

Historical move at a historical time for Oakridge's Fashions



There was once a time where Deb Clark lived a fast-paced commuter life. She would get on to the GO Train from her residence in Aurora, steamroll down to the core of the city of Toronto to work a strenuous day and then take the train back home.

But when Ms. Clark encountered a health scare in 2014, she changed the lens on her camera and began looking at things differently. She wondered if it was time to make a change in her life?

While recovering, she volunteered at the charitable second-hand clothing store at Trinity Anglican Church called The Clothes Closet. It inspired her to set aside the corporate life. That is when she purchased Oakridge Outfitters six years ago, changing the name to Oakridge's Fashions in 2017 to better reflect the products sold.

In her past, she was always an avid shopper. Her mother would take her down to the Oshawa Shopping Centre as a child and the two spent precious hours wandering through the stores.

"She was my first customer when we bought the store, and while she is no longer with me I know she looks over our store and me," Clark said.

Considering herself as a steward of the business instead of being an owner, things got tricky when COVID-19 hit.

"I had endless emails from women during the initial closures - 'Please Save Our Store'. It was incredibly touching and encouraging. I began calling these emails our S.O.S. - Save Our Store emails," Ms. Clark said.

"We were blessed by generosity of customers and community at that time. I recall how one gentleman, Keith Houghton, a retired photographer, stepped up to help with our website photo shoots when the operating budget was tight."

Originally located at 14800 Yonge Street in Aurora, Ms. Clark wasn't thinking of making a move until fate stepped in this past November. Although she loved the previous location, she believed it was in the best interest to move for a more secure future and she found it, right in the heart of downtown Aurora.

"When we stepped into the door, what did we see? Potential? and really good bones," Ms Clark emphasized.

"A big part of my decision to move revolved around whether my customers would like it. Will this suit my customers? Am I doing the right thing by my customers? It was a very difficult decision. But I felt that once we got here, they would approve. Apart from the beautiful historic qualities of this building, it also has the space to allow us to carry more product and more easily run the business. For our customers, they gain customer washrooms, a complimentary coffee station and an exclusive 12-car Oakridge's parking lot."

The building was constructed in 1951 by The Imperial Bank of Canada. Ms. Clark secured photographs of this period from the Archives Department of CIBC and has displayed them throughout the store.

Throughout the Cold War, it was apparently a regional gold depository.

The building has 16 foot ceilings and is 18 inches of solid concrete throughout. There is a hidden manual elevator shaft that is still there and currently operating. There is also an exterior clock high above the front door that was brought back to working order and illuminates at night.

In what she described as a "random alignment," the lease of this historical building, came at the most opportune moment. The Oakridge's Fashions business is celebrating its 25th year in operation.

Last Thursday, in front of Mayor Tom Mrakas, members of Council, the Aurora Chamber of Commerce and many more, Ms. Clark poured the champagne with her family, friends and those who played a huge role in this, to officially host the grand opening.

On the day, Ms. Clark contributed 10 per cent of sales to International Red Cross in support of Ukraine.

Speaking to the attendees, Mayor Mrakas recalled his early conversations with Ms. Clark about the possibility of a move.

"I have to say, when I received the call, I jumped on it right away. She asked me "what do you think of me moving downtown?" explained the Mayor. "I said, "absolutely." I said, "We have to have you in downtown, you would be a tremendous anchor in the revitalization of downtown," said Mayor Mrakas in his speech at the grand opening.

"I can't think of a better person, a better business and a better family, to take over this historic building, continue the historic theme of this 1951 building and carry it forward."

With plenty of parking spots exclusive to Oakridge's customers and room to walk, the building is uniquely aesthetic on the inside. And thankfully, to Ms. Clark, the timing just all worked out.

Ms. Clark, who didn't have any decorators or designers, found the way for the business to make the necessary adjustments.

"I don't have a designing background so when I found myself making decisions along the renovation process, I looked to history to guide me " history of both my industry and this building. I researched the mid-century architectural period, looked up interiors of 1950s department stores, and held steadfast to maintaining the original character of the building."

Ms. Clark and her employees pride themselves on offering services to any woman who walks into the location, no matter who they are.

"I've also always believed style has no size. I can dress a woman of any size. It's just about wearing the right pieces. When she puts back her shoulders and smiles into the big mirror in our fitting room, I'm a happy woman. That's when I know I've done my job," Ms. Clark said.

Ms. Clark cannot stress how important her customers, Town leaders, family, local businesses and great Aurora citizens were in helping save the store during COVID and achieve this large re-location endeavour.

Head on out to the wonderful Oakridge's Fashion store, now located 15195 Yonge Street, just north of Mosley. Parking is in behind and can be accessed off Mosley Street.

By Brock Weir
Editor
Local Journalism Initiative Reporter