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Cold comfort: Helping new Chicagoans brace for winter's onslaught



A woman protects herself from blowing sleet as she walks east on Adams Street toward Michigan Avenue, in downtown Chicago. (Tribune photo by Chris Walker / December 23, 2009)

Barbara Brotman



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Barbara Brotman
November 8, 2010

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Friends, our civic duty beckons: How should Timothy Short outfit himself for a Chicago winter?

Short, a physician, moved to Chicago last month from **Charlottesville, Va.**, to become medical director of **palliative care** for Midwest Palliative & Hospice CareCenter at Northwest Community Hospital; his wife will soon join him.

As Short has begun to meet Chicagoans, he has encountered our traditional welcome to people from warmer climates.

"The most universal response I've had when people learn I've just moved here is, 'Oh, you're in for a winter.' 'Brace yourself.' 'Why did you move from Virginia?' " said Short, a genial fellow who has enjoyed the conversations. "There's been disbelief about why someone would choose to move here in October, just before winter."

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"I had to buy a winter coat, so I went into a store here. I said, 'I'm from Virginia.' I got that universal reaction — why am I here? — and then I got all kinds of advice about what to look for."

Naturally. The appearance of tender-skinned Southerners in our city arouses our protective instincts. They have no idea what they're in for, the little lambs.

You see them sometimes in a store, wandering among down coats and fur hats, stunned deer in oncoming winter's headlights. In a department store a few years ago, a young woman approached me beseechingly, a fashionable puffy coat in her hands.

"I've just moved here from **Arizona** to go to school," she said. "Can you tell me, is there any difference between this polyester filling and down?"

Poor thing.

We are glad to give advice even if we aren't asked for it. When Short told a Chicago friend he had just bought a winter coat, "the first thing he said was, 'Does it cover your butt?' "

Alas, it does not. Short's salesman had neglected that crucial matter.

The rest of us wouldn't have. And we are happy to pass on the lessons we have learned through bitter-cold experience. When I posted a request for advice on **Facebook**, I got a blizzard's worth:

Lots of layers! I will start with a T-shirt, then turtleneck, then thin fleece and top it off with a wind-stopping top layer. Also good gloves, boots, wool socks and a hat! I also use hand-warmers; you can get a large box at Costco.

Real boots (insulated or fur-lined) and ear warmers, says the girl from Miami. Silk long johns. Lots of bourbon. And be sure they understand about fleece weights. Also: Mittens are warmer than gloves.

A scarf is basic: It not only keeps your neck warm, it seals the heat in and doesn't let it escape. I also wear a hat that covers my ears or use (wraparound earmuffs) in less cold temperatures. And I wear wool socks and Polartec-lined shoes. Of course the coat you wear is important too. I have a Thinsulate-lined one, which provides warmth without the bulk.

A warm hat that covers the ears is essential for those long, cold waits at the bus stop, "L" platform, or Metra train platform. Don't be vain about mussed-up and flattened hair during the winter. I also recommend a ...sturdy pair of boots with good treads in the soles for trekking through the snowdrifts and slippery sidewalks. I always carry tissues for the inevitable runny nose and fogged-up glasses. Indoors, I keep a "snuggie" at my desk because it never seems warm enough for me.

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Go ahead and buy snow pants and snow boots, and a coat that covers your tush. There is no vanity in a snowstorm. (I'm from [Kentucky](#) originally.)

I grew up in the cold of New York and thought I knew what cold was. I visited relatives in Chicago after law school, and they giggled when they picked me up at the airport and saw my leather coat. By the end of the weekend I was wearing a quilted down coat that went way down to my ankles. I recommend the bulky unattractive quilted down coat.

I know this is politically incorrect, but FUR FUR FUR. Also, very good, warm, waterproof boots. Throw fashion out the window on this one.

Short is weighing whether to wear a long shell over his too-short coat or buy another one entirely. He has yet to buy a hat, whose importance he believes in but which he hates. And what kind of hat/glove combination would allow him to answer calls while walking outside without freezing ears or fingers?

Fellow Chicagoans, we have a sacred obligation to care for the cold-buttet stranger in our midst. What should Short, and all our brave transplants from warmer climes, wear to make it through a Chicago winter?

Post your suggestions in the comments below. And thank you in advance for not making fun of my hat.

bbrotman@tribune.com

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shanvas at 2:41 PM November 08, 2010

Isotoner now makes gloves that can be used with touch screen phones. No more freezing your fingers when you want to use the phone.

Racheal1 at 2:33 PM November 08, 2010

Love, love, love you Barbara, for saying how it is. I used to sell coats, here, in Chicago. The 3 best types are 1. down 2. fur and 3. wool for keeping you warm. Responsibly looking after fur and donating to sell again, make fur a viable, affordable option for women (and men!) if you take care of it, like anything else. btw about the politically correct comment about fur; what about all those animals who are slaughtered for footballs, pigskins and leather? Don't talk about that we eat the meat as well; sometimes that happens, but not always. I'm wondering when PETA is going to pick up on this one. Either way, keeping warm is first about layering; a big, huge coat is great, but that is more about convenience, I mean you could literally wear a T-shirt under a coat like that, just throw it on in the morning. Not having a big coat like that mean layering with 2-3 layers, the trapped air in between the layers is what keeps you warm, on top and on the legs. This is especially good if you're active and outside moving around because you can add or take away a layer, according to your comfort layer. And I highly recommend Sorel boots, which, thankfully, are now available locally, and not just online, at Columbia Stores.

2 at 2:31 PM November 08, 2010

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