

Sharing *in the* SHIMMER

At Top Buttons, Sara Garas is creating more than a boutique—she's building a community where young women learn to stand tall, feel confident and shine.

By **Mo Houston** | Photography by **Emily Will**

Dazzling baubles on the back counter of the boutique catch the morning light as a woman leans over to set down a gown she has draped between her arms, its sequins giving their first shimmer of the day. The countertop's display of silvery studs and slender chains wink back.

"I almost forgot—I have a few earrings to donate, too!" she adds brightly.

A young woman steps forward to accept the items. Beside her is Sara Garas, CEO of Top Buttons St. Pete, her Middle Eastern accent warm, her big smile framed by a crown of curly hair. She speaks with passion about the store and its mission, then gestures toward the counter.

"That's Chloe," she says with pride. "She first came to us as a volunteer—resonating with our mission. Now she helps other girls and just shines when she's with them."

The nonprofit boutique blends revenue from public sales with its mission: providing free, private shopping experiences for girls who are referred through local partner organizations. Tucked along Central Avenue, the store feels both intentional and inviting, just as Garas envisioned. She wants the young women who shop here to feel as though they are at the heart of a vibrant city—surrounded by healthy, active streets and endless possibilities. Inside, the bright walls are lined with carefully selected racks of clothing. Brands like Trina Turk, Reformation, Faith & Joy, Halston and Loft hang from blonde wooden hangers, each piece curated with care.

"I always ask myself if the clothes will build her up," Garas says. "Everything we put out needs to feel modern, fresh and





dignified. When she walks out of here, I want her to feel proud of what she's wearing."

Above the shelves, words stretch across the space with affirmations like "Worthy," "Confident," "Believe" and "Kindness Matters."

Clothing, shoes and handbags fill the space, creating an atmosphere that feels both aspirational and welcoming.

Beside the dressing rooms, in the back corner of the store, is where a seasonal glow-up recently occurred. Sequined gowns, rhinestone purses and golden-buckled kitten heels were all gathered for the very special event.

"Homecoming is a big deal—and it's expensive," Garas offers. "Most girls wear the dress only once and then it just hangs in the closet. We wanted to create a way for those dresses to have a second life and for girls who might not otherwise afford them to still feel beautiful, included and confident."

That vision took center stage on September 30th, when the boutique hosted its first *Let Her Shine* event. Eight young women, nominated by partner organizations for their effort and resilience, were invited into a private celebration. They shopped for dresses, received professional makeup tutorials and even learned to "stand tall and be confident, how to walk and how to own it," with guidance from Aileen Cerchiara, the reigning Miss Belleair Beach. It was more than a dress-up day—it was a confidence-building rite of passage designed to make sure no girl felt left out of one of high school's biggest nights.

Social events like homecoming are pivotal moments because it's often the first time a young woman steps into the spotlight on her own terms—choosing how she'll present herself to her peers, her community and to herself. For Garas, creating access to that experience is about more than just fashion. It is about



reinforcing the mission of Top Buttons, which is to move girls from surviving to thriving and show them they are worthy of every opportunity to shine.

Garas often describes her work as a calling. Growing up in the Middle East, she saw firsthand how limited opportunities for women could be and how narrowly their roles were defined. She believes everything happens for a reason. What once felt like injustice, she now sees as the imbalance that pushed her toward her purpose. Those early challenges became the foundation for her empathy and determination.

"I used to wonder why I was born there," she recalls. "But now I see how it shaped me to have the heart for women. It gave me the push to make a path not just for myself, but for others."

What grew from those experiences was a deep love of women and a desire to protect in others what had once felt so vulnerable within herself. That protective instinct, combined





with her belief in determination and the importance of letting others step in where they can, fuels her.

At Top Buttons every step is taken with care, safety and intention in mind. Girls come through a referral program, connected by schools, churches and case management organizations that already know their stories and needs. Local partners such as Pace Center for Girls and Brookwood Florida are among those who help make introductions, ensuring the space remains safe and purposeful. When a girl arrives through one of these referrals, the store closes to the public so she can shop in private, at no cost to her. Guided by a stylist, she selects clothing that feels current and affirming—an experience that's equal parts shopping trip and reminder of her own worth.

The organization isn't just about the fit or the label, it's about support and the belief that positive change is not only

possible but inevitable when the right community and mindset come together. Still, the right outfit can inspire you to stand a little taller—and sometimes that's all it takes to start believing.

As Garas looks ahead, she talks about building systems, strengthening partnerships and welcoming more volunteers into the fold. The vision is to make Top Buttons not just a store, but a movement sustained by community hands—stylists, mentors and ambassadors, all playing their part.

It's here that Chloe reappears, her role bringing the story full circle. She began as a volunteer, drawn to the mission, and quickly found herself at the heart of it—connecting, encouraging and growing alongside the girls she serves. In between, she's spent time on mission trips to Panama and Costa Rica, experiences that reflect the broader spirit of Top Buttons as a gateway to purpose, confidence and a light carried far beyond Central Avenue.