Light wallet? Go swapping.

Events allow deal seekers to unload and trade their gently used clothing

BY LARAYE BROWN
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Fashionistas seeking the adrenaline rush of a good deal have another weapon in their arsenals: clothing swaps.

At events across the region, deal seekers bring their unwanted, gently used clothing, shoes and accessories to trade with others. Sometimes there's an entry fee. At other events, it's simply enough to bring five or more items and trade.

For some women, it's become a way of life.

"I like it because it's against consumerism," said Monica Buitrago, a Takoma Park resident who attended a swap in New York and began hosting swaps five years ago. "Instead of buying new things, why not exchange things people don't want anymore?"

Swaps range from cozy — a handful of friends at a studio apartment — to elaborate events featuring DJs, vendors, hairdressers and anyone else willing to set up a temporary shop at the swap.

Smaller swaps are promoted word-of-mouth among friends and acquaintances. Larger events are listed on the Web at sites such as Eventbrite.com and Meetup.com, where swapping groups have attracted hundreds of members in the Washington area.

After once hosting 188 people, Kim Pratt of Alexandria now limits her Frugal Fashionista clothing swaps to 150 and includes a potluck. Her Meetup.com group has more than 1,100 members.

Some listings are for themed clothing swaps — plus-size women, for example, or season changes. More often, swappers and organizers say, there are just women meeting new people while seeking good deals.

"You get the most of your money," Ariana Graham, a 30-year-old fashion blogger and Alexandria resident, said as she shopped for blouses on a table in Chinatown in Northwest Washington on Saturday.

And in an economy laden with the unemployed and underemployed, saving money isn't just fashionable. It's necessary.

"Part of [the attraction] is the high cost of buying new clothes," Sheila Wexler, an adjunct professor at the Art Institute of Washington in Arlington County, said. She said that quick-changing fashion trends means this season's purchases can quickly become unwanted.

As an added attraction, Wexler points to what she terms the "fat closet," that unofficial place some women store items that fit when they gain or lose weight. That dress once seen as too good to simply give away might be the perfect item for trading at a clothing swap.

Graham was among about 75 on a Chinatown rooftop. Each woman brought seven items of clothing. Organizers sorted items on tables, racks and reclining lounge chairs. Then the deal hunting began.

Hannah Baker, a 26-year-old District resident, walked away with a Diane von Furstenberg skirt and an orange halter dress she said caught her eye across the rooftop. At another event, she nabbed an Yves Saint Laurent scarf.

"I would never be able to afford that," she said.

Monica Heyward, 36, of Greenbelt found a Ralph Lauren sweater.

Pratt, organizer of the Frugal Fashionista's Clothing Swap Group that hosts swaps quarterly in Alexandria, said she has had swappers leave with fur coats.

Unclaimed clothing — the end result of all swaps — is donated.

Thomas, who has been hosting events since November, donated clothing left from Saturday's swap to Martha's Outfitters, the thrift store that benefits Martha's Table, a nonprofit group and volunteer center.

Swapping isn't limited to Washington.

In 2008, Suzanne Agasi, the San Francisco resident often credited with starting the clothing-swap trend, hosted an event...
themed for the first "Sex and the City" movie. The event drew 400
and featured a bridal fashion
show. Agasi has hosted about
250 events across the country,
including a swap at the home of
a dermatologist who promoted
his products.

Agasi, who does out advice
from her Web site Clothing-
Swap.com, encourages organiz-
ers to host smaller events and
find free sites. Because many
swap hostesses only charge
enough to recoup their costs,
there often isn't a charge to at-
tend swaps at free sites.

Saturday's swap, produced by
the group Dewdrop, was $10 in
advance and $15 at the door.
Pratt, who's hosted about 20
events, gets a free site — the
Franconia Governmental Center
in Fairfax County — and doesn't
charge admission.

Asked why they're so drawn
to swapping, many shoppers
point to the savings. They get to
update their wardrobes without
spending much, if any, money. If
they pick up something they
eventually don't like, they sim-
ply swap it at another event.

But does swapping really help
folks cut back on shopping?
Heyward flashed a guilty
smile. "I'd love to say yes, but . . ."
Fashion blogger Ariana Graham "shops" for items she'll take home at no cost at Dewdrop's Get Lucky Swap and Shop on Saturday. Gaining in popularity since 2008, swaps range from cozy get-togethers among friends to events attended by hundreds.