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Retail Notebook: Give kids a blast from the past

Parents have a vintage remedy when 'retro-virus' strikes

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By **CECELIA GOODNOW**
P-I REPORTER

Sometimes there's just no substitute for a fringed cowgirl skirt. Or vintage saddle shoes. Or one of those clip-on bow ties immortalized in family photos of the 1950s.

When "retro-virus" strikes, creative parents can outfit their brood at Retroactive Kids, which today celebrates its grand opening at its new location in Columbia City. The party, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., will include cake, door prizes, goodie bags and crafts.

Filled with vintage and reproduction children's clothing and toys, Retroactive Kids shares space with WS Kids Salon and offers a backroom Art Lab for children's sewing and craft classes.

The shop is a labor of love for co-owners Beth Reyes, 42, and Trisha Gilmore, 36, who had enthusiasm but no retail experience when they opened three years ago in West Seattle.

They were just "two moms that love vintage," Reyes said.

Though they met through Capitol Hill Presbyterian Church, where they both have worked as administrators, their friendship deepened after they gave birth to premature daughters at the same hospital, at about the same time, five years ago.

"She was one of the few supports I had," said Gilmore, who now has a 3-year-old son as well. "I didn't know anybody else who had a premature baby."

Looking for work-life balance, the new moms eventually took the retail plunge, essentially job-sharing by working alternate days at the shop. They opened on a shoestring -- less than \$10,000.

"We didn't take a lot of loans," Reyes said, "and still had money coming in" from other employment.

With the end of their West Seattle lease, and the landlord's plans to sell the building, they went scouting for a new site. Already, Columbia City has proved an ideal match.

"Columbia City is way funkier and more interested (in vintage) than West Seattle," said Gilmore, who with her pink-streaked hair and delicate nose ring colors the shop's artistic sensibilities.

Located in the restored storefront of the old Neighborhood Service Center, Retroactive Kids is a good fit for the historic community, which, on May 3, will celebrate the centennial of its incorporation into Seattle.



 zoom

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Twins Madelyn and Tess Turner, 4, entertain themselves in the children's play area of Retroactive Kids while their mothers shops.

"The community involvement down there is great," said WS Kids salon owner Sophia Hill, who expanded beyond her West Seattle location at the invitation of her former retail neighbors.

"I want to stay with Retroactive Kids for as long as possible," Hill said. "They're a fun bunch to be around."

The boutique opened quietly a few weeks ago and, because of historic preservation regulations, doesn't yet have a permanent sign -- just a sidewalk sandwich board.

Even so, the owners say they did more business in their first week at Columbia City than in the entire month of January in West Seattle.

"We just didn't have the foot traffic that this area does," said Reyes, who handles the money crunching. She predicts that the shop, with two parttime employees, will soon turn a profit. As for the owners, Reyes said happily, "This will be the first month we draw a paycheck."

It helps that Retroactive Kids is next door to the popular Columbia City Bakery. Jaylon Von Mertens, a young mom from the neighborhood, happened upon the boutique during a bakery run the other day and came away impressed.

"They have great products," she said, browsing with her 9-month-old son, Ezra. "It's just exciting to see more independent businesses come into the neighborhood."

Toys at Retroactive Kids include vintage and reproduction puzzles, spinning tops and tea sets, old board games and -- in a nod to changing culinary sensibilities -- wooden playsets with pretend sushi. "Realistic chopping sound as you cut your sushi rolls!" the box says.

Surprisingly in this high-tech era, kids who visit the shop are especially fascinated with read-along, audiotaped storybooks and plastic Fisher-Price record players from the 1970s, which sell for about \$45.

"It's so interesting to get the kids' reaction," Reyes said. "Most of them have never seen a record player before."

Such treasures are getting harder to find -- especially for resale -- in the age of eBay and "Antiques Roadshow."

"We try to keep our prices low," Reyes said, "so it does take a lot of digging and creativity to find things."

Vintage clothing includes children's saddle shoes and high-topped sneakers, OshKosh overalls, jeans, dainty dresses and little-boy shorts-and-blazer sets for dress-up. Most items are well under \$20. For mom's shopping pleasure, the shop also carries some vintage handbags, aprons and enameled pins from the 1950s and '60s.

Other attractions include new clothing, changing pads, nursing drapes, baby leg warmers and other accessories designed by Seattle "mamapreneurs" -- women who combine cottage industries with motherhood.



zoom

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Beth Reyes, left, and Trisha Gilmore, co-owners of Retroactive Kids, show off tutus they sell in their store which they advertise as "one of a kind, and classic."

Two popular items are soft-leather toddler shoes by "See Kai Run," an internationally known firm started by a Columbia City mom, and ZuZu Petals, a stunning line of vintage-fabric dresses and coats by local designer Lily Hotchkiss.

The store's extrememakeover decor now reflects its festive wares, thanks to weekend work parties that transformed the gray-green warren of office cubicles and fluorescent lights into 1,600 square feet of wide-open, tomato-red walls. Blue dragonfly kites dangle from an immense skylight that is finally open to public view.

It was a lot of work, but Gilmore and Reyes, true to their shoestring origins, kept their budget -- and the prospect of looming profitability -- firmly in mind.

"We didn't have to pay anyone," Reyes joked, "except in pizza and beer."

IF YOU GO

Retroactive Kids

4859 Rainier Ave. S., Seattle

HOURS: Monday, noon-6 p.m.; Tuesday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.; Sunday, 10 a.m.-3 p.m.
Extended hours May 2-Oct. 31: Open till 7 p.m. on Wednesday and till 9 p.m. on the first Friday of each month.

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retroactivekids.com

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