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Swap recycles and reinvents.

Changing clothes, for a cause

By Dawn Falik
For The Inquirer

Acid-washed jeans? Too-tight skirt? Cyndi Lauper concert T-shirt from the '80s? Megan Haupt wants them all.

The coordinator of the Philadelphia Swap-o-Rama-Rama wants piles of clothes - all those unwanted, unworn, unseen garments that lurk in the closets, trunks and garbage bags of local residents. And then she wants to find someone else to love them, change them, and wear them again.

Philadelphia's first citywide clothing swap, the Swap-o-Rama-Rama, otherwise known as SORR, will be held Sunday from noon to 5 p.m. at the Old Pine Community Center in Society Hill. For a \$20 donation and your unwanted threads (clean and gently used), there will be loads of clothes for the taking, of course, but also tables of artists happy to help turn that freakish coat-of-many-colors jacket into a fabulous bohemian skirt.

Volunteer art-school students and artists will modify clothes, add silkscreen designs, and recycle T-shirts into undergarments. Once the \$20 admission is paid, all clothing and changes are free.

"The whole point is to take materials and reuse them in a creative way," said Haupt, 37, founder and director of the Philadelphia Sewing Collective.

Although informal swaps are common among local groups and groups of friends, SORR was started in 2005 in New York by artist and yoga teacher Wendy Tremayne, who has since moved to New Mexico. According to her Web site, she started the event (and a coed nude yoga class, but that's a separate matter) "to be an alternative to consumerism."

Since its inception, SORR events have been held in many places, from Vancouver to Israel to Oklahoma. At the Philadelphia gathering, part of the proceeds will go to Kiva, which gives microloans to businesses in Third World countries. And all leftover clothing will be donated to the Curiosity Shop, a thrift/vintage store in Center City, and a nonprofit.

Elizabeth Thamm, 23, volunteered for SORR after attending a clothing swap held by a friend at a gallery in South Philly.

"I found this great bathing suit and this dress that was actually one my roommate had brought there," said Thamm, who went to Tyler School of Art at Temple University for printmaking. "Some of the things were really ridiculous."

Thamm works as a nanny while doing silk-screening on the side. She described herself as the kind of person who has enough clothes to last a lifetime, but is always peeking through thrift shops or through friends' closets.

Part of the fun of going to a swap is seeing people connect with your former treasures, she said.

"It's a place for people to naturally come together," she said. "I love seeing someone try on a T-shirt I had and say, 'I used to love that T-shirt but you could totally take it.'"

Ayla Steimling, 22, works for Arcadia, an eco-friendly boutique in Northern Liberties, and found out about the event through her boss. As a current student at the Parsons School of Design in New York City, Steimling is particularly interested in deconstructing clothing.

At the event, she'll have a sewing station complete with "notions" such as buttons, zippers and other extras to add an updated accent or completely remake a garment into something brand-new - at least to the latest owner.

"I just created a jumper outfit that's a light teal material - it was a long-sleeve librarian dress that I found in the Salvation Army," she said. "It was about ankle length and pleated and I cut it and hemmed it to be shorts and cut the sleeves to be short sleeves. I love it."

Both organizers and volunteers hope the swap draws attention to the buy-and-throwaway culture that has developed in recent years with the explosion of the cheap-and-trendy clothing industry.

"We tend to buy a lot of things without thinking about the lives behind them," Haupt said. "We shouldn't just dump them and throw them out."

"Our grandmothers had an understanding of how clothes were meant to fit, and the quality of materials," Haupt said. "They would never spend money on cheaper garments that wouldn't last."

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BONNIE WELLER / Staff Photographer

Megan Haupt, demonstrating sewing techniques, is the coordinator of the Philadelphia Swap-o-Rama-Rama, to be held Sunday in Society Hill.

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