

Full Disclosure

Legal Times
June 26, 2006

Just the Shirt Off His Back

At a time when mentioning the lobbying business tends to conjure images of shady dealings in dark corners, Dave Wenhold of the American League of Lobbyists says he's happy to be known as "a lobbyist with a heart."

During the third annual Capitol PurSuit Drive last week, co-sponsored by the league and Men's Wearhouse, Wenhold, the event's founder, attempted to show a different side of the lobbying world — one entailing racks of donated suits and boxes stuffed with neatly rolled ties and dress shoes. As someone surrounded daily by suit-donning Washingtonians, he explains that formulating the idea to collect business attire for Americans re-entering the work force was a no-brainer. "You would not believe the changes in somebody when they put on a brand-new suit. . . . You see this sparkle in their eye, and their self-esteem goes through the roof," says Wenhold, a partner in Miller Wenhold Capitol Strategies LLC.

This year, Wenhold collected 10,562 items from lobbyists and members of Congress and their staff. The suits, shirts, and ties will be given to local and nationwide organizations, including Working Wardrobes, the Women's Alliance, Career Gear, and Suited for Change. Rep. Mark Foley (R-Fla.), who spoke at the drive, handed off items from his own wardrobe, making sure to point out that he would not be taking a tax deduction for his donations. Laura Dennis, an associate at Miller Wenhold and another of the drive's organizers, calls it "the best thing I've ever done in my life." And though the American League of Lobbyists has been called too small and inexperienced to wield much influence, Wenhold believes he's proved skeptics of this particular event wrong based on the amount of participation in the drive, which collected a total of 13,000 suits in its first two years.

But what about those who see Wenhold's efforts only as a flashy gimmick to remedy recent skepticism about his line of work? After all, he acknowledges, "In the time of the post-Abramoff scandal, this is a time for us to highlight the good we do."

In response to critics, Wenhold points out that he and Dennis are the only two lobbyists to receive the President's Call to Service Award (given to individuals for lifetime volunteer service) and insists, "This is one of those events that is very dear to my heart."

— **Marisa McQuilken**