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Posted at 02:27 PM ET, 05/03/2012

Circa 34, a Mt. Rainier consignment shop with ties to the community

By Fahima Haque

Circa 34 is much larger than it looks from the outside. Inside, it's airy and naturally lighted with racks of colorful jackets, beaded gowns, crates of albums and housewares. But the [Mount Rainier consignment shop](#) is about much more than just selling things and making money.



Co-owner of Circa 34, Vivian "Bell" Ledbetter. (Fahima Haque - The Washington Post)

Some of co-owner Bell Ledbetter's best friends are patrons and she now knows the people of Mt. Rainier intimately, in a way she hadn't been able to foster despite living there for nearly 17 years.

"This store has allowed me to slow down and really connect with people on a person-to-person level. That's been very

rewarding," said Ledbetter.

The shop is environmentally friendly and specializes in recycled home goods, antiques, art and vintage and modern fashions. Located in the heart of Prince George's County's Gateway community, the store is unlike typical consignment shops. Circa 34 offers trainings, hosts community discussions and partners with nearby entrepreneurs. On Saturday, for instance, the store will host a workshop on personal style by local designer and stylist Shara Nicole. Attendees will learn how to maximize their shopping dollars and receive a \$20 voucher redeemable in-store.

Ledbetter, store manager, said that local residents are paying more attention to over-accumulation and waste.

"I love to create a new beginning out of things that already exist," she said. She added that her customers frequently suggest how to make the store better- from décor to signage. She added that the store is similar to a community watering hole: local musicians often stop by for a "jazz jam"; local residents stop in to watch educational films.

"People come to the store to be uplifted," said Ledbetter's sister and Circa 34 co-owner Phyllis Jordan.

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Ledbetter said that the store is dedicated to nurturing entrepreneurs who want the launch their own businesses but lack the capital. “We would like it to be a venue for young entrepreneurs to really have a jump-start,” Ledbetter said. “I want to teach the young people that are coming in here that they can all do well if they learn to support each other.”

Both local and international talent showcase their wares in the shop. Among the consignees are Funkiedo, a natural beauty line and Folk Jewelz, a handmade line of upbeat funky jewelry.

Ledbetter and Jordan opened the store in 2009. It was Jordan’s dream to open a store, and she was the “fashion diva” between the two. Ledbetter just wanted to help her sister.

Much of Ledbetter’s life has been dedicated to service to others. She’s built houses for the poor, been active in many churches (her husband is a minister) and worked in education.

So it seems only natural that that tradition would continue with Circa 34. The store supports charities — including holding a fashion show last October to raise money for an Ugandan orphanage. The show raised enough money to purchase 100 goats and chickens for orphaned children. The shop plans to host another fashion show in the fall called “Model for Cause” that will highlight the work of area charities. The staff has already started recruiting models interested in both fashion and championing causes.

Ledbetter nearly single-handedly manages the store with the help of several community volunteers- she works at the store six days a week. Meanwhile Jordan, who must balance her day job with her work at the shop, tends to the store on Saturdays. Jordan also hunts and gathers for the store’s eclectic merchandise.

“What I like about the store is the customer’s involvement,” said Ledbetter. “Our customers enjoy the fellowship that comes with shopping. They also love to assist other customers who are shopping. Customer and community involvement is what makes our store a lot more than ‘just’ a consignment shop.”

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