

School supply maven opens public store in Portland

By [Randy Billings](#)

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PORTLAND — Leanne Fisher has seen first hand how Ruth's Reusable Resources can help schools by soliciting office supplies from local companies and offering them to teachers at little to no cost.

This school year, 3Rs has given away more than \$3.4 million worth of supplies to local schools, many of which have faced significant cuts in state funding.

So, when Fisher, a teacher in Regional School Unit 1, heard that 3Rs founder Ruth Libby had opened up a public store at her new warehouse on Blueberry Road in Portland, Fisher and colleague Laura Devin had to make the 45-minute trip from Woolwich to Portland.

Ruth's allows Fisher to get classroom supplies without using her own money, which gives her more money to spend – at the 4 Public Store.

"Professional economy helps the personal economy," Fisher said.

Libby said people other than schools and nonprofits have been pushing her to open a public store ever since she moved her clearinghouse out of her basement and into the former Bessy School in Scarborough.

Now, with donations pouring in from companies that are either closing or moving out of the state because of the recession, Libby said the time was right to make more people's dreams a reality.

The cash-only, 4 Public Store is nearly half the size of the 5,000-square-foot teacher's store, Libby said. Merchandise that includes magazines, books, fabrics, binders, buttons and a variety of other items will vary from week to week.

"I have three times the inventory that I can fit into the store," Libby said. "(The store) is not going to be for everybody. It's for those who like to bargain hunt."

Westbrook resident Stacy Tucker-Stanley was one of the shoppers on Saturday, picking up supplies for her business, [The Pampered Chef](#). She found a \$2 business binder that would have cost as much as \$50 at a retail store, as well as inexpensive gift bags and expense sheets.

"I've always been curious," Tucker-Stanley said. "It's great what she does for the schools. I'm so excited now that I can shop here."

Sebago resident Pam Callinan said she was shopping for quilting supplies and was surprised to find a variety of fabric for only 50 cents a yard.

"Don't tell anyone," Callinan said. "I never knew this existed – I'm amazed."

On Saturday, Libby spread out her inventory on more than a half a dozen tables for a yard sale in the 3R's parking lot, both to move supplies and introduce the new store. Items ranged from \$5 fake Christmas trees to \$3 MP3 players.

After several days of rain, the blustery wind did not deter people from showing up.

Diane Brakeley, a Cape Elizabeth artist at [Della Mano Designs](#) who is also Libby's cousin, said she was finding items she needed, such as a brief case with wheels for the classes she teaches at [Artascope Studios](#) in South Portland, as well as things she didn't know she needed.

"The art I do is found object jewelry, so this is perfect," Brakeley said. "I even got a Christmas present for my son."

Gloria Beeler, who works at a child-care program in Scarborough, said she has been a loyal Ruth's shopper since the early days. On Saturday, she was looking for art supplies for the kids and a computer cart with wheels.

"We kind of followed her (to Portland)," Beeler said. "This is really good for us."

Jackie Burwell, a Scarborough resident who was working as the store's cashier, said there was a steady stream of people and compliments.

"They love the low prices," she said. "Hopefully they will come back. We will have new stuff on the shelves."

For now the store is only open from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturdays, but Libby said she would like to expand those hours. She is just beginning the public push for the new store, but she has already seen some repeat customers since it opened quietly in January.

Judging by the reactions of shoppers on Saturday, she may have picked up a few more.

"I will definitely be a regular customer," Callinan said.

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Photo:

Gloria Beeler, of Scarborough, looks through items Saturday at the new 4 Public Store at Ruth's Reusable Resources on Blueberry Road in Portland, a haven for school supplies that is now open to the public.



Photo:

RSU 1 teachers Leanne Fisher, left, and Laura Devin, both of Woolwich, look through items Saturday at the Ruth's Reusable Resources yard sale, celebrating the opening of Ruth's 4 Public Store on Blueberry Road in Portland.



Photo:

Ruth's Reuseable Resources employee Mary Nablo, left, helps Cape Elizabeth Artist Diane Brakeley find deals at a yard sale celebrating the opening of Ruth's 4 Public Store on Blueberry Road in Portland.