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Clothing exchange aims to help in hard times

Irvine's Village Church holds swap meet to serve community.

By **LOU PONSI**

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IRVINE – Stacy Owens was looking for someplace special to donate clothes belonging to her father, who died recently.

So Owens did some research and learned about the "For the Love of Clothing Exchange" organized and hosted by the Village Church in Irvine on Sunday.

For every one of the 200 or so gently used articles of clothing she donated – "Everything from head to toe," she said – Owens received a ticket she could exchange for another gently used item.

After rummaging through several neatly organized stacks and racks of merchandise, Owens, of Irvine, wound up leaving with clothes for each of her dad's five grandchildren.

"This was just perfect because it goes right back to the family," Owens said. "It really turned into something good."

Church member Anjuli Watanabe, one of the key organizers for the exchange, approached Village Church Pastor Matt Kyser several months ago with the idea of a clothing exchange as a form of serving the community in a tangible way during hard economic times.

"With this economy, I can't afford to buy new clothes that (my children) will grow out of in a few months and I know a lot of other people in the same boat," Watanabe said.

Volunteers began accepting donated items in January and Watanabe placed an online ad, posted flyers in local businesses, made announcements in church and sent mass e-mails.

The clothing exchange started Sunday with about 2,500 items and many more were added as the event went on.

Girls' clothing lay folded in stacks on one table, boys' items on another and baby clothes took up space on another. Men's shirts and jackets and women's dresses were displayed on racks; shoes and handbags were scooped off large, round tables.

People unable to donate items were still given 10 tickets each to exchange for clothing and accessories, and several shoppers donated unused tickets to those in need.

"I think I volunteers would say that Jesus came to meet the spiritual and physical needs of people and we can try to emulate him," Kyser said. "We are willing to serve up the Gospel and willing to serve up soup."

Kyser estimated that about 250 people passed through the exchange, with about 5,000 items changing hands.

"I just came to get a bunch of stuff for my friends that have babies," said Cindy Dickens of Anaheim, who donated about 150 articles of clothing and left with several overstuffed bags.

Joanna Rodriguez of Fullerton was thrilled to find a sequined, beaded dress nice enough to wear to a high-end restaurant.

Jennifer Sterling of Orange exchanged her old clothes for items she said will satisfy her "picky teenagers."

"Normally, you find stuff that is outdated and not trendy," Sterling said. "There was stuff in there I saw in Active ... I'm appreciative."

More than 2,000 items remained when the exchange shut down and will likely be donated to the Orange County Rescue Mission or saved and used if the church hosts another clothing exchange in the coming months, Watanabe said.

"That is the one thing about the bad turn in our economy," Watanabe said. "It brings us close."

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Amy Perez, 12, tries a hat on her dad Robrigo Perez of Santa Ana. The family came to a clothing exchange at the Village Church of Irvine.



James Cutajar, 9, Irvine, traded for a pair of size 9 Michael Jordan sneakers. "They are for when I grow up," he said.



Ashley Augsburger and her son Darren, 2, pick out pieces of clothing at the Village Church of Irvine.



Emylee Gussler, Tustin, makes a great find at the clothing exchange at the Village Church of Irvine. The event lets people trade pre-owned clothing with each other.



Chloe Proung-McCreery, 2, picks out a doll at the clothing exchange at the Village Church of Irvine. The well attended event was a surprise for Anjuli Watanabe of Foothill Ranch, who came up with the idea of the clothing exchange. "I am just awestruck at how many people it is reaching," said Watanabe. The event was also posted on Craigslist.



Friends Cyndee Morris of Huntington Beach, left, and Emylee Gussler of Tustin helped with the clothing exchange and traded-in clothing as well. The Village Church of Irvine hosted the first ever For The Love Of Clothing Exchange.



James Cutajar, 9, of Irvine, holds a handful of tickets signifying how many pieces of clothing he can trade for.



Friends Cyndee Morris, left, of Huntington Beach and Emylee Gussler of Tustin check out the goods at the Village Church of Irvine hosted the first ever For The Love Of Clothing Exchange. The two women exchanged clothing as well as volunteered with the event.



Jenny Gorcoff, left, of Irvine inspects a poodle skirt with Anjuli Watanabe of Foothill Ranch, who came up with the idea of the clothing exchange. Watanabe, a mother of young children said, "How great it would be if a person could give someone what you don't need and trade for what you do."



Mimi Perez of Santa Ana and her children look through children's clothing at the For The Love Of Clothing Exchange. Perez husband has been without a job and the exchange was a welcomed help.