

Charity Helps Needy Put Best Foot Forward

By Chablis Jenkins

Issue date: 8/5/04

District Chronicles

When Dave Wenhold came to Washington, D.C., in 1994, he was determined to make a difference.

Although uncertain of which direction his career was headed, Wenhold learned that when interviewing for a job, first impressions are often lasting impressions.

To be taken seriously a candidate must look the part.

Last month, Wenhold, chair of the American League of Lobbyists, was one of many lawmakers and lobbyists who donated business clothing to assist those trying to reenter the workforce.

The lobbyists partnered with members of Congress and retailer Men's Warehouse in a day-long drive that netted thousands of men and women's suits, dresses, shirts, jackets, shoes, ties, handbags and other work clothing. The event brought in more than 7,000 items.

"We're very excited that this event is tremendously successful beyond our expectations," said Deanna Gelak, president of the lobbyists league.

"We were hoping for only 3,000. We will continue to build on the drive's success with additional outreach to potential contributors and beneficiaries."

The event, dubbed Capitol PurSUIT Drive, was held in the foyer of the Rayburn House Office Building on Capitol Hill.

"Back in October I knew that jobs were going to be a key issue in the upcoming election year," Wenhold said as he reflected on where the idea of a charity drive originated. He felt this "was a true opportunity to have key decision makers make a tangible difference by showing that they care."

More than a dozen clothing racks overflowed with pieces of every imaginable style, size, cut and color, while boxes of shoes and accessories lined the room -- creating a miniature maze around the refreshment and information tables.

The traditional business colors of black, charcoal and navy were abundant, while chunks of white, beige and pastel colored clothing were scattered throughout.

The clothing will be distributed through such non-profit organizations as Working Wardrobes and Career Gear. The two organizations give workshops motivational seminars, job fairs, and personal grooming services to help men and women in crisis get back to work.

Women like Deborah Brinker, a former client of Working Wardrobes.

Brinker, a resident of Orange County, Calif., said she was lost, empty, alone and in a domestic violence shelter six years ago. She had spent just escaped from years of abuse from a drug-addicted husband. Her home, possessions, money and job were gone. And so was her dignity.

Through the shelter she received an invitation to Working Wardrobes' "Day of Self-Esteem." That seminar changed her life.

"I was impressed by the volunteers," she said. "Their kindness made me feel like a princess." Brinker had not only received an outfit, she had received a lesson in self-esteem as well. She has been a volunteer with Working Wardrobes for the last five years.

Like Brinker, Tyrone Garcia was in need of confidence and direction. Garcia, of Brooklyn, N.Y., was paroled in 1999, after serving a 16-year sentence for attempted murder, robbery and conspiracy.

He emerged from prison broke, unemployed and barely able to comprehend the changes that surrounded him.

"I was afraid to cross the street," he said. "So I stayed within my neighborhood, around those familiar to me. I had to readjust slowly."

When Garcia was finally ready to enter the working world he was referred to Career Gear.

"I was still wearing fitted shirts and fitted pants and had no idea what corporate attire was."

Even after receiving a new wardrobe and job training skills, Garcia was still intimidated by companies and afraid of his past. Career Gear gave him what he describes as words of wisdom and understanding.

"Words cannot express efforts like this," he said. "It gives people like me a second chance."