

Pop-Up Clothing Swap for the Homeless by Beth Buczynski

Kayli Levitan and Max Pazak work in an advertising agency in Cape Town, South Africa. The area around their workplace is hip, but like many urban areas it has a large homeless population.

"People often want to donate but they don't know how, where or are a little frightened of the unknown. We're often told by city officials not to just give, as they worry that it will perpetuate the problem of begging," explained Levitan.

They wanted to connect those who have clothing to give with those in need, but in a way that gave recipients back some control, allowing them to feel on an equal footing with their peers. "We wanted to bridge the gap...making it easy and safe to donate and more dignified to receive. The middle ground we needed was right in front of us: The Street," Levitan said.

The pair decided to bring people together to exchange clothing on a level playing field, and thus The Street Store--a pop-up clothing swapping event--was born.

The very first Street Store opened in Cape Town in January 2014. Built on the spontaneous principles of the free space, the one day event is a rent-free, premises-free, pop-up clothing store designed specifically for those with low or no income. It's found entirely on the street and curated by the community.

It's similar to the way used clothing is re-distributed through a thrift-shop or charity clothing drive, but at the same time, different in some important ways. Charity clothing efforts often operate with a "beggars can't be choosers" mentality. We think only those who can pay deserve the right to choose, which fuels a lack of autonomy in the clothing donation process. That's something the creators of the Street Store hope to change.

"It gives dignity to those who have none, as they have a choice," Levitan says of the project, which pops-up for just a day, then is gone. "For the first time, they have the freedom to say no to something they don't like! As The Street Store is NOT a clothing drive, we don't take clothing in advance. This means that all donations are made on the day so the haves and the have-nots meet like never before."

Now, you may be thinking: "There's no way some used clothes could really make that much of a difference in someone's life. The problems that fuel homelessness

are bigger than clothes." That may be true, but sometimes just doing what you can--even if it's just hanging a shirt on a hanger, can be life-changing.

"On our very first day, we were standing around waiting for donations," recounts Levitan. "We were so nervous that no one would arrive. Suddenly a man dropped off one item. About 2 minutes later, a gentleman came past in a shabby suit and completely broken shoes. He asked what was going on and told us that he was going to a job interview. He didn't need clothes but desperately needed shoes. And by luck or fate, the one item that had just been donated was a pair of men's leather shoes in his exact size."

The idea began as initiative for a homeless shelter, but the creators soon realized that homelessness and poverty isn't a uniquely Cape Town problem, and therefore The Street Store shouldn't be uniquely a Cape Town solution. So they've made the entire project, enabling anyone to create their very own pop-up clothing store, anywhere there's a need.

All you have to do is take the pledge and apply to host a store on www.thestreetstore.org. You will then receive a dropbox link with access to all of The Street Store designs for t-shirts and marketing materials, and a full how-to guide!

You can also follow the pair on Twitter @TheStreetStore and Facebook for updates about future pop-up events.