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Boutique suits up job-seekers for interviews

PITTSFIELD -- More than 500 people attended a job fair at the Crowne Plaza Hotel earlier this month, but the attire they wore was as varied as their ambitions.

While some came clad in jackets and ties, others arrived dressed in shorts, sandals or sneakers.

Guess which ones had the best chance of landing a job interview.

"First impressions count," said Meelan Dale of Goodwill Industries of the Berkshires. "The minute you walk into a job interview, they're sizing you up."

Unfortunately, and for a variety of reasons, many people entering or re-entering the work force these days either don't know how to dress for a job interview, or can't afford the types of clothes that they need to make a good impression.

The SuitYourSelf Boutique is trying to fill that void.

Originally founded in 2005 through a cooperative effort of local community organizations, the boutique provides high-end, donated clothes to job-seekers who receive referrals through a variety of agencies, including the BerkshireWorks Career Center, the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, and the Berkshire Community Action Council. Those who receive jobs are provided with additional outfits.



The Suit YourSelf Boutique at Goodwill Industries, 158 Tyler St.

The program moved from the Christian Center on Robbins Avenue to Goodwill Industries' administrative offices at 158 Tyler St. in August. Goodwill decided to take on the unfunded program because it fit the organization's mission of training and teaching work force skills, CEO Frank Engels said.

The boutique will hold an open house at Goodwill from noon to 4 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 4.

"Confidence-building is the goal," he said. "So when you walk into an interview, the dress you're wearing inspires confidence. A lot of people don't know how to dress."

With so many people out of work and the gap between rich and poor so large, it's typical that new job-seekers don't know how to dress for an interview, those in the career field say.

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"I think some people have had real strong role models in their lives and been told how to dress, and others just haven't had those role models," said Barbara Emanuel, a marketing and business services representative for BerkshireWorks. "There's definitely economic factors. People don't have the attire and can't afford it. SuitYourself provides great resources for people. It sets people up on the right track."

Besides finding the right clothes, attendees also receive fashion advice from Dale, who runs the SuitYourSelf Boutique. A native of Great Britain, Dale worked for Harve Bernard, a national women's retailer in New York, before coming to Lenox to open a store in that chain in 1989. Dale was referred to Goodwill from BerkshireWorks after she was laid off by Kripalu in 2007.

Dale helps her clients mix and match clothing and accessories until they get the right fit.

"I fit them for size; I don't force things on people," Dale said. "Something magical happens. When they get into a blazer, there's a transformation."

One of the job-seekers who received Dale's clothing tips was Karen Fisher, who is the educational coordinator for Berkshire Community Corrections, which is now run by Phoenix House.

A single parent, Fisher said she was referred to the SuitYourSelf Boutique while looking for work after moving to the Berkshires from the state of Florida.

"I knew I needed to be properly attired," said Fisher, who wore one of the shirts that Dale had picked out for her when she spoke with The Eagle on Friday. "I didn't have the money to purchase the clothing. I was a single parent, in transition, and starting all over. This program gave me a hand up, and got me on my feet."

On a table in the boutique, Dale keeps a notebook filled with letters from clients who have expressed sentiments similar to Fisher's. Dale is proud of its contents.

"Without your help," one client wrote, "I wouldn't know where to start."

Donations for the SuitYourSelfBoutique must be labeled for that purpose, and placed on hangers. They can be dropped off at any Goodwill Industries location in the Berkshires.

Goodwill Industries of the Berkshires is a social enterprise that funds job training and employment placement and community programs like Suit Yourself by selling donated clothes and household items at local Goodwill retail stores. When you donate to Goodwill, you are donating to your community. When you make a purchase at a Goodwill store, you are funding job training in the community. Goodwill operates retail stores in Pittsfield, Adams and Bennington VT.

For more information about the Suit YourSelf program and Goodwill, please contact Frank Engels, Goodwill CEO at (413) 442 0061, visit www.goodwill-berkshires.org or find us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/GoodwillBerkshires