

Bottomless Closet provides professional look for jobless

Clothes give clients needed confidence

By Jack Kelly
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Getting back into the workforce can be a daunting task. In these tough economic times, as more and more people are being forced back to work, Bottomless Closet is there to help with the transition.

The nonprofit organization was founded in 1997. The store is an affiliate of The Women's Alliance, a national organization that helps provide low-income women with job skills and attire. Bottomless Closet of Milwaukee serves nearly 1,000 women each year.

"Our goal is to get clothes into the hands of professionals who can't afford them so they can professionally present themselves in the workforce," said Andrea Estrada, executive director of Bottomless Closet.

Estrada said the organization's mission is to give women the skills and confidence to enter or re-enter the workforce.

"We work with our clients on an individual basis to provide them with the appropriate attire at affordable prices without exhausting their resources," she said.

Bottomless Closet receives clients through referrals from government and community agencies such as Maximus, which puts women in need of employment in touch with Bottomless Closet, Estrada said.

A sale was held last Thursday through Saturday at Wisconsin Community Services. Gently used suits, skirts, blazers, dresses, shoes and purses were available, at prices ranging from \$3 to \$10. There was also a designer section, with higher-end items available for higher prices.

Tamikia Taylor, administrative coordinator at the Milwaukee Urban League, was at the sale with a woman currently transitioning into employment. They picked out clothes for the woman to wear to a job interview.

In conjunction with Bottomless Closet, the Urban League offers GED education and resume-building workshops for those trying to enter or re-enter the work world.

Taylor said the Urban League helps the clients, mostly women, develop interview skills.



Photo by Lauren Stöxen/lauren.stoxen@marquette.edu

Tamikia Taylor, left, administrative coordinator at the Milwaukee Urban League, attended Bottomless Closet's sale this weekend to assist women transitioning into employment.

Closet

Continued from page 7

"It's a community-based organization," Taylor said. "We help people find jobs, get them into the workforce."

Estrada said Bottomless Closet serves as a midway point for the clients. Once the women learn the necessary skills to succeed in the workforce, they come to Bottomless Closet to dress the part.

"We're the bridge between vocational training and employment," she said.

A woman who comes to Bottomless Closet is typically between ages 18 and 35, of low income and in transition into the workforce, Estrada said.

Estrada said Bottomless Closet places strong emphasis on building confidence in its clients.

"Image enhancement is what we strive for," Estrada said. "The other agencies handle the soft skills. What we're focused on is a professional presentation."

Estrada said they help women professionally present themselves through proper makeup application, speech and attitude. She added that clothes alone can have a dramatic effect.

"You'd be surprised," Estrada said. "With the proper clothes,

people have the confidence and strength to do well."

The clothes come in from a variety of sources, said Kathryn Wellner, board member and public relations chair. Clothing and financial donations are given throughout the year by individuals and companies.

Wellner also said the clothes Bottomless Closet sells aren't your typical resale items.

"These aren't things you'd find at Goodwill," she said. "These are professional clothes."

Lately the store has seen a surge in clientele due to the current economic crisis, Estrada said.

"The phone has been ringing off the hook," Estrada said. "We're getting 15 to 20 calls per week from people we haven't heard from before."

Tough economic times have forced many consumers to cut corners, and shopping at resale outlets such as Bottomless Closet is one way to save.

Bottomless Closet plans to move in 2009 from its current location at 6040 W. Lisbon Ave. to the building where the sale was held, 3732 W. Wisconsin Ave. Estrada said expansion into men's clothing and services is also in the works.