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February 2014

Sister Act for Charity

Paradise Valley Siblings Plan Fashion Gala to Aid Women

Siblings Working Together to Help Empower Women

Entrepreneurial Paradise Valley sisters co-chair annual fashion gala to benefit nonprofit founded by two sisters.

by Jim Brophy
Editor

Tess Loo remembers the chance meeting at the Fresh Start Women's Foundation's resource center in Phoenix quite well. It left an impression on the Paradise Valley resident.

Loo had been working on a photography project, taking black and white photos of the faces of Fresh Start, both the women who turn to the foundation for help and the volunteers who aid them.

She recalls one day when she visited the Jewell McFarland Lewis Fresh Start Women's Resource Center to take photos. She was taking out her camera equipment and not really looking around as she came to the door.

"There was this beautiful person there holding the door for me, and I looked up to see she was clearly a burn victim," Loo said. "She had no face left and she was missing a limb and it had not been repaired properly. And yet, she smiled at me. My heart was so full that this woman was going through the doors of the resource center to ask for help."

Loo said many women who come to the resource center have suffered abuse, violence, heartache and pain, and they are

finding their voice again. While working on the photography project, Loo heard some amazing stories talking to the women at the center.

"You hear these stories of 'I lived on the street, I lost my children, now I have an apartment and I have my children back.'"

That is a big reason that when she and her sister, Ann Siner, were asked to co-chair the 2014 Fresh Start Fashion Gala, the foundation's major annual fundraiser, it was an easy decision.

Siner, who serves on Fresh Start's board, is also a big supporter of the foundation. "You just can't picture all the ways it helps women," she said.

This year's Fresh Start Fashion Gala will take place on the evening of Saturday, Feb. 22, at the Arizona Biltmore resort in Phoenix. The charity gala is expected to sell out with about 800 people, with the goal of raising \$1 million. That's more than half the foundation's operating funds for the year, Siner said. The event netted close to a million last year.

The 2014 gala will feature a cocktail reception, a gourmet dinner, the Founder's Award presentation and a breathtaking fashion show, hosted by Saks Fifth Avenue with both male and female models, followed by entertainment and dancing. The Biltmore foyer will be surrounded by an art gallery depicting the experience, strength and hope of 5,000 women helped by Fresh Start.

For the Paradise Valley sisters, Tess Loo and Ann Siner, collaborating on a fashion-based project is no big stretch since they already work together at the recycled designer apparel chain My Sister's Closet. Siner, the CEO, founded the business 22 years ago with their other sister Jennifer Siner, and Loo

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People gather for a preview of the 2014 Fresh Start Fashion Gala held in November. The gala itself will be held Feb. 22 at the Arizona Biltmore. Photo courtesy of Darrylee Cohen/Haute Photography



Sisters Tess Loo, left, and Ann Siner enjoy working together, whether it's in the family business at My Sister's Closet or co-chairing a fundraiser. Photo by Jim Brophy



Models take to the runway during the Saks Fifth Avenue fashion show at last year's Fashion Gala. The 2014 event will feature male and female fashion. Photo courtesy of Darrylee Cohen/Haute Photography

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joined My Sister's Closet a few years ago as the chief fashion stylist. Siner said they now have 14 stores in Arizona and California, including Scottsdale, Phoenix, Chandler and San Diego, with 250 employees. "So we're busy," Siner said with a laugh.

Adding even more to the symmetry of this year's fundraiser is the fact that Fresh Start Women's Foundation was founded by two other Paradise Valley sisters, Pat Petznick and Beverly Stewart, in 1992, a year after My Sister's Closet originated.

"We think it's fun that there's a sister connection, that sisters

are co-chairing an event for an organization founded by two really outstanding sisters, Pat and Beverly," Ann Siner said. "We've always felt passionate about helping women."

So when Petznick asked the sisters to co-chair the annual Fresh Start Fashion Gala, she couldn't say no. "She is one of the most remarkable women you'll ever meet," Siner said.

Loo said that Petznick started Fresh Start with her sister more than 20 years ago.

"At the time they owned a hair salon and they would have women come in and they sometimes found themselves offering extra assistance," Loo said.

Sometimes that assistance was simply helping women build self-confidence. The effort grew into the Fresh Start Women's Foundation and the resource center at 1130 E. McDowell Road in Phoenix. More than 25,000 women come through the doors of the center each year, Loo said.

"I feel they help everyone who walks through the door. There are about 5,000-plus women who go through the program, and come out with kind of a degree in self-confidence and starting over."

Siner added that Fresh Start does not discriminate in the women they assist.

"They help women in all walks of life, from very poor women all the way to affluent women, whether they are going through a divorce, they've lost their job or are having problems with their children. They like to say they are giving a hand up rather than a hand out," she said.

Faces of Fresh Start Women

5,000

The Fresh Start Fashion Gala promises an uninterrupted dinner amid 5,000 Fresh Start faces aglow in the dining room.

Successful Sister Team

Siblings Ann and Jennifer Siner and Tess Loo work together at the clothing chain My Sister's Closet.

When Ann Siner and sister Tess Loo aren't volunteering as co-chairs of the Fresh Start Fashion Gala, they are hard at work with fellow sister Jennifer Siner on their successful recycled clothing chain, My Sister's Closet, which now has 14 stores in two states.

The idea began 22 years ago when Ann Siner was working as director of marketing for PetSmart. During a business trip in Dallas she stopped into a "pretty nice" resale store. When she returned to Arizona, she talked to sister Jennifer, who had just graduated from college, about starting one here. "When we looked at resale or consignment stores around here, we called them the three Ds: dark, dirty, dingy," Ann recalls. "We said our goal is to turn them into the three Cs: cute, clean, current. We thought why can't it look like a new boutique?"

Ann and Jennifer opened the first store in Phoenix in 1991, and since have expanded with two stores in Scottsdale, one in Chandler and two stores in California in San Diego and El Camino Real. At many of the locations they have added My Sister's Attic, selling recycled home furnishings, and Well Suited, offering men's fashion resale. The three sisters make up the executive team of My Sister's Closet, with Ann as CEO and co-founder, Jennifer as co-founder, and Tess as the chief fashion stylist. —**Jim Brophy**



More than 25,000 women come through the doors of the Fresh Start Women's Foundation every year, according to Ann Siner, the co-founder of My Sister's Closet who also sits on the Fresh Start board.
Photo courtesy of Fresh Start Women's Foundation



Joelle Hadley, the emcee of last year's Fresh Start Women's Gala, talks with the 2013 Founders Award recipient Carole Moreno.

Photo courtesy of Darrylee Cohen/Haute Photography

Loo recalls taking classes at the resource center herself, and sitting next to a woman with a PhD on one side and a woman who stands in line at the food bank for several hours on the other. "If you are a woman in need of just a guiding light, if you will, that is the place to go."

The sisters want the gala to provide a fun time that avoids the traditional dull fundraiser. "When you're paying \$500 a ticket or more, we want you to come and have your table of guests and really enjoy yourself," Siner said.

"We feel like we've been very lucky with My Sister's Closet and as part of that we like to give back to the community that we are in, whether it's San Diego or here."

Siner serves on several boards of nonprofit organizations, including the Arizona Humane Society, Phoenix Art Museum, Fresh Start and National Council for Defenders of Wildlife.

My Sister's Closet donates all of its unsold products for the thrift stores of these groups, Siner said, which "literally raises hundreds of thousands of dollars each year for these groups."

Anyone wanting to purchase a sponsorship or to reserve a table at the 18th annual Fresh Start Fashion Gala can call Amanda Schmidt at 602-261-7140 or email aschmidt@fswf.org. You can find out more about the nonprofit at freshstart-women.org or phoenix.wehelpwomen.com.

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Upcoming Gala to Benefit Fresh Start

With entrepreneurs and sisters **Ann Siner and Tess Loo** as co-chairs, the 2014 Fresh Start Gala figures to be an exciting and fun event that will help raise money and awareness for the Fresh Start Women's Foundation in Phoenix. This year's event will be held at the Arizona Biltmore on Saturday, Feb. 22.

The theme for this year's Fresh Start Gala will be "Best Gala Ever," featuring a dazzling fashion show, center, cocktail reception, gourmet dinner, Founder's Award presentation, entertainment and dancing. At right, Tess Loo, second from left, is shown at the gala kickoff event in November. Photos courtesy of Darrylee Cohen/Haute Photography



The Fresh Start Fashion Gala Kick Off held in November offered a preview of the exciting 2014 Fresh Start Gala that will be held at the Arizona Biltmore on Saturday, Feb. 22. Sisters Tess Loo and Ann Siner of the My Sister's Closet clothing chain, center, are the co-chairs of this year's fundraiser. The Kick Off brought out a number of supporters, left, and a look at some new fashions, right. The gala will benefit the Fresh Start Women's Foundation nonprofit in Phoenix. (See story, Page 14). Photos courtesy of Darrylee Cohen/Haute Photography