



IndyBar: Start the New Year with a Clean Closet — And Help Local Students ‘Suit Up’

From IndyBar December 16, 2015

By Ian Goodman, Rubin & Levin PC

The Indianapolis Bar Association’s Young Lawyers Division (YLD) and Law Student Division are teaming up to form a program called “Suited Up.” The concept is simple: provide college-bound seniors, both men and women, from low-income households with dress clothes. The YLD and the Law Student Division are partnering with local organization Starfish Initiative to find students to participate in Suited Up.

Starfish Initiative mentors academically promising but economically disadvantaged high school students. It is a college access and readiness program that uses one-on-one mentoring to help guide each student through high school and on to college. One hundred percent of the “Starfish Scholars” who have completed their program have graduated from high school, and 98 percent of those students have been accepted by colleges or universities.

Suited Up was developed by Barath Raman, an attorney at Lewis Wagner LLP, and Alexandra (Alex) Blackwell, a third-year student at the IU McKinney School of Law.

“Alex approached me about this entire idea [after] I told her about an experience I had while shopping at a local Goodwill,” Raman said when asked to describe how Suited Up had been born. Raman continued, “I went into Goodwill to pick up some Halloween items, and I walked up to the suit rack . . . and there had been a young boy there with his mother. The kid asked me how he looked in the suit. I worked with him for about five minutes on picking the best suit for him. He thanked me and told me his mom was buying him his first suit because he had his first job interview.”

Raman said he and Blackwell realized that attorneys, many of whom have suits that have gone unworn for years, could fill a void for talented young men and women who need dress clothes but don’t have the resources to obtain them.

“We want to work with at-risk and economically disadvantaged high school teens who are not only going to successfully graduate high school but who are also going to go to college,” says Raman. Starfish Initiative, he says, is the perfect partnering organization to achieve that goal.

Clean Out Your Closet!

Suited Up is on a timeline to achieve its goals, and the clock is already ticking. The program has begun

with a clothing drive. Raman expects that all clothing ultimately donated to the teens will be donated by lawyers in Indianapolis and the surrounding areas.

“We want lawyers to look into their closets and to donate suits and dress clothes that they no longer wear – jackets, pants, blouses, skirts, shoes, belts, ties – anything that would put together a business professional outfit,” says Raman.

The clothing drive lasts until Jan. 15, 2016. Donations may be dropped off at the IndyBar office or at any of the following offices: Barnes & Thornburg LLP, Blackwell Burke & Ramsey PC, Coots Henke & Wheeler PC, Frost Brown Todd LLC, Lewis Wagner LLP or Riley Bennett & Egloff LLP.

Looking to the Future

Suited Up doesn't end once the clothing has been donated. Raman says that the YLD and Law Student Division will organize the donated clothing and that the goal is to match participating students with a complete outfit that the students may wear at their graduation from the Starfish Initiative.

“Starfish has an annual graduation ceremony and they want to require their students to wear business professional attire, but a lot of their students don't have the necessary clothes, nor can they afford them,” says Raman.

Before the students get their dress clothes, area dry cleaner Classic Cleaners has volunteered to provide dry cleaning services for all of the donated items. Then, once the students have been matched with their clothing, the YLD and Law Student Division have secured a commitment from Jos. A. Bank to provide tailoring services for the students.

New dress clothes in tow, in April 2016, participating students will attend an event with the YLD and Law Student Division, where lawyers and law students will show the high schoolers how to properly wear their new clothes. The lawyers and law students will also give a presentation that focuses on professionalism tips.

Raman says the YLD and Law Student Division are hopeful that they will be overwhelmed with donations. There's no worry about excess donations, though, as Raman notes the groups intend to make Suited Up an annual program, rolling over any unused items for the next year.

“These kids are overcoming hardships to go to college, and we should recognize their achievements,” says Raman. “They're going to need suits in college for interviews, internships or even for a formal dance, and we're going to give them their suit.”•