

The Clothing Closet

By Samantha Pittman '08

Tracey Waring will never forget the day she left prison. As she walked through security at the airport, she realized the only identification she had was her Department of Corrections ID badge. Waring clearly remembers standing there, waiting, as the security officer stared at her ID. "It was humiliating," says Waring.

It's a feeling that stayed with Waring and motivated her to help other women in similar situations.

Now a graduate student at Eastern Washington University, Waring has turned bad into good. As an undergraduate, she planted the seed for the "Clothing Closet" – a program that gives clothing, shoes, undergarments and personal hygiene products to women leaving the Pine Lodge Correctional Center for Women (PLCCW) in Medical Lake, Wash. Clothing that gives them a fresh start as they re-enter society. An adjustment that can be hard to make with state-issued shoes as a constant reminder.

Waring considers herself one of the lucky few who had a supportive family to come home to after serving her sentence. "Most of these women have \$40 in their pocket when they take the bus downtown in their state-issued clothing," says Waring. "When they get downtown, people recognize the clothes and they immediately become vulnerable targets for drug dealers and other criminals."

With a lack of food, shelter, clothes and job skills, the transition back into society is often unsuccessful. Without support, the cycle of crime and despair is hard to break. Waring's "poor choices" of the past led her to her current mission. "I knew I deserved to be in prison but I also realized I could make a difference. So, I thought about what I could do with my life when I got out."

Once she was released, a friend in prison started writing Waring letters telling her about all the women who "just don't have anyone" when they get out. In 2006, Waring decided to do something about it. She began collecting clothes on her own and supplying one woman a month with a set of clothes to use when applying for jobs and to ease the transition into society. Waring would get names of women in need of support from her friend.

Busy working on her education, Waring found herself short on money



Tracey Waring '08,
founder of the Clothing Closet

and time to dedicate to her budding project, but she knew "the need was still there." So during her junior year, Waring developed a proposal to send to the PLCCW with the help of her advisor, Interdisciplinary Studies Program Chair John Neace, who helped her enroll in three independent study credits dedicated to the project.

It was a slow process. Nine months would pass before Waring could put her plan into action. In the meantime, she developed relationships with local churches. St. Andrews Episcopal Church gave her two rooms to use for storage and Dr. Patty Luse '67, an EWU education professor who has since retired but still volunteers for Waring, required community service for her classes and offered Waring's project as an option.

The Clothing Closet finally opened its doors in October 2007 and has since outfitted 250 women. "In the beginning I thought we would get two or three applications a week, but we are getting up to 10 a week," says Waring.



Dr. Patty Luse helps resident find the right fit

Pine Lodge fundraiser

The fitting room

EWU students sort clothes

Stacking the Clothing Closet

The Clothing Closet is a walk-in closet in the prison. The residents can apply four to six weeks before their release date and have to meet the criteria that they don't have outside support. They are first given a duffel bag and purse, then they pick out five pairs of pants and five shirts to try on. "For some of them it is the first time they've had an opportunity to shop, sometimes in 10 years," says Waring. "A lot of the women don't know what appropriate dress is, so we help by suggesting outfits. But we let them be as creative as possible."

The Clothing Closet supplies each woman with two outfits, shoes, coat, undergarments, purse, duffel bag and hygiene pack.

Waring recalls one woman who was so grateful for the clothing, she came out of the dressing room in pink silky pajamas and modeled them for the volunteers. "She walked up and down in front of us and said, 'I've always wanted a pair of pajamas like this, thank you so much.'"

But Waring isn't just giving the women clothes for their backs, she's giving them hope for the future. To say she's a role model would be an understatement. Waring is a McNair Scholar, an honor society member, and was awarded the 2008 Volunteer of the Year for Pine Lodge by the Washington State Department of Corrections. She's also received the Frances B. Huston Medallion from Eastern Washington University, an honor that recognizes a graduating senior for academic excellence and outstanding community service.

Waring's successes only push her to do more. In addition to working on her master's in social work and public administration at EWU, she's the program director for the Clothing Closet, and she's been the inspiration for a similar project at the men's correctional facility in Airway Heights, Wash.

Ultimately, she seeks a career providing transitional services and resources. Says Waring, "If I won the lottery tomorrow, I see myself running a nonprofit, working with women in transition."

A career helping those whose shoes she has clearly walked in. **E**

The Clothing Closet is a community-based project working with local churches, students at Eastern Washington University, community organizations and individuals. The collaborative project is called Great Opportunities for a Lifetime (GOAL) and has received funding and donations from the Washington Department of Corrections, Pine Lodge Correction Center for Women, Episcopal Diocese of Spokane, the Alumni Association of Eastern Washington University, as well as organizations and individuals throughout Washington, Oregon and Idaho.

For more information about GOAL, visit www.thegoalproject.org.