

Women Get Fashion Makeovers At Welfare To Work Program

by AP, The Associated Press, 2002

By Catherine Lucey, Associated Press Writer

PHILADELPHIA (AP) - Traditional black or navy blue pinstripes? Geanetta Gary just can't decide which business suit she likes better.

"Both of them look real nice," she says, holding up both outfits. "It's a tough decision."

Finding a stylish look is a challenge for most women, but for Gary, 35, it's much harder. A single mother of 10 children, she has been out of work for months and living on child support. She usually buys her clothes at thrift stores, but today she has come somewhere new to get a suit for job interviews.

Gary is trying on clothes, shoes and accessories at The Working Wardrobe, a Philadelphia nonprofit that provides business clothes to women trying get off welfare and find jobs.

Wardrobe's basic philosophy is that clothes make the woman - or at least give the woman a much needed boost.

"This helps motivate us to let us know we have possibility," said Gary, who is here with a group of women from a city-sponsored program called Workwise. "It gives us a jump start."

Since opening in 1995, Working Wardrobe has dressed about 20,000 women. The two locations, in Center City Philadelphia and suburban West Chester, work with women referred by social service agencies, like domestic violence, substance abuse or job assistance programs.

Wardrobe helps women who are trying to start over with a new job and just need the pizzaz of a fitted black skirt, a soft cream silk blouse or some simple black pumps.

Executive Director Sheri Cole said that the group tries to teach women "that in order to get a job you have to look the part. You can't come in off the street in jeans and a T-shirt and expect to be taken seriously."

Women who are referred to the Wardrobe get an interview suit on their first visit and when they get a job they can come back for two more business outfits. Local women donate most of the clothes and Wardrobe also receives items from Charming Shoppes, the corporation that owns Fashion Bug. The organization's annual budget of about \$250,000 is made up of contributions from foundations, corporations and private donors.

Cole said there are about 50 similar organizations nationwide, located in most major cities, and they do an important service.

"We're working in difficult issues, but there is so much hope here," she says. "The women leave so excited."

Wardrobe's Philadelphia office is set up like a clothing boutique with racks of suits in black, grey and pink along the wall. Blouses, pants and skirts hang on circular rails across the floor and shoes are neatly stacked in a corner. The clothes are a mix of basic and more upscale names - Ann Taylor, the Gap and Liz Claiborne.

Gary and about a dozen other women scour the racks intently, giggling, trying things on in the two small dressing rooms and modeling before the three-paneled mirror.

"I have an interview at Sears," says 20 year-old Denise Milton, who is searching for a size 2 dress. "My baby is a year old. I've got to get a life for us."

She leaves, beaming, with a gray knee-length shift dress and matching jacket.

Danielle White, 21, is nine months pregnant, exhausted and worried she won't find anything that fits. After a few tries she comes out of the fitting room in a black suit with a skirt.

"It goes around my stomach," she says, relieved. "It's nice."

But Gary is clearly the most gleeful shopper. After she picks the pinstripe suit she finds a pair of navy and white heels.

She fills out her paperwork so she can take her new getup home. "I'm going to say, 'Look what Mommy got and (my kids) will say 'What thrift store?' And I'll say, 'It was better than a thrift store.'"

Before she leaves, Gary tells Cole, "I'm going to hurry up and get a job so I can come back."

On the Net:

The Working Wardrobe:

<http://www.careerwardrobe.org>