



Left to right: A photo of Nick Luminelli sits high on a top shelf, overlooking the store. Melissa Kevlahan and Laura Luminelli, front, stand with volunteers Patrick Bubniak, Maria Rivera, Karen Helmsstetter, Vicky Sullivan, and Jenny Clancy in the original storefront. Melissa Kevlahan snaps a photo of a dress that will be added to the online shopping site.

## More Than a Thrift Store, a One-Stop Shop for Hope

Story by ELLEN WILKOWE  
Photos by KAREN FUCITO

The racks are full of the shirts off your backs—as well as the slacks, dresses, shoes and any number of accessories. And all items are waiting to find new lives with those who need them most.

This is the mission of Nick's Hope, a nonprofit organization full of fashion, faith and well, hope, which offers free clothing to anyone in need.

The nonprofit was founded in May of 2020 as a way for Hopatcong resident Laura Luminelli to honor her son, Nick Luminelli, who died of an asthma attack in 2017 at the age of 31.

With friends Melissa Kevlahan of Oak Ridge and Sherry Guzman of Oak Ridge, the three women collaborated on how to pay forward Nick Luminelli's legacy of kindness. As the story goes, he gave up his jacket to a homeless man in Dover on a cold night.

"I was online one night and saw that a woman had put out a message about a homeless man named Eddy in Dover," she said. "She was asking people to try and find him and help."

Luminelli sprang into action and called her son. The duo packed up some items and set out on a search in the wee hours of the morning. After nearly three hours, they located Eddy in a church.

"Nick had an army fatigue coat on—he loved his fatigues," Luminelli said. "Eddy never said a word but pointed at the coat as if to say that's the one he wanted."

Without hesitation, said Luminelli, her son gave Eddy the coat off his back.

That was two months prior to his death, said Luminelli, who described her oldest son as a fun-loving, kind and generous all-around good guy.

"He lived his life the way he wanted to live it," she said. "He was a free spirit."

Nick's Hope was run out of Kevlahan's basement, with donations coming from three

counties thanks to a Facebook post put out in March of 2020. To work around the shutdown due to the pandemic, clothes were picked up from people's driveways, said Guzman. The women, along with a handful of other volunteers, washed and sorted the clothing. By May, the group was working with social service agencies, churches and food pantries distributing the clothes through outdoor pop-up markets in areas most in need.

Once the cold weather set in and still unable to distribute at indoor venues, the women took the operation online with a website for free clothes.

There was no shortage of clothing. "People were home cleaning out their closets during lockdown, and we would go to their homes and pick up their bags at the end of their driveways and take them to my basement," Kevlahan said.

With so much inventory—some of it top of the line—the women were looking to expand beyond the pop-up markets and the online operation, and the idea of a thrift store was born.

What began as a below ground venture in Kevlahan's basement emerged above ground two years later as a buzzing brick-and-mortar thrift store.

The organization and its mission were moving ahead full steam until tragedy struck again when Guzman contracted COVID and passed away in February of 2022.

The same way the three women celebrated Nick Luminelli, Kevlahan and Luminelli paid homage to their friend when they affectionately named the sales-side of the organization after Guzman referring to it as the "Very Sherry Boutique." It opened in April of last year in a small storefront at 5716 Berkshire Valley Road in Oak Ridge.

"Sherry was the original hippie chick," said Kevlahan. "So, whenever we saw something,

we'd say, 'Oh, this is so very Sherry.'"

The nonprofit is now run out of the Very Sherry Boutique store, which just recently moved to a larger storefront a few doors down in the same strip mall.

"We're not here to make money. We just want to pay the rent and keep the lights on," said Kevlahan of the thrift store.

The warm and welcoming space is where paying customers leave with full bags and full hearts.

Such was the case for Oak Ridge resident Cathy Struck, one of a steady stream of regular shoppers who learned about the store from her regular visits to a bagel shop located in the same strip mall.

"I stopped in one day and Melissa told me the story and I came back and dropped off clothes and now come about once a week [to shop]," she said. "It's a great cause and you can find wonderful things."

Such as?  
"I found a fur coat here for a dollar," she said. And yes, a real full coat.

On a recent Thursday, Struck scored two dresses. Just as she was about to check out, she was, well, struck by a third dress: a \$6 navy polka-dot, flared ensemble that she just had to purchase.

"If it doesn't fit me, it will fit my daughter," she said, adding it to her collection.

Kara Vincelli, of Lake Hopatcong, was also scouting for dresses. She learned about the store on Facebook, and as a social worker, applauds the cause.

"They share all the info with the community [on Facebook] and do great things," she said, clutching two dresses.

Looking for a bridal gown or prom dress? Prices are between \$25 and \$30. Need some high heels to match? Think \$5 to \$7 for Madden Girl and Vince Camuto. Costume jewelry? Flawless earrings: \$2.

Oak Ridge resident Kathy Seeger landed herself a sage green Gap cardigan for \$4.25. New to the area, she was visiting the store for the second time, her sister in tow.

While the store caters primarily to women, it also offers some items for men and children at equally low prices.

Both the store and the nonprofit accept gently used clothing, plus accessories and shoes. Items are categorized by 15 dedicated volunteers who wash and sort the clothes at their homes.

Damaged goods are donated to Goodwill or the Salvation Army. Name-brand clothes are set aside for the thrift store. The rest are tagged and photographed for the pop-up markets and online shopping.

Sparta resident Jenny Clancy is one such dedicated volunteer who answered the Facebook call in the fall of 2020 to drop off donations and volunteer.

"I called to volunteer and showed up at [Kevlahan's] house and there were racks of clothes to pack up for online orders," she said.

With her daughter away at college, the opportunity filled Clancy's case of empty nest syndrome while fueling her passion of working with clothes by assisting with pricing, photographing the items and dressing the mannequins.

"Prices are set to move," she said. "We're not looking to make money. We want the community to come back in, so we keep the prices low."

Clancy can also be found at the cash register in the front end of the boutique.

Due to the overwhelming success, Nick's Hope and Very Sherry Boutique moved to a bigger space just a few doors from their original storefront location in late August.

The larger site allows the organization to display more items in the boutique, as well as open their doors to organizations such as the Girl Scouts, whose members need volunteer hours. Nick's Hope already partners with Jefferson Township High School students with special needs, who help out once a week.

"We just needed a bigger place to help us be more organized," Luminelli said. "So far this has worked. Melissa came up with every idea. She's made it like a well-oiled machine."

The expanded space allows for more volunteer opportunities for residents with developmental disabilities who live in group homes such as Rebecca's Homestead in Wantage and Katie's House in Newton. The boutique is already on board for supplying the clothing for an upcoming fashion show at Katie's House.

In addition to Nick's Hope, Luminelli has one of her own. "My real hope is that there won't be a need for this and we just do the boutique," she said.

Nick and Sherry would probably very much agree.

"He's smiling down and saying, 'Good job mamma,'" she said.



SEPTIC SYSTEMS  
INSTALLED AND REPAIRED  
PUMPING AVAILABLE  
•  
RESIDENTIAL  
AND COMMERCIAL  
•  
SITE WORK  
•  
FILL DIRT  
•  
TRUCKING

# AL Hutchins EXCAVATING

LAKE HOPATCONG, NJ

973-663-2142



973-663-2142 • 973-713-8020

CELL