

John Zavinski/Herald

The landmark Winner building has always been a traffic magnet for downtown Sharon. It previously housed popular upscale department stores.



Jason Kapusta/Herald

Owners Jim and Donna Winner opened The Winner in Sharon in 1988, fitting the store with finery that includes crystal chandeliers, a grand piano and even a convertible car in the lobby – secured, of course, with The Club steering wheel lock, one of Winner's other claims to fame in the business world.

SHARON

Fashion store is winner for special occasions, charity

By Green Street Press

Most of the world's great enterprises started out small. That includes The Winner, dubbed "the world's largest off-price fashion store."

"We started a small outlet store in Transfer somewhere around 1976 or 1977," said Donna Winner, store owner.

A few years later, she and her husband bought the building in Sharon that once housed department stores Strouss' and The Sharon Store, whose prestige had spread far and wide.

"We opened there on Sept. 15, 1988," Mrs. Winner said. "We started with just the first floor and expanded into the

lower level, then to the second floor. That's the history of the store – there's no more glamour to it."

There is plenty of glamour in the merchandise, however.

"Our claim to fame is special occasion dresses," Mrs. Winner said, "everything from confirmation dresses for small girls to mother-of-the-bridal dresses."

That leaves no doubt about the "fashion" portion of the store's tag line. If you doubt the "world's largest" claim, consider this:

■ More than 8,000 prom dresses are in stock in sizes ranging from zero to 28.

■ Last year, the store sold nearly 7,500 prom dresses.

■ In the 5,000 square feet of space it dedicates to weddings, the store stocks more than 500 gowns in sizes zero to 32, as well as veils, crowns, and other bridal accessories.

■ The store sells about 3,000 mother-of-the-bridal dresses each year.

The store's success stems not only from the huge variety of dresses in stock, but also from their "off-price" approach that compromises neither quality nor variety.

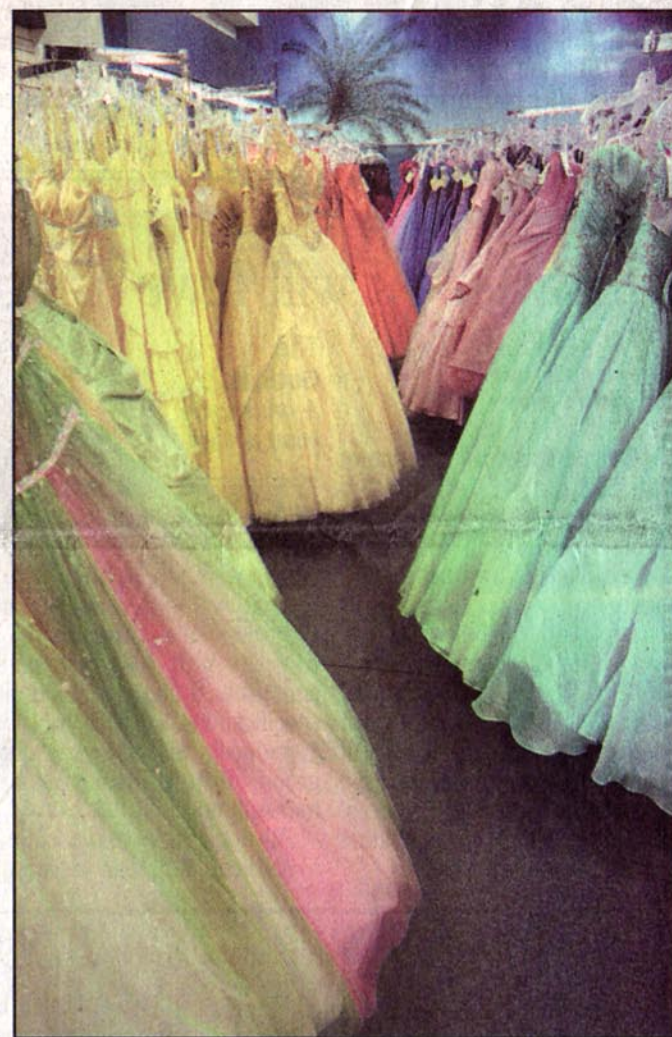
"We have a buyer that is in New York City who buys directly from the manufacturers," Mrs. Winner said. "We buy things at the end of the run. We bought prom dresses maybe three months ago,

which was probably late compared with when the other stores buy them."

Not everything in the store is purchased at a deep discount.

"We buy some of what my husband and I call 'spice,'" Mrs. Winner said, "a few things here and there just to spice up the racks. Maybe we pay a little bit more for them because there's a demand for it. Some people come to the store not so much for the gowns, but more for the sportswear, like in our swimming suits. We have a year-round resort department for those items.

"Also, we sometimes have
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Jason Kapusta/Herald

A wall-to-wall rainbow of dresses fills one of the floors of The Winner. The store is a mecca for shoppers who'll drive 100 miles or more for the perfect prom, homecoming or bridal wear.



Jason Kapusta/Herald file

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Winner

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to buy a size run at a lower discount just because we need it for the reputation of the store."

The store always stocks a good selection of clothing for larger women.

"We're very proud that we have always maintained a very well-stocked 'plus' department. If a woman is size 20, she can find a pretty dress to go to a daughter's wedding, or a granddaughter's wedding, or whatever."

Although the store in downtown Sharon remains The Winner's only outlet, its sales volume shows that its market area extends far beyond the Shenango Valley.

"We do some advertising in Erie, Butler and the Youngstown-Warren market areas," Mrs. Winner said, "and the Web site is really magic. It gets from 18,000 to 20,000 hits

per month. We ship dresses to customers far beyond an 80-mile radius."

Because it is an off-price store, the economic downturn probably has affected The Winner somewhat less than it has hurt other stores.

"Because of the economy, people are looking for the best pricing. We're able to buy at lower prices than a lot of other places, so we can sell at lower prices while maintaining our markup. I think people know that they're going to get value for their dollar when they come to The Winner," she said

The Winner benefits other people besides its customers. All of its profits go to charity.

"We channel them through the Shenango Valley Foundation," Mrs. Winner said. "That way we can effectively help a greater variety people than we could if we contributed to just one charity."

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The Winner is at 32 W. State St. in Sharon. Phone: 724-346-9466.