
Trade wins

By Jenn Abelson and Katie Johnston Chase

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SOMERVILLE — They came. They dropped. They swapped.

They were the owners of unwanted items who came to trade them for something they wanted. As the clock struck 8 on a recent evening, nearly 250 women rushed the floor of the converted performing arts center to get first dibs on each other's discarded jeans, purses, boots, books, and DVDs. After 22 minutes of hangars flying, it was all over. They took their loot and ran.

This was the kickoff to National Swap Day, a bartering frenzy organized by Boston firm Swap.com. Across the country, thousands are expected to turn out for 18 events through February that combine the cathartic purging of closets with the euphoria of filling them up again with the coveted belongings of others.

"You never know when someone else's trash is going to be another man's treasure," said Jennifer Lula, a seasoned swapper who volunteered at last Thursday's event in Somerville to help turn bags of second-hand goods into the inventory for a temporary "swapping" store organized by jeans, shoes, and other categories.

"In this day and age, swaps are really the way to go for refreshing your wardrobe," said Lula, who returned home with a bag with baby clothes, jean shorts, a vintage party dress, belts, a floral skirt, a designer plaid dress, and children's books. "It's fun, easy, and cheap. You really can't beat that."

The inauguration of National Swap Day reflects the growing popularity of bartering and the movement from online trading to off-line gatherings. Hundreds of websites, including swapagift.com, toyswap.com, and swapstyle.com, have launched in the last few years that help broker trades for toys, clothing, books, and beyond.

Swap.com allows consumers to trade books, video games, and DVDs. The online site recorded 1.8 million swaps last year, up from 1 million in 2009 and 300,000 in 2008.

Rachel Botsman, coauthor of the recent book "What's Mine is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption," attributes the swelling of swapping to a perfect alignment of social and economic attitudes. The recession forced budget-conscious consumers to barter rather than buy. Sophisticated technology made it easy to organize quickly online. Such sites addressed people's interest in recycling their belongings. And despite the apparent rancor with which they shop, swappers say they enjoy the sense of community.

GrowNYC, an environmental nonprofit created by the New York City mayor's office, has recognized the trend and recently organized 13 "Stop 'N Swap" events that attracted more than 4,000 people.

"The result is a big shift away from the 20th century defined by hyper consumption, essentially buying more stuff and a culture of me, myself, and I towards the 21st-century era of collaborative consumption," Botsman said. "In the past, it was not worth the hassle to swap stuff. Network technologies now create an infinite marketplace to match millions of haves with millions of wants, whatever they may be, from a small device in our hands."

Amy Chase of Worcester has managed to parlay swapping into a full-time job. The 30-year-old started hosting informal swaps at her house during the recession and began receiving requests to organize these events at restaurants and bars. She later teamed up with Melissa Massello to create Swapaholics, a business dedicated to spreading the love for secondhand style and hosting in-person swap events.

"Once you do it, you get hooked," said Chase, who said her entire wardrobe is swapped and who scored a gray poofy sweater and cropped, black motorcycle jacket at the event on Thursday. "I have great designer

basics from Marc Jacobs and Theory that I would never spend money on in a store.”

Swap.com acquired the local start-up last fall as part of an effort to tap into the huge pool of off-line swappers. Since then, the Swapaholics have helped organize hundreds of Halloween costume trades across the country. They also held a Fashion Week fete in Somerville that featured a runway show where style bloggers flaunted outfits pulled together on-site from the swapped clothes. These events typically have a \$15 or \$20 cover charge, and a discount is sometimes offered to those who bring bags of clothes to trade.

Another high-profile swap is planned for fashion bloggers next month in Austin, Texas, during the South by Southwest film festival. Chase was hoping to put together a “Lame Gift Swap” in Boston this month but ran out of time trying to plan National Swap Day. Swap.com was hoping to create buzz online for National Swap Day by offering free trades last week and waiving the 50 cent or \$1 transaction fee.

“This is a great way to bring the two worlds together and build a community of swapaholics,” said Jeff Bennett, chief executive of Swap.com, as he surveyed the scene from the balcony.

Cofounder Greg Boesel — one of the few men present — described the event as a “mini-Running of the Brides.”

Like the Filene’s Basement wedding dress sale, the atmosphere was frenzied but friendly. For the most part. One woman pulled a denim shirt out from under Kaleigh Foley, 22, of Somerville. But Foley didn’t protest. She left with her own bulging bag of goodies. “I was not going to fight over clothes,” she said.

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