



WOMEN'S CLOTHES CLOSET

Local nonprofit helps women build wardrobes and rebuild lives.

by **KIM SEIDEL**
CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Bonnie Newburg, employee (**left**), and Deb Daehn-Zellmer, advisory chair (**right**), keep the Women's Clothes Closet running for women in need of professional clothing.

Debbie Hubert cried with joy the first time she visited the Women's Clothes Closet (WCC) in La Crosse. She had been laid off from her professional teaching job of 20 years in July. She needed new clothes, but she had no room for them in her tight budget. At WCC, she found just what she was looking for.

Located in Our Savior's Lutheran Church, 612 Division St., WCC offers clothing for free to women in need. The attractive 1,000-square-foot space is much bigger than any typical woman's closet. After a design upgrade by Western Technical College students three years ago—which included fresh paint and window treatments—WCC resembles any neat and organized consignment shop.

"It is so nice in here. I do appreciate it," says Hubert, holding an outfit she chose from the racks one morning. She has been substitute teaching at area schools since her layoff and works a second job at night.

Hubert is the type of woman WCC loves to assist, said Deb Daehn-Zellmer, WCC advisory committee chairwoman. "We are offering a bridge to women to help them get through a tough time," she says.

Hubert has picked up blazers, T-shirts, turtlenecks and shoes at WCC, which carries everything required to put together a stylish outfit, including socks, accessories, purses and jewelry. Women are asked to try clothing on in WCC's changing rooms to ensure items fit.

On a first visit, women can select three outfits. They can return up to twice a month to select one outfit per visit. No questions are asked about a woman's income or employment status. If a woman comes in for clothing, she will leave with clothing.

WCC was started by a UW-La Crosse student in 1996 to support women in the changing welfare system. "Our hope initially was that women would become more self-sufficient and not need WCC, but our numbers have increased over time," Daehn-Zellmer says.

It's reflective of the tougher economic times. Through November 2008, the number of visitors rose 27 percent from 2007. "The population we serve is primarily looking for work, or they are in the workforce and trying to stretch their limited budget," Daehn-Zellmer says. "They have other money, then, for gas, food and other necessities."

Many women learn about WCC through various organizations, and Daehn-Zellmer has noticed more college students coming in. "It's a way for them to have ongoing access to clothing to expand their wardrobe," she says.

WCC has an annual operating budget of \$10,000, which includes salary for the sole employee, Bonnie Newburg. Our Savior's provides the space and custodial and disposal services. Grants and gifts from area organizations have helped cover equipment. A new checkout counter and display case are among recent improvements. WCC also held its first annual fund-raiser this fall: a style show and luncheon that brought in \$2,700.

To keep operating, WCC accepts monetary and clothes donations. Clothing, accessories and other items must be in good condition and in season, as the organization has limited storage space. Donations can be dropped off during WCC's open hours: 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Mondays, 2 p.m. to 7 p.m. Tuesdays, and 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays. For more information, call 608-784-5745. ❀

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