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INTERVIEW STYLE

Dress for Success racks up \$23,000 with fund-raising

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At first glance, the place looks like a fine boutique with matching floral settees in the center of the room and displays of ladies suits, shoes and handbags. There's a rack of blouses and silk scarves, and a glass counter where complimentary makeup lessons might be given. It's the sort of place where perfumed clerks scurry around looking for just the right thing and help with fittings and accessorizing.

All those things happen at the Dress for Success office at New Orleans Shopping Centre. But the objective is not just dressing up, but outfitting women for their first job interview and sending them on their way to financial self-sufficiency.

When the local Dress for Success chapter started in 1997, the clients of the not-for-profit group were women who hadn't worked in a long time. Now the clientele includes women who have lost jobs or are returning to work to make ends meet, said Hope Encalade, executive director of Dress for Success New Orleans.

The group's purpose is to solve a dilemma faced by people who can't afford the clothes they need to land a job because they don't have a job to earn the money to buy them.

"You have to look appropriate to get the job," Encalade said. To accomplish that, Dress for Success accepts donations of women's suits, shoes and accessories. The items are kept at the group's offices at New Orleans Shopping Centre.

Since a local chapter of the national organization was founded in New Orleans, the group has suited and trained nearly 6,200 women for their first job interview, including 678 women this year alone, Encalade said.

After they are working, the women return for monthly meetings and more advice on advancing themselves on the job.

Clients are referred to Dress for Success by 78 agencies in the New Orleans area when they are ready to start job-hunting. Clients can use one of a dozen computers at the Dress for Success office downtown to research jobs and write résumés.

The group accepts donations of interview-appropriate clothes and encourages people to host parties and invite friends and colleagues to donate clothes. Dress for Success is always in particular need of larger-sized suits and shoes, Encalade said.

That's where fund-raising comes in. Besides paying for daily operations, Dress for Success uses money from its fund-raisers to buy suits for women who can't find a suit that fits from the stock of donations.

Dress for Success has agreements to buy suits for \$55 apiece, but it costs about \$100 to completely outfit a woman including shoes, hosiery and accessories, said Susan Mancuso, a fund-raising consultant who volunteers with the group.

On Thursday, Dress for Success held its sixth annual fund-raiser at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Downtown New Orleans. The event honored five women who have finished the program and who typify the can-do attitude embodied by graduates of the program. This year's honorees are Connie Strahan and Julia Payne, who both found jobs at Macy's department store; Winifred Williams, who works at a church; Colleen Murphy, who works at a restaurant; and Avis Scott, who works for Kentwood bottled water company.

Encalade said in the beginning, their clients often started work in the hospitality industry. But in recent years the women have been able to find jobs in customer service, medical offices and retail businesses, she said.

About 400 people attended Thursday's event, where marketing consultant Mary Lou Quinlan was the keynote speaker. A marketing consultant who advises businesses on how to reach female consumers, Quinlan encouraged women to take time for themselves, whether just a weekend or several weeks away to assess their careers.

Quinlan, who is based in New York, advises companies on how to get their message to women and win them over as customers. In the five years since she started her business, Quinlan said the range of businesses interested in her advice has expanded beyond the predictable household products marketed to women to include automobile manufacturers, financial service firms and banks. Among her clients are General Motors, Best Buy, Smith-Kline-Beecham and Clairol.

"Women are great advertisers for a brand that they have a good experience with," Quinlan said after Thursday's speech. On the other hand, "women have long memories, and a bad experience will resonate for some time."

At events such as the Dress for Success fund-raiser, Quinlan hands out cards asking women to share their career stories and include contact information so she can reach them later. Some of those stories will be shared on a Web site to support her upcoming book, "Time Off for Good Behavior: How Hard-Working Women Can Take a Break and Change Their Lives," a compilation of stories of 37 women who took time for themselves away from busy careers to reassess their lives.

On Thursday, Quinlan autographed copies of her first book "Just Ask A Woman: Cracking the Code of What Women Want and How they Buy," and donated \$10 for each

copy sold. In addition, Barnes & Noble donated 15 percent of its sales, bringing in an extra \$763 to Dress for Success, Mancuso said.

Between Thursday's breakfast, a patron party Wednesday night and raffles of donated items, Dress for Success raised an estimated \$23,000, Encalade said.

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