



WENDY M. LEVY/THE COMMONS

Experienced Goods assistant manager Ellen Graham stands beside a pile of rejected clothing that fills the window of the Flat Street store.

NEWS

Hospice thrift store swamped with unusable clothing

Experienced Goods says it needs new recycler to handle the four tons of rejects from donors



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By Wendy M. Levy/*The Commons*

BRATTLEBORO—In the westernmost display window at Experienced Goods, there lies a pile of clothing so high that if you climbed on top of it, your head would bust through a ceiling tile.

This textile mountain in the window is not what one typically sees in the thrift shop's front windows. It is not decorative. It does not celebrate any holiday.

It is illustrative, though.

This textile mountain represents just a fraction of the unusable items Experienced Goods receives every month: clothing too torn or stained to expect anyone to wear, shoes worn down beyond the point where they can be sold.

This textile mountain has always been a part of the experience of the thrift store, whose proceeds fund the Brattleboro Area Hospice. But unless you worked or volunteered there, you have been sheltered from it.

Not anymore.

Assistant Manager Ellen Graham put this textile mountain in the front window to let people see the cumulative effects of unsellable donations.

Graham is the gatekeeper of wearables whose job is to sort through all the clothing donations.

"I look at it and decide what happens to it," she said.

A donation might get a price tag and go out on the sales floor. It might go into storage, awaiting its season or holiday. Or it might go in the garbage.

Graham said Experienced Goods' problem is nothing new. Thrift stores have always had to manage the steady influx of textile donations they could not use. Most shops work with textile salvage companies, which take the unwanted clothing and recycle it into things like insulation.

For many years, the store paid people to load unwanted clothing into a shipping container on Old Ferry Road. Then, when it was full enough for the textile salvage company to retrieve it, they paid people to transfer the bags of clothing a second time, from the container to the recycler's truck.

A few years ago, the shop began contracting with Southeastern Vermont Community Action (SEVCA) to pick up the shop's unwanted textiles and shoes. Graham said that

arrangement made sense, as it allowed Experienced Goods to work with another local nonprofit that was directly helping people in need.

But the rules have changed.

Two years ago, the textiles recycling market paid 16.5 cents per pound for the store's cast-offs. Now the clothing sells for 2 cents per pound.

SEVCA officials recently informed Experienced Goods' management it was not cost effective for the agency to receive any other organization's unwanted donations — they had their hands full with their own. So Experienced Goods was left holding the bag.

Graham said she is not sure why the price of salvaged textiles fell. Some of her theories involve the drying up of the recycled textile trade with China, more people becoming involved “in the salvage game now,” and, “it's cheaper to make new.”

Meanwhile, the donations keep coming in.

And the store's official policy is, keep 'em coming.

“The only change is, we're trying to give each donor a letter” that Graham wrote, explaining the store's situation.

“We're putting it on [donors] to make responsible decisions,” she said, explaining, “if you're confident you'll buy that item in a thrift store, by all means bring it in.”

In the past, Graham said Experienced Goods' management has implemented strict policies on donations. Staff members would pore through a donor's bags and boxes before accepting them.

Graham said this approach did not work.

“It can have a chilling effect on donations when people feel judged,” she said.

Someone was also getting paid to examine the donations. “It's more efficient” from a labor standpoint “to just take the donations, then sort through it,” Graham said.

“We've relaxed looking at people's stuff the last four years, and we don't really want to start,” she said.

Graham credited her boss, Store Manager Karen Zamojski, with “working really hard” to make people feel comfortable giving their belongings to Experienced Goods.

“That’s who we are,” Graham said. “That’s how you have success.”

Graham said that by having a more inclusive and encouraging policy, donations come in at a steady clip — and, she noted, without donations, the store has nothing to sell.

“But the trade-off is we’re taking on waste,” she said. “It’s a careful line to walk.”

“Until there’s a solution for recycling [clothing], we have to throw it away,” Graham said, adding, “we can’t store it or sell it.”

Since putting the word out about the glut of unsellable textiles and nowhere to send them, Graham said some local crafters have approached her.

Quilters, rag-paper-makers, and other “hobby fabric people” have expressed interest in picking up some of the textiles, Graham said, “but it won’t really change the amount we throw away.”

“I’m psyched people are getting this stuff,” she said, but “a few quilters” is “not a solution.”

Graham said she hopes there is a way to recycle more textiles, and she has been in contact with representatives from the town — Brattleboro is Experienced Goods’ landlord — and from the Windham Solid Waste Management District to collaborate on solutions.

“We’re making calls, trying to find recyclers,” she said.

Some have suggested to Graham that Experienced Goods dump their unwanted textiles in donation boxes, such as those owned by Planet Aid. She said that will not work. Because those organizations also resell clothing, they do not want thrift stores’ cast-offs.

When asked if Act 148, which implemented the “pay-as-you-throw” trash requirement statewide, contributed to the increase in unusable textile donations, Graham said no. She said unsellable donations have not increased since the bill became law — it’s just that now she has nowhere to send them.

In her experience as assistant manager, “people have a real aversion to throwing things away,” Graham said, “but it stops people from being real about what needs to get thrown away.”

“Bringing it somewhere else feels better,” she said.

Graham wants potential donors to understand the difference between an item “being useful, and being useful to us.”

“People look at us as a recycling point,” Graham said, “but we’re not anymore. And people need to know that.”

What's on the 'ick' list?



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By /*The Commons*

BRATTLEBORO—“I think there’s a misconception that people who shop in thrift stores are not discerning,” Experienced Goods Thrift Shop’s Assistant Manager Ellen Graham told *The Commons*.

“But, to successfully shop in a thrift store, you must be discerning,” she said. “You’re shopping for used clothing in weird lighting,”

Graham says used clothing is “only a good deal if it’s wearable.”

Part of Graham’s job is sorting through every piece of clothing and pair of shoes — well, they hope the shoes come in pairs — the public donates to Experienced Goods.

She sees things even one’s hairdresser never knows about.

When *The Commons* asked Graham for some of the ickiest items she has received, without missing a beat she ran down the list:

“Poopy underpants. Stained socks. Clothing that looks like it was mashed on someone’s dirty floor and smells like dog and cheese sandwiches,” she said.

To potential donors, Graham offers this gentle reminder: “You may be okay with wearing your own stained shirt,” she said, “but not with paying \$4 for someone else’s stain.”