

HEALTHY LIVING FROM THE GROUND UP

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The fashion intended
antiquity and uniqueness
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feature

The secondhand bazaar

Your ugly sweaters are a hot commodity

By Becca Tucker
Photos by Rusty Tagliareni

It's a time of year full of ridiculous bargains to fend off the sorrow of summer's end. But first, you've got to clear some space in your closet. Maybe you'll lug your bag of single socks and too-short-and-too-wide sweaters to a Salvation Army, or squash it into an overflowing clothing donation bin.

But hang on a minute. Can you think of anyone who would willingly accept the "gift" of your hand-me-downs? Where are our single socks going? What happens to the collective ugly sweaters of America circa 2013, land of the largest walk-in closets full of the cheapest and most disposable clothes in history?

As it turns out, no matter how unspeakably ugly your sweaters may be, they are nonetheless a hot commodity and competition for them is fierce. That's right, fierce. A booming industry has sprung up around the 2.5 billion pounds of clothes Americans donate annually. (That number accounts for only 15 percent of our unwanted textiles. The other 85 percent ends up in the landfill.) Charitable

nonprofits vie for your castoffs with shady operations that are not above leaving clothing donation bins in parking lots in the dark of night, without permission from the landowner. You've seen the lines of bins. Each represents a company scrambling to tap into this spewing volcano of free raw material.

Planet Aid, the nonprofit behind the ubiquitous canary yellow donation bins, has been around since 1997, making it one of the grown-ups in the young textile recycling industry. The 30,000 square-foot warehouse in Fairfield, N.J. is one of the company's 14 regional hubs nationwide. This is where trucks bring the contents of over 1,000 donation bins in the tri-state area.

It's hot. Two workers wearing plastic gloves speak to each other in Spanish as they quickly sort through a pile of loose clothing that includes neckties and pajama pants, tank tops and Capri pants, a knee brace and what looks like a fleece boxing robe with a skeleton on the back, a baby shoe, a purse. These clothes exude an easy-come, easy-go air that suggests they were never much loved. They are the manifestation of the fact that we now pay less for our apparel – less than three percent of annual household budget – than ever in history.

Other than removing shoes and the stuff (like the wicker laundry basket that stands off to the side) that's obviously not clothes, Planet Aid doesn't sort clothing. If donations come in a bag, the unopened bag goes straight into the bailer, to be hydraulically compressed into 1,000-pound bales. The fewer times workers touch the clothes, the lower the overhead. The lower the overhead, the more money goes to Planet Aid's international aid missions, like a five-day program that took place in July to train locals in Mozambique to establish gardens in rural primary schools.

"Eighty-four cents out of every dollar goes to the missions of the program. We run operations as lean as we can," said Rick Henningsen, operations manager for this Planet Aid warehouse.

Planet Aid doesn't have the resources to "offer crazy amounts of money to a site host" for permission to place a donation bin, as some for-profit competitors do, said Henningsen.

So Planet Aid goes about making a good impression in other ways. Workers will pick up anything in the vicinity of one of their bins and try to find a way to recycle it. They get mattresses, books, many a dropped cell phone, sinks, faucets, TVs. Once they received an inquiry from a woman who wanted to know whether they could find a use for her veteran husband's prosthetic leg, which he never used. (They made some calls, but in the end could not.)

Some cities and towns don't allow donation bins at all; others only allow a certain number. Planet Aid has a salesman whose job it is to secure permits to place donation bins. Those permits are particularly coveted when they're in high traffic areas, but "we'll take any area that'll take us," said the salesman.

The packed bale that sits in the warehouse waiting to be loaded onto a truck could be studied as an anthropological artifact. Its bulging sides, compressed by wire, are blankets that were donated by a local company that tests the blankets' flammability. Squashed between those blankets is a mishmash of discards from so many lives. A girl's necklace of plastic flowers spilling over the wires, alongside price tags still attached to knitwear from Canal Jeans, a Brooklyn company that closed in 2002.

Eighty percent of the clothes that come through this warehouse will go through the port of Newark overseas, to African or South American countries or China, where an entire economy has grown up around our used clothes. Local entrepreneur types in developing countries make their living buying bales, sorting and pricing them, and selling the wares at a stall at open air markets.

The remaining 20 percent will be snapped up by domestic buyers, like sorting houses that go through the clothes and separate them by type and quality.



One such sorting house is Trans-Americas Trading Co., headquartered in Clifton, N.J. "We get the stuff that has no home," said Ed Stubin, principal of Trans-Americas. "No one wants to wear a sweatshirt that's got a stain on it. Dress for Success for example, they're going to want to give women good usable clothing they can get a job interview in. Salvation Army, no one's going to buy a sweatshirt with a hole or a stain on it. A lot of it is just not salable. There are no takers for it!"

Stubin has been in the textile recycling business for four decades. He sounded tired as he rejected the idea of a tour of his facility. *The New York Times* already wrote the story, he said. Indeed, in 2002 a reporter followed a stained t-shirt from the Upper East Side, through Trans-Americas, to the Ugandan man who ended up buying it. But eventually Stubin warms up and starts talking.

Trans-Americas pays for thrift store excess ("bathing suits in January, sweaters in July") by the trailer load, sorts it into more than 300 categories, bales it and matches it with markets.

"If I get a t-shirt that has some holes in it, it'll go into a wiping rag," Stubin said. More than half of the 70,000 pounds of used clothes that come through daily will be turned into rags or fiber to make things like insulation or

automobile carpeting.

The better half sets sail from Newark to developing countries like India, Pakistan, or Uganda, where – again – locals will sell the clothing at stalls. Over the course of his career, Stubin has seen a steady increase in the stream of excess clothing coming to Trans-Americas. The fashion industry is deliberately driving that change, he said, by constantly offering new models.

"You only have to think of it in terms of kids' sneakers," he said. "As a kid I got a new pair of sneakers every spring, the same model as the year before and the year before. Today, a new model comes out in April, June, August."

A small but growing fraction of the mountain of excess will be hand-plucked by Trans-America's sorters, and end up in windows of American vintage boutiques with high price tags attached. Ironically, they won't be the clothes that are in the best condition.

"I can find a t-shirt with an imprint on it that's been washed out and looks terrible. If I sold it to Africa, the people where it ends up wouldn't even wear that," said Stubin. "In most of the poor countries we ship to, it's important that the quality of the clothing be good and strong. Fashion's not the critical issue. If I sold it here in the United States in a boutique, people might like that."

Above left: A bale of used clothes at the Planet Aid warehouse. Below left: A pile of used clothes ready to be compressed into a bale. Below: One wall of the warehouse is lined with 100 sacks full of shoes, each sack weighing in at between 200 and 350 pounds. They represents about a month's donations.



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