

Jeannette's nonprofit couples a passion for fashion with her desire to help others.

THIS MARYLAND MOM TURNED HER FASHION CONSULTING BUSINESS INTO A NONPROFIT. NOW SHE HELPS LESS FORTUNATE WOMEN GIVE THEIR LIVES EXTREME MAKEOVERS.

BY SUSANNAH ROSENBLATT

Jeannette Kendall has always loved playing dress-up—ever since her first attempts at sewing gowns (which she says resembled pillowcases), when she was 6 years old. Her fashion sense has come a long way: Since founding the nonprofit Success In Style in 2001, she has outfitted about 1,000 women in need in Ellicott City, Maryland, with elegant suits and tasteful jewelry. They come to her not just for an image overhaul but also for help getting back on their feet after fleeing domestic violence or moving off welfare assistance. They leave with new clothes—plus confidence, useful job interviewing skills and a positive outlook.

For women like Margot Chaffee, Jeannette is a wardrobe miracle worker. When the mother of two daughters (now ages 20 and 17) walked into Success In Style's offices three years ago, she was desperate for a job after leaving her husband. Now a first-grade teacher on her way to earning a master's degree, she still treasures the smart suit she took home that day. "I really wanted to become self-sufficient for me and my girls," says Margot. "Thanks to Jeannette, I'm almost there."

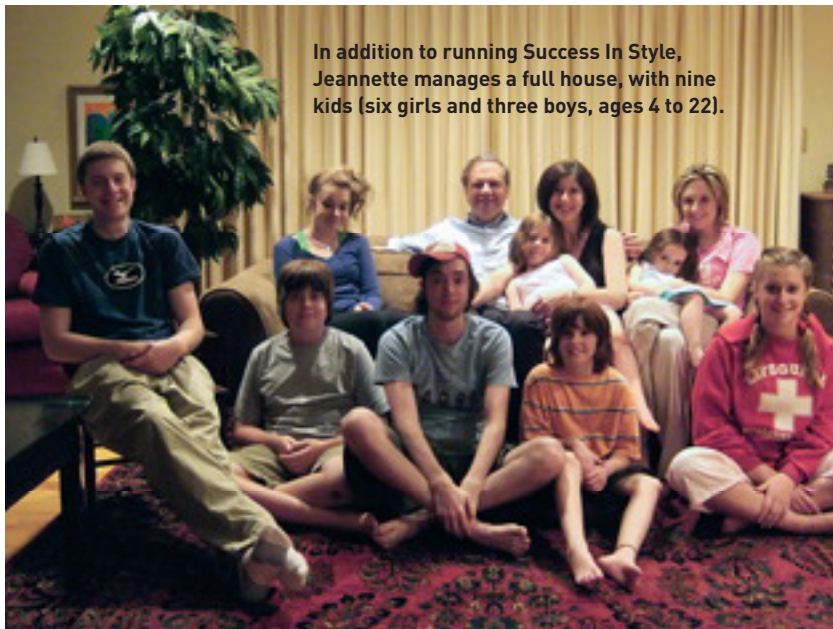
Jeannette built a career on her style sense. After graduating from New York City's Fashion Institute of Technology

SUITED FOR

SUCCESS

in 1979, she worked as an assistant clothing designer in Manhattan. She left when she married Paul Kendall, a Justice Department attorney in Washington, D.C., in 1984. Jeannette continued in the fashion industry, working at Saks Fifth Avenue, doing occasional clothing consultations and designing dresses out of her home in the Maryland suburbs. She was also working on building a big family (she now has six girls and three boys, ages 4 to 22). When her fourth child arrived in 1991, Jeannette gave up dressmaking to focus on wardrobe consulting; she also gave informal talks to church groups and friends. In these talks she helped women develop a sense of uniqueness with tips on choosing their best colors and finding figure-flattering shapes.

Five years later Jeannette and two friends—Patti Francomacaro, who used to run a boutique, and Mary Sheehan Warren, a teacher and com-



In addition to running Success In Style, Jeannette manages a full house, with nine kids (six girls and three boys, ages 4 to 22).

explains Jeannette. “Mary, our business expert, found out how to file for nonprofit status and we were off.”

But the travel expenses and time

(Mary had moved to Milwaukee) started reaching out to disadvantaged women as a side project of Elegance In Style. Jeannette made house calls based on word-of-mouth referrals, and their inventory consisted of castoffs (nice ones) from former workshop attendees. After three years, piles of clothes filled the Kendalls’ basement, and suits spilled out of bedroom closets. Paul threatened to start wearing the stuff himself unless Jeannette found office space of her own. Around the same time she and Patti began discussing expanding the side project into a second nonprofit.

“Mary had always done the business stuff, so we were sort of on our own,” says Jeannette. She approached Leadership Howard County (an organization of local business owners and elected officials) for help in creating a board of directors to guide their fledgling nonprofit. “Twelve women signed on,” says Jeannette. “They were looking for a way to give back to the community. One woman, who works in retail, assisted with getting clothing contributions. Another is in real estate; she got the word out that we needed a donated office space.”

To get Success In Style launched,

When Jeannette began giving style seminars, it bothered her that low-income women couldn’t afford to attend. They were the ones who could benefit most.

puter whiz with a background in business—decided to put together a fashion seminar for women in their community. They charged \$50 per person for the all-day workshop and were floored when 60 women (many of them customers of Patti’s old shop) showed up.

The threesome decided to launch Elegance In Style, a nonprofit that would help women boost their self-esteem through fashion. They offered workshops for busy moms, teen girls and working women, as well as sessions at women’s and church groups and schools around the country several times a year. “The mission was to teach women how to look and feel good,”

away from home became too much for Jeannette. She also knew that she wanted to make a more substantial difference in other people’s lives. It had always bothered her that low-income women—those who could benefit most from her advice—couldn’t afford the entry fee. “There are a lot of women in need around here,” says her husband, Paul. “Jeannette felt helping them was very important.” They also both wanted to show their kids that there’s more to life than manicured suburbs and nice cars. “They needed to see that not everyone is as lucky as we are,” says Jeannette.

In August 2001 Jeannette and Patti

family

Jeannette borrowed \$8,000 from Elegance In Style and also applied for grants. “The first one, for \$2,000, came from an organization called Network 2000, which promotes women in business,” she says. As president of the nonprofit, she scrambled to learn the ropes of fundraising and generated about \$1,500 in the initial year with an exclusive shopping event at Nordstrom. She joined the chamber of commerce, networking with local businesses to raise money and attract volunteers, and visited a nearby Jenny Craig to call on women who had lost weight to donate clothes that no longer fit.

Once the new nonprofit was ready for clients, Jeannette approached churches, temp agencies and service organizations (welfare to work, domestic violence and offender reentry programs) and asked them to refer low-income women who were searching for jobs. Now these groups account for the bulk of Jeannette’s referrals.

Today the organization’s annual budget is around \$65,000, which goes toward rent, utilities and publicity, purchasing new clothes and shoes, and Jeannette’s salary. Elegance In Style is still going strong (though Jeannette no longer runs it) and occasionally donates garments to its sister organization. Thanks to these and other contributions, Success In Style has racks of outfits in sizes ranging from 2 to 32. “We keep only about 5% of the garments given to us—just the newest, highest quality pieces,” says Patti, who is now a volunteer and a board member. The rest goes to Planet Aid, a nonprofit that sends clothing to developing countries, Salvation Army or Goodwill.

Jeannette remains the lone paid

staffer, earning about \$30,000 a year, and has around 20 helpers who ensure clients leave with more than just a new outfit. Volunteer Bernie Bradley, who owns a management consulting company, preps women one-on-one on how to answer potential interview questions and dispenses advice on office behavior, appearance and phone etiquette. She also once found Christmas gifts for a client’s kids. “It’s not just about giving somebody suits,” says Bernie.

Jeannette’s hard work has benefited the women she has outfitted and has taught her kids life lessons, as she and Paul hoped. “It’s easy to get caught up in material things, but what I do is a constant reminder to be grateful for

open your closet

Go to successinstyle.org to learn more about Jeannette’s business, which is a member of the Women’s Alliance. This nationwide network of around three dozen organizations provides professional clothes and job skills to 50,000 disadvantaged women every year. To donate clothes, volunteer, make a credit card donation or learn how to start your own community closet, visit thewomensalliance.org.

what we have,” she says. Her children pitch in by printing or folding literature and sorting clothing. They’re all proud of their mother. “At first some of the women just don’t have a lot of confidence,” says Katibeth, the oldest. “But when they’re finished, they feel so beautiful and happy. It’s awesome that my mom can make them feel like that.” ●

Looking for a Hero Know of a mom who’s making a difference in her community? Is she an inspiration for the way she has reached out and changed the lives of others—perhaps by starting a charity, a group or a project that has helped make the world that much better? Whoever this person is—a friend, relative or perhaps even you—we want to hear about her. Send your nominee’s name along with a brief description of her story and accomplishments to: Familyhero@familycircle.com. Please include your name, phone number and e-mail address as well.