

Jewell Cardwell: Homeless women get new way to talk, walk and hopefully a job

Published: November 18, 2013 - 12:00 PM



Lynn Budnick (left) the executive director of ACCESS, a shelter for homeless women, Latima Forbes, an ACCESS resident, Rachel Whitehawk-Day and Sonya Calhoun, an ACCESS resident at ACCESS Thursday in Akron. Whitehawk-Day teaches a job interview skills class at the shelter. (Karen Schiely/Akron Beacon Journal)

By Akron Beacon Journal Staff

Jewell Cardwell

Akron area life coach Rachel Whitehawk-Day is as passionate as they come, particularly about the women she engages at Akron's ACCESS, a homeless shelter for women and children.

And the residual effect is unbelievably transformative, the advice she so effortlessly dispenses life-changing.

Her "Stepping Stones" curriculum is one element of a month-long program at the shelter, funded entirely by WITAN (Women In Touch with Akron's Needs).

ACCESS executive director Lynn Budnick gives high marks to WITAN and to Whitehawk-Day.

The program has a series of speakers aimed at giving clients a healthy road map for the future.

"Own Your Life meets Monday, Tuesday and Thursday of every week," Budnick said. "We also have a series of speakers talking about everything from financial literacy to self-esteem to stress management and job training."

Stepping Stones is about job readiness and it's required for all ACCESS clients, unless they already have a job.

Stepping Stones is about job readiness and it's required for all ACCESS clients, unless they already have a job.

"It's a fast-track effort designed to take homeless women to the next level in their personal and professional lives," Whitehawk-Day said. She unveiled it three years ago at H.M. Life Opportunities for homeless families, and it offers "employment readiness and interview skills, resume writing, wardrobing and the motivation to believe in themselves and follow through ... And the unique thing is we do it all in a week!"

Even more significant is that Whitehawk-Day not only offers her services for free, but also her Whitehawk Ranch Inc. and Whitehawk Institute pick up the tab for women's job interview clothes.

Ruth — a former ACCESS client in her 50s who battled alcoholism — agrees that Stepping Stones has been a real game-changer and confidence-builder for her.

Being charged with driving under the influence and having no place to go brought her to ACCESS. "It's been a phenomenal experience ... Rachel is very likeable and she doesn't speak down to you ... She's reaching out to us in our greatest time of need when we're not in a confident place."

Ruth — who graduated from ACCESS and Stepping Stones over the summer — is now employed with her own apartment and is grateful her life intersected with Whitehawk-Day's.

She's not alone in that regard.

You can see that in the questions the women ask Whitehawk-Day and the way they rely on her for advice when they go shopping for interview clothes. Both, they come to realize, are invaluable tools in their arsenal when they apply for jobs.

"We have not been able to find this comprehensive of a program and we had looked hard and long," Budnick noted, adding, "Rachel is a unique individual who immediately connects with clients and they respond and get incredibly involved."

Because of her many successes as an entrepreneur, a well-traveled professional model and owner of a horse farm, Whitehawk-Day — a tall, svelte, raven-haired Native American — could easily be seen as an intimidating force, especially to those down on their luck.

But she is adept at using real-world examples and humor to put her audience at ease.

She talked about the "unintended consequence of our welfare system" that puts women into what she calls "economic incarceration."

"The system is designed to be temporary but all too often it becomes a lifestyle — of the government telling what you can afford to eat, wear, drive and live," she continued, "These women deserve the freedom to choose those things for themselves and a job is the ticket to that freedom. This program changes their lives by changing their perspective."

Budnick agrees: "What I've seen is that Rachel's program gives those much-needed soft skills in job hunting which our clients have never been exposed to. Something as simple as shaking hands, to looking someone in the eye and knowing when to stop talking are pivotal lessons they learn in her program."

"This changes their anxiety levels as they go to the job interview. Now they're sure what they should do. They're also much more successful in getting that second interview now that they know what to do."

Whitehawk-Day cautions her clients not to reveal too much in the interview. That includes talking too much, as well as dress and other behavior: no cleavage, tattoos or body piercings showing; no dangling earrings (which Rachel fancies for herself but cautions they are not for the office), gum chewing or ringing cellphones.

"The right clothes give credibility," she said.

Entering the room for an interview and the proper way to sit also are part of the winning interview package, she continued: "Sit slightly off center with your left leg crossed over your right at the ankle; then place your left hand over your right hand in your lap. It works!"

Other elements in her handbook include maintaining good eye contact and the correct handshake.

"Your handshake should not be too weak nor too strong that the other person would require surgery," she noted with humor and seriousness.

When you're asked questions, answer with an economy of words, she instructed: "Don't just keep talking and talking and talking."

Here are a few other indispensable tips Whitehawk-Day offered through various mock-interview scenarios:

- It's important to have knowledge about the company you're applying to. You never want to say something like "Oh, I didn't know Little Tikes made toys. Wow! That's really cool!"
- When asked "What motivates you to do your best?" be genuine and just say "I want a better life."
- If asked to "tell me about a problem you had with a co-worker or employer," don't expound on that. There's no way to win. Just say something like "Nothing worth mentioning."
- When asked to "tell me about yourself" you don't want to say "Well, I'm a Scorpio, I like rain and pizza." Instead, you might want to say "I'm a hard worker and a team player. I'm willing to learn."
- It's also a good idea to send a follow-up thank you note, not an email, to the person you interviewed with. "Less is more is the important thing," Rachel advised about the length and content of the note. And always handwritten if you can.

Classroom sessions are punctuated with lots of laughter, further putting her clients at ease.

Whitehawk-Day cautions the women to "not allow their emotions to change the goal post."

If you don't get the job the first time, keep trying.

"You can't get weary," she advised.

"When they get that career outfit it really changes their demeanor the minute they put it on," Budnick said. "They automatically stand taller, are more confident and they smile."

Whitehawk-Day said she starts everything with the premise of "our three guiding principles" which serve to set an equal playing field:

- Everything happens for a reason.
- We are never given more than we can handle.
- Everyone is doing the best they can with the skills they have.

Ruth – no longer homeless and no longer drinking – credits ACCESS, WITAN and Rachel Whitehawk-Day for pointing her in the right direction: a future that's bright with promise.

Jewell Cardwell can be reached at 330-996-3567 or jcardwell@thebeaconjournal.com.