

IMAGE

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COSMETICS REVIEW

JOHNNY DEPP

SUMMER CONCERTS

SOLAR TECHNOLOGY SPOTLIGHT



Working Wardrobes

HOW YOUR OLD CLOTHES CAN AFFECT LIVES

It all began for Jerri Rosen almost 20 years ago. She'd become concerned with the stories she'd heard on television news or read in the paper about women needing to go to shelters to escape abuse. "How do they get on with their lives?" she wondered. "They likely brought little with them to the shelters. How do they have a 'dress for success' wardrobe to even apply for a job?"

Jerri knew how important answers to those questions were. For some 25 years she'd headed a marketing and communications company. And, dealing as she did with the heads of businesses, corporations and financial organizations, she knew what employers wanted to see in prospective new hires. "Wouldn't it be great," she pondered, "if somebody came along and not only provided some guidance but also the clothes that might be needed?"

At dinner parties and with acquaintances, Jerri began talking about the need. Soon, an idea formed: "How about a day when Jerri and five of her friends could help out people like that?"

Jerri and her five friends began collecting clothes, accessories, even some costume jewelry from their closets and from those friends of friends who wanted to help. The stuff was all stored in Jerri's office.

Once the contributions began to overflow, Jerri contacted Orange County shelters and told them what they were going to do. They were going to hold a "Day of Self Esteem" where the abuse victims could pick from racks of collected garments, could get some advice on cosmetics to use and hair styles and generally prepare themselves for the job hunt by learning interview skills and application preparation.

Six Orange County Shelters jumped at the chance to participate in that first year back in 1990. And some 67 abused women were helped to start a new life by Working Wardrobes.

During that first year, Jerri and her friends not only helped the women achieve self-confidence and presentability, but they also began to detect there might be a greater need than first anticipated. There were other women out there who needed help, too. There were the homeless, the impoverished, even the women being released from jails.

Along with recognition came a determination to include these women, too, in the Working Wardrobes charitable efforts.

Working Wardrobes soon became a talked-about success in carrying out its mission of helping women looking for that fresh start. They also became noted for providing the skills needed to be able to find a job and the clothes to wear to work.

That's when contributions began coming in. It wasn't just used clothing, though. Many who heard about the work being done wanted to contribute cash to help out and did. Soon, corporations like Allergan and Boeing and Disney Resorts came aboard to help.

By 1997 Working Wardrobes had become an important, known and established charity in Orange County. But, that's too when Jerri realized there was an even bigger job for her organization to perform.

As the C.E.O. of the organization, she may have shocked her board of directors with what she wanted to do next. She wanted to expand Wardrobe's efforts. She'd realized there were a lot of men out there, the homeless, recovering addicts, men released from jail or even, sometimes,

ABOVE LEFT: Working Wardrobes founder and CEO Jerri Rosen.

ABOVE CENTER: At the Working Wardrobes career center clients can select outfits to take home and wear at job interviews.

ABOVE RIGHT: At a Working Wardrobes Career Fair, clients have opportunity to meet with prospective employers as well as decide on career training.

BELOW: Indika Wijesekera, who was one of Working Wardrobes' clients, now serves on the Board of Directors.



Working Wardrobes

former combat veterans who needed help in getting their lives back on track.

Jerri's board agreed and another expansion of Working Wardrobes got underway. Now men came under the protective umbrella of their services. And, they could get outfitted with new styles. George Zimmer, owner of Men's Wearhouse clothing stores came aboard and helped bring Working Wardrobes to a new level.

In the year 2000, still another addition was made to the ranks of the organization's services. "The goal was," says Jerri, "to prevent a percentage of teens from winding up in one of the shelters that works with the adults served by Working Wardrobes." Added to the charity's curriculum for younger "clients," then, were an extensive series of workshops which included career coaching, presentation skills, values and ethics discussions.

A short while later a side-growth of teen problems surfaced and the need was met by holding an annual "Cinderellas for Life" event. It wasn't just to provide prom dresses and accessories for underprivileged young girls but also to help them plan for the future by holding workshops on etiquette, self-esteem and goal setting.

In the first 14 years of operation, Working Wardrobes used only donated warehouse space for its operations. In May of 2004 it finally moved

into its own 10,000- square foot facility where it can not only have its Career Center but also its administrative offices and its Donation Center.

Today, the organization annually helps nearly 4500 men and women re-enter the work force. Gone are the days when some new clothes and, hopefully, a new attitude would work.

Today, wardrobes are still the mainstay but at its Career Service Center clients work with a "Personal Shopper" to select career quality clothing for interviews and employment. And, clients at the Center not only find a new wardrobe but full grooming services available on a daily basis.

At Career Development Services, Working Wardrobes' job seekers can be brought up to date in this tech age. Tools are available where they can undergo personal assessment to determine their skills, post resumes and conduct online job hunts. There's also a Career Developer available who can focus clients on their skills and abilities and offer assessment and possible job leads. Working Wardrobes Human Resource-trained volunteers also trek to shelters and rehab facilities to hold on-site workshops to help ready those about to re-emerge into the working world.

Working Wardrobes also presents various workshops. "The Power of Your Image" Workshop aims to enhance their clients' image and credibility by motivating them to be more conscious of projecting a positive and professional image. Here the clients learn how to feel great and look professional. During this dynamic and interactive work-

shop, Working Wardrobes covers a wide array of topics including:

- ◆ The impact of first impressions and how to make the right impression every time.
- ◆ An explanation of different clothing styles and how to find your best personal style.
- ◆ Business etiquette tips.

As they geared to increasing client workloads and increasing contributions to their efforts, Working Wardrobes soon found itself entering the retail business of offering "slightly worn fashions" gathered from contributions. They began opening stores throughout Orange County called "Hangers." Before they knew it, they had six stores in Fountain Valley, Brea, Laguna Niguel, Tustin and Anaheim.

It was the development of those stores which offered still another opportunity to Jerri Rosen. It's called Customer Services Training. With the help of the National Retail Federation, Working Wardrobes set up a course of instruction where the Wardrobes "clients" are trained in retail sales and customer service at its Hangers. The clients not only become familiar with all aspects of retail sales during their on-the-job experience, but graduate from certified training.

Giving folks a new start has always been the goal of Working Wardrobes. And, its clients love the stories of success they hear at such events as the organization's Day of Self-Esteem. At this year's Spring event, one of the speakers was a young mother identified as Jennifer.

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Working Wardrobes

Jennifer told of arriving at a domestic abuse shelter with her children 18 months earlier. Everything they owned fit into a laundry basket. She didn't know what she was going to do, how she was going to support her children or even how she might apply for a job. She had nothing.

"Working Wardrobes came into my life at a perfect time," Jennifer told her audience. She talked about being outfitted with the necessary clothes and attending workshops on resume writing, financial planning and building personal skills for success. "The workshops helped me to gain confidence," Jennifer told her audience. It wasn't long before Jennifer found a good job. She is now an administrative assistant with a leading investment firm and proudly boasts her family was able, recently, to move into its first home.

Jennifer's story is just one of the many abound-ing about Working Wardrobes successes.

Another success that's dear to the hearts of all who labor or volunteer at Wardrobes is that of Indika Wijesekera.

Indika's story starts when he was a kid, trying to fit in, playing around, as so many kids do, with drugs. When he got to the University of Massachusetts, he says, his habit escalated. He found himself using cocaine on a regular basis. "Before I could understand the gravity of my deci-

sions," he says, "I suddenly found myself expelled from school and homeless...left with nothing except a terrible addiction."

Too proud to tell his parents, Indika headed to the West Coast where he soon switched from cocaine to speed and even began peddling drugs to support his habit. From there life was a series of getting high, getting caught, doing jail time and always being sentenced to rehab which, he says, never worked for him. "I was miserable," he said, "but I couldn't stop and the shame and helplessness from my failed recovery attempts only worsened my downward spiral." Eventually, he says, a probation officer gave him one more chance: either shape up or go to prison. Either graduate from a rehab, get a job or get locked up for a long time.

Indika was scared. He enrolled in a Salvation Army rehab program and asked for help in finding a job. The Army counselor pointed Indika toward Working Wardrobes where he could certainly find the clothes he'd need to apply for a job. There, he spent weeks with career coaches attending life skills workshops. He learned about mastering interviews, diplomacy in answering questions about his past and many other abilities crucial to re-entering the workforce.

On one special day, when the clients could not only get a haircut, grooming, and mingle with the Personal Shoppers who would measure them for a custom wardrobe of suits, shirts and shoes, Indika met one of the volunteers, a corporate exec-

utive from The Men's Wearhouse. Indika remembers "He said to look him up when I finished the program and I did."

Indika's success story doesn't end there, though. He's been with the Men's Wearhouse for several years now and gives the company credit for allowing him "to make the income I need to be independent, paying for my education."

Not long ago Indika decided it was time for payback at Working Wardrobes. He became a volunteer and has contributed so much, he now serves on the Board of Directors.

Working Wardrobes has been privileged to have their work recognized by civic leaders, government and organizations at the national, state and community levels. Last year alone, the organization earned First Place in NATOA's "Interview/Talk Show" category for Working Wardrobes TV show, and received the Kingdom Assignment Well Done Award and the Soroptimist International of Huntington Beach "Making a Difference for Women" Award.

What began for Jerri Rosen as an idea to help out abuse victims has grown far beyond her dreams of 20 years ago. Working Wardrobes success stories are heartwarming and its efforts applauded by many in government, education and civic leadership.

For Jerri, though, those 20 years are filled with good memories and bring a smile of satisfaction that she has, for so many, been able to change lives with some old clothes. IM

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