

Pop-up gallery shop at Outback & Company this weekend

By Aly Livingston

Outback & Company sits vacant, on the side of a busy highway in Caledon village ? a whisper to the history of a bygone era ? now struggling to exist as something more than a commuter thoroughfare.

The building was erected in 1851 and housed the town's first telephone exchange before becoming a private residence. Most importantly to me though, this structure was a space where, over the course of 25 years, I worked alongside my mother.

I remember the evening my Mom announced to my father over dinner. ?Peter, we bought a building,? and the stress and excitement that ensued. I can recall the renovation, new names being thrown into conversations and dusty coveralls in the laundry room. My sisters and I felt the absence of Mom's presence in the home after school and on weekends, but most vividly, I recall the fashion!

Open in 1987 and christened Outback & Company, my mother and her friend Lynda had pioneered a perfect hybrid of clothing/gift shop to suit the needs of the town's residents. Looking back, perhaps it fulfilled a desire within my 12-year-old soul too, for a Saturday afternoon at the store beat out riding lessons, and was certainly more interesting than babysitting.

The work could be daunting at times. I still feel overwhelmed when I think of the towers of boxes the UPS man would unload and my incredulity of where to put them. I learned that if I was ever going to get through it, I just had to buckle down and get to it. And so, box-by-box, the work was done. These days were also like Christmas, for once opened, these boxes seldom disappointed, revealing the softest of knits by Canadian designers, a shiny Hillary Radley Parka, rich corduroys in the colours of the season. I would carefully check these items off the invoice before finding my sizes and scurrying to the change room to try them on ? slipping the rest on to hangers or in one of the many wicker baskets placed throughout the store.

Yes, there were hours spent in front of the mirror, studying colour, texture, line and form. I can recall the years by their palettes and hemlines; the dusty rose and forest green of 1987; the rust and shocking purples of 1990; and not to be forgotten, the Stirrup pant of 1989.

For the women in my family, the store was our closet, and there was a different outfit each week. Many of our customers could say the same too. A friend's mother once told me: ?You can always spot a woman who shops at Outback ? she always looks a little more unique and put-together.?

To this day, I still feel this is true.

While the store was most certainly a place of fashion, it was also a respite for conversation ? a sacred space of sharing stories, ideas and laughter and losses. Perhaps the store motto could have been ?Talk, look good, feel better.? And talk we did, and look good? Oh yes, we most certainly did. And over the years, fashion and friendship prevailed. Our customers became our friends and our friends became our models, our mentors our helpers.

I know that while Mom and Lynda felt it was time to retire, they would miss the community of people who congregated at Outback and Company. I wonder if the community misses them too?

While the building sits for sale and in the spirit of community, Mom and Lynda have given me permission to host a pop-up gallery shop May 25 and 26 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Select fashions from Outback's final season(s) will be for sale along side a curation of art, screen prints, antiques and body products by myself, and some dear friends of mine.

And perhaps, the apple doesn't fall that far from the tree.

Fran and Lynda will be in attendance too ? please come, we'd love to see you

