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Dress for Success Provides More Than a Business Suit

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Putting on a new suit for your first interview can be exciting. Sometimes it's a revelation.

At [Dress For Success](#), a non-profit serving women in the U.S. and internationally, women help women put on a new suit—and build a career in the process.

Dress for Success (DFS) clients come from a range of backgrounds; many come to DFS from welfare to work programs, domestic violence shelters, recovery programs, or programs for the formerly incarcerated. For Adrian, a single mother who once struggled with alcohol and drug addiction, she learned about DFS while staying at [Phoenix House](#), one of DFS's partner agencies.

By the time they come to DFS, women have already had some job training. Clients are required to have at least one interview lined up before coming to receive a suit.

Over half the women have never owned a suit until this moment. For many the experience is sweet. Looking in the mirror with a volunteer, the emotion can be overwhelming. According to Suzanne Armstrong of DFS, clients often say: "I feel amazing. I feel so professional!" They're also given handbags, jewelry, and when possible accessories to complete the look.

Depending on the type of job, DFS volunteers will make recommendations. "Banking jobs require the conservative black or grey suit, but we tell clients if you're applying for a marketing job, we can suggest some color!" quipped Suzanne.

After clients have been on a job for a minimum of thirty days, they return for a "Second Suiting," receiving

one-week's worth of pieces that can be mixed and matched. But DFS knows that it takes more than a well-tailored suit to *stay* and *advance* in a job. After the second suiting, women can join Professional Women's Group (PWG) workshops.

Once part of PWG, clients go to meetings and career development sessions led by speakers, developing strong bonds with other women along the way. In addition to transitioning clients to the workplace, DFS familiarizes them with "financial literacy," or knowledge about saving money, investing, taxes, and buying a home. Once Adrian got a job as a hostess, the PWG meetings helped her tremendously, providing self-confidence and guidance in order to start her life over again.

Dress for Success was founded in 1996 in New York City by Nancy Lublin, who inherited \$5,000 from her great-grandfather, upon graduating from law school. She wanted to use the money to honor him and give back to others. Lublin, talking with catholic charities involved in transitioning women from welfare to work, learned that although women were getting interviews, they were not getting the jobs. It was not for lack of skills or personality, but because they did not have the right attire for the interviews. Lublin realized women needed some nice suits and with the help of three nuns from Spanish Harlem, the idea for Dress for Success was sparked. The concept exploded and now there are close to eighty affiliates in the U.S. and internationally.

Today about half of the suits are new and come to DFS from the fashion and cosmetics industries. The other half are gently worn suits provided by the public.

Though DFS started with this simple idea of a suit, the program now takes a holistic view of a woman: looking at the entire woman so she can best advance, to succeed in life. To do this, DFS continues to expand their programs.

Employment retention programs enable women to stay employed and advance in their careers. Their annual Success Summit (which will be held in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 2007), in its second year, is a chance for women who are elected to attend as "delegates" to participate in workshops on leadership, entrepreneurship, time management, and financial literacy with others from around the country and the world. The added dimension is that delegates take these skills to lead fellow PWG members, provide awareness, and mobilize in their own cities and towns.

According to DFS, the PWG coordinators are full- and part-time staff as well as volunteers who act as trainers, role models, counselors, and mentors, handling the marketing, recruitment, strategic planning, and program evaluation.

Although DFS gets some support from corporate sponsors, all of these programs are growing. The programs still rely on grants and fundraising to reach their goals. This year's 10th year Anniversary Gala in April will be chaired by Bobbi Brown, CEO of Bobbi Brown Cosmetics.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of DFS is that you can apply to open an affiliate in your own community! I asked Suzanne what it takes to start your own. DFS offers the following tips:

- Carefully read all the application materials to ensure that you fit the criteria, understand the expectations, and are not duplicating existing services in your community
- Spend some time reading, researching and talking to people in the nonprofit field about what it takes to run a nonprofit. Dress for Success operates like a business!
- Show your passion for the mission and be creative—but balance it with a solid understanding of nonprofit management

Right now DFS is looking for people interested in opening up affiliates in Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Raleigh,

North Carolina. The Board of Directors is also engaged in ongoing strategic discussions about potential further international development in the future. It's not yet clear how the model might translate in developing countries such as India and South Africa, which have already shown interest in the program. The model may need to change to address new issues, cultural differences, and a different set of challenges to advance the plight of women globally.

For DFS, it's not enough to help women become self-sufficient. Their mission is also to enable women to mentor others in the program once they've gotten their feet on the ground. So inspired by what DFS did for her, Adrian speaks at events and public meetings.

In a speech at a 2005 fundraiser, Adrian said: "The women of Dress for Success are guardian angels strategically placed in my life and the lives of thousands of women to empower them, nurture them, and assist them in building their self-esteem and careers."

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