

Opening Taylor's Closet



The Art Live! 2016 event will benefit Taylor's Closet, a Pompano Beach non-profit that serves neglected, abused and abandoned girls in South Florida.

BY DANIELLE CHARBONNEAU

What started as a 14-year-old's simple idea—donating clothing to girls in need—quickly blossomed into multiple programs aimed at empowering some of the area's most vulnerable girls. Taylor's Closet, a Pompano Beach non-profit founded in 2005, opens the hearts of girls hardened by neglect, abuse and abandonment in South Florida. While free designer clothing gets girls in the door, the Taylor's Closet programs help them heal and transform into self-confident, purposeful and successful young women.

The exterior of Taylor's Closet is a fairly nondescript, grey, building, but inside is like a vibrant, designer clothing boutique. Chic dresses, silk blouses, glamorous bags and fashionable jeans line the walls. A contemporary chandelier hangs in the center of the room over a formal round dining table where girls in the program dine together several times a week. A plush chaise lounge rests outside the dressing room with its velvet curtains. In the back of the building is a room where volunteers host art workshops and small groups. The smell of fresh-baked cookies wafts in the air to make newcomers feel welcome.

The building has served as a second home to hundreds of girls from South Florida who were nominated to be a part of the Taylor's Closet family. How it works is fairly simple: Leaders at 20 service organizations across South Florida nominate girls to shop at Taylor's Closet. The "closet" is stocked with brand new designer clothing donated by national designers including XOXO and Michael Kors. Once nominated, a volunteer with Taylor's Closet screens the candidate and schedules a shopping appointment with a Taylor's

ABOVE participant in the Taylor's Closet program OPPOSITE Interior where the girls often dine together.



Closet “stylist” (volunteers who double as mentors). The session begins with a small art project, then shopping and trying on clothes. Clothes are just the beginning. Phase two, “Awaken,” includes ten weeks of therapeutic small groups in which the girls form friendships, learn about themselves and take part in topical discussions. Phase three, “Blossom,” includes one-on-one mentorship and life coaching. All the phases use art as a means of accessing stored emotion.

The Backstory

The story of Taylor’s Closet is one marked by moments of serendipity and what Linda Giambattista would call divine inspiration. What started as her 14-year-old daughter Lindsay’s small seedling of an idea—to donate clothes to girls in need—quickly transformed into a project with scope and weight.

At the time Linda was homeschooling Lindsay. As a high school requirement, Lindsay needed community service hours. With more free hours in the day than the typical teen, Linda encouraged her daughter to do something grand. When Lindsay proposed the simple idea of donating her clothes, Linda was rather disappointed.

“I was like, that’s just silly,” Linda said. “What do you mean you’re going to just give your clothes away? That will only take like two hours. You need more.”

But Lindsay was adamant. Giving clothes away was what was on her heart. She had always loved clothes and knew they were important for a teenage girl to feel confident and secure. She started writing letters to people in the local community for clothing donations and within seven weeks had received a whopping 70 garbage bags full. Her small, colorful room was stuffed full of them. Linda looked around and said, “We don’t know any girls in need. We better find some, because what in the world are we going to do with all these?” she laughed. “I mean, we never thought through the whole thing.”

Linda reached out to a close friend, Doug Sauder, who was the president at the time of 4Kids, a South Florida non-profit that helps orphans.

Coincidentally, Sauder had an upcoming charity event on a cruise ship in the Pompano Beach boat parade at which a group of local foster girls would be in attendance. Sauder suggested Linda and Lindsay set up a clothing store on the boat.

“Let’s just see what happens,” he said.

“So we set up our tiny little store with some clothes and we were blown away,” Linda said. “These girls walked in so hard and so distant. They wouldn’t even talk to us at all. They were like, ‘who are these two white women who think they’re going to befriend us.’ Lindsey was like, ‘let’s pull out the clothes. Let’s get them over to the clothes.’ And it was like this immediate bond and

connection through clothing. They began to like us—open up to us, talk to us, tell us their stories. We were all weeping and crying together. We knew at that moment that clothing had power.”

Sauder saw the miraculous transformation in the girls. He said, “I think we have to do this permanently.”

He suggested Linda and Lindsay adopt a space and offered them a small, 400-square-foot corner of the 4Kids building. Lindsey had her own store and was thrilled.

“We started having girls come in on Saturdays. We saw maybe 20 girls a month, just to come in and shop. That’s all we did. They came in and shopped, and we loved on them and told them they were beautiful, and then they left. That was it. And that was fine,” said Linda. But from the beginning, Linda and Lindsay could sense the organization’s natural potential. They were amazed by how it all just blossomed.



“We didn’t do anything. We really didn’t. We sent out a little letter and 70 bags came. We went on a boat and then we got a store. So it just all organically happened. And we knew that was what we wanted to always remember: that it all happens organically.”

Growth

Taylor’s Closet has continued to grow in this organic fashion ever since. In 2009, Taylor’s Closet was offered a two-story building from Christ’s Church that was about to be leveled. The building needed \$350,000 worth of renovations including new air conditioning, plumbing, roofs, floor, ceiling and fixtures.



“We didn’t have any money, so we just began this major prayer effort and asking people to connect us,” said Linda.

The response was shocking.

“Everybody in the community came forth and paid for it. One person came in and said I’ll give you the ceiling. Another said I’ll give you the floors. I’ll give you the toilets. It was like this major project and we didn’t pay for one thing. It was crazy,” said Linda.

Now, the once run down building looks like a luxurious boutique clothing store, and the organization has three phases of programming. The first phase, Reveal, is the shopping phase: the girls first participate in a small art project then go shopping and try on clothes.

“When the curtain closes, the stylist sits outside the dressing room and asks questions They get a lot of information—basic information—but it leads the stylist to know what’s going on in their life,” said Linda Giambattista, the executive director and co-founder of Taylor’s Closet. “When the big curtain closes, they feel free to tell us everything because it’s like they’re behind a protective curtain. Most of the girls that come here are victims of sexual, verbal or physical abuse. Those are the girls we are trying to identify and get into one of our programs, because in the programs is where we actually start unraveling what is happening.”

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In the second phase of the program, Awaken, is when some of the unraveling can begin. Awaken consists of ten weeks of group meals, small groups, topical discussions and art projects. In the third phase of the program, Blossom, girls are assigned an individual mentor who helps them develop life goals and create a plan for their future. The mentor serves as a nurturing figure, helping the girl make decisions in her life and begin to find purpose.

In all three phases, art is a major therapeutic component. As a Taylor’s Closet art facilitator and professional artist, Felicia Fish says art unlocks something in the girls, helping them to get in touch with parts of themselves that might otherwise be inaccessible.

“I think there is a healing aspect to art—like a therapy,” said Felicia Fish, “For me, art is very conceptual, where I can kind of process. Things will start coming up that you might not have seen to be there, but as you’re working through a process, you start realizing. As you’re processing through art, you need to process through your own heart.”

Getting to the heart, softening it, opening it and exploring it, is the goal at Taylor’s Closet.

Going Mobile

In addition to the programs at the Taylor’s Closet boutique, Taylor’s Closet has started a pilot program at Fort Lauderdale High School (FLHS), which has been tremendously successful.

“In our pilot year, FLHS was able to provide us with data pertaining to each participating girls’ absences/tardiness, GPA, disciplinary incidents, and severity of infractions,” said Linda. “Of those who experienced changes throughout the 2014-2015 school year while enrolled in the TC program, when compared to

the 2013-2014 school year without the program, 100 percent had a decrease in absences and tardiness, 93 percent had an increase in GPA, 100 percent had a decrease in disciplinary incidents, and 80 percent had a decrease in the severity of their infractions. As we increase the number of girls served at the school to 100, we will continue to collect similar data to measure the impact we are making in the coming years.”

The data was so encouraging that Linda dreamed up a way to make Taylor’s Closet more accessible and mobile. The Bloom Bus, which is currently being renovated and will be unveiled in January, will eventually visit five schools a week to expand Taylor’s reach.

Find out more about Taylor’s Closet at taylorscloset.org

ABOVE left art projects RIGHT dining together

