable donations within their respective communities. Last year, the West Chester Woman's Exchange donated $38,000 to local organizations.

And did we mention that the whole thing is run solely by volunteers?

Here in West Chester, there are quite a few women running the show at the shop, according to Woman's Exchange WC Board Secretary Gayle Jeffries. "We have 27 dedicated volunteers who do pretty much anything and everything," she told us. "They staff the shop, handle the intake and pricing of the consignments, display the merchandise, decorate the windows, and handle the day-to-day business matters."

We visited the shop on an early, overcast Saturday afternoon, where there were quite a few customers roaming around, no doubt tempted in by the eye-catching window displays. A ceramic dachshund sat front and center in the right window, his deep



copper color setting the tone for the fall-inspired décor assembled around him. The Little Teddy wagon behind him held a stuffed bear occupant, complete with an aviator hat and goggles; just past it a music stand stood next to a small antique wooden chest of drawers, a tasteful smattering of pumpkin and gourd ephemera also on display. The theme was repeated in the other window, where a ladderback chair with a rush seat was positioned next to an intricately carved dark wood dry sink, all accented with matching pumpkin plates and a pitcher. The windows set a perfect West-Chester-in-the-fall scene.

There's a sense of familiarity once inside the shop; ceramic figurines placed alongside Nutcracker Christmas décor can conjure memories of childhood books or visits to a grandmother's house. That's not to say the merchandise is fusty or boring; on the contrary. We were drawn more than once to a spectacular purple purse by Judith Ripka ($20!). Two striking vintage silver-plate pheasants strut across a shelf underneath Frosty and Mrs. Snowman figurines. Framed reproductions of landscape paintings line the top shelf under the intricate ceiling (could it be painted over pressed tin, we wondered?), casually juxtaposed alongside African masks.

"We have a very eclectic merchandise mix," Gayle told us. "Since it is all either donated or consigned, you never know what you might discover." Mondays and Tuesdays are reserved for unpacking, tagging, and displaying any new merchandise received, and new items are out in the store and displayed in the windows when the shop reopens on Wednesday. This near-constant influx of items means that there are those customers who make Woman's Exchange a regular stop.

"We have quite a few shoppers who are in to browse at least once a week," Gayle said. "While we get many unique, unusual, and vintage items that are usually priced well below what similar items are shown for online, we don't have quite as much excitement as an *Antiques Roadshow* discovery! But every day a shopper will find the perfect gift or personal treasure at a very reasonable price, with the added benefit of knowing any profit from the sale supports the community. And some consignors do include 'backstory' information on their items, which is always welcome."

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We saw items on our visit priced anywhere from $3 to $100. For those who consign items with the Exchange, there is a 50/50 commission split. "Consignors can price their own items or have our pricing team do that, based on research, and their 15+ years of experience with what sells best at what price in the shop," Gayle said. After a month, the price of the item is reduced by 10%, after two months by 20%, and after three by

30%. Among our favorite higher-ticket items was a stunning model ship replica of the Titanic, and two beautiful paintings of the downtown West Chester of old; we were particularly taken by the Currier and Ives-like painting depicting a snow-driven scene of the West Chester Normal School—which is now, of course, West Chester University—complete with a horse and carriage in front of a massive gray stone building.

Oh, and if you're really looking for rock-bottom pricing, there is an entire basement area of even more merchandise for you to browse as well. On the way down the stairs, a large cardboard replica of last year's $38,000 charity donation check is proudly displayed.

On our visit, Joan, Grace, and Thelma were manning the operation, forming a small but mighty assembly line removing merchandise tags, which are then affixed on sheets of paper in a folder, tallied by hand, and rung up, while great care is taken to wrap and bag the often-fragile merchandise. All the women chat easily with the customers and field their various questions. "We are very fortunate to have quite a few volunteers with more than 15 years of service," according to Gayle. "Since we all believe very strongly in the importance of our partnership with community non-profit organizations, as well as the 'recycling' opportunity we offer our consignors, we tend to have longevity with our volunteers. And because we are a relatively small group, we have a great deal of camaraderie–and lots of fun!"

Grace echoed that sentiment, telling us, "I have volunteered elsewhere, and never have I ever met such a wonderful group of people as the people here."



Among those long-time volunteers is Gayle's fellow board member and President of the Exchange, Shelley Coover, whose dedication is not only philanthropic but personal. "My first memory of the Woman's Exchange goes back over 50 years to a time when I helped my grandmother consign her hand-embroidered dresser scarves and crocheted doilies," Shelley told us. "Those items can still be found at the shop today, along with other vintage and more modern-day treasures."

Shelley was able to revisit those fond memories as an adult. "My next experience with this wonderful shop began about 20 years ago when I moved back to West Chester," she said. "I became a weekly shopper, then a consigner, and most recently a volunteer. The great thing about the Woman's Exchange is that it benefits the community, the consignor, and the shopper. Unlike a traditional retail store, you just never know what unusual or one-of-a-kind item you might find. And because the merchandise comes from donations and consignments, there is new inventory on display every week! I also love the idea that it's a totally volunteer organization and that

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everything that I buy, donate, or consign helps to support my local community."

Last year, that support translated to a $38,000 donation from the Exchange to local charities, including Community Volunteers in Medicine; Denney Reyburn Resident Council; Fame Fire Company; Friends Association; Good Fellowship Ambulance Company; Goodwill Fire Company; Maternal & Child Health Consortium; Melton Center; Safe Harbor; West Chester Food Cupboard; and the West Chester Public Library. That's quite the lineup.

"Our board reviews donations yearly," Gayle told us. "Last year we were able to distribute $38,000 to these organizations, and we are on track to be as generous again this year, thanks to our customers, consignors, and donors, as well as our volunteers, who help to keep the cost of doing business as low as possible."

On November 25th, the Exchange celebrated its 80th anniversary at the Church Street location, where they rent from the Free and Accepted Masons, who own the building and run the lodge hall upstairs. According to the ladies we spoke with, they have never raised the rent on the Exchange—no doubt the best real estate deal in the borough.

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Adds Gayle: "New consignors and shoppers are always welcome. If you've never visited the shop, it's well worth a trip to beautiful downtown West Chester, especially during the holidays, for items to decorate your home as well as for great gifts that you won't find anywhere else!"

Given that the shop is run fully by volunteers, the hours are not excessive, but it is worth making the time to visit as you move down your holiday shopping list this year. The trickle-down effect cannot be beaten: buying a unique gift item at an excellent price, supporting the wonderful work of the volunteers who run this organization, and, by extension, supporting local charitable organizations. There's no downside.

One last word of advice if you visit the Exchange: if you see something you like, buy it. Odds are it may not be there on a return visit. Oh, and if that purple purse is still there when you go, ask them to hold it for us, would you? We're having non-buyer's remorse.

Woman's Exchange of West Chester is open Tuesday through Saturday, 11am-3pm at 10 S. Church Street. For information about how you can volunteer, consign, or donate, visit them online at wewc.org, call them at 610-696-3058, and follow them on Facebook and Instagram.