



A REFRESHING TALE OF COLLABORATION

FASHION MERCHANDISING MAJORS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

by Elizabeth Hise Brennan

When you walk into [RE]FRESH on Brentwood Boulevard, it feels just like any other retail store targeting teens and young adults. The mannequins model stylish fashions, the visuals dazzle, and the professional staff greets you at the door. But [RE]FRESH isn't any other retail store. It's the latest initiative of the Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition (FACC) and it simultaneously benefits foster families, kids, teens, and the community — all in one space. It's a space that Fontbonne University students and faculty had a hand in developing, and it reflects the passion and talent of everyone involved.

The Coalition is a non-profit agency in St. Louis that recruits foster and adoptive families for children without permanent homes, then provides training, advocacy and support for those parents, families and children. Support comes in a variety of forms, including access to affordable necessities like clothing.

"Kids in foster care receive an average of just \$340 from the state of Missouri each year to purchase clothes," said Executive Director Melanie Scheetz. "One of our purposes is to support these kids and families. We've had a small resale shop (the KidStore) for a while, but it benefits only young children.

[RE]FRESH is for teens and twenty-somethings."

About three years ago, Scheetz called Rogene Nelsen, director of Fontbonne's fashion merchandising program, looking for participants for a focus group related to the resale concept. A few students gladly volunteered.

A year later, Scheetz called again, looking for more input from students, so Nelsen built a focus group experience into her fashion promotion strategies class. Scheetz hosted a formal development meeting, bringing together her team with Nelsen's 15-student class. The meeting became a "designer's challenge" for the students, dividing them into three groups to brainstorm the concepts, and develop ideas about marketing, visual merchandising and store design. It was intense, Nelsen said.

"Their eyes were opened," she said. "This was the real thing. They were tasked with developing a store out of these concepts in only 15 minutes, then presenting their ideas to the group."

While it was daunting, according to Nelsen, the professionalism of the situation was not lost on the fashion merchandising majors. "They came back and told me they felt so empowered," she said.



Jessica Duco '11 (left), a Fontbonne fashion merchandising graduate, and Jen Frey MM '08, worked closely together to organize, manage and run the opening of the new Brentwood resale store.

One of the students was Jessica Duco, a fashion merchandising major from Belleville, Ill., who loved fashion, but hated to see her barely used clothes end up in just another resale bin.

"We were all part of the store's target market, and came together as a class to discuss what we liked and what worked," said the 24-year-old, who would go on to intern with the resale store. "So much of what we suggested came true."

Next, Nelsen brought in Angie Dowell, another Fontbonne fashion merchandising instructor, who used the real-life space as a basis for a semester-long project in her store planning and visual merchandising strategies class.

"Everything we did that semester dealt with the store concept," Dowell explained. "The students built the profile of the store's target market and went to the location and took measurements. It was creative, but it was also a very analytical process. They came up with a layout and floor plan, and developed signage and fixturing."

Armed with binders and blueprints, the students made formal presentations to Scheetz and her team, which included store director and Fontbonne alumna Jennifer Frey MM '08, introducing the images, pricing, measurements and research they had gathered.

"So many of the ideas permeated what we have done here," Scheetz said. "Having touchpoints with our target audience was so important."

Frey, an experienced retail professional, couldn't say enough about the collaboration — and about the quality of the

Fontbonne students involved.

"They provided ideas about store traffic, color schemes, different ways to present merchandise, and all from the perspective of our target audience," she said. "Their professionalism was extremely impressive."

[RE]FRESH celebrated its grand opening on August 20th, and although it's an attractive space, its beauty isn't found solely in its design and layout. The finished store is an all-encompassing collection of community service, recycling, advocacy, fashion and support.

"I love the fact that [RE]FRESH gives back," said Duco, who graduated from Fontbonne in May 2011. "Even people with busy lives find time to volunteer here and give."

While [RE]FRESH is a place where foster teens can purchase inexpensive clothing, it also provides them with opportunities to become associates, receive job training and develop professional skills. Teens have a community space where they hang out, host birthday or sweet 16 parties, and take comfort in a supportive environment. [RE]FRESH also accepts all used clothing donations, but only sells higher quality pieces, then finds new homes for items it doesn't use. And the space was created using donated or found items — lighting, fixtures, lockers and even the cashier's table.

"It's been like a community barn-raising; everyone has come to the table with something to offer, including Fontbonne," said Scheetz. "In addition to being a gift to the agency, Fontbonne's input is a gift to the teens with whom we work. I wish I could adequately describe how thrilled they are to be here. They own it."

Editor's Note: Visit www.refreshstl.org for more information about [RE]FRESH, and visit www.foster-adopt.org to learn more about the programs of the Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition. To donate to or volunteer with [RE]FRESH, contact Jennifer Frey at jenfrey@foster-adopt.org or 314.881.0331.

"In addition to being a gift to the agency, Fontbonne's input is a gift to the teens with whom we work. I wish I could adequately describe how thrilled they are to be here. They own it."

*Melanie Scheetz
Executive Director,
Foster and Adoptive
Care Coalition*