

The makeover that matters

On a rainy Wednesday morning, just west of Kips Bay, a woman with short, dark curly hair and glasses, in a green print cardigan, gray turtleneck, black pants and black sneakers sits on a black chair in a small waiting room in the back of the cheerfully decorated Dress for Success Worldwide customer service area. To the left of the waiting room is a closet larger than most Manhattan studio apartments, set off from the rest of the office by plastic dressers and shelves. If the clothes don't work, the all-female office and randomly placed vases of flowers indicate the purpose of this space is Woman Power.

The woman in the green is Irena Garrett, of Crown Heights, a new Dress for Success client. Garrett has been mostly out of work since she and her husband moved from his native Australia to her native New York after her mother passed away. The petite 57-year-old has an impressive, if eclectic resume - from management consulting to ballroom dance instructing to government human resources. But what she's missing is New York "street cred" and a chance to get her foot in the door.

Which is where Dress for Success swoops in to help. The organization is currently celebrating its 15th year of helping disadvantaged women enter the workplace. Founded by Nancy Lublin in New York, DFS now serves women in 110 cities across 12 countries.

In the Worldwide New York headquarters, volunteer personal shopper Jackie Montras, also dressed in green and black, leads Garrett back to the closet and fitting rooms, draped with red curtains. Montras and two other personal shoppers, Marlene Bostick and Maxine Short, get busy pulling clothes off the nearly 50 feet of racks

winding around the room. Blazers, shirts, pants, even bras -- donations keep the nonprofit able to make women over from head to toe.

The shoppers zoom through the options in Garrett's size - one shirt's too bulky under a blazer, one outfit doesn't have enough color, one bra's too big in the back.

Finally a black blazer with subtle rippling around the hem excites Garrett, and she leaves the fitting room to get a closer look in the mirror.

"Well, she's not shy," comments Judi Lindower, a volunteer career counselor, of the lack of pants on Garrett's legs.

Garrett carefully inspects the jacket, opening and closing it before announcing she's going to sew a hook and eye on it to help define her waist better. Montras politely points to the uncovered windows across from the dressing area, and tells Garrett she should probably go back in the fitting room.

In an earlier life, Garrett studied music for 23 years, attending New York University for a bachelor's in music and education, then a master's in orchestral conducting. A few years after she graduated and realized the field wasn't exactly friendly to women, a "clever friend" asked her "You have a good personality, why don't you conduct seminars instead of music?"

So she switched gears and started working in human resources fields -- resume writing, communication skills, giving seminars -- eventually working her way up to management consulting. From 1987 to 1994 she lived in Los Angeles, where she became a ballroom dance instructor and competitor. After going through a bad divorce, she took a trip to visit friends in Sydney, Australia.

“I will always be a New Yorker, but I feel in love with Sydney,” she said.

She also met and fell in love with her husband John, with whom she adopted then 5-year-old Beata, from China, who’s now 13. Everything was going well. Garrett worked for the Australian government, became a dual citizen and lived in a city she loved.

But then her mother fell ill, and passed away in 2006. Garrett said she became overwhelmingly homesick. “Also, my daughter, she’d lived in China for five years, and then Australia; I wanted her to experience her American side,” she said.

So the Garrett and her husband decided to take a year sabbatical, to show Beata her mother’s roots. Garrett found herself back in love with New York, and the family decided to stay. John found a job and got his green card, Beata was thriving in school... but Garrett couldn’t find her place in her own hometown.

“You have to have street credibility in New York,” she said, occasionally asking if she was speaking too fast. “People don’t care what you were doing in foreign countries, they want to know what you did on 45th and Park.”

One piece of the wardrobe puzzle solved, Montras, Bostick and Short search for shirts and bottoms to complete Garrett’s interview look. As the volunteers pull options, Garrett remarks “I feel like I’m on ‘What Not to Wear!’”

She tries on a skirt that fits perfectly, and comes back out to the mirror. The volunteers (and this reporter) coo compliments.

“I have Stacy Londons everywhere!” Garrett said, her posture improving as she checks herself out. She’s put herself on the back burner as Beata finishes junior high school; once her daughter starts high school this fall, Garrett plans to give herself more attention.

“It’s a different attitude that you get,” said Lindower, comparing the way both recipients of “What Not to Wear” makeovers and Dress for Success suits walk and stand after getting better clothes.

One of the shoppers finds a black and white print shirt in the right size, and the look is complete - Garrett says she has black dress shoes and a dressy coat. After changing back in to her dark green floral cardigan, gray turtleneck and black pants, she heads over to sit down with Lindower.

But the shoppers keep finding more stuff to send her home with -- underwear, a scarf, boots -- and remind her that once she gets the job she can come back for five days worth of clothes.

“Yay! I love shopping,” she shrieks. After Lindower asks if she needs make-up, and adds a tinted moisturizer to the bag, the ladies sit down for the career advice portion of the interview.

In front of bookshelves holding a variety of test guides and career and wardrobe advice, the counselor asks Garrett if she needs help preparing for her upcoming interview. She explains her experience in consulting, so in lieu of interview practice, Lindowski focuses on the resources mentioned in the packet given to new clients - computer classes, tax filing information, sample letters. She also tells Garrett about a networking group DFS runs.

“Sometimes when you’re looking for work you feel isolated, lonely,” said Lindower.

Garrett asks about the age range of the group, and after Lindowski tells her there’s a wide mix, she replies “I never worried about being a woman, but I’m so conscious about my age.”

Lindower reassures her that many companies will see hiring with more experience as a way to save money on training, and that what many of her clients are telling her is that judging how a new candidate will “fit in with the group” is more important - but with her outgoing, friendly demeanor, Garrett shouldn’t have any trouble in that department.

Confidence boosted, Garrett heads back out into the rain.

The interview went well, Garrett believes. Although she describes herself as a positive person, her looks disguise her age and having a teenage daughter gives her a youthful energy, she knows her resume tells the truth. But she left the Dress for Success office a happy woman.

“The whole experience was wonderful,” she said, while on her way home to start brushing up her Excel skills in preparation for a free class offered by the organization. She said she looked forward to the networking opportunities, and thought all the volunteers were professional, polite and supportive, going so far as to call Lindower a “role model” for being the same age and volunteering while she looks for work herself.

What Garrett may be missing in street cred and Excel skills she more than makes up for with effort and motivation.

“I don’t give up,” said the woman who adopted the Australian philosophy “no worries.”

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www.dressforsuccess.org/whoweare_founder.aspx