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Special-needs adults learn clothing biz at NE Philly boutique
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JOHNZEE TOOK A break from the breakneck pace of the JFCS Thrift Boutique's back room and said that he and Robin Michaelson are pioneers, which is true.

"Me and Robin are like the founders of this program," said JohnZee, 64, who prefers to use his email name. "JFCS does so much for people with special needs." Michaelson, 46, nodded.

In 2013, when Jewish Family & Children's Services opened the JFCS Thrift Boutique on Frankford Avenue near Tolbut Street in Pennypack Woods, its goal was to offer low-income residents donated clothing, housewares and toys for pennies on the dollar.

Then, in January, JFCS added another layer of caring by making its thrift boutique a job-training site for adults with special needs.

JohnZee and Michaelson, who have attended counseling and life-skills classes at JFCS in Bustleton for many years, are the boutique's first two special-needs trainees, and they are thriving.

The duo formed an island of focused calm in a back room busy with scurrying volunteers and filled with donated clothing that needed to be sorted and examined for damage.

"I live alone with my dog, Harley Jr.," JohnZee said. "We've been together eight years, since he was 10 weeks old. He's a Dogue de Bordeaux. He is a gentle giant."

Much as he loves Harley Jr., JohnZee likes going to work. "I feel good about getting up and getting out in the morning to help here," he said. "I like being with the public. I'm feeling good about myself."

The boutique prides itself on selling name-brand clothing at rock-bottom prices. One of JohnZee's backroom jobs is to check for imperfections.

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Geni Hagelin, who served 600 volunteer hours in the boutique last year and double-checks the clothes before they're put out for sale, overheard JohnZee and told him, "You are my third eye."

JohnZee smiled and said, "Geni's like the fourth eye."

His co-worker, Michaelson, said she's happy to be learning the clothing trade. "I live with my parents," she said. "I've been coming to JFCS for counseling since 1992. And it finally came true that I work in a place like this.

"I can strengthen my skills here and be a really productive person," she said.

Lisa Ney, a JFCS director, said the hope is that after three months of training at the boutique, JohnZee and Michaelson will be able to find similar work in a thrift shop or retail store.

The key, Ney said, is continued support on the job. "A lot of special-needs adults go through training programs, get jobs and then the supports fall off," she said, and the people struggle.

"A nice thing about our boutique is we're primarily run by volunteers, many of whom are retired teachers," Ney said. "They are very patient. They really embrace our clients."

She hopes to find employers who feel the same way about JohnZee and Michaelson, so the two pioneers can move on and new trainees can learn the ropes at the JFCS Thrift Boutique.