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FACES & PLACES



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Working Wardrobes

Written by Dawn Mori

Photos Courtesy of Working Wardrobes

Working Wardrobes continues to bring professional clothing, career-readiness training, and hope to people in need throughout Southern California.



Working Wardrobes provides professional clothing and career-readiness training to people in need throughout Long Beach and Southern California.

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF WORKING WARDROBES

Working Wardrobes



ometimes a journey begins with a single step in a new business suit.

Every year, Working Wardrobes helps 5,000 women and men in Orange County, Long Beach, Los Angeles, and the Inland Empire take another step forward from difficult life situations which include domestic violence, alcohol and substance abuse, and transitional homelessness. The Costa Mesa-based non-profit partners with more than 65 local social service agencies, providing career-readiness workshops and professional clothing, personally selected for each client by a volunteer personal shopper.

"It's about treating men and women with dignity and increasing their self-esteem—our vehicle just happens to be the clothing and the career development," said Jerri Rosen, Working Wardrobes Founder and CEO.

Since 1991, the organization has transformed more than 50,000 lives through its programs that include its two annual *Day of Self-Esteem* events, which provide motivation, wardrobe, and personal grooming for men and women, and a *Cinderellas for Life* prom dress and makeover event.

Rosen founded Working Wardrobes with a group of friends as way to help victims of domestic violence. At the time Rosen, already a dedicated

volunteer, had a successful corporate career, using her background in marketing and advertising to start her own ad agency.

It was a colleague who would give her the newspaper clipping which would change her life. It was a story of a woman who offered unsold clothing from her North Carolina retail store to women from a local safe shelter for job interviews or court appearances. Deeply touched, Rosen and her friends focused their volunteer efforts to help Orange County women enter or return to the workforce with an event that would become the first Day of Self-Esteem.

"We really knew nothing about what we were doing," she remembered. "We didn't know what rolling racks were, we didn't even know what different sizes we needed."

Quickly overcoming their learning curve, the event was a success, growing into an annual event then an annual weekend of events. Agency partnerships also expanded to include those from homeless shelters and drug and alcohol recovery programs. The program was further expanded to include veterans and teens.

The Men's Wearhouse became a corporate partner in 1997, allowing Working Wardrobes to launch its first *Men's Day of Self-Esteem*, an annual

event to be held this October at Los Amigos High School in Fountain Valley.

A designated non-profit organization since 2000, Working Wardrobes now fills a busy warehouse in a Costa Mesa industrial park. At the heart of the building is the organization's walk-in job center and men's and women's clothing boutiques, each with a distinct department store look and feel.

Here, agencies make group appointments, matching each client with a volunteer personal shopper who helps them select one or two work outfits, blouses or shirts, and all accessories. Clothes are free to each client with agencies paying fees to use Working Wardrobes services.

These services include the use of the volunteer-staffed computer lab and job center, which is open to clients as a drop-in service. The center provides assistance in searching and applying for jobs online, building a resume, and improving interview skills.

On the far side of the building, the Working Wardrobes Donation Center processes 12,000 to 15,000 items of clothing each month from community donors, clothing drives, and donations from manufacturers and retailers. Corporate donors include long-time partners Kiyonna plus-size clothing for women and the Men's Wearhouse, which now provides 40%-50% of the men's clothing for the organization.

Even though Working Wardrobes asks that all clothing arrive at the Donation Center clean and on hangers, each piece undergoes extensive quality control to look for rips, stains and overall wear-and-tear. Approved clothing is sized, tagged, then sorted in four ways—as business attire suitable for clients, high-end and designer pieces which are sold at the organization's The Hanger Resale Boutiques in Tustin and Laguna Niguel, casual items which are sold at their thrift store in Anaheim, or excess clothing which is donated to other organizations.

Josh Milius, Working Wardrobe's Administrative/IT Assistant and unofficial Goodwill Ambassador, notes that the Donation Center is able to manage the sheer volume of clothing due to the efforts of dedicated volunteer teams. They are part of the organization's 2,000 volunteers who contribute time and talent as personal shoppers, salon stylists, job center staff, administrative help, and more.

Volunteers also serve as Success Coaches who teach the off-site workshops that precede each Day of Self-Esteem event. Because the need for transportation and child care may keep clients from attending career readiness workshops, Working Wardrobes volunteers travel to partner agencies teaching two nights each week to clients in residential programs. Only those clients who complete the five-week workshop are invited to participate in the Day of Self-Esteem events.



Some of the Working Wardrobes staff with Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez (center).

Volunteers even lead Working Wardrobes' two-week customer service training, which is certified by the National Retail Federation.

"This really is an organization run by volunteers and fueled by volunteers," said Rosen.

She also stressed that while 60% of Working Wardrobe's revenue comes from its business model of earned income from agency fees and store sales, financial donations from the community play a critical role in providing the remaining revenue. It is needed funding that will allow Working Wardrobes to continue its good work of helping those in need get back on their

feet, making a difference in thousands of lives, one step at a time.

"The individuals that are sent to us obviously are coming from very difficult life challenges and crises, so when someone tells them, 'Hey, you need to find a job,' it's terrifying and overwhelming for a lot of them," said Milius. "So to have an organization just break it down into simple, easy manageable steps, then walk them through each one is just amazing. I can't tell you how many times we have seen this look of relief across our clients' faces when they understand what we can offer them. It's fantastic." ●