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Created 09/12/2011 - 19:56

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Monday, September 12, 2011

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It is no mystery how the term “power suit” came to be. When you put on a business suit, you transform. No one knows this better than New York-based attorney Robyn Young. Young recently founded the Relief Boutique, a nonprofit that provides professional clothing and accessories to women who are looking for work but can’t afford to purchase appropriate business and interview attire on their own.

“The right clothes can improve a woman’s confidence significantly,” says Young, as she tells the story of the very first client who came to the Relief Boutique earlier this year-- a promising nursing student. “When she came to us she had

skills. She was at the top of her class,” said Young. “But she didn’t have confidence.” The young woman had spent her entire life in scrubs and jeans so the prospect of getting dressed up and interviewing for a nursing position was frightening. That is, until a Relief Boutique stylist assisted her in picking out a formal business suit, a pair of shoes and other accessories. The change in the woman was dramatic. She looked at herself in the mirror and triumphantly said, “I can do this. I am a professional nurse.”

“Many of the women who come to us are putting on a suit for the first time,” said Young whose own love of clothes inspired her to start the organization. The admitted “fashionista” is an example of the old adage: When you’re starting a business—be it for profit or social service—do what you love.

The idea for the Relief Boutique came to Young one day when she was looking in her own closet. She felt so humbled and blessed by all of the abundance in her life that she began to wonder what she could do to give back in a way that was connected to her love of clothes. Then it hit her. She’d start an

organization that would provide professional clothing to underserved women.

No stranger to social service, Young already sat on the board of one nonprofit and she'd been heavily involved in volunteer and pro bono activities including tutoring, mentoring, food preparation and delivery, fundraising, courtroom advocacy and small business legal counsel. As a high school student, Young was the founding member of a child advocacy organization, Students Advocating for Young Children. Despite all of this experience, Young was not exactly sure how to turn her vision of providing professional clothing to economically disadvantaged women.

As an attorney, research is second nature to Young so that's where she started. She spoke to various people who were active in New York City's social service community asking if there was a need for the type of organization she had in mind. When she was told that yes, low income women are in need of professional clothing, she began to find out the next steps to take.

She knew she would need tax-exempt status, a board, and space for clothing and fittings, among other things. The Internet was an invaluable resource for Young as she went through the process of starting the boutique. For every question, she found an answer.

The Foundation Center's website www.foundationcenter.org ^[3] provided information about seminars and workshops focusing on a myriad of topics including board development and fundraising. Young went to the Internal Revenue Service's website www.irs.gov ^[4] for guidelines on tax reporting requirements for nonprofits. She found the Relief Boutique's current Harlem location through the Nonprofit Coordinating Committee's website www.npcc.org ^[5] which features an ads section for organizations that want to share office space.

Young also received plenty of support from her family and friends. Her mother and sister helped found the organization and, now, they both work there. Last year was the set up phase. This is the first year of operation and, so far, the all-volunteer staff has served dozens of women. Clients who are preparing for job interviews come to the boutique through referrals from a community based employment center. During the initial visit, each client meets with a volunteer stylist. The stylist helps the client pick out two outfits, one of which is appropriate for an interview within their particular industry. The second outfit, while professional, is less formal. Women who are subsequently hired or maintain employment following their first visit may come back to select more clothing to wear to work.

The Relief Boutique acquires either new or gently used clothing in various ways. Recently, the Brooklyn Women's Bar Association sponsored a clothing drive for the boutique. Also, a model donated 20 pairs of size 10 shoes helping out with the larger hard to find sizes.

There are many more avenues Young would like to explore including providing men's clothing, which she discovered is in high demand. In addition, Young would like to extend services to incarcerated women and women who have been in abusive relationships and are in need of appropriate clothing for court appearances. The Relief Boutique's website www.reliefboutique.org ^[6] features a number of upcoming activities including style makeovers and a hair and nail salon.

Currently, Young is working to create more partnerships with local organizations and to raise awareness for her cause. "We want to be more established in the community," she says. "We want to give our clients the best of everything."

Entrepreneurs

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