

Non-profit in Chinatown outfits men for the workforce

Working Gear aims to collect 400 pairs of steel-toed boots

By Cheryl Rossi, Staff writer September 7, 2010



Lani Johnson (left), Working Gear's board vice-chair, helps outfit men for job interviews.

The men were ready to work but lacked steel-toed boots to wear on job sites and proper clothes for job interviews.

So in late 2007, a group of employment counsellors started a non-profit called Working Gear Clothing Society to provide men with appropriate work and interview clothes. Working Gear helps men, referred by agencies aiding them in their job search, on Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at 87 East Pender St. in Chinatown. Each man gets a half-hour appointment with two volunteers.

"Sometimes it's even teaching a guy how to tie a tie," said Lani Johnson, an employment support coordinator who volunteers once a month to help men find the right clothes and serves as Working Gear's board vice-chair. "It's a bit of a mix between What Not to Wear and Extreme Makeover where we're like 'Don't wear that!' and then the next moment we're crying because something is just so magical."

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Volunteers aim to instill confidence with the right clothes. “When they walk into the interview, knowing that they are the right person and they look it,” Johnson said. She helped Darby Norton, a clean-cut looking 33-year-old find the steel toed boots he needed for the labouring jobs he was pursuing until he got his career in real estate back on track, and two suits “that just looked ridiculously amazing on him.”

Norton, whose story is profiled on Working Gear’s website, intensified his drug use after his wife committed suicide and he lost everything, Johnson said.

And in a few short years, added Johnson, he ended up living as an addict on the Downtown Eastside.

When she met him, a friend had given Norton work in real estate but he lacked proper office attire, so he only worked at home.

Working Gear clothes men who’ve found a steady bed in a shelter, dealt with their addictions, stabilized their mental health and are ready to work. Some of them have sold their boots after long bouts of unemployment or had their gear stolen and need socks and underwear as well as outerwear.

The society’s volunteers also help new immigrants who need clothes and sometimes tips on what to wear to interviews. After the economic downturn, their clients expanded to unemployed men looking to the trades for work, or labourers interviewing for work in dressier settings.

Tony St.-Pierre, an employment counsellor and case manager at Pathways who refers clients to Working Gear, says a single man on basic welfare receives \$610 a month. Of that, \$375 is a shelter allowance—but most rooms, even in the Downtown Eastside, cost more.

“On welfare, when you only have about \$235 or less [for food, toiletries, phone bills and bus tickets] once you’ve paid rent there just isn’t enough money to buy a \$70 pair of boots,” he said.

With the help of a community grant from Vancity, Working Gear has been running a No Small Feet campaign to collect steel-toed boots. Coast Mountain Bus Company, the Vancouver Police Department, Canadian Border Services Agency, YVR and Telus have donated boots and gear. But as of the morning of Sept. 3, Working Gear was less than halfway to meeting its goal of collecting 400 pairs.

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The society needs boots, jeans, suits and dress shoes. Just don't drop off novelty wear. "We do not need Christmas ties. We don't need singing ties. We don't need ties with Elvis," said Johnson.

For more information, see workinggear.ca.

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