

Change Jackets

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(unofficial translation)

With President Obama change is now supposed to come to America. Not everyone is dressed appropriately for this: The volunteer organization “Suited for Change” dresses women “without means” for Interviews.

Things are happening just like in a real store. Two saleswomen are swarming around Rhonda Brown, “how about a pair of grey slacks?” they ask. “I like brown” mumbles the 27 year old as she looks shyly to the ground. Rhonda Brown does not own a pair of slacks nor does she have the money to buy them. However, if she wants to interview for a training center position as a receptionist, she has to be appropriately dressed. That is why she has come to “Suited for Change,” an organization which dresses destitute women for interviews.

The promised change that is supposed to bring the people in America new jobs and new self-confidence is not likely to be realized without volunteers. On Martin Luther King day last Monday, Obama, prior to the begin of his presidency, already paid homage to volunteer organizations and assisted with the renovation of a shelter.

Tyna Gaylor, the executive director of “Suited for Change” feels encouraged by such gestures. Her helpers who are advising Rhonda Brown, work as volunteers, they come on average once a week. Volunteer work is a big thing in America – 1.5 million community NGOs exist in the US, they make up about 10% of the economic output in the country, and relieve the state of numerous social obligations.

“Suited for Change,” in addition to the support of its volunteers and private clothing donations, relies on the support of other organizations. The German software creation company SAP is an important sponsor, who doesn’t only provide capital, but has also already freed up its employees who have gone to the organization and put up closet shelving and painted walls. Even if clothing is being given away free here, the experience for the customer should outwardly be just like any normal shopping trip.

Jacquelyn Klah at least feels as though she has won the lottery as she heads to the exit, carrying an armful of bags. “The suit that I got still had the price tag of over \$150 attached. I never could have afforded that,” she said. 80% of the 1200 customers who are suited here each year, from personal testimonies, would not have had the appropriate clothes for their job interviews. At “Suited for Change,” to go along with their new outfits, customers receive handbags, coats and other accessories. If they get the job, they are eligible for 3 additional outfits.

With Rhonda Brown, picking something is taking a little longer. She is looking for something slim-fitting. However this wish for someone with the size 20, what

corresponds to a 50 in European sizes is not easily fulfilled. But also for her the saleswomen finally do find an outfit. The stockroom is also continuously stocked with larger sizes. “It’s just not good for the customer’s morale if we do not have something for her, says Celesta Jurkovich, one of the volunteers.

Last year, in addition to business attire, “Suited for Change” also offered workshops in interview techniques and office etiquette. Executive Director Gaylor would like to expand on these services, this is however not possible on her budget of \$400,000. She is hoping now for help from the government. “It is after all usually government agencies who send these women to us.” “Maybe” she adds “Obama could help us to also close this gap.” After all, it is not only now after the election that he has become familiar with the importance of volunteer organizations – he himself has been working as a community organizer in Chicago.



Tyna Gaylor, executive director of “Suited for Change” in her Shoe stockroom.