

Preparing for the real world ... to a T

Chicago-based Threadless opens first store outside of virtual world

BY JESSICA GALLIART, ASSISTANT A&E EDITOR

Standing on Broadway Avenue just off of Wellington Street in front of a seemingly under-construction storefront on Sept. 7, workers quickly but carefully climb ladders and step over piles of screws, boxes and tarps. And although there is still endless work to be done before the big unveiling of the long-awaited clothing store in a few days, the steady humming of paint rollers skimming the walls quiet everyone's nerves.

Threadless, an online T-shirt company, will open its first store in Chicago Sept. 10. But Threadless, 3011 N. Broadway Ave., won't just sell merchandise. From its two-level space in Lakeview, Threadless will try to bring its large online community into the real world by utilizing reusable shopping bags, offering free computer design classes and hosting two free concerts to celebrate its grand opening.

Started in 2000 by co-founders Jake Nickell and Jacob DeHart, Threadless has grown from a small Chicago-based website that accepts T-shirt designs and sells T-shirts into a massive online community of more than 300,000 members. The T-shirts Threadless offers are designed by other Threadless users who submit their ideas online to the weekly T-shirt competition, which pays four to six winning members \$2,000 for their designs.

Senior radio major Charlie Festa began working with Threadless four years ago shipping orders from the Chicago warehouse. Festa, who now hosts a podcast and organizes events for Threadless, said the company is all about keeping in touch with the users and the community.

"I'm really getting excited and anticipating this opening," Festa said. "There are still so many people out there who don't have a clue what Threadless is. It's just going to be really nice for people to walk in and be like, 'Oh OK, I get the point now.'"

Online, winning T-shirt designs for the week are released on Mondays, but at the store, winning designs will be released and available on Fridays. The store will only sell 20 different T-shirts each week, with about six new designs every week. Threadless will also feature in-store only designs from Threadless members, available only in the Chicago store.

Threadless' popularity doesn't stay inside the boundaries of the Chicago area or even the United States. When Glenn Jones, the creative director of Dashwood Design in Auckland, New Zealand, heard about Threadless in 2000 through a co-worker, he decided to give it a try. Now, 17 winning designs later, Jones is one of the best-selling designers for Threadless and will make a limited edition T-shirt to be sold exclusively at the store.

"It sounds like the way they're going to do [business] isn't going to be like any other store," Jones said. "It's just become a really good portfolio for designers. The whole community thing they've got going on now really means that you actually get put in touch with other talented people, which is great."

Donella Demorest, manager of Threadless, said she and the staff hope the store will encourage people to get on the website and start voting and participating in the Threadless community.

"We wanted to open a store to really draw and build on the community involved with Threadless," Demorest said. "It's basically a brick and mortar version of our website and an outlet to be able to bring more community into the world of Threadless."

In the storefront window, an in-house artist will display and create composite artwork with elements of each of the winning designs that change every week. Demorest said the artwork will help tie together all of the winning designs for the week.

Past the window displays and up the staircase on the second floor of the Threadless store sit computer workstations, benches, a podium and a projection screen, resembling a modern classroom environment. Here, Threadless will team up with computer technology program Digital Bootcamp to offer free classes and workshops to Threadless customers. Digital Bootcamp has its own office at 1400 W. Hubbard St., but the classes will be held at the Threadless store.

At the hour-long training classes offered Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, customers can learn how to use basic design programs, like Adobe Photoshop or Adobe Illustrator to create their own T-shirts or posters, said Ashley Johnson, Digital Bootcamp schedule coordinator.

"I think it's going to be a good match, just because their audience is people who are creative and people who are already on the Internet," Johnson said. "I think [Threadless] just gives you the freedom to express yourself without the limitations that other stores have. We're really excited for it all."

The sense of community within the Threadless community and the store, which currently has a "close-knit" staff of five, Demorest said, resonates all the way from the intimate space and the personification of T-shirts down to the bags customers take their T-shirts home in. The navy blue, non-woven material bag with the Threadless logo plastered on the side given to customers can be reused. If customers bring the bags back to the store on their next shopping visit, they will get \$1 knocked off of their purchase.

Threadless will celebrate its opening the week of Sept. 10, ending with a free all-ages concert and a free 18-and-up show and after-party Sept. 14, both at Metro, 3730 N. Clark St. The two concerts will feature such local bands as Office, Hey Mercedes, White Hot Knife and The Assembly.

Both shows are free, but for admission into the all ages show, attendees must stop by the Threadless store to pick up a free ticket. The 18 and up show is first come, first serve.

"We're really just expecting people to be coming in and begging us for tickets," Demorest said. "The tickets are free but you do have to come in and suffer through us chatting you up. It's going to be a really amazing show."

After preparing for the store for months now, Festa and Demorest agreed opening week will be amazing, but chaotic.

And they would hope for nothing less.

“It’s been long in the works,” Demorest said. “It’s a really great experience to show the community involvement with the store. It just kind of carries through with the whole concept of Threadless.”

For more information, visit threadless.com.