

68-year-old entrepreneur opens new thrift store 'built on love'

By JONDI GUMZ
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

BEN LOMOND — At 68, Shirley Welch is one heck of an entrepreneur.

She used to manage the St. Vincent de Paul thrift store on Highway 9, and when the shop closed seven months ago, she was stunned because she was sure it was needed.

On Thursday, she reopened the store as Mountain Thrift and greeted a steady stream of customers with hugs.

"It feels great to be back," she said.

Welch, who lives in Ben Lomond with her son and 16-year-

old grandson, looks like a grandmotherly Madge the Manicurist. She always wears a smile.

When she retired from Seagate's financial department after 13 years, she thought her working days were over. But she came to St. Vincent's to help out after her father died, and ended up as the manager.

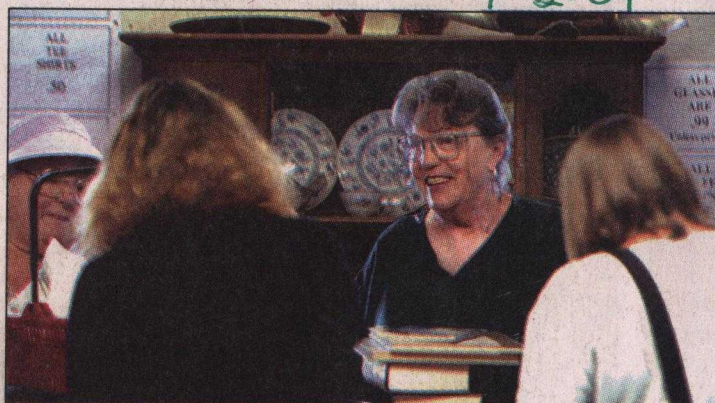
The shutdown last November

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■ Construction on Highway 9 in Ben Lomond is making it hard to do business.

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Shirley Welch staffs the counter Thursday at her new thrift store, Mountain Thrift. Welch used to manage the St. Vincent de Paul thrift store on Highway 9 before financial troubles shut it.

Thrift

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took everyone by surprise.

"The employees were heartbroken and the community was disappointed," Welch said. So she decided to do something about it.

The landlord was doubtful Welch could find merchandise to fill the empty building, which used to house a bank, but she found a partner and negotiated a lease for \$4,570 a year.

One investor backed out the night before the lease was signed but Welch refused to give up.

That's when Tom Goodreau came in.

Goodreau, 39, who lives in Boulder Creek, met Welch when he repaired her water pump. He left his job at Capitola Pump and invested in her dream.

"It's like one big family here," he said.

"He was willing to take a chance," Welch said.

Goodreau put up the stainless steel display shelves and built the clothing racks and two new dressing rooms.

Welch secured a 501c3 certification so donations are tax-deductible. Any profits after paying employees and operating costs will go to San Lorenzo Valley schools, she said.

Mountain Thrift

WHAT: Variety secondhand store with clothes, books, electronics, furniture, dishes and glasses, toys and games. Profits benefit San Lorenzo Valley schools.

WHO: Shirley Welch and Tom Goodreau.

WHERE: 9477 Highway 9, Ben Lomond.

HOURS: Shopping hours 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday. Donations accepted from 10:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday and noon to 4 p.m. Sunday.

INFORMATION: Call 336-9763.

People started saving items for sale as soon as they found out the store would reopen.

"It's built on love," said Marilyn Clearihue, a friend of Shirley's from Boulder Creek.

"Then we come and buy," added Darlene Schroeder, spotting an antique-style painting in a gold-trimmed frame on the wall.

Soon she was at the cash register, frame in hand, writing out a check.

Welch has the personality and the business acumen to keep customers coming back.

"She's so honest," Clearihue said. "She has what it takes to help people, and she keeps

prices low. She doesn't gouge people."

The store offers bargain prices. Pants are \$3, dresses \$2 and glasses are 99 cents each. Hardcover books go for 60 cents and paperbacks are a mere 30 cents.

Specialty items are inexpensive, too, such as rubber boots for \$3.99, a globe for \$5.99 and a child's boogie board for \$6.99.

A personal watercraft is marked \$300, "and it works," Welch said.

Shoppers also will find jewelry, baskets, picture frames, stuffed animals and children's games.

The merchandise goes fast.

By 11 a.m., the stereo from the electronics room set up by Sam Parker was sold for \$1.99.

"I'm so glad you're doing this," said Bonnie Eskie, a customer who came from Santa Cruz and got a hug from Welch. "Part of my heart is right here."

Eskie said she used to patronize the St. Vincent's store in Boulder Creek when she lived there. Before that store closed, it was a community gathering place, a spot where people would meet and socialize.

"We'll make it," Welch said. "With your support, we'll make it."

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