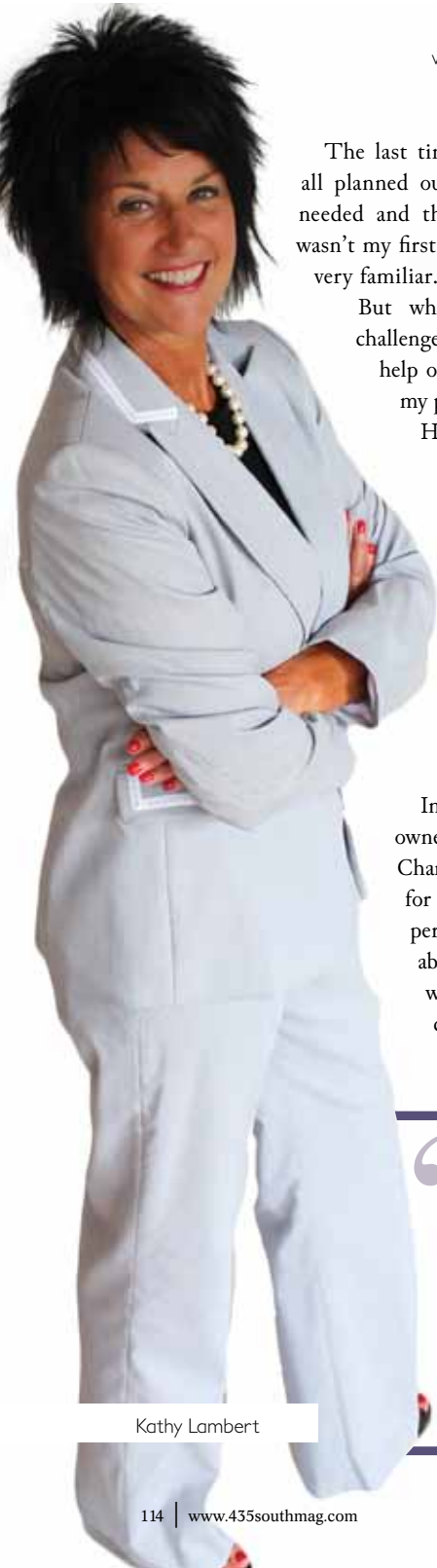


Measuring Success, One Connection at a Time

A personal call to service leads to dramatically changing lives.

words LYSA ALLMAN-BALDWIN | photos courtesy CONNECTIONS TO SUCCESS



Kathy Lambert

The last time I interviewed for a job, I had it all planned out: what I'd wear, the paperwork I needed and the appropriate questions to ask. It wasn't my first career interview, so the process was very familiar.

But what if I had some socio-economic challenges in my life? Or little to no family help or education? Or I'd made mistakes in my past that resulted in a criminal record?

How would I gain the skills, resources and opportunities necessary to move forward with my life?

Enter Connections to Success, whose mission is to inspire individuals to realize their dreams and achieve economic independence by providing hope, resources and a plan.

LIFE CAN CHANGE ON A DIME

In the late 1990s, Kathy Lambert owned a corporate training business in St. Charles, Mo. Already possessing a passion for helping others, she recognized a personal call to service upon hearing about Dress for Success® Worldwide, which provides interview-appropriate clothing to low-income women.

"I thought I'd set up a Dress for Success boutique in my area, train

someone to run it, then return to my day job," she recalls. "However, God had other plans."

One day, before opening her own Dress for Success affiliate, she received an urgent call.

A young woman needed a suit for an interview that day. Lambert met with her, although at that point there were only a few clothing items in the trunk of her car. Searching through, they found a suitable outfit, but no shoes. The young lady was wearing tennis shoes.

She went anyway, confidently wearing a "new" suit and the only appropriate shoes they could find — the pair Lambert had been wearing. Two hours later, she landed the job.

"My eyes filled with tears, and I knew then that this was what I was meant to do," says Lambert.

So she dissolved her business, and devoted herself full-time to Dress for Success Midwest, opening the first boutique in 1998.

A lot has transpired since then.

Lambert's husband Brad, who witnessed his wife's success and happiness serving their community, left his corporate consulting business and began Wheels for Success, which awards vehicles to deserving participants needing reliable transportation to the job they successfully interviewed for through Kathy's organization.

Their collaboration was a huge success.

Not long after, the Lamberts realized that clothing and transportation were sometimes not enough to transition from dependence to economic self-reliance. Participants also needed childcare assistance, continuing education, mentors and support systems.

To meet these needs and help break the cycle of poverty, the Lamberts created extensive programming for their new venture — Connections to Success (CtS).

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“The majority of the target population we serve have the desire to change and improve their lives,” says Lambert. Through CtS, we’ve been able to help more than 25,000 people whose family resources are so scarce there is literally nowhere else to turn during and after times of stress and strife.”

INSPIRATIONS

don't know how," Kathy says. "But through CtS, we've been able to help more than 25,000 poor, underprivileged, uninsured and underinsured people whose family resources are so scarce there is literally nowhere else to turn during and after times of stress and strife."

Today, CtS has locations in St. Charles, St. Louis and Kansas City, and a second Dress for Success affiliate downtown. In 2012, they opened a new office in Wyandotte County, and just recently expanded into a new state-of-the-art facility in the heart of downtown Kansas City, Kan.

A PASSION FOR HELPING OTHERS

Pam Harris is the job developer manager for CtS in the Kansas City, Kan., office. She heard of the organization through a previous business relationship, and was eager to become part of the team if the opportunity became available.

"In my role, I am responsible for managing employment services, securing job opportunities, and building employer relationships," Harris says. "I bring several years of experience in employment, business development and community service to my work. So that, combined with a passion for helping others and the organization's goals, are a good match."

CtS has garnered national attention from the Department of Health and Human Services, and often receives requests for presentation of their holistic organization model.

"We're so proud of our current 70 percent employment placement rate," says Harris, "and have seen how our work has made a big difference in helping to transition people from generational poverty, incarceration, domestic violence and other disadvantaged situations."

The CtS umbrella encompasses an array of programs, services and resources for their clients, who are evenly divided between men and women and generally between the ages of 30 and 40.

Dress for Success Kansas City is on target to suit 500 women this year to attend job interviews, and their Going Places Network initiative serves roughly 60 women per year in workforce development, job placement, coaching and case management.

Their social enterprises include Sweet Success, a transitional employment program that teaches all aspects of the cookie-making business from baking to marketing and sales,



Sweet Success, one of CtS's social enterprises, is a transitional employment program that teaches all aspects of the cookie-making business.

while earning an hourly wage and building a resume. The entity came about through a CtS volunteer who had closed her catering business.

Brandi Jahnke, regional director of the Kansas City CtS office, is particularly proud of this venture.


"The volunteer shared her recipes with us, and has provided hours of training to our staff and participants in order to ensure quality of the products," she says. "Not only does Sweet Success allow us to provide transitional job opportunities, it also generates revenue which helps fund our mission."

They also have the Mystique Boutique, a volunteer, mobile resale boutique stocked with upscale, designer clothing open to the public.

"The mobile aspect allows us to bring professional clothing, free of charge, to low-income women in outlying areas who do not have the capability of venturing to our various program locations, and 100 percent of the proceeds go towards CtS programming," Jahnke explains.

Under CtS's Pathways to Success program is Successful STEPS — Services and Training to Empower ParentS. As one of their fatherhood training initiatives, it is the first and only comprehensive anti-poverty program focusing on creating responsible fathers who work and contribute positively to the well-being of children, family and the Kansas economy in general. The program offers coaching and mentoring to develop the soft





and hard skills employers require, and helps fathers find and maintain jobs through employer partnerships, social enterprises, a personal car ownership program, and transitional job opportunities.

“Successful STEPS is a wonderful example of how CtS helps change lives,” says Jahnke. “The biggest draw for me when I started with CtS was their ‘out of the box’ thinking, as they are not a typical social service agency often seen in our society. That is one of the things that perhaps benefits us when building a community presence through outreach and networking events.”

WE ARE ALL ONE

Despite the common funding challenge that runs through most non-profit organizations, CtS staff and volunteers are committed to upholding and developing their vision and mission.

“Disadvantaged people are people first, who want what most people want: a decent paying job, nice clothing, reliable transportation, safe housing and positive role models,” Harris says.

“And because of that,” Jahnke adds, “I don’t see what I do as a ‘job.’ It is a way of life and something I look forward to every day.”

“Our greatest success,” shares Lambert, “has been working with families long enough to see the positive generational impact of participants at their workplace, attending their weddings, meeting their children, and knowing that somewhere CtS had a part in it.” ❖

For more information about Connections to Success, check out the company website at connectionstosuccess.org.

HOW YOU CAN HELP CONNECTIONS TO SUCCESS

Connections to Success offers numerous individual and company volunteer opportunities. These include:

- Donating professional clothing, shoes and accessories for men and women
- Serving as a personal shopper or job coach
- Becoming a mentor
- Participating in suitings, mock interviews and speaking engagements
- Offering skilled individuals job opportunities
- Providing financial support or donating a vehicle