

## Final Copy

Kate Goldwater is not afraid to make a statement. She brought this ethos to her thrift-shop AuH20 in the East Village when she opened on October 1, 2006. She called it a “thriftique,” a cross between a thrift-shop and a boutique, as she curated each item on the rack. Nothing was off-limits, not fast-fashion or fur. Her mission was to extend the life-cycles of as much clothing as she could, and to make sure her prices were low enough that everybody could engage.

Now she makes a statement again, as she closes her storefront for good on the anniversary of its opening. Although the shop will continue online, AuH20 is one of many small businesses in New York City impacted by the coronavirus pandemic.

“I think I could have done it if there was an end in sight,” Goldwater said.

AuH20 was a thrift-shop staple in a neighborhood that loves second-hand. It was best known for its low prices (\$3 earrings, \$5 dresses), handmade items and inclusive sizes. Goldwater wove sustainable principles through every part of the shopping experience. She even solicited plastic bags and old shipping boxes from neighbors to package her customers’ purchases.

Within two to three weeks of closing in March per the city’s order, she knew hard choices were ahead. She saw how other businesses were going under across the country, but was determined to make her business work.

“I remember thinking well, that would never happen to me,” she said. “I’m a McDonald’s during the recession, I’m going to be fine.”

Even when the city said it was okay to reopen, she knew if her sales weren’t what they used to be she could only get by for so long on savings and one \$1,200 check from the government. She did not apply for the PPP loan because she could not put the money toward expenses the loan needed to supplement, she said.

She also has two children under 5-years-old with sporadic childcare, and her husband works full-time. She has been outspoken about president Donald J. Trump’s failures to control the impact of the pandemic in the country, and even cites him as the reason the store closed its doors on her website. The homepage reads: “We were located at 84 East 7th Street in New York's East Village for 14 years, then closed in October 2020 due to Donald Trump's horrible handling of the coronavirus pandemic.”

As of December 2019, right before the pandemic reached the states, over 70 percent of consumers reported an interest in buying secondhand, according to a Mintel report on the impact

of Covid-19 on retail and commerce from June 2020. One principal issue arose from the report, however, that more than 55 percent of consumers were concerned about the cleanliness of pre-owned items.

To address this concern and assure customers that stores are safe to shop in during a pandemic could compound challenges for thrift stores, but overall, attitudes around buying second-hand have changed significantly since its inception as an industry.

When the first Goodwill was established in Brooklyn in 1910, three-fourths of New York City's population were either immigrants or first generation Americans, and the first consumers of second-hand clothes were largely foreign-born. As a result, middle-class consumers were hesitant to engage in commerce that was deemed unclean and lowly. The ties that Goodwill and the Salvation Army created between Christian ideals and secondhand shopping was a catalyst in the acceptance of thrift shopping in American consumer culture, according to Dr. Jennifer Le Zotte's book *From Goodwill to Grunge: A History of SecondHand Styles and Alternative Economies*.

Goldwater developed a passion for the second-hand scene from a young age. She preferred the Salvation Army and her local thrift shop over the brand-name retailers her middle-school classmates flocked to.

"I was never a mall girl," she said.

That interest stayed with her in her studies at the New York University Gallatin School of Individualized Study, where she explored art, social justice and the environment through clothing. She even ran a business out of her dorm, making and altering items for her peers. At 22-years-old she invested in her first storefront, a 100 sq. ft. space next to where AuH20 would establish its roots. (It was when the neighboring vintage store closed during the 2008 recession that she worked out a deal with the landlord to move into the space, double the size, but without doubling the rent).

"My prices were always low enough that people could always still shop with us, which I think is the same for the pandemic," Goldwater said.

With the advent of Instagram in 2010, Goldwater began to post on the company page, but regarded it more as maintaining a social media presence than facilitating another way for her customers to buy. In 2019, when her customers began asking to purchase pictured items, that presence morphed into an Instagram store. Goldwater hired someone to do Instagram full-time in early 2020.

Adele Meyer, executive director of the National Association of Resale Professionals (NARTS) said that adapting to an online business model proved both crucial and even beneficial for some of her members.

“We had some members who were doing better on live Facebook [than] when their stores were open because they didn’t have employees, they were doing it themselves and didn’t have such overhead,” Meyer said.

Now, AuH20 has plans to take advantage of the many apps such as Depop and Poshmark that facilitate second-hand clothing purchases. When Goldwater announced her decision to close on Instagram on September 9, hundreds of comments from shoppers and friends poured in. Many comments recounted memories of browsing the store. Others credited Goldwater with helping shoppers find a sense of identity, belonging and community in the city.

“This shop is part of my story here in NYC,” Louise Mira commented.

“I can’t tell you how sad this makes me,” Abhilasha Sinha commented, a regular patron of AuH20. “Your store was more than just a store--it was a cornerstone of my life in New York so far.”

Goldwater remembered how one shopper gave her inspiration for her wedding vows, how the store reunited old friends and created new roommates, how she and her employees were always ready to offer recommendations for a good ice cream or a coffee.

“I think the fact that we all supported each other and love each other and wanted to help each other, that is really tough,” Goldwater said. “I think that the East Village was really unique in that way.”