

Suited & Booted: How one recycled suit can transform a man's life

By **Jeremy Weil**

Reproduced courtesy of telegraph.co.uk, 21 April 2016

The Telegraph



Suited & Booted's rails of donated clothes, Amer, a recent recipient of the charity's work

When I was six years old my father took me to his work. We caught the tube to the City, where he toiled long hours every day, and I got to eat biscuits and read my Famous Five book while sitting on a wheelie office chair in my own enormous meeting room.

Happy memories – but none match my utter delight at getting to wear a suit that day. With a real tie. Aged just six, I was the business. Rocking it next to my smart father.

And that's the potent power of a suit. Even on an infant.

I was reminded of this childhood moment when starting my first shift at Suited & Booted, a phenomenal but little known charity based in the City, which dresses economically disadvantaged and often vulnerable men for job interviews.

My wife has been a volunteer dresser for the unrelated female equivalent, Smartworks, for many years and I'd long wondered if there was a similar service for men. Finally I got off my backside and took action.

Housed in the aptly named 'St Andrew By the Wardrobe Church', I wasn't sure what to expect. Sure, I'd given friends advice before job interviews – but dressing another man? A man I'd never met before? I couldn't imagine it. Men don't even typically try clothes on together.



I was greeted by the sight of Dr Maria Lenn, the charity's tireless founder, sifting through rows and rows of donated suits. Punctuating these rows were ties, shirts, and cufflinks – the accoutrements that contribute to make dressing smartly as a man so expensive.

(Curiously, the only thing lacking from this picture was shoes. A few were scattered here and there, but not in the numbers of the other garments. I later learned that men tend to wear their smart foot clobber to leathery death, which means few are donated to the charity for a second life.)

Even though there is a sea of suits at Suited & Booted, I soon learned upon meeting my first client that it's challenging to find one that fits the chest, waist and height of an individual. (Fortunately, the charity has volunteers who can shorten trousers if required).

Experienced dressers can navigate the rails quicker, usually managing to find something that works within 30 minutes, with a bit of trial and error. It took me longer. I was inefficient at finding my way around the oversized walk-in wardrobe, and I was also anxious to nail it for the young man before me, who was nervously shifting his weight from one foot to the other. My eagerness to do him justice only increased when he confided he'd spent the last bit of cash he had on his bus fare to make the appointment. Gulp.

On some occasions, it's not possible to find the right size for a client from the existing donated stock. That was the sweaty position I found myself in – having searched in vain.

Maria, whose small army of volunteers dressed over 1,000 men in 2015 and is on track to clothe 1,200 this year, does her best to ensure that no client is turned away without a successful dressing. So, as a last resort, we took my guy to a nearby Next to purchase the required items.

Seeing this young man emerge grinning from the changing rooms in a suit, with all the trimmings, was incredible. He was a man transformed, head held high. Not only had his appearance been radically altered, but his sense of self-worth and confidence had enjoyed a major boost too.

Whether you're aged six or sixty, the power of a suit is tremendous. The man in front of me had found his self-belief again. I can think of no better testament for the enormous impact a service like Suited & Booted can have.



As important as the dressings are, that's not all the charity offers. Men down on their luck or struggling with their mental health suddenly find themselves the centre of attention – in a positive way. They are welcomed with open arms, given tea and biscuits, offered haircuts and shaves and are made to feel good about themselves. They tend to be incredibly grateful and even apologetic for being there in the first place, but my God do they walk out of that church with a real bounce in their step.

Which brings me onto why I'm writing this piece. Suited & Booted need to find new premises, so if you know of anywhere near Blackfriars, or in the City, please contact them. You can also help through cash donations – as well as continuing to donate your suits and shoes. All the information is below.

Because here's the thing: any one of us could end up needing a service like it. And that's what I realised watching my guy repeatedly try on ill-fitting blazers. Security is a fragile thing. These men's circumstances could quite easily happen to anyone, me included. A sobering thought.

These men want to work and get on with their lives. They also want to feel good doing it. Suits and boots may sound like small things to sort – but get them right and something deep inside locks into place.

Jeremy Weil is the chief product officer of The Smart Cube. Follow him on Twitter: @jeremyleoweil

www.suitedbootedcentre.org.uk

Suited & Booted, St. Andrew-by-the-Wardrobe, St. Andrew's Hill, City of London EC4V 5DE
Registered in England No. 8079045 Registered Charity No. 1149229