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## Retail Relief

At Constitution Hall, a Girls Night Out With Wall Street Blues Nowhere in Sight

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'Twas the night after the crash. And outside the news was dire, nerve-racking. Ugly. All gloom and doom. A week of financial markets tumbling. Creating creases above the brow, parentheses around the painted lips. So *not* good for the complexion. *Nobody can be fabulous looking scared and broke.*

And yet inside [DAR Constitution Hall](#), in bottles and on hangers, there was happiness. Tuesday night was Girls Night Out, and the world was fabulous. New purses, new dresses, makeup, shoes -- and cocktails. Girlfriends shopped with girlfriends in an intoxicating circle of smells and sounds and fabrics.

The earrings that dangle into oblivion. The "*Omigod*" baby blue dress hanging there alone on a rack, begging to be had. The sweet [Bacardi](#) drinks, the cubes of sharp cheese. The *too-cute-for-words* baby-doll sweater, too small, but too adorable to leave behind. The Dove soap bar with scents you've never heard of. And here was a woman spraying a beautiful card with mint-and-water-lily scent and waving it in your face. And your senses exploded.

All around, women were smiling, giddy, on their treasure hunt for the perfect dress, because there is nothing like a new dress to make you feel better.

Girlfriends' Heaven was brought to you the last two nights (and will be brought to you again tonight) by Shecky's, a marketing company that a few years ago tapped into women's desire to shop for beautiful, discounted things with their BFFs by their sides. They can do that at the mall, but this is intimate and exclusive, the difference between going to a restaurant and being invited to a wonderful dinner party with more than a thousand friends.

Shecky's sets up Girls Night Out in major cities across the country several nights a year. For an entrance ticket of about \$25, women are provided a five-hour shopping experience in a convention center where up-and-coming designers display their wares and vendors provide complimentary cocktails, makeovers and goodie bags.

The nights were launched in 2001. "We wanted to create the ultimate girlfriend experience where women could come out and enjoy everything they loved in life: shopping and cocktails," said Claudia Chan, president of Shecky's, which she calls a girlfriend-lifestyle media marketing company.

The experience has grown from one night and one city to more than 20 major cities.

"If the world looked like ['Sex and the City'](#), it would look like our event," Chan said. "I call it a Super Bowl for women. If men bond over sports, women bond over fashion. Time to yourself and time with your girlfriends is so important."

Chan, 33, was spinning through the place. ("Do you want a cocktail first?") She waved at buyers and sellers. "Look! All the girls are in pairs. They are so totally focused on looking at products," she said. "It's like a drug: 'How does this look on me? Wouldn't this go with the other thing I bought?'"

She passed designers hawking their dresses as market women do in so many different parts of the world. Just then, a woman in a short black dress screamed in delight: " *This* is so amazingly cute!"

Chan climbed a set of stairs to a lounge set up by [Nintendo](#), with curved white leather seats under blue lights next to white laminated tables where video games sat beside game covers wrapped in bling!

Why does bling draw us so?

"Before [Facebook](#), these were the social networks in their most natural form. When a girlfriend likes something, she is the first one to tell all her girlfriends about it," Chan said.

While they -- the men and the women on [Wall Street](#) -- try to solve the problems of the world, we shop. Frivolity to stomp the bad news.

"Honestly, I'm not thinking about that tonight," said Ivy Chan, 34, a government worker (and no relation to

Claudia) who lives in Silver Spring. "Tonight's girls' night. . . . It's like you've stepped away from the real world."

She sinks down onto the white leather sofa next to Winne Wong. "This is my best friend BFF!" And the two women who have been friends since childhood giggle. And you understand, because there is nothing like a best friend who does not require background information or even a rational reason when you call her, choked up, can barely speak and she knows just what to say -- or not to say.

"With a best friend, you can share everything and anything. You don't have to hold anything back," Chan said. "No matter how goofy you are, she just knows."

Chan reached over and gave Andrea Massengile, 44, of Southeast Washington, a hug: "This is my sister," she said, pressing her face against Massengile.

"It's a bonding moment," said Leann Luong, 28, of Northwest Washington, who stood nearby. For this moment, she, too, was unconcerned by a crashing stock market. "It's so happy in here," Luong said. "You have shopping. What more can a girl want?"

On the speakers, [Mary J. Blige](#) was singing loudly: "Work what you've got." Mary, if only you knew, girl, if you only knew.

Massengile was stopped by the jewelry. And then she saw the most marvelous, most beautiful necklace made of orange coral, held together by thin silver. Her fingers traced the coral. And its color sang out. For a moment, the necklace was enchanting, like a siren pulling its admirer in against its rocks, begging that she dig deep into the wallet. But no. She moved on. And just like that, the power of the necklace was broken. It retreated on the table, waiting for another soul who wants it more.

All around, women were diving into racks of dresses. Admiring rhinestones sewn on bodices. And red fingernails trying on freshwater pearl rings.

There is artistry in the way women trip over each other, bump into each other, to get to that dress before someone else captures it. Attracted to bling like a bird attracted to ribbon.

Reagan Heine, 41, of Lavon, Tex., pulled out an orange-sherbet dress. "We are from Texas, where shopping is a passion," Heine said. "We've got to have pretty things to look at and try on and we need a second opinion." She whips out a wad of cash. "We are bartenders. We live on cash."

"If we don't have it, we don't spend it," said Barbara Rahe, 59, of Dallas. They are in town for a conference.

They have been friends for a long time. "Nothing better. It's someone who watches out for your soul as much as you do," Heine said. "They know when you are hurting."

"Girlfriends notice things," she said. They notice you made the effort to sweep your hair in another direction today. To put on those three strands of pearls. "Women friends are good to take along on the journey," Heine said.

And there sat Selma Karaca, a New York fashion designer, with a piece of fabric on her lap, pins holding the 100-year-old silk together. She was making a wedding dress for a 60-year-old dancer who is getting married for the first time. On her lap, she was pinning together hope, weaving a dress of desire.

"I love making things with my hands," she said. "Women like touch. It's important. I sold my softest materials tonight. More than other fabrics, the soft and the sensual makes a woman want to put it on. Something beautiful. It tells you, 'To get me, I want to be on.' "

Her dresses are spirals, one piece of ribbon spun round and round, fitted to a woman's body. "They spin and whirl," Karaca said. "I'm from Turkey. The spiral is the life source. Every creature has this spiral."

Just then, a woman dove into the rack like a cougar and snatched a long black spiral dress.

"Wouldn't this look so hot on me?" said Jodi Wilson, 35, an acquisition analyst who lives in Fort Washington. "I'm serious. That dress is so hot."

Her friends told her yes, it was true, the dress suited her. Women are each other's mirrors. A friend can look in your face and read there whether she looks good. Whether her lipstick is askew, whether her jewelry is too much, whether her hair needs to be done.

And the night wore on. And group by group, the girlfriends vanished, slipping into the cool, black night full of grim news, happy with their treasures.


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