

Dress for Success

It's Not Just About Fashion



By Mikell Worley



Ruth Koup is the advocate, founder, and chief executive of Dress for Success of South Central Pennsylvania for reasons that extend well beyond fashion. The initial benefit comes from the increased self-esteem that female clients demonstrate when they are comfortable with their appearance during an interview and have had the opportunity to practice interviewing skills beforehand. Consequently, they are more likely to convince a potential employer of the professionalism and skills they will bring to the workplace. The agency helps clients build a wardrobe in preparation for their new jobs. Then the women attend professional-development workshops and network with numerous collaborating agencies. It doesn't end there. Ultimately the women pass these skills to their children, who in turn are more likely to be successful, contributing members of their communities.

When the Koup family relocated to this area five years ago, Ruth was considering the next step in her career. Her dream was to combine her experience in social work with something she enjoyed. The idea of developing a not-for-profit organization that would fill a critical need in the community appealed to Ruth, and she became increasingly interested in opening a local branch of the worldwide company Dress for Success. Not only has her dream become a reality, but the agency has also expanded well beyond anyone's expectations. Dress for Success anticipated that it would serve 500 to 600 clients from the time it opened in 2007 until now. By the time this article is in print, the store will have dressed more than 1,500 women.

"It took nearly two years to complete the start-up efforts to find the appropriate space and develop the connections for the first boutique," Ruth reported. She began with 750 square feet and has since expanded to a 3,000 square-foot facility in Harrisburg with an additional 13,000 square feet for an office, meeting, and training space. There are also two other boutiques in Lebanon and York, as well as a recently added mobile suiting program in a truck that has been transformed into a rolling closet. The latter provides opportunities for clients who do not live close to current sites.

Each boutique has an elegant atmosphere that makes clients feel special. When they enter the store or mobile unit, a personal shopper greets them. Staff and volunteers pride themselves on the quality of service as well as the quality of merchandise provided. Each client begins with a suit, donated by someone who wants to give another woman an opportunity to take the first step to a better life. The suit must be of the highest quality, something that will give the recipient a sense of pride so she will feel confident and comfortable during a job interview. Ruth notes that when the clients see themselves in the complete outfit, the impact is often startling.



“We take before and after photos so they can see themselves through the eyes of an interviewer. Seeing the pictures brings smiles and tears. They often comment about the after photo as if it is someone else — ‘She will get the job!’ The feeling that comes from being well suited, often for the first time in their lives, is just the beginning,” Ruth declares. “This is combined with assistance in building their resumes. Then they learn techniques to be more professional during an interview and have the opportunity to role-play to improve their skills and increase their comfort level. These new skills are applicable not only during the interview but on the job as well.”

Collaboration is a key component in every aspect of Dress for Success. Agencies that want their clients to obtain the company’s services are required to do an initial screening and then set up an appointment. “We don’t take anyone who has not taken the initial steps,” Ruth says. “If someone comes to us and is interested, we explain our guidelines. They must be disadvantaged with a poverty-level income. If they qualify, we provide them with information to receive services.”

Ruth notes that Career Link is the first place she sends anyone who is looking for employment. She praises its sites and notes a number of valuable services. “They have computers on-site for job searches and tweaking resumes with help from staff and volunteers. Jobs are posted there that never make the paper, and they have free classes to learn a variety of job related skills. Attending classes keeps the women proactive and helps keep them from becoming discouraged.”

Libraries have also proved to be invaluable. Every client has an e-mail account and is encouraged to visit a local library to look up information on jobs, as well as to check e-mails from potential employers. “We value our partnership with the Dauphin County Library System. They have gone out of their way to work with us and provide resources and support to our clients,” Ruth notes, adding that the clients’ children often go along and become comfortable using a library’s services.

Dress for Success continues to provide support to clients after they are employed. “It is the first two weeks on the job that they are the most vulnerable. They return and we help them build a working wardrobe. We give them five articles of clothing and show them how to make ten different outfits by adding different accessories or articles

of clothing that they already own,” says Ruth. “We encourage quality over quantity. A white shirt is one of the most important components. We can always use more white shirts and black skirts. The quality must be excellent. Please don’t donate anything that you wouldn’t wear yourself.”

Job retention and professional career development are key components of the process. Financial literacy, for example, is one aspect that is particularly valuable. “Many have never had a checkbook or taken out a loan,” Ruth comments. “Learning to work with financial institutions increases their confidence and allows them many opportunities.”

In 2009 Dress for Success plans to launch “Power Lunch — Power Suit,” a promotion that will enable clients to come in for an hour of training during their lunch break and then be on their way. Ease of access is a key component. Stores are conveniently located with accessible parking.

The testimonials from women whose lives have been changed by Dress for Success are heartwarming. One client wrote, “I had the opportunity of being fitted by your associates for a job interview. I have to say the whole experience was just wonderful. When I left your facility, I had the confidence I needed to step in that interview knowing I had the job when I walked out. Well, I did get the job and my confidence level has increased since that day. I am a survivor of domestic violence and this whole experience with Dress for Success has really given me the power back in my life. THANK YOU!!!!” In addition to accolades from clients, Dress for Success of South Central Pennsylvania has also received praise from donors, sponsors, and volunteers.

Visit the international organization’s website <http://www.dressforsuccess.org/home.aspx> for more information and look under affiliates on the right of the page for opportunities to volunteer your time and resources to our local organization. ❖

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