

THE ORANGE COUNTY BETA REGISTER

Homeless, but not alone

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Carol West walked in to the lobby of the gymnasium at Los Amigos High School in Fountain Valley Sunday morning feeling apprehensive.

The place was buzzing with action, hosting the 20th annual "Women's Day of Self-Esteem," an event sponsored by Working Wardrobes, a charity that helps struggling women and men remake their work lives.

For Carol – whose life with husband Mark West I've chronicled since April — it marked a turning point she never expected to experience.

Since becoming homeless in January, every aspect of the Wests' life has been turned upside down. But of the many things Carol has lost of late, the toughest to recover might be her confidence.

"I'm not upper class or middle class," says Carol, 51. "Now I'm considered homeless; and poor. And it's like there's a stigma.

"I used to be able to hobnob with corporate women," she adds.

"I used to have my little briefcase rolling behind me. I had my makeup, my hair done. I could reach my hand out and shake somebody's hand."

The event in the gym was aimed at helping Carol get that feeling back.

If you've always had steady work, it might be hard to imagine how inconsequential Carol felt in seeking help from a charity.

Working Wardrobes helps people from various backgrounds, be it domestic violence survivors or welfare-to-work recipients. Carol has worked most of her adult life (as human resources director, a customer service representative, an administrative assistant) and she grew up in a working, middle-class family that moved to Anaheim when she started high school.

But, today, much of that family is gone. Both of her parents are dead. And a fear of becoming a burden to her remaining relatives – a grown daughter and a brother – has prevented Carol from seeking help from them.

So, early Sunday morning, Carol walked up the steps to the gym alone. But as she checked in she was surrounded by people; *lots* of people. Some 365 volunteers gave up their Sunday to help 135 women like Carol. They provided seemingly simple, feel-good things like haircuts, makeovers and massages. They also offered more concrete forms of help, such career tips and leads and, most important, encouragement.

Soon, Carol's fears evaporated.

"I feel really alone sometimes... But all of these people who helped me are like a pseudo family. I have people who care about me and I'm so grateful for the attention, the kindness, and the love."

The turnout of women was a record for Working Wardrobes. But helping those women with something more than a day of pampering will be a challenge in the current economy. Last year, for the first time in its 19-year history, Working Wardrobes saw its donation revenue decrease (it fell by about 12 percent) from the previous year. Meanwhile, the group projects to help some 5,300 people this year, so reversing the donation trend will be key.

"This event will always be our gift to the community. We feel really strongly about that. But the way that we can make it work is the community giving back," says Jerri Rosen, chief executive of Working Wardrobes.

Rosen says helping their clients look polished – and boosting their confidence along the way – is fundamental to their clients' eventual success.

"It is about the recession, and women feeling that need, but also realizing that they have to be more marketable to get a job," Rosen says. "They're facing an uphill battle."

In that battle, what's made a difference for Carol is that so many people are willing to help. They *are* bothered that so many people are facing homelessness here in Orange County.

As one reader, Bill Quinn of Lake Forest put it: "I just can't sit back and do nothing."

Quinn, a writer and Internet marketer, got in touch with me last month after reading about the Wests' plight. He told me he's researching ways to help the homeless, particularly veterans.

"I don't want to get to the end of my life and say 'Man, I could have done something to help these people.' Enough's enough," Quinn says.

"All of us are tied together as human beings in ways that we never think about. We're all responsible for one another to some degree."

That's the sense of community Carol felt Sunday as she left the Working Wardrobes event.

She was loaded with goodies, and was wearing a champagne colored business suit with matching patent leather pumps. It had been a long day, but she knew was on her way to recovering the old Carol who once hobnobbed with company executives and toted a briefcase on wheels.

"That person that I was is still there, she wants to come out again," Carol says.

"And it felt good to know that I was doing something... to get that back."

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