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True believers join a mission to Nordstrom ***Hundreds of local shoppers ride a caravan of seven buses to Farmington, Conn.**

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ON THE NORDSTROM BUS CARAVAN - Jackie and Joan are talking shop, which for them is shopping.

As we travel in a bus toward the Nordstrom department store in Farmington, Conn., Jackie Gaines, of North Kingstown, has noticed a couple of items in the Nordstrom catalog that she needs. But mostly she'll be applying the "just-in-case" method of shopping on this trip.

"'Just-in-case' is when you buy things you like, but you don't have immediate use for them," she says. "So you buy them just in case."

To her right, formerly of Warwick but now of Vero Beach, Fla., is her good friend Joan Henderson. Joan is discussing the behavioral patterns of males and females in the shopping ritual. She's concluded that "men are from Mars, women from Venus" when it comes to the retail universe.

"Men have a definite purpose," she says. "They go in and get it. They're goal-oriented. We just enjoy shopping for shopping's sake. We like to take it all in."

We're on our way to the Nordstrom anniversary sale at the Westfarms Mall in Farmington, the Nordstrom nearest to Providence. Nearly 300 people in seven buses have chosen to skip the outdoors on a splendid Saturday for a shopping excursion that began at 9 a.m. and won't conclude until they return to Providence sometime near 7 p.m.

Why they would do this seems to speak to the image Nordstrom has built, as well as the state of upscale shopping in Rhode Island. Two years ago, when the General Assembly and the Providence City Council were debating whether to give tax credits to the developer of the Providence Place mall, a central issue was whether Rhode Islanders would support an upscale mall. Yesterday's pilgrims gave a hint.

"Rhode Island presently doesn't have good shopping," says Diane Faria, of Jamestown, who made the trip with Betty Ann Taylor, also of Jamestown. The two frequently leave Rhode Island to shop at higher-priced stores in Boston and New York.

"We love Nordstrom," says Taylor. "Every time I come to Providence I look to see how the new building is doing."

Nordstrom is building a new store as part of Providence Place, which is expected to open this summer. The bus trip is a nifty bit of marketing by the Seattle-based retailer. For \$15, the upscale-deprived receive roundtrip transportation, a box-continental breakfast, lunch and free parking at the Rhode Island Convention Center garage.

Nordstrom began its bus trips about 15 years ago when it brought customers from Arizona to a San Diego store, says Greg Welter, manager of the Farmington store. It's become a regular marketing tool for the company, particularly in areas where a new Nordstrom store is about to open. About 70 people from Boston were also bused to Farmington yesterday.

"To us, this is the biggest event we have all year," says Welter. "We want to let people know about it and then offer transportation."

The anniversary sale, which runs for two weeks, is one of three annual sales Nordstrom holds. More than 1,000 Nordstrom credit-card holders in Rhode Island received invitations to the sale, which ends Aug. 2, while many others on the trip learned of it from reading the Journal.

Jackie and Joan are two fifty-somethings who can't stop laughing as they call themselves "shopaholics." But their condition is common among the more than 40 people on Bus 3. Spending limits, for example, are not a consideration.

"Why would they be as long as there's bankruptcy," jokes Linda Watson of East Providence.

She is joined at the back of the bus by Mike Sheridan of Warwick, who seems to be living testament to Joan's observations of men and merchandise.

"I loathe shopping, but it's a necessary evil" he says.

The Farmington store, open less than a year, has 176,000 square feet of space, smaller than the planned 190,000-square-foot store in Providence. Still, it is bright, airy and spacious. The aisles are wide, there's ample room between the clothes racks, and the floor shines. To accommodate an anticipated increase in business during the two-week promotion period, salespeople seem to be everywhere.

Jackie and Joan are first through the doors, charging down the center aisle in a rush of giddy anticipation. They promptly begin a quick "lay of the land," as Joan describes it. In about 10 minutes they pop into every department on the first floor, determining whether Connecticut's sales tax will deter their shopping (of course it won't), howling as they fling flowing chenille boas around their necks and checking out the children's shoes (Joan is an expectant grandmother).

Then it's up the escalator to the second floor. At the top, a pianist plays a baby-grand piano. It's a Nordstrom trademark. A piano plays all day in all Nordstrom stores.

The music is background as much as the other "special services" that many customers claim contribute to the overall Nordstrom experience. There are the "personal books" in the men's suits section, for example, in which sales people make notes of customers'

sizes, style preferences and even special occasions such as anniversaries. Welter says the salespeople sometimes call customers at home when an item is available that might be of interest to them.

There's also the "Personal Touch" individual consultants, with whom customers make reservations for guidance in wardrobe creation and individual color analysis.

While impressed, Joan passes on the consultants.

"We're experts," she says laughing. "We do this so much, we don't need consultants."

By day's end, the trip appears to have been a success for the customers, as well as for Nordstrom. Bags upon bags are stored in the belly of the bus for the ride back to Providence. The shoppers, all but a handful of whom are women, are in fine spirits. When they return to their bus seats, they find chocolate truffles placed there by their Nordstrom hosts.

Jackie has blown away Joan in consumption. Ringing the register for more than \$300, she returns to Providence with three pairs of the same style shoe (different colors at least) and an assortment of slacks, sweaters and jackets. Several fall into the "just-in-case" category. This time "just in case it gets cold this summer," she says.

"They were calling to me from the racks," Jackie says of her new clothes.

"And you answered the call," Joan says proudly.