

The Closet

By Barbara Glakas

The year 2024 marks the 50th anniversary of The Closet of the Greater Herndon Area. The Closet has occupied many spaces in Herndon over the course of decades. For these many years they have served our community in a devoted manner. The beginnings of what many people call The Closet thrift shop in Herndon dates to 1973. Many local churches at that time had their own clothes closets, but still felt they were not adequately meeting the needs of their respective communities.

It was two ladies from St. Timothy's Episcopal Church in Herndon – Janice Shanks and Gwen Betor – who had the idea of collaborating with other local churches in Herndon, Reston, and Sterling, to create an ecumenical clothes closet. They, along with Mrs. Virginia Carlsson, Mrs. Irene Maygarden, and Mrs. Joan Shelton, sent out a letter to the various churches. They had their first meeting in December of 1973. Their overarching goal was to provide quality clothing at a minimal price and use any profits to benefit the community.

Janice Shanks served as the temporary unofficial chairman in 1973, acting as the leader and spokesperson of the group as the organizational efforts got underway. First steps included setting up organizational by-laws, starting the incorporation process, soliciting funding, and finding a suitable location. Local Attorney, Bill Hanes, drew up the Articles of Incorporation, pro bono. An official Board was elected in January of 1974 and Lila Rountree became the first president. The Articles of Incorporation were signed in October of 1974 and were officially posted on the SCC listings of incorporated entities as of Nov. 1, 1974. The formal name of the organization was established as The Closet of the Greater Herndon Area, Inc.

In attendance at the first meeting were ten churches, the Shoreshim Jewish Congregation, and two service groups – FISH (Friendly Instant Sympathetic Help) and Gemini. Board officers were elected and each participating church provided two representatives to the Board. Each church was also asked to contribute \$170 to the effort, which was later repaid. It was established that the Board would meet quarterly. They met at St. Timothy's Church up until 1993. Meetings later moved to Trinity Presbyterian Church, where they still meet today.

The Board next set out to establish the purpose of their new organization. They agreed that the purpose would be:

1. To give families the opportunity to buy used clothing at a nominal price.
2. To donate clothing without charge to persons unable to pay after referral by an authorized agency. Donations are limited to four outfits per person on a biannual basis. *(This was later changed to allow each person a dollar value limit, but the twice-yearly aspect remains in effect).*
3. To utilize the profits for worthy projects that will directly or indirectly benefit low-income families in the community.
4. To encourage community involvement.

The Location Committee – chaired by Gwen Betor – set out to find a possible location for The Closet in Herndon. Trinity Presbyterian Church allowed a small room in their basement to be used on a temporary basis, while the Location Committee continued to look for a permanent site. The Closet officially opened its doors at Trinity in April of 1974.

Several months later, some space on the second floor of the Taylor Rental Center on Lynn Street became available. (This building formerly housed Schneider's hardware store, Dudding's hardware store, and the Herndon Farm & Garden Center). Volunteers painted the walls and made curtains. The Closet eventually expanded to use the entire second floor of the building. The Closet stayed there for several years.

It was during this time, in approximately 1975, that the Closet hired a paid manager. The first paid manager was Faye Harper, the wife of the pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran Church. In 1979, The Closet acquired a truck with the help of Joe Burdell, who became the first driver. The Closet started sending surplus clothing to Appalachia monthly. Over the years they also sent surplus clothes to places such as St. Martin's Church of the Assumption, in Keyser, West Virginia, and to other needy communities in Shenandoah and Elkton, Virginia. The original truck has since been replaced, but The Closet continues to make weekly or twice-weekly trips to areas of need in Virginia.

The Taylor Rental Center building burned in 1980 but, luckily, The Closet moved to a new location shortly before the fire occurred. The Closet's next official home was rented space at 785 Station Street, at the corner of Station and Pine Streets in downtown Herndon. This building is now the Great Harvest Bread store, but had previously been used as part of the old bank building. The Closet stayed there for several years.

Next, in 1987, The Closet moved to the former Herndon Lumber and Millworks building at Monroe and Van Buren Streets, where it remained until the fall of 1999. They were provided the building rent free for years. Both the old bank location and the Herndon Lumber sites were obtained with the help of Haley Smith, a member of the Herndon Town Council who also volunteered at The Closet as one of its truck drivers.

In the late 1980s, Faye Harper moved to North Carolina. Assistant manager, Leomia Brunson, of Reston's Washington Plaza Baptist Church, became the second manager and served from 1988 to 2004.

When the lumber mill property owners decided to sell the property, The Closet had to move again. After an extensive search, The Closet bought an old building on Station Street in downtown Herndon in 1999, and its adjacent rear parking lot. This was at 841-845 Station Street.

This building dates to circa 1919, and was originally Harrison's Garage, a Ford automotive service center. Over the years the building had been expanded and it later housed Northern Virginia Tractor, a tractor parts and service shop, and Perfection Automotive, another auto repair business. When The Closet purchased the building, it had been home to Perfection Automotive for 24 years.

The Closet renovated the building, turning it into a retail shop. It opened for business at that location in May 2000. Over the years The Closet not only sold clothes, but expanded its business to include a wide variety of donated items, including housewares, electronics, linens, art work and toys.

After Leomia retired in 2004, Aaron Sawyer became the third manager. Managers over the years at the Station Street location included Aaron Sawyer, Patricia Rhoads, and Tempestt Ware Harmon. Gene Wiley has served as the President of the Board since 2016.

In 2009, the inside and outside of The Closet building was painted. The exterior was landscaped and awnings were added to the front of the building. This work was done by volunteer teams from two churches in North Carolina. This work significantly improved the appearance of exterior of the building.

In the summer of 2016, The Closet went through another major interior renovation, with new flooring, lighting, etc. During that renovation The Closet had to shut its doors and temporarily move out of their building. They temporarily occupied the old Horn NAPA Auto parts building at 711 Elden Street, which was vacant at the time. The renovation was completed by the end of the year and The Closet moved back into their bright new retail store.

In the year 2020, an open-air addition was constructed onto the back of the building. This addition is used to receive and sort The Closet's donations.

The Closet currently has approximately 15 paid employees, including a full-time manager, full- and part-time staff, and part-time drivers. Multitudes of volunteers also staff The Closet, many of them from the 20 participating churches and two Jewish congregations, as well as other non-church affiliated volunteers from within the community.

Since The Closet has been operating it has donated over \$2.4 million to charitable organizations and worthy causes in the community, such as the Jeanie Schmidt Free Clinic, Herndon-Reston FISH, LINK, Kids R First, Just Neighbors, and others. In 1981 The Closet made a donation to FISH to help start the Bargain Loft, the thrift shop that supports FISH (Friendly Instant Sympathetic Help). The Closet also awards yearly scholarships to graduating seniors from Herndon, Dominion, Oakton, South Lakes, Westfield, Park View and Mountain View high schools. Nearly \$780,000 in scholarships have been awarded to 400 students since the program began. Through the voucher program, between 2007 and 2021, families and individuals referred to The Closet from local private human service agencies, have received over one million dollars in clothing and goods.

Over the years The Closet has received many well-deserved awards, citations from the Fairfax County Shelter for the Abused, Loudoun County Department of Special Services, and Northern Virginia Project Graduation. In 1993, The Closet received the "Best of Reston" award.

The town of Herndon is lucky to have such a longstanding and exemplary organization in our community. It provides clothing and household goods for those in need. It provides volunteer opportunities for community members. And it provides scholarships for deserving students.

About this column: “Remembering Herndon’s History” is a regular Herndon Patch feature offering stories and anecdotes about Herndon’s past. The articles are written by members of the Herndon Historical Society. Barbara Glakas is a member. A complete list of “Remembering Herndon’s History” columns is available on the Historical Society website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org.

The Herndon Historical Society operates a small museum that focuses on local history. It is housed in the Herndon Depot in downtown Herndon on Lynn Street and is open every Sunday from noon until 3:00. Visit the Society’s website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org, and the Historical Society’s Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory> for more information.

Note: The Historical Society is seeking volunteers to help keep the museum open each Sunday. If you have an interest in local history and would like to help, contact HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com.