

Connections to Success Suits 54 Women in Greenville Prison



By: Amie Bossi

"It was nice to know that someone actually cares."

"It's so uplifting and very beneficial."

"I really think this will help me when I go find a job."

"The care and attention really boosted my self-esteem."

These were some of the comments that were written on the exit evaluations of the 54 women suited inside Greenville Women's Prison on October 2, 2008. For the past five years, Connections to Success (CtS) has driven its 8' X 40' mobile trailer - called Wheels of Hope - to the door of the Federal Correctional Institution in Greenville, Illinois to provide the women with a suit to wear for the mock job fair, which is also held inside the prison.

Four days before the day of suiting, CtS staff and volunteers loaded the mobile unit full of suits, blouses, shoes, hosiery and jewelry. "It's a difficult process, trying to plan ahead and make sure we have enough of everything to fit each woman," says Dress for Success Midwest Program Manager, Amie Bossi. "It's very stressful. I want everything to be perfect for the women. I definitely could not handle this project successfully without the help of volunteers!"

Along with CtS staff, ten community volunteers assisted with suiting the women. They were rewarded with kind words and thankfulness from the women receiving the clothes. "I haven't worn street clothes in over five years," one

woman remarked. "I'm not even sure what size I wear!"

Size was not an issue for the expert personal shoppers. They assisted the women in selecting a few sizes to try on, pulling skirts and slacks inside. The really fun part

came in the accessory department. In order to ensure that enough jewelry was available for the event, the volunteers rummaged their own jewelry boxes and coaxed their friends into doing the same. "The amount of jewelry we had was unbelievable! We've never had that much. I am

always worried that we won't have enough, but not this time!" said Amie.

The 54 women who were suited were participating in a job readiness course at the prison. They will all be released within the next twelve months and will need to find employment. In the course, they write a resume and practice interviewing in preparation for finding employment. Kathy Lambert, Co-Director of Connections to Success, leads a morning workshop at the prison a few days before the suiting in order to help prepare the women for making a positive first impression at the mock job fair. The most important aspect of Kathy's lesson is teaching the women how to answer "the felony question."

"Job interviews can be intimidating," says Kathy, "especially if you have a felony conviction on your record. The most important thing is to be honest, admit that you made a mistake and then tell the interviewer what you have learned and how you have improved as a result of your situation."

The clothes make a difference, as well. One interviewer who participated in the mock job fair both before Dress for Success Midwest provided interview suits and after the women received the suits remarked that the women seemed more approachable and professional when dressed in their suits.

"They may as well have had the word 'felon' stamped across their forehead," he said of the women when he interviewed them in their prison uniforms, which are olive green button up shirts and pants. "Interviewing them in their suits was much better. I could actually picture interviewing them in the real world."

There were tears of gratitude and happiness from the women and volunteers. "It's an amazing opportunity to see the gratitude in the women's faces for a simple piece of clothing," said CtS Resource Specialist Cari Nelson.

This is not just a suit to these women it's a sense of hope, a lift of their spirits and a connection to the outside world. In the words of one of the women suited, "It made me feel like a human being again." For more information about Connections to Success, visit www.connectionstosuccess.org.



Connections To Success Volunteers



Before



After

