

**THE COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE INSIDER**  
**BY O'NEILL REALTY ADVISORS, LLC**  
**May 15, 2009**

**Retail is Thriving in Georgetown?!**

Recent government data shows retail sales were down both in March and April across the country this year. April marked the second consecutive month of falling sales, after two months of increases that had snapped a six-month pullback last seen in the early 1980s. Literally, every day I pick up a newspaper or open an email about the status of the economy, I read another retailer has announced they are closing. Despite all this, there is a Georgetown business that is still generating a profit and continues to succeed. Since 1933 the Christ Child Society of Washington, DC has owned and operated their retail business located in Georgetown at 1427 Wisconsin Avenue. The Opportunity Shop is a retail consignment store that was created by the non-profit Society. The Christ Child Society was officially established 122 years ago and is the second oldest non-profit in Washington, DC. The Society was founded by Mary Virginia Merrick, a lay woman who was severely disabled due to a childhood accident. Their mission is to support the material, educational, and emotional needs of children of the inner city. Through the efforts of nearly sixty volunteers and staff, the Opportunity Shop provides the Society with much of necessary funds needed to accomplish their goals and facilitate their social programs. One hundred percent of the sales proceeds from the shop go to serve the needs of underserved children.

The Opportunity Shop, or the "Op Shop" as it's known to some, started as a thrift shop selling most clothing for women. After many years, several founding members decided to transition the shop to consignment in order to raise more money for the various programs they provide. "Part of the reason for the transition was realizing the value of the real estate and the location of the shop. We could no longer sell five dollar dresses since our volume of customers was growing considerably," the shop's consignment manager Ann Le Noir told me. Ann has been working at the shop for nearly thirty years and has watched the shop evolve. Today the shop is a high-end consignment store, specializing in fine jewelry, sterling silver, crystal, art and furniture among other things. On any given day, you'll see a constant flow of customers, many of whom are their once or twice a month looking for bargains. There are several reasons for this success. According to the Society's executive director, Kathleen Curtin, "overall business has remained steady because of the competitive prices offered for high quality goods as well as the new administration's move to a more "green" perspective.

Consumers prefer to buy second hand (recycled) items and are more cost conscious.” In a time when business should be down, the Op Shop seems to be benefitting from the economic downturn.

The shop takes merchandise on consignment by appointment and when the items sell, the owner receives 60% of the sales price for all non-furniture items. Furniture merchandise is sold with 50% split. Most of the items are sold on a reduced price basis, meaning the longer the items stays in the shop the lower the price is reduced. The turnaround time to move the inventory has improved dramatically over the past four years. What used to take multiple years now takes months. Many items are donated as well from generous individuals. Recently, donations to the shop have increased by 10% from last year. This may be because people are opting to give items, instead of cash, to charitable organizations, Curtin explained. Revenues for the shop have remained relatively consistent over the past year, despite the economic downturn and the impact it has had on retail. Another explanation for the steady revenue is the fact that people are also trying to make ends meet financially. The shop provides an easy way to get cash by selling disposable items or belongings. Quite often customers decide to sell grandma’s old sterling silver or a beautiful painting. Much of the merchandise has an interesting history associated with it appealing to many of the customers.

Another reason for the success of the shop is attributed to the tireless volunteers. The combination of volunteer “employees” and profits generated from donated or consigned merchandise create an unusual business structure that happens to work, even in the worst economy in nearly seventy years. The shop has a rotation of workers who donate their time. In fact, the workers are often second or third generation volunteers whose families have been affiliated with the shop in one way or the other since its inception. This creates a warm, neighborhood feel to the place and is evident when you pay a visit. To many folks the shop offers a sense of social mission and camaraderie centered on helping needy children.

Stop by and visit the Opportunity Shop. Check out their website (<http://www.christchilddc.org/>) for hours of operation and to learn more about this wonderful organization.

**\* O’Neill Realty Advisors, LLC (ORA) is a full service commercial real estate brokerage and advisory company focusing on Georgetown and upper Northwest, DC. You can reach Andrew O’Neill at 202-741-9405 or [andrew@oneillrealtyadvisors.com](mailto:andrew@oneillrealtyadvisors.com).**