

A suit off your back

ASSOCIATIONS NOW, February 2006

Lobbyists with hearts of ... gold?

Dave Wenhold earned this year's "Presidential Call to Service Award" for donating thousands of volunteer hours to his Capitol PurSUIT Drive charity. Wenhold, partner in his firm Miller/Wenhold Capitol Strategies LLC is the first lobbyist to win the nation's highest honor given to volunteers. Since creating the Capitol PurSUIT Drive in 2004, Wenhold has collected more than 13,000 gently used business suits from government workers, members of Congress and their aides, and fellow lobbyists. These suits are given to men and women in need of appropriate attire to reenter the workforce.

Here is what he told Samantha Whitehorne of *Associations Now* about the program.

***Associations Now*: Why did you start the Capitol PurSUIT Drive?**

Wenhold: I wanted to help fellow Americans get back into the workforce and also change how people view lobbyists and the association world. I wanted to show people that we care and that we are willing to help them out. Being well dressed is part of being a lobbyist. We [lobbyists] take this for granted, but there are people who could use a nice suit to make a great first impression.

How do you find the time for this while serving on boards and working full time?

Wherever or however I can work it into my schedule. I am also fortunate to work with two other association employees, Laura Dennis and Shari Rendall, who volunteer their time to make the charity event the success it is.

Why do you think the campaign has been so successful?

To put it simply, pure persistence. The first year, we collected 7,000 suits in four hours when we went in with a goal of 2,000. We worked with charities and associations such as Career Gear, Working Wardrobes, the Women's Alliance, and the American League of Lobbyists. We convinced retailer Men's Wearhouse to be our corporate sponsor, and got a local news station to broadcast 50 15-second public-service announcements to get the word out.

What motivates you to keep this charity going?

Seeing the transformation that happens when you give someone a suit. A young man walked in wearing jeans and a T-shirt. We handed him a suit once worn by Representative Bill Thomas (R-CA), chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. When he put it on, he knew he had a better chance of getting a job and that someone cared enough to give him the suit off their back.