

Passions Drive Businesspeople to Create Charities

Washington Post
Sunday, November 6, 2005; Page F10

Helping Job Seekers Look the Part



Dave Wenhold, like most lobbyists, is well dressed. Making a good appearance is an important part of his job. But unlike many of his colleagues, Wenhold's thoughts about wardrobe don't end with his personal grooming. The 37-year-old former Senate staffer is an advocate with a heart who has devoted thousands of pro bono hours to collecting "gently used" business suits -- men's and women's -- from other lobbyists for people who can't afford their own.

Wenhold is the brains behind the Capitol PurSuit Drive, which once a year asks government workers, members of Congress and their aides, and lobbyists all over Washington to donate business attire for people who want to enter or reenter the workforce.

"I get so passionate about this because at the end of the day we know we really did something and helped people," Wenhold said.

During the run-up to the 2004 elections, Wenhold got tired of hearing what he considered to be empty rhetoric about the need to create more jobs. He decided to do something concrete.

He figured that unemployed people need to dress properly during job interviews to make a good impression and that lobbyists like himself could provide them with plenty of presentable attire.

Thus was born the Capitol PurSuit Drive. Wenhold and Laura Dennis, an associate of his at Miller/Wenhold Capitol Strategies of Fairfax, spent their time between lobbying appointments enlisting volunteers. Wenhold persuaded Men's Wearhouse, the retail chain, to become a corporate sponsor and the American League of Lobbyists to assist.

At first, Wenhold needed all of his skills to convince his fellow lobbyists that his idea would succeed. "Initially everyone was lukewarm. We weren't sure if it would work," said Patti Jo Baber, executive director of the American League of Lobbyists. "But he kept pushing it, and now everyone supports it."

Wenhold has twice commandeered the foyer of the Rayburn House Office Building as the main collection point for "pre-owned" suits. Over the past two years, the drive has pulled in more than 13,000 suits and all sorts of other accessories, such as shoes, that have been distributed by local charities to people eager to move up. (Pictures of the event can be found at <http://www.mwcapitol.com/probono.shtml> .)

The drive has been so well received by the charities and the givers that Men's Wearhouse wants to expand the concept to state capitals, starting with California.

Wenhold has won an award from the White House for his tireless efforts, but that isn't what motivates him. Getting successful people to serve as role models is more significant.

One of the drive's highlights in 2004 was the handing over of a gray pinstripe suit once owned by Rep. Bill Thomas (R-Calif.), the chairman of the powerful House Ways and Means Committee.

The glow in the eyes of the young man who put on the suit, Wenhold said, gave him everything he really wanted: the knowledge that someone in need believes that he now has a chance.

■ *Jeffrey H. Birnbaum*