

Tamala Edwards (LEFT) and Sheri Cole (CENTER) advise Career Wardrobe client Andrea Blessingame.



# clothes minded

PHILADELPHIA'S CAREER WARDROBE, WHICH LAUNCHES A NEW STYLE EVENT IN SUPPORT OF ITS UPCOMING ANNUAL FASHION SHOW, CONTINUES TO SERVE LOW-INCOME WOMEN WITH SUITS, SMILES, AND HOPE. BY MARNI PRICHARD MANKO



Participants and donors model fashions from the nonprofit's resale boutique.

Career Wardrobe is the country's largest independent, community-based nonprofit organization that helps low-income women make their way into the workforce by offering them the professional attire needed for job interviews—and, on a more fundamental level, by helping them improve their confidence. Since it was first started back in 1995 (when a group of women came together after seeing Oprah highlight a similar concept based out of Chicago), Career Wardrobe has since gone on to become one of Philadelphia's most lauded philanthropic organizations, providing clothing and education assistance to more than 75,000 women—90 percent of whom are single mothers. The charity's Wardrobe Boutique, an upscale resale shop that donates all of its

proceeds back to the organization, funds many of their yearly initiatives. It will also play host to a new in-store fundraising event this April in anticipation of Career Wardrobe's signature annual fashion show, "Perfect Fit: Fashioning Futures for Women."

Women from diverse backgrounds contribute to the success of Career Wardrobe. Exclusively for *Philadelphia Style*, director Sheri Cole, news anchor and volunteer Tamala Edwards, and success story Andrea Blessingame reveal the extraordinary passion behind the non-profit—and the power of a suit.

## LEADING THE CHARGE

"Something happens to a woman when she puts on a professional outfit," says executive director

Sheri Cole, who has sat at the helm since 2000. "Her whole posture, demeanor, and attitude shifts... for the better," she continues. "A woman will come in for her appointment and not be able to quite look you in the eye. She is not smiling, because she feels defeated by the process of looking for a job and being turned down not just a few times, but 50 or 60 times. But Career Wardrobe exists to turn that around for her."

And how it does that is by inspiring and enabling women in transition to succeed on real, tangible levels. To get there, Cole has tapped into her years of experience working at Women's Way and the Women's Alliance for Job Equity, and has skillfully staffed a team of women with a range of professional skills, who take their *continued on page 66*

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real-life experiences and share these essential skills with women entering the workforce.

“I love having the opportunity to empower and truly help a woman to change her life by the simple act of giving her a suit, or helping her acquire job-readiness skills that most of us take for granted. I am blessed to have had the opportunities I have, so I feel it is my duty to pay it forward.”

**A HELPING HAND**

Although thousands of women donate their time and clothing to the cause, no one champions Career Wardrobe quite like 6ABC News anchor and reporter Tamala Edwards. “I feel like it’s the least that I can do, and not nearly enough,” says Edwards, who originally became involved when she was asked to participate in a Career Wardrobe fashion show. “Those of us blessed by luck of birth with a more fortunate or stable situation have no idea what it is like to be born, through no fault of your own, into the opposite.”

And although Edwards now sits on the advisory board and dedicates great time and effort to endeavors such as using her networks to advocate for Career Wardrobe’s programs and speaking to clients about the importance of profes-

sional appearance, she also knows that being a well-known personality who champions a cause can go a long way. “Shine a light, since people may recognize my name or my face. And I really hope I help reach the people who think helping the less fortunate is futile, even foolish. This organization is the ultimate opportunity to reward and help those who have the desire to help themselves.”

**INSIGHT**

The Career Wardrobe hosts its Spring Fashion Show + Style Event, a preview event for “A Perfect Fit” on June 5, at the Wardrobe Boutique. The afternoon event takes place April 7, from 11 AM to 1 PM, and features cocktails, hors d’oeuvres, expert stylists, and looks for the spring season. Tickets are \$30, or \$20 with a clothing donation. All proceeds benefit Career Wardrobe. 1822 Spring Garden St., 215-568-2660; [careerwardrobe.org](http://careerwardrobe.org)



Blassingame (CENTER) IS a Career Wardrobe success story.

*“I love empowering and truly helping a woman change her life by the simple act of giving her a suit...”*—SHERI COLE

**BUILDING CONFIDENCE**

Andrea Blassingame is one of Career Wardrobe’s biggest success stories. “From my initial meeting with the ladies at Career Wardrobe to find my interview suit, Career Wardrobe has helped change my life in more than a few ways,” says the single mom, who today is not only the group leader for the EducationWorks HiSTEP program at Overbrook High School, but is also working toward her MBA while giving back by volunteering her time and effort to Career Wardrobe’s annual “Perfect Fit” fundraiser.

“Initially, it was just a suit, which I would wear on a job interview,” she says of her first encounter with the organization. “Then it grew to the eye-opening Gateway to Success session I’d attended about personal credit. And from there, the confidence that built up within me would carry me on to every interview thereafter. I remember feeling the confidence that I could land any job I went after, and once I’d been offered a position, I knew it all wasn’t in vain. I worked each day with that same confidence, and my coworkers would even comment on my professionalism and positive attitude,” she says proudly. “A major part of those feelings came from what I’d taken away from my Career Wardrobe experiences.” **PS**



Everette Gillison walks the runway with NBC10’s Monique Braxton.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL PERSICO (EDWARDS); HUGHIE DILLON (GILLISON); TONY JULIANO (FITZPATRICK)



Citizens Bank President Dan Fitzpatrick, Mayor Nutter, and Cole at the boutique opening.