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ECOHOLIC

Where do my clothing donations really end up?

When you're addicted to the planet BY ADRIA VASIL

Q: Where do my clothing donations really end up?

A: You're putting together a bag of clothes to give away, and as you stuff it, wonder for a brief moment: will anyone really want my old college hoodie or the hideous T-shirt my boyfriend insisted on wearing until I snuck it out of his closet this morning?

Well, yes, actually, if Canadians don't buy your stuff at local thrift stores, chances are someone in Africa, Indonesia or maybe South Asia will end up sporting them. In truth, all the established companies like Value Village as well as trusted charities like Salvation Army will tell you that Canadians don't want your stuff (especially the torn stained, threadbare half) and so, about 50 per cent of donations are sold to overseas dealers, or on rare occasions, rag-makers.

Abroad, it's much more likely that someone will bring unwanted garments back to life by patching your jacket's elbows or sewing on missing buttons.

Enviros would say it's better than all of it going to the dump, no doubt, but organizations like Oxfam have expressed concern that our second-hand exports are undercutting local economies and cultures in Africa by offering Western discards way cheaper than locally made clothes. (Ironically enough, in the UK, Oxfam is one of the very organizations dumping castoffs in sub-Saharan Africa.)

In Ghana, for instance, 60 per cent of clothes purchased are now second-hand imports.

Oxfam noted in its 2005 report on the topic that agencies concerned about the local clothing and textile sector in Africa should really advocate for beefed-up trade protection there to put a stop to flooding the market with foreign rejects.

So far, the only protection is for the underwear industry. Ghana and Rwanda recently banned used underwear imports, which leads me to ask, who the hell has been giving away their old panties?

Since there's no getting around the fact that some thrift store leftovers are sent abroad, you have to determine who you want to have first crack at your clothing. Goodwill, a registered charity and social enterprise, directs the revenue raised from your old hoodies and harem pants to its core mission of creating jobs for new immigrants, the disabled, the young and old.

The Salvation Army is another (this time Christian) charitable choice that allots store profits to one of its many services, including homeless and women's shelters,

palliative care hospitals, camps, disaster relief and more. Families in need get free vouchers to their thrift stores.

Value Village is a for-profit business, although it does buy second-hand clothes in bulk from charitable orgs such as the Canadian Diabetes Association – you know, the ones that call your home for clothing donations. VV says over the last 10 years it's purchased \$1 billion worth of clothing from 140 such charities.

You could also bypass the big boys altogether and donate your unwanted clothes to an indie organization that distribute them to someone who needs them. Any women's shelter will gladly take drop-offs, and they're not alone.

If you've got old suits, slacks or work-appropriate clothes to give away, get in touch with the peeps at Dress for Success Toronto (dressforsuccesstoronto.org). It takes new and lightly used professional clothing and shoes for disadvantaged women looking for work. Dress Your Best for Men (dressyourbest.ca) does the same for men. You can drop off for both at the same Lowther Avenue location. Ditto for Dress Your Best for Kids.

Another honourable end of life for your clothes is New Circles, a non-profit providing support services and clothing to new Canadians (newcircles.ca). The list goes on.

If your aim is to donate to charity, be wary of clothing drop boxes in mall parking lots and whatnot. Too many are actually for-profit businesses that at best give a tiny percentage of their profits to charity. The good news, for Torontonians at least, is that since 2007 all bins have to indicate clearly whether donations go to a genuine charity or not.

If you could use some fresh threads yourself, a whole other avenue involves swapping. Hold mini-swaps with pals or look for swaps around town like Swapsity's fashionista-friendly Take Off Your Clothes events, tagged as Toronto's biggest clothing swap through swapsity.ca.

East-end boutique/community hub Nathalie-Roze also holds periodic Uber Swap fundraisers to which styley girls flock to share and snag clothes of their own, all in the name of charity (nathalie-roze.com). In this case, leftovers go to the Yonge Street Mission's Double Take Shop.