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It's All About the First Impression

Wardrobe for Opportunity helps low-income job seekers through hurdles

By Diane Claytor



Wardrobe for Opportunity Executive Director Darice Jones, left, and Director of Employment Programs Mahogany Charlton at WFO's Concord boutique. Photo Diane Claytor

Twenty years ago, longtime Orinda resident Jeri Foster made a life-altering decision; although she thoroughly enjoyed her job in outplacement career development – helping unemployed people find new positions – she was tired of commuting to San Jose. With years of experience helping displaced workers search for new opportunities, refine their resumes and improve their interview skills, Foster figured there must be some way she could transition these talents into something else. She had guts. She had passion, a desire to “give back,” and friends willing to help. What she didn't have was any knowledge of the nonprofit world.

That didn't stop her. Having read about “closet” organizations and knowing the importance of “dressing the part” when interviewing for a job, Foster forged ahead. With \$3,000, she formed a board of directors, leased a small space in Walnut Creek, collected women's clothing from friends and neighbors and in May, 1995, opened the doors to Wardrobe for Opportunity, a nonprofit organization that she describes as “giving low income people self-esteem and confidence that

they can do more than they thought they could.

“It takes 90 seconds for an employer to form a first impression,” Foster explained. “So much of that first impression is visual so if you're not dressed appropriately, you typically don't stand a chance.”

Partnering with local service agencies and job training organizations that referred clients, WFO began helping low-income women learn how to “dress the part.” It was set up like a “personal shopping experience,” Foster said. But there were no price tags, no cash register; there were only volunteers, many of whom were professional stylists, offering one-on-one personal styling advice, preparing these women to go on that job interview with confidence. “What we'd see was a big transformation,” Foster said. “Put someone that's used to wearing tennis shoes and sweat pants into professional clothing and you can see their self-esteem, posture, and even language change.”

The organization has grown substantially in the past 20 years. With offices and boutiques in Oakland and Concord, it now provides clothing to both men and women seeking employment. Donations of workplace attire come from all over the Bay Area. It partners with 40 other nonprofit agencies that offer job support and training. It has served 26,000 Bay Area residents, enabling them to move from poverty to self-sufficiency. Darice Jones, WFO's executive director, credits Foster, noting, “The seed Jeri planted is what led to those 26,000 people being served.” WFO also has a large number of volunteers, many of whom have been with the organization almost from its beginning. “Jeri had a magnetism so that people she introduced to our mission continue to believe in it and continue to work with us,” Jones said. “You don't see that kind of commitment in most nonprofit agencies.”

While providing professional-looking clothing for low-income job seekers referred by their partner agencies is still a key element of WFO, it offers so much more. Once em-

ployed, WFO clients can come back and choose a week's worth of work outfits. “We want people to have a good start in the workplace and not feel the anxiety that comes with not having resources,” Jones explained.

WFO also offers corporate-sponsored, speed-dating style interview clinics, where clients connect directly with potential employers and receive constructive feedback to help perfect their interview skills. Additionally, a six-week retention class – Pathways – is available to employed WFO clients. This course teaches people how to work: workplace etiquette, communicating with supervisors, how to ask for more responsibility, promotions and raises and, according to Jones, “how to position yourself so that your presence is consistently articulating your professional value.” Professional coaches are hired, “at a substantial discount” to conduct these workshops knowing that “we're the little nonprofit who could,” Jones proudly stated. “We stick with our clients, we think long term,” she said. “We want them to be able to achieve economic success, to support themselves and their families. Our goal is to help people find a job, keep a job and build a career. We want to see poverty end in the Bay Area.”

It seems to be working. According to a recent WFO annual report, 45 days after their styling appointment, 77 percent of the clients had a job interview and 34 percent had found employment; six months after graduating from the Pathways program, 91 percent had retained their job.

Although Foster is no longer involved in WFO's operations, she is extremely proud of what it has accomplished and how it's grown in these last 20 years. “So many volunteers have donated hours of work and our generous funders, both individuals and corporations, have contributed so much. We help a lot of people, making a huge and positive difference in their lives,” she concluded.

For information about donating to or volunteering for WFO, please contact Julia or Deb at (510) 463-4100 or info@wardrobe.org.

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