

POWER SUITING (alt title: TAILORED TO FIT)

Dress for Success Austin isn't just about clothes; it's about courage, too.

by Amy Wilde

NOTE: pull quotes = highlighted in yellow

Zola Clark has big plans.

We're sitting in a classroom in the newly expanded Dress for Success Austin office on the eastside, and she lights up when I ask what her goals are. Before she goes into detail, though, she tells the story of how she found the nonprofit group in the first place.

She was looking for employment a few years ago, she explains, but didn't have any suitable clothes for a job interview. A caseworker at Goodwill Industries referred her to the local chapter of the global organization working to help women pursue productive career paths. The moment she made contact, a spark ignited.

"When I walked in the door, it was just something I'd never experienced before," she says. "I love how all of the volunteers here meet you where you're at. No matter what your issue is, or how different one woman is from the next, I like how they can harmonize everyone together and... start you at square one and get you to that goal."

Clark, whom program manager Mia Johns refers to as a star client and whose professional headshot hangs prominently in the classroom, has completed nearly every program Dress for Success Austin offers. Ranging from suiting services and resume-building workshops to leadership training and career advancement programs, the agency acts, in a way, as an incubator for individuals, helping them move beyond the earliest stages of job-searching and career development into long-term goal setting and professional troubleshooting. (<<<NOTE: place this pull quote as close to the top of the story as possible, per Bo's request) But for some Austinites who seek its services, more pressing needs have to be addressed first.

"I think one thing that's common with our clients is that there's some sort of – I don't want to say hardship, but there's some bump in the road that they've

experienced – and they’re just having a hard time overcoming it,” Johns says. “It can be something really awful – (they may be) battered, abused, homeless, living out of their car – or it could just be something small like a family illness that they’ve been dealing with and just haven’t been able to get (back) on their feet.”

When a new client arrives in need of shelter, security or immediate sustenance, Johns explains, DFSA works with fellow nonprofit organizations like Goodwill, Caritas and local churches to make sure those needs are met before embarking on the search for employment.

“There’s a fine line between being okay and not being okay,” she continues, “and our volunteers are able to help them bridge that gap and overcome it.”

Once the basics are in place, the transformation process begins, and contrary to the agency’s sartorial name, it involves far more than just an outfit. While most clients come through the door looking for the perfect ensemble to help them make a solid first impression, many stay for the enrichment programs, all of which are offered free of charge. A bonus, and perhaps also the backbone of the operation’s success, is the feeling of support generated in the relationships between clients and volunteers, and in the realization that none of them is really alone.

It’s a sentiment Clark expresses openly when she talks about her experience with the programs she’s mastered over the past year or so.

“I’ve never networked this much in my entire life,” she says, leaning forward in her chair. “I have so many goals, and this is the place I can always come to that I know will help me get to whatever my goal is. If (the volunteers and staff) don’t know how to do one particular thing, they know someone who can help me. When I first came in here, I kind of shied away from speaking – not that I have a problem speaking in front of people – but it was a little embarrassing to tell my story, to tell what I’d been through, because I didn’t want to come off as, oh, I’m this helpless woman looking for a handout, or being crippled or handicapped in any type of way.”

“But after I started speaking more,” she continues, “I started to see myself and my life transition, not just in my personal life, but my professional life as well. I said, ‘Wow, I’m not the only one out there who has a story, and I’m not the only

one that has a goal.' So when I think about all of my plans and goals I'd like to achieve, I can look back and say, 'Wow, I can tell my story to someone who's either going to be in my shoes, or who's been in my shoes. Everyone wasn't born with a silver spoon in their mouth, so people want to know what your struggle is, and how you (made it).' So now, anytime they ask me to speak, I try to make myself available because it's so worth it."

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Founded in 1997, Dress for Success has long been a steady force in the economic empowerment of disadvantaged women. With more than 140 affiliates in 19 countries, it reports that its programs have helped more than 700,000 women work toward self-sufficiency in the past two decades.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics placed Austin's unemployment rate at 3.2 percent in December 2014, well below the national rate of 6.1 percent and even that of Texas, which stood at 4.6 percent at year's end. But while the city's percentage is positive in context, it still represents around 30,000 people without jobs. And, as Johns and Clark both note, many Austinites who have jobs aren't earning enough to make ends meet. As a result, Dress for Success Austin also takes on clients who are underemployed and in need of a second job or are looking to move up in the workforce altogether.

"A lot of women have jobs, but they're still not making enough money," Johns says. "We want to make sure they have a career, not just that \$10/hour job that they can barely survive on."

Even then, the struggle to maintain equilibrium can be tough – around eight out of every ten clients know all too well, since that's how many are mothers in single-parent households. For them, the pressure to find and maintain employment is higher than ever, even in environments that are less than ideal.

"A lot of women (still) feel like they're powerless even when they get the job," Johns says, "because they're either being mistreated by an employer or by a fellow employee, they don't know how to ask for more money, they feel they're being overworked, or they're being taken advantage of." Through informal referrals, staff and volunteers connect those clients with attorneys to apprise them of their rights in the workplace and empower them to speak up for themselves.

Another endeavor designed to bolster confidence is a program the DFS family calls "PWG," or Professional Women's Group. Each year, its members are given an opportunity to provide input on what the programming will be, but a common theme among its guest speakers is that of overcoming an obstacle and achieving success in spite or perhaps even because of it. Johns says she and the staff are always on the lookout for professionals to speak to the group about their triumphs and the roads that led them there.

As with any nonprofit, the more money it has, the more services it can offer to those it seeks to help. Thanks to a \$50,370 grant from the Walmart Foundation last year, DFS Austin was able to expand its office into a more habitable space. With those funds, it's grown to include a full-sized classroom and an employment services center where clients can work one-on-one with volunteers to build resumes, conduct mock interviews, and search for jobs.

Prior to the grant, staff and volunteers were cramped in a small reception area and single office that opened into a break room. That modest setup made way for the operation's pièce de résistance: "the closet," a meticulously appointed boutique where volunteers work with clients to find the right professional attire, much of which is donated through drives held by stores like Talbot's, Banana Republic and JCrew. From time to time, it hosts makeovers arranged for clients with a little help from the community.

The Pretty Project, Johns explains, collects gift certificates from area spas and salons and re-distributes them to DFS clients, matching them with professional hairstylists and aestheticians on occasion.

"Some of these women who haven't had any hope – just having someone spend an hour pampering them makes them feel so good," Johns says.

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A former military servicewoman, Clark knows a thing or two about discipline. When it comes to dividing her attention, though, she admits to a degree of difficulty.

"I'm 30 years old and I don't have any children, so I don't really have any obligations right now," she says, "but I find it hard to go to school and work

(full-time) at the same time.” Finding it hard to strike a balance while working and attending Austin Community College on military tuition assistance, she discovered online classes, and that’s when her dedication to DFS clicked into gear.

“I love *learning*,” she says with emphasis. Of the staff and volunteers, she effuses, “These ladies have been where I’m trying to go. I just admire them.”

In the next year, she says, she wants to finish school and launch a business. She starts to tell me about her plan to run her own environment-focused nonprofit organization, but she doesn’t want to speak too publicly about it before she’s fully explored the idea and put a business plan together. In the meantime, though, she’s promised Johns something: a community action project. Through the “CAP” program, Johns works with one nominated client at a time to lead the Professional Women’s Group in a community project. For her turn, Clark has an idea, and it’s ambitious.

“I would love to start a community action project to start a Dress for Success for men here,” she says. There’s a men’s program in San Antonio, she explains, and Johns chimes in that the Austin office gets about one call per day from unemployed men looking for assistance in getting back on their feet – **not a handout, but rather, a hand up.**

“You know who you should get in touch with?” Johns asks, leaning back in her chair. “George Zimmer.”

It takes a moment before it registers with Clark: Zimmer is the recently-ousted founder, chairman and longtime CEO of Men’s Wearhouse, one of the nation’s largest specialty retailers for men – dealing particularly in suits and dress shirts.

Clark’s eyes light up.

“I’ll help you write a proposal,” Johns says.

Clark smiles, nods, and says, “My heart’s set on that now.”

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SIDEBAR:

How to get involved

If you're a business leader

[Contact DFS Austin](#) about speaking at a Professional Women's Group meeting

If you're a style aficionado

Become an [image consultant](#) to assist with client suiting and boutique upkeep

If you're free on weekdays

Consider [volunteering 2-4 hours per week](#) as a career advocate or mentor

If you'd like to donate

Drop off [much-needed items](#) like handbags, jewelry, plus-size clothing and gift cards to stores like TJ Maxx, Marshalls and Ross – or [donate funds here](#)