



**Mati Rodriguez, a client at Dress for Success' Belle Glade office. For women, she says there are few retail stores in her community that provide work-appropriate clothing.** RACHIDA HARPER SKINNER/PALM BEACH POST

## Dress for Success clothes women with confidence

### Nonprofit provides professional wear

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**BELLE GLADE** — It's been hard to find a job in Belle Glade since the Great

Recession. It's even harder to find something appropriate to wear to a job interview. And so Mati Rodriguez's eyes lit up the day the perfect outfit materialized right in front of her.

A turquoise button-up. Black slacks. Block heels. And accessories to complement.

"I love this. I feel wonderful," Rodriguez told the stylist with Dress For Suc-

cess, the nonprofit that has brought its mission of providing lower-income women with professional wear to The Glades.

At the corner of South Main Street and Southeast Avenue K, Dress for Success shares an office building and a common goal with CareerSource Palm Beach County, an organization that works to reduce unemployment in the

community with a job-search database, job fairs and job-readiness workshops.

Those connections, which include the neighboring Dress for Success, can be especially valuable in The Glades, where the unemployment rate is far higher than in the county as a whole.

About 20% of Belle Glade's 16,698

**See CLOTHES, Page 3D**

# Clothes

Continued from Page 1D

residents currently are unemployed, said Kelly Smallridge, the president of the Business Development Board of Palm Beach County.

Tom Veenstra, vice president of administration at CareerSources, said the county's unemployment rate is now at 4.8%, below both the 5.7% national rate and 5.1% state rate.

But The Glades' unemployment rate is five times greater than the county's, according to Veenstra, and it is partly due to a lack of resources for women in the community.

Smallridge cited several obstacles women have to navigate when they re-enter the workforce. Transportation – much of it on buses – is unreliable. Day-care is expensive. The economy is concentrated in a few large industries, such as agriculture, offering fewer employment choices than women can find in cities.

Besides unemployment and under-employment, the women who receive help face challenges such as poverty, homelessness, addiction recovery, and mental or physical disabilities, Dress for Success Palm Beaches executive director Mary Hart said.

Finding suitable work attire is just one more challenge.

"We are judged by what we wear, whether we like it or not, consciously or subconsciously. We are helping to level the playing field," Hart said. "These are amazing women that we are working with – amazing women with gifts and a lot to share."

"But if they walk (into an interview) and are not dressed appropriately, they can be immediately judged based on that and not given a fair opportunity."

Because of a lack of retail stores in the community, women are not often given the opportunity to "dress to impress."

Dress For Success Palm Beaches, based in Palm Springs, opened its doors

11 years before its Belle Glade location did. With the assistance of volunteers and more than 70 partner organizations, the non-profit has assisted nearly 6,000 women through its wardrobe and job readiness programs.

Hart said the Palm Springs chapter of Dress for Success has always wanted to expand westward to reach the growing need, but the push to move was prompted by CareerSource, the community partner, which told it about the available space.

"We seized the opportunity to finally make this move," she said.

The Belle Glade location opened in May and The is open to clients every Wednesday. In the boutique-like space, one can shop with a stylist for a head-to-toe outfit, accessories and makeup for a job interview. Once hired, they can return to select a week's worth of clothes.

Its mission is more than just to make a woman look good.

Hart, who doubles as a stylist at times, said each program that Dress for Success offers is made to help women from all walks of life – GED to Ph.D., as she put it – "add to their toolbox" and achieve economic independence. Because of COVID-19, sessions are currently virtual.

● **Next Step:** Ages 18 to 25, 10 weeks, 2 ½-hour sessions, launched in 2013. More than 120 graduates, with 60% directly securing jobs.

● **Road to Success:** Ages 26 and older, eight weeks, 3-hour sessions, launched in 2014. Over 200 graduates, with 65% directly securing jobs.

● **Professional Women's Group:** For graduates who seek advice on workplace issues such as financial literacy.

"We're so much more than clothing," Hart said.

Rodríguez, 56, learned about Dress for Success through the Glades Initiative, a nonprofit that aims to improve the delivery of health and human services in the area, that also helps residents apply for jobs. Like Dress for Success, the nonprofit also helps people apply for jobs.



**Mary Hart, the executive director of Dress for Success Palm Beaches, at the nonprofit's new Belle Glade office, where low-income women are provided with work attire and career development tools that help them enter the workforce.**  
RACHIDA HARPER  
SKINNER/PALM BEACH  
POST

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, she worked at a local restaurant. She wants to work again.

One of her first obstacles to She said she had trouble finding professional clothes was finding a place that sells them.

Other than Goodwill and It's Fashion, a store that caters to younger shoppers, she said that there is a limited affordable retail selection, especially for women who seek work attire.

"There's really nothing here, now that I think about it. There isn't," she said.

Tammy Jackson-Moore, the founder and leader of Guardians of the Glades, says Belle Glade wasn't always like this.

"There used to be a bustling and very active downtown community, but over time, with the economy and things changing, those stores, they left," she said. "There have been (matters) where women, men, and children have had to go outside of the community for their shopping. It became a hardship for some people who didn't have the transportation or the ability to get to those other locations."

Throughout the country, 22 million people have lost their jobs, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Some layoffs were temporary. Others are permanent. The service industry, took a big hit.

In the five-year Census Bureau estimate, some of the most common jobs in which women in the Glades work are retail, health care, education, and food services.

Prior to the pandemic lockdowns, Niteria Love worked at an assisted living center, but after contracting the virus and recovering, she was too scared to return.

Guardians of the Glades, which operates food drives and provides access to COVID-19 testing sites as part of its advocacy for the community, connected Love, 33, with Dress for Success.

On a Wednesday afternoon, she took a step closer to returning to work. With the help of Hart and Jackson-Moore, Love not only walked left Dress for Success with an interview outfit but also with resume tips, interview advice, and other help.

The type of support that Dress for Success provides – fashion and work advice from other women – is encouraging, Rodríguez said.

"I think this is a great idea because you come here and you get support from the ladies," she said. "Pretty much, it's like going to an expensive boutique and getting a one-on-one, but if you don't have the resources, you are able to do it anyway."

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