

LivingArts

Deep discounts, creative design make Allston's Designers Circus a go-to fashion destination

Shopping at the 3,000-square foot warehouse is as much about the experience as the clothes.

By **Betsy Groban** Globe correspondent



Pamela Wise, KO, and Natalie Dion at Designers Circus in Allston. BETSY GROBAN

For Kathleen O'Neill (known as KO), it's always been about the clothes. She began making clothes for her Barbie doll when she was 5 years old and by the age of 10, she was sewing all of her own clothes. Now she's the "ringmistress" (a.k.a. founder and owner) of Designers Circus, an Allston-based go-to discount fashion destination for women.

KO trained as a graphic designer, with a minor in business; early in her career, she worked in advertising. But on a vacation with a friend to Guatemala, she fell in love with Guatemalan textiles, and started Blanco Nero, a line of handwoven, hand-loomed, hand-dyed contemporary clothing for women made in Guatemala and sold at pop-up stores in the Boston area.

The idea for Designers Circus, which also began as a pop-up, was born more than 20 years ago, when KO was recovering from a serious illness. She and her husband and business partner, William Morris, conceived of a place to sell the overstock from small, independent designers at deep discounts — 50 percent to 90 percent below standard retail.

KO only works with designers "with the highest standards whose clothes I love and believe my customers will love." Currently there are more than 70 mostly female designers represented in the 3,000-square-foot warehouse, both national (Noblu, AMB, Iridium) and international, such as Alembika (Israel), Grizas (England), and Two Danes (take a guess).

"I love my customers and want them to feel comfortable and beautiful in the clothes they wear," she said.

At Designers Circus, shopping is a social experience. Women come with their friends, their sisters, their book group. The customers are loyal and enthusiastic, and report that when they wear clothes from Designers Circus, they never see anyone else wearing the same thing.

Recalling a bygone era of Filene's Basement and Loehmann's, the changing room is communal, a place where women of all shapes and sizes freely exchange frank opinions about clothes and many other things. For some shoppers, the intimacy of the dressing room is one of the best parts of the experience.

Local artist and architect Wendy Prellwitz goes to "the Circus" when she "needs a refresh." She's especially fond of the Alembika brand, and refers to Designers Circus as "a fun place with crazy, great prices."

Designers Circus is also a good citizen. KO and her staff (all former customers) offer "private shopping" to groups of women after hours and donate 10 percent of sales made during those events to a nonprofit chosen by the customer. KO is also a partner in sustainable fashion; unsold stock is donated to carefully curated local charities including Dress for Success, Second Chances, and Uncommon Threads.

For Christine Cleary, a longtime shopper, Designers Circus is the perfect antidote to online shopping, huge impersonal stores, or pricey little boutiques.

"The abundant selection encourages me to make bolder choices for myself," she said. "Designers Circus lifts you up — it's a great destination when you need a boost."