

Well Suited

How one woman helps underprivileged men get the clothes and skills they need to make a fresh start.



Shara Mondy started Suited For Success to answer a basic need.

When Shara Mondy was traveling as a motivational speaker and board member for Dress for Success, the nonprofit group that provides clothes and career help to disadvantaged women, she kept getting the same question over and over again. "People would always ask, 'My husband has suits he doesn't wear anymore. Where can I donate those?'" Mondy says. "I'd have to apologize and tell them we only help women." When she returned home to Jacksonville, Florida, Mondy tried to find programs that provide men the same kind of fresh start—and was shocked to find that there weren't any.

That didn't seem fair to her. Having seen women totally turn their lives around while working with Dress for Success, Mondy wanted to give men similar opportunities. So she settled down to work on a business plan for her own organization that would give men the tools they need to become self-sufficient and successful, starting with a new suit. Although Mondy had never written a grant proposal before, she outlined her vision and submitted her plan to the city of Jacksonville. The city granted Mondy \$15,000 in start-up funds, and in 2004 Suited For Success was born.

"At first I just asked my male friends to donate their own gently used suits and work clothes," she says. "Then they mentioned it to their buddies and suddenly people were calling and e-mailing me to say, 'Hey, I want to help out too.'" When she had collected about 25 suits, Mondy opened her

doors to clients, who found her through a local church and agencies that provide support services to ex-offenders and homeless men.

"My guys get a complete outfit: suit, shirt, tie, socks, T-shirt, underwear—the works," Mondy says. But her vision expanded quickly. "I also wanted to make sure these men were the best candidates for the positions they were applying for," she says. Because she has worked for years as a personal and professional development consultant, Mondy had the skills to coach her new nonprofit clients, too. With the help of some of her friends, she began editing the men's resumé's, conducting mock interviews and helping them with job searches.

Driven by her desire to give struggling young men a chance, Mondy also started offering free workshops and mentoring opportunities. "Seventy to 80 percent of my clients are ex-offenders," she says. "You can't lock a man up and then expect him to change if you don't teach him how to find a job and be a productive citizen when he comes out." So Mondy brought in male speakers—volunteers from 100 Black Men of Jacksonville, a leadership program—to offer classes on how to create a savings plan, balance a checkbook, learn fathering skills and address relationship issues.

Mondy's impact on the Jacksonville community has been dramatic. "When I met Shara I was jobless, homeless and very depressed," says Nathaniel Hendley. "She gave me a suit and

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Do you know a woman like Shara Mondy who goes the extra mile for a worthy cause? LHJ and WE Volunteer are still looking for outstanding volunteers for our WE Do Good Awards. Nominate your amazing lady at wevolunteer.tv today.

encouraged me to reach for higher goals." Five years after his first meeting with Mondy, Hendley is a prevention coordinator with the Northeast Florida AIDS Network and also serves as a board member for the Duval County Health Department.

Suited For Success now serves more than 200 clients each month with the help of a small but dedicated team of volunteers and has three locations in the Jacksonville area. This year Mondy is even introducing a signature tie with the help of a local neckwear company and sitcom actor Tommy Ford. Her clients will sell the ties and receive a portion of the sales, which will help them earn income and network at the same time.

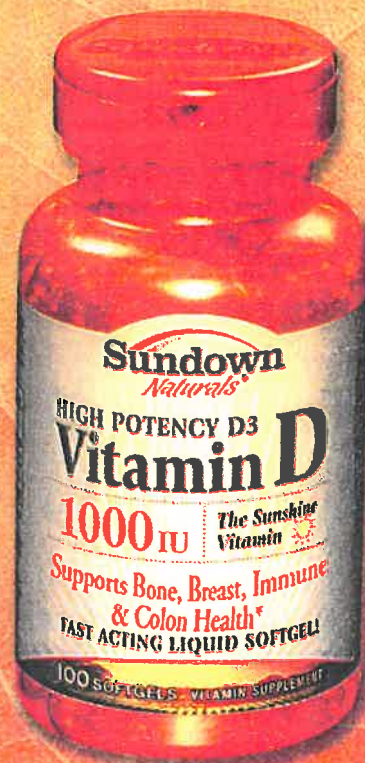
Mondy doesn't see an end to the number of men Suited For Success can reach or the services and support she can provide. "The suit is definitely the symbol of the program," she says. "But our mission is to help men be healthy, happy and successful in every area of their lives."

THIS MONTH'S CHALLENGE
Participate in the Men's Wearhouse National Suit Drive. This retail chain will accept gently used men's professional clothing items in exchange for a 10-percent-off thank-you coupon. Or go local and **organize a men's clothing and shoe drive in your neighborhood**, then donate the items you collect to a shelter or group in your area.

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Shara Mondy, President Suited for Success

Suited For Success and Focused on the Future

By Margaret Howard & Jay Boatwright

Five years ago Shara Mondy was inspired to serve her community by taking the initiative to create and develop “Suited for Success”. Suited for Success is a development program which focuses on the professional, spiritual, and personal aspects of essential life skills for formerly incarcerated males. The goal of the program is to facilitate a smooth re-entry back into society for these individuals, while providing essential life skills such as employability, life management, career development as well as mentoring.

Re-Entry, Re-Building, and reducing chances for **Re-Cidivism**; also known as the 3 R’s of Suited for Success. **Re-Entry:** Helping men transition from prison into a positive and productive lifestyle by providing resources and supportive services; **Re-Building:** Helping participants rebuild their lives through continuing education, job readiness, mental health and drug rehabilitative services; **Reducing chances for Re-Cidivism:** As part of the program’s criteria, participants of Suited for Success are helping other participants with their Re-Entry and Re-Building strategies, this helps reduce chances of recidivism for ex-offenders.

A recent interview with Ms. Mondy revealed some interesting facts about the organization. When asked what her inspiration in creating Suited for Success was, she replied; “I was on the Board of Directors for the women’s program, Dress for Success. Whenever I went out to speak for the organization people would ask about a similar program for men. I did my research and found that there no programs providing similar services for men. So, that’s how Suited for Success was born”.

Actor, Tommy Ford is the main celebrity supporter for SFS. “He does speaking engagements on behalf of the program and supports signature events. “He loved the concept of SFS and really wanted to help men in need”, states Shara. *(continued on page 4)*



Shara Mondy and Actor, Tommy Ford at a recent fund raiser event held for Suited for Success



Suited for Success Clients: Stephen Austin, Mario Pope, Raymond Perry and Arlick Spence after being 'Suited' by SFS.

(continued from page 3)

“...With these donations, men will have the opportunity to walk into an interview with confidence - an essential step toward economic stability.”

Suited for Success is also partnered by two other well known entities. *100 Black Men*, Jacksonville Chapter and Men's Warehouse.

porter by sponsoring fundraisers and local suit drives. Business owner members of *100 Black Men* also provide support by way of allowing SFS clients to participate in job shadowing at their businesses.

Men's Wearhouse, the nation's leading retailer of men's tailored clothing has partnered with Suited for Success in a national suit drive. “We are very excited to work with Men's Wearhouse on the National Suit Drive campaign,” said Shara. “Proper professional attire really makes a difference in our clients' lives. With these donations, men will have the opportunity to walk into an interview with confidence - an essential step toward economic stability.” Last year, the inaugural suit drive garnered 125,000 professional items nationally. This year, Suited For Success and Men's Wearhouse have set a goal of not only gathering as many items as possible, but also increasing awareness about the importance clothing has on their clients' success as they work to overcome barriers to gainful employment. To demonstrate its commitment, Men's Wearhouse also donated a new tie to help complete the outfit for every suit donated.

All Men's Wearhouse locations will serve as drop-off sites for gently used suits, dress shirts, sport coats, slacks, ties, belts and shoes that will be used to benefit men in need of these items to transition into the workforce. Men's Wearhouse will accept donations for Suited for Success, which in turn will provide them to individuals who utilize their services. For a complete list of drop-off locations, please visit www.nationalsuitdrive.com. Other local supporters/mentors of Suited for Success include City Rescue Mission, The Potters House Church, Soul-food Bistro and Chicken Koop.

Evidence of the program's success is found in the testimony of a former SFS client that came to the program about three years ago for services. The gentleman was suited, went on a job interview and landed a job with another community service agency.

He quickly moved up the ladder to become a Counselor himself and began refer clients from his agency to Suited for Success. To add to his success story, he purchased a car, and then the next year closed on his first home. (continued on page 6)



Suited for Success

A suit may not make the man, but it does make a difference when he's looking for a job.

Jackie Carter is confident that his new suit will help him move up and out of homelessness. "I am a bright guy and ready to work. I know how to network and conduct a job search," Carter

said. "Having a nice looking, new suit, shirt and tie lets me project the image of who I know I am, not the image that people associate with homelessness."

Carter quit his job to start a home renovation and repair business just before the housing market crashed. "I couldn't have picked a worse time," he said. "As time went on, I lost my car and had to

sell all of my tools to try to make ends meet." Eventually, he was evicted from his apartment and turned to City Rescue Mission for shelter.

Carter learned about Suited for Success, an agency that provides interview-appropriate suits and accessories to disadvantaged men seeking employment. Dignity U Wear provides the agency with brand new suits, shirts, ties and other accessories.

"Dignity U Wear has been an absolute blessing to help me meet the growing demand," said Shara Mondy, the president and founder of Suited for Success. "I'm servicing up to 20 new clients per day."

Mondy's clients come to her through referrals from many

agencies like City Rescue Mission. "I fit suits for men who are completing job readiness programs and are ready to begin interviewing for jobs," she explained. "The new suits are a critical tool they need to start the process."

"For a man who's been through a rough period, a new suit comes with a new attitude," Mondy said. "As we start shopping and I'm trying things on them, they just start standing up tall, and after a while, the head they've been holding down, it comes up."

"There's a stigma attached to the word homeless," Carter said. "People think all homeless people are drug addicts or mentally ill. But there are good people out there that just need help from those who can."