

Harlem's Job Seekers Get Working Wardrobes

By [Lucy Pawle](#) on Nov 8th, 2011

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Rena Ashby gets styled by Victoria Towns-Griffith at the Relief Boutique.
(Photo by Lucy Pawle)

She walked in wearing her track pants and puffer jacket. But Rena Ashby left with two trouser suits, a simple black dress, a grey jacket and a pair of business-like pumps. It wasn't Bloomingdale's or a SoHo boutique responsible for her new outfits, but a charity the top floor of a Harlem brownstone.

Ashby, 45, emerged from the changing room and stood before the mirror and beamed. "Wow I look gorgeous," she said, observing herself in black pants, a white shirt and waist-nipped jacket.

Relief Boutique provides low-income women with clothes suitable for job interviews. Uptown unemployment is historically double that of the city, currently 8 percent. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports show that women are virtually as likely to be unemployed as men.

Boutique founder Robyn Young, a 37-year-old attorney, said that women seeking jobs often lack confidence and don't know what to wear to an interview. But Relief Boutique's clients leave with at least two outfits, styled by Young's mother Carolyn Young, 65, and her aunt Victoria Townes-Griffith, 57.

Though she'd donated clothes to charities like Goodwill in the past, Robyn Young's inspiration came "when one day I looked through my closet, saw how many clothes I had, and realized I could do more."

Harlem was the obvious choice for the charity because "we wanted to be in a community that needs us." Relief Boutique has served over 100 clients, most black and Hispanic, since its March opening. Women now travel to it from around the city, many referred by job-training organizations. "They work on the inside and we work on the outside – it's a package," said Young.

The package requires the manpower of seven volunteers, required to sift through a mountain clothes. Most donations come from clothing drives at corporate offices. The week before Ashby arrived, a large batch came in from Morgan Stanley's Westchester office. The boutique feels half its actual size. Racks of dresses, suits, shoes, coats and handbags obscure the floors and walls, shrinking the space. There's barely room for the couple of desks and changing room.

Photos of Michelle Obama and Oprah Winfrey line a mantelpiece, photos of smiling women are tacked to the wall, and a book of inspirational quotes sits on the desk. "We create an atmosphere where the client feels comfortable," Young said.

A mother of two and a former drug addict who hasn't worked since 2008, Ashby is training to be a nursing assistant. She needs clothes for interviews later this month, and called visit was vital for "building up my confidence." Her regular attire is "jeans, sneakers and sweatshirts," she explained, but she was surprised how good she felt wearing a dress.

She is not unusual. "Lots of women come in and don't like to wear skirts and dresses or haven't worn heels before," said Carolyn.

Many of Relief Boutique's clients have never attended a job interview, and the stylists explain gently but firmly when outfits aren't appropriate. "Last week we had someone who tried on a cute dress but it was just too short," Carolyn Young recalled. "We told her, 'Yes you look great, but not for the workplace', which she didn't understand at first."

The Relief Boutique staff tries to adapt to each customer. Clients come in all sizes and ages, size 0 to XXXL, mid-20s to mid-60s. Rena came away with three outfits, not the standard two. "She just looked so good in that last dress. I know she had two pant suits but I couldn't help it," Carolyn admitted, laughing.

The afternoon before, Robyn Young was asked to open the Boutique to a woman requiring shoes for an interview the next morning. Young left her midtown law firm at 4 p.m., to supply her client with footwear within a couple of hours. "It was pretty crazy, but she was happy and we'll bring her back to get a full outfit next time," Young said.

She had another happy client in Ashby. "Once I put that suit on and I looked in the mirror I felt different," she said. "I feel like I could go out to work today!"