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FINE MAGAZINE / NOVEMBER 2014 / DRESS FOR SUCCESS CHARITY EMPOWERS WOMEN IN SAN DIEGO

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Dress for Success Charity Empowers Women in San Diego

The New Black is Dress for Success®

WRITTEN BY JEANNE FERRIS



Graduates of the Dress for Success San Diego "Going Places Network:" a curriculum based program that helps clients gain professional skills, accelerate their job search and build confidence through weekly training sessions, one-on-one coaching and networking.

Sylvia McKinney has her feet planted firmly in the present. Her focus is in the immediate future, and as a survivor of domestic abuse of over 25 years ago, her past only serves as a deep-seated compassion and motivation to help others with a critical need for self-sufficiency. McKinney's motto resounds with her humility and grace: "Begin each day with gratitude."

Of Scottish roots, McKinney is the founder and executive director of a non-profit organization called Dress for Success San Diego (DFS). It is one of the 134 worldwide affiliates of the flagship office based out of New York.

Fleeing Scotland, she bravely landed in New York. She tried to connect with Nancy Lublin, the creator of Dress for Success New York, but it never manifested.

Years later in San Diego, after raising her five children, working a full time job and achieving her master's degree in Human Services, Lublin happened to be in town. She sought McKinney out and subsequently offered her the San Diego affiliate. McKinney had already been trying to get a similar service off the ground and "felt it had come full circle and that it was the right opportunity." It was meant to be.



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Amber is prepared to enter the workplace with confidence after a "personal shopping" experience at the private Dress for Success San Diego boutique.

DFS promotes economic independence for disadvantaged women by providing professional attire, a network of support and the career development tools to help women thrive in work and in life. It is, in fact, a quest for empowerment and achievement, which has taken the idea of the "power suit" and elevated it to a whole new level.

The first step offered in the many-tiered programs available at DFS is an education of the fashion basics needed for the corporate environment, which starts with a private appointment in an inspirational and well-appointed boutique. DFS offers its services as a supportive ally and resource for those experiencing challenges in their career and life advancement.

"Dress for Success has helped about 7,500 recipients," said McKinney. "At no cost to the client, we teach employment preparedness and also important, a promotable skill which helps with job retention."

"Sylvia and my Personal Shopper inspired me from day one," said Theonisa Davis, a DFS former client. "I walked in[to] the boutique dreading the appointment. I thought that I would have some snooty people turning up their noses and judging me. It turned out to be the complete opposite. They were so nice and accommodating, I wanted to be a part of Dress for Success San Diego. I am now being inspired by the women in the program [and] seeing them grow into homeowners and entrepreneurs."

"What I learned is that I needed to be true to myself," Davis added. "My confidence in myself determines how well I will do on a job. Knowledge is power and Dress for Success has been a great tool for me by providing me with information and training. I give back to Dress for Success [by] volunteering as the Professional Women's Group Coordinator."

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DFS offers a “lifeline of services”:

Suiting Program – Personal Shopper appointment.

Business Attire – clients receive up to a weeks worth of workplace appropriate attire.

Professional Women’s Group – a monthly forum for networking, sharing of new experiences and challenges, and education with subject specific (financial literacy, debt counseling, etc.) guest speakers.

Women’s Workforce Development Center – Through a grant from Women Give San Diego, this center offers four fully equipped workstations for updating/creating resumes, job searches, personalized career assessment, and online continuing education.

Going Places Network by Walmart – Through a grant from Walmart, this program helps unemployed and under-employed DFS clients through weekly training sessions, one-on-one counseling in a supportive environment.

DFS operates in a state of the art “Smart Corner” complex in downtown San Diego. This was made possible through a shared commitment and partnership in serving survivors of domestic violence with the San Diego Family Justice Center. This includes easy public transportation by trolley or bus and on-site security.

“We have 65 collaborative partners in social services,” McKinney said. “And 82% of our proceeds goes toward our programs, with 18% toward administrative costs—we have one full-time staff member and one part-time staff member. Otherwise, all services and goods are entirely volunteer driven and donated.”

The DFS board members are a who’s who of influential and accomplished people. If McKinney doesn’t inspire you to donate, join, or follow in her footsteps, each board member dedicated to DFS is a solid source of inspiration by virtue of their professional expertise and civic merit.

An apropos sign that DFS has served as a valuable contributor to the San Diego community for 15 years, is that they have been selected as the designated beneficiary for the proceeds from Fashion Forward® Leonard Simpson’s 2014, 7th Annual “10 Best Dressed Awards” fundraiser. It would seem that Dress for Success San Diego is The New Black.



Leonard Simpson's 10 Best Dressed of 2014.

Gentlemen (left to right): John Winfield, Raymond Dale, Jonathon Collopy, Roberto De Gregorio, Dave Carothers, George Gould, Brent Wilsey, Patrick Kruer, Matthew Shillingsburg
(not pictured): Dr. Paul Chasan

Ladies (left to right): Bibbi Herrmann Conner, Carmela Koenig, Laurie Black, Sally B. Thornton (founding chair), H el ene Gould, Mina Kooklani, Lola Green, Jo Ann Kilty
(not pictured): Chief of Police Shelly Zimmerman, Darcy Delano Smith, Katheen Connor, Teri Valentina Rios

Supermodel Kelly Emberg has been appointed as Honorary Chair and television and film actress Vanessa Williams is slated to host the event. The theme of this gala is "A Moment in Time" and will be held on November 13, 2014 at the Hilton La Jolla Torrey Pines with doors opening at 5:30 p.m. with a hosted cocktail reception and silent auction. Formal seated dinner at 7:00 pm with a live auction and an 8:00 p.m. Fashion Forward Theatrical Show. Awards ceremony is scheduled for 9:00 p.m. See www.10bestdressedgala2014.eventbrite.com for tickets.

When asked who was the first person she shared the exciting news regarding DFS's designation, McKinney said, "I was in my office when I received the news from our board member Sara Kooklani--I immediately contacted [Lisa Schalon], our board president. She is always among the first people I call to share significant news that affects our organization."

Most fashion enthusiasts would choose one of Academy Award film actresses, Princess Grace of Monaco or Audrey Hepburn's movies as inspiration for haute couture and style.

McKinney's choice? "The Color Purple." It is a deep story rife with unlikely heroes who overcome adversity and cruelty with pursuits of empowerment and hearts of valor. And a "period piece" for the fashionistas.

This article appears in the November 2014 issue of FINE Magazine

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