

BEST FOOT forward



Lora Jean Kohloff, Carol Cornachini and Marissa Gamberdella in Shoetique.

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Branford shoe store offers more than footwear

By Lisa Reisman

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IT WAS JUST another morning last summer in Branford. Few people saw a van pull up to Branhaven Plaza's Shoetique. Fewer still knew that inside was a group of women from BHcare, an organization based in Ansonia and Branford that helps anyone enduring domestic violence, mental illness or substance abuse.

And that's just fine with owner Carol Cornachini. Whether it's ensuring a child whose mother is seriously ill starts the school year with a new pair of Stride Rites or giving sturdy boots to someone who's fallen on hard times, she's been engaging in these quiet acts of kindness for years.

"You see a need, you just fill it," said the petite, elegant mother of two, whose store celebrates its 27th anniversary starting this Sunday with a two-for-one sale.

For this group of women, her motivation was the same.

As manager Lora-Jean Kohloff recalled, "Most of their shoes were in pretty rough shape." Some had foot problems from years of wearing ones that didn't fit. Others told long-time employee Marissa Gamberdella that "they were always in pain."

Not surprising, considering the human foot is one of the most intricate structures in the body. With 35 joints and more than 100 ligaments, tendons, and muscles, your feet absorb at least 2.5 times your body weight while walking.

That's why it's an axiom that good shoes take you good places.



Marissa Gamberdella helps customer Anne Rebuzzini in Shoetique in Branford.

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tively, good shoes give you a lift.

It's also why, for the better part of two hours, Kohloff and Gamberdella, along with Cornachini, attended to each of the 10 women, one at a time, patiently sounding them out on the particular quirks of their feet, on the fit of the shoe.

When the women reboarded the van later that morning, most in high-end Naot sandals, a brand of shoe specifically designed to mold to the foot, there was no photographer snapping pictures. There was not even a mention of the event on the store's Facebook page.



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who spends her non-summer weekdays as a school nurse in the Branford public school system, seek publicity a few months later when she and her staff did it again for another group of women.

Still, this kind of under-the-radar altruism goes a long way in explaining how Shoetique has weathered three recessions and the vagaries of customer taste, while standing strong against the brute force of big-box stores, outlets and chains.

It's not that Cornachini is unaware of her competitors. Nor, with the meteoric rise of online retailers like Zappos, that shoppers can have nearly any shoe delivered to their front door with little more than the swipe of a finger.

For someone descended from a long line of shopkeepers — her great grandfather, Luigi, was a cobbler who owned a shoe store on Chapel Street near Wooster Square in New Haven — the secret to Shoetique's uncommon longevity in the face of such stiff headwinds is as simple as a pair of flip-flops, and has been so ever since she first opened the doors to her business on Route 1 across from McDonalds in 1986.

"We serve our customers the old-fashioned way," said the woman known around town as Nurse Carol. "We take care of them. We want them to feel taken care of. We want them to walk out of here happy customers and come back happy customers."

Something else has remained constant, said Cornachini, who recalled the struggle of the early years when layoffs from SNET and the Reagan-era recession had her working long hours and absorbing losses to keep her staff paid: the quality of shoes and range of selection offered by Shoetique — from high-end fashionable heels in the late 1980s to Merrells, Reikers and Danskos today.

Said a customer from Guilford of the well-crafted European sandals she was deciding

among, as Gambardella brought out another box of Uggs for her daughter in the children's section: "They're smart, they'll last, I'll wear them over and over again, and my feet will thank me. It's a gift that keeps on giving."

Above all, though, beyond the durability and style of the shoes and the wealth of experience among the close-knit staff, there's a certain

dealing one-on-one," said the perennially upbeat Kohloff, a statuesque blonde who's worked at Shoetique for almost 20 years.

"It's about connecting," she went on, and she wasn't referring to Wi-Fi. "About the relationships, the friendships, and the times you don't just sell a pair of shoes, but get to make a real difference in another person's life."

Not only on the summer morning when some of the women from BHcare told the staff that they had never felt so special, had never worn so nice a pair of shoes, when both they and the staff found themselves hugging and crying.

Pretty much every day, several times a day, said Gambardella, a straight-talking, 15-year veteran who calls Shoetique "her second family."

Which is not to say Cornachini doesn't plan to invite another group from BHcare to be fitted for sandals sometime this summer.

That's in the works. Shoetique is located in the Branhaven Plaza at 1060 West Main St., Branford. Phone: 203-488-0021. Visit them at www.facebook.com/pages/Shoetique-Branford.



Shoes to tickle the Carrie Bradshaw in any woman.

small-town magic to the store.

"It's the experience of