

Low-income students get ‘Suited for Success’

STANDARD CLUB | Brooks Brothers a big change for group

BY STEFANO ESPOSITO

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Off and on, for a stretch of about 15 years, Lewis Magers was told what clothes to wear — usually in a “really nasty” shade of brown or pale blue, and if they didn’t fit so good, well, too bad.

It’s been three years since Magers’ last jail stint, and on Saturday, Magers, 37, slipped into another uniform — also a shade of brown, but this one came with a burnt-orange tie and a tailor wielding a measuring tape and a piece of chalk.

“If I saved my money, I might be able to go to the Salvation Army and piece something together, but a custom suit? No,” said Magers, modeling a “gently used” taupe suit at the swanky Standard Club in the Loop.

Magers was one of 41 men and women — some of whom had never worn a suit and couldn’t tell you their shirt sizes — to get outfitted, for free, as part of “Suited for Success,” an event sponsored by the Illinois Education Foundation. The non-profit has awarded more than \$3.5 million in scholarships to some 250 low-income community college students since 2006.



Lewis Magers was one of 41 men and women to get outfitted, for free, as part of “Suited for Success,” an event sponsored by the Illinois Education Foundation. | Rich Hein~Sun-Times



Bruce Wilson, 24, of Chicago, (center) gets help from Brooks Brothers tailor Alex Jasiak (left) and General Manager Barbara Mitchell. | Rich Hein~Sun-Times

Brooks Brothers, Allen Edmonds, the 900 Shops at North Michigan, Morgan Stanley, Davis Imperial Cleaners and Juliewatsonstyle were among the companies donating time and services for the event Saturday.

Magers, after losing much of his earlier years to drug addiction and dealing, is now focused on becoming a certified alcohol and drug counselor, after he finishes up his coursework at Harold Washington College.

Another community college student, 18-year-old William Mendez, who spent a stretch as a homeless teen, said he could easily get used to the “pampered” life he experienced Saturday.



Chris Gardner (center), inspiration for “The Pursuit of Happyness” and CEO of Gardner Rich LLC, is greeted by Rick and Lynda Wood, owners of Davis Imperial Cleaners. | Rich Hein~Sun-Times

“Now I feel like I can look forward to having” a future, said Mendez, who lives in the Little Village neighborhood and is studying business at Harold Washington. “Before, I just chose not to look ahead.”

Chris Gardner, whose rags-to-riches story inspired the Will Smith movie “The Pursuit of Happyness,” was on hand to remind the students — not to contradict the day’s theme — but to point out that a sharp mind is more important than a sharp suit in becoming successful.

He also joked about his early days in the business world when he had to make do with only two suits for an entire year.

“One blue and one gray,” he said. “The joke around the office started: ‘Oh, that’s Chris. He’s re-enacting the Civil War. Some days he’s with the North, some days he’s with the South.’ It’s funny now. That s--- wasn’t funny at the time.”