

TAKING ROOT AND BRANCHING OUT

A new model of thrift store benefits donors and the organizations they value.

BY DOREEN PFOST
Contributed photo



Mary Jo Wilbur displays the organizations benefiting from RootinCrown proceeds.

A new thrift store on La Crosse's South Side makes it easy—and fun—to support local nonprofit organizations. “It’s a win-win for everybody,” says owner Mary Jo Wilbur, “because we all love to shop at thrift store prices and we all have *stuff* to give away.”

Here’s how it works: Suppose you have a rocking chair that you no longer use. You can take it to RootinCrown and donate it—not to RootinCrown, but to one of the dozens of local nonprofits listed on a board inside the store. The organization you choose becomes owner of the rocking chair, and thus the consignor. A tag on the chair tells shoppers which group will benefit from its sale, and when it’s sold, half of the proceeds go to the designated organization. A list on RootinCrown’s website, www.rootincrown.com, details the types of items they accept.

And how do organizations get their name on that board? The process is simple, says Wilbur. Send a message through the website, and RootinCrown’s administrator will respond with a short agreement form outlining the terms of the consignment relationship. That’s it.

Registered organizations can increase their participation by sending volunteers to help in the store. Any group that provides at least 20 volunteer hours in a month receives an additional 10 percent on sales of their consigned items.

A celebration of community

Proceeds are distributed quarterly at an event with the feel of a celebratory party. “I was going to just send out checks,” says Wilbur. “But this is all about networking and supporting each other.” So quarterly distribution events begin at 5 p.m. with a half-hour


shopping spree, where prices are discounted 25 percent storewide. That’s followed at 5:30 by a meet-and-greet that is open to the public.

Details about the next distribution day, on April 11, can be found on the RootinCrown Facebook page.

RootinCrown’s name refers to a community’s reliance on its foundation—its roots—consisting of its organizations. “And when the roots are big and solid, the crown of the tree grows strong,” Wilbur says. She explains that the unusual spelling comes from her 12-year-old granddaughter Lena’s observation that they are “rootin’ for organizations.” The words “Willow Branch” in the logo refer to this first store, which is named for Wilbur’s favorite tree.

Growing and giving

Looking to the future, Wilbur envisions opening additional stores in the region and eventually franchising her unique concept. In the short term, a second RootinCrown store is scheduled to open in Onalaska this spring. Young Lena has already been at work to find a name for the new location. It will be the Seven Sisters store, named for a venerable tree in Louisiana, the largest certified specimen of southern live oak, a particularly vigorous and resilient species.

Like the trees for which the stores are named, “we just want to grow,” Wilbur says. “The donors are happy; the shoppers are happy, because they see where their money is going; and the organizations are delighted. That’s why this is such a happy place.” 

Eloy-based writer Doreen Pfost is a member of Women Writers Ink and a devotee of thrift shops.

