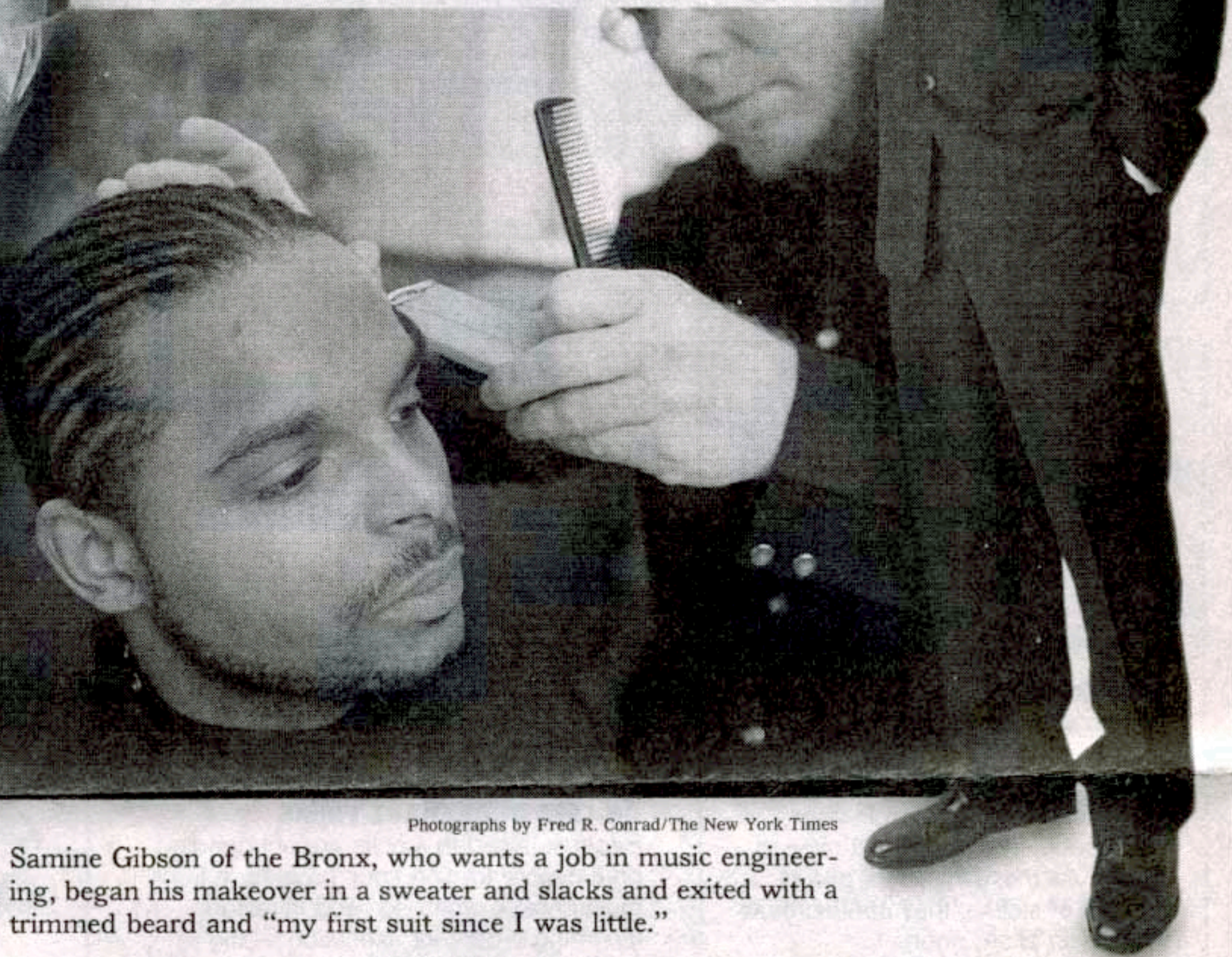


Personal Business

From Unemployed To Interview-Ready

A Nonprofit Offers Clothes,
Haircuts and Hope



Photographs by Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Samine Gibson of the Bronx, who wants a job in music engineering, began his makeover in a sweater and slacks and exited with a trimmed beard and "my first suit since I was little."

By ALEX PRUD'HOMME

THEY were 19 men down on their luck, and they came to the penthouse of the Times Square Hotel in New York at 1 P.M. on a rainy January day to get a big boost in their search for work.

A 20th man showed up at 2, one hour late, and was turned away. "Punctuality is expected in the real world," said Wayne Fletcher, director of the Jobs Cooperative Program at Grand Street Settlement and a member of the welcoming committee. "It's tough love."

If that sounded unforgiving, what happened next was like a gift from the gods. Each man got a haircut and grooming tips from professional stylists with Red Salon, an upscale chain, and each received about \$1,700 worth of business clothing, including a trench coat, a suit, a dress shirt, a tie, a Coach watch and a pair of socks and Rockport shoes. The items were donated by the manufacturers and distributed by a new nonprofit organization called Career Gear that so far has raised just \$4,000 toward its projected annual budget of \$235,000.

David C. Woolard, 40, the vice chairman of Career Gear and a costume designer, fitted each job candidate individually before sending the suits to an express tailor shop for free alterations. As Mr. Woolard pinned his sleeve, Mikhail Murodov, an economist from Uzbekistan, said: "I'm feeling very emotional right now! So many people helping so many people."

Another participant, Samine Gibson of the Bronx, was having his beard trimmed. "I feel like a million bucks," exulted Mr. Gibson, who wants to enter music engineering. "It's my first suit since I was little. It makes me want to go out and get a job right now." Then the men had their pictures taken.

Brian Gurganious, a former postal clerk and a single parent of two girls, struck a pose and said, "I don't know why, but I can't stop smiling."

The American economy may be a giant job machine these days, with unemployment falling to 30-year lows and labor shortages developing in many parts of the country, but many employers still shun job seekers they view as undesirables. These include unskilled workers, recent immigrants and people who have coped with personal or family traumas. It is for them that Career Gear was formed late last year. Its simple premise is that a job seeker can greatly increase his chances of landing a job if he wears crisp business attire to the interview.

"The psychology of clothing is very important in our society," Mr. Woolard said. "Judgments are made in the first five seconds. When these guys put on a new suit, it's like putting on a suit of armor."

OTHER groups, like Dress for Success in New York and the Bottomless Closet in Chicago, have provided "interview appropriate" clothing to women for years. Now, the movement is crossing the gender border with the formation of groups like Career Gear in New York and the Street Clothes Project in Philadelphia.

Career Gear was founded in October by Gary L. Field, 39, who recently quit his job as director of services for the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill in New York to devote all his attention to the project. Mr. Field said the need to teach the chronically unemployed the ins and outs of job-hunting has intensified with the spread of workfare programs aimed at moving people off welfare and into paying jobs.

"A lot of the people on welfare are totally unprepared to make the transition into a professional environment," he said. He added that he hopes to build a network of peers

and mentors to help his clients cope with workplace problems and "deal with tricky things like office politics."

People are referred to Career Gear after learning job-seeking skills — like how to write a résumé and answer interview questions — at work-readiness programs including the Employment Training Program for Recovering Alcoholics, the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty and the Federation of Employment and Guidance Services.

Today, two months after their makeover, some members of Career Gear's first class have found work while others are still looking. Mr. Gurganious, the single father, is one of the lucky ones, finding employment as a hardware store clerk. "I wore my suit to the interview, and I guess it worked," he said. "This job makes me feel like a brand-new person. The suit is my good-luck charm. It stays in the closet."

Gary Waytes, a fellow alumnus and former co-owner of a multimedia production company who said he has struggled with addictions, jail time and homelessness, landed a job at a mental-health clinic. "When you've been out of work, it's frightening to look for a job," he said. "My self-esteem was low. It's amazing how a change of clothes can make you feel so much more optimistic and confident."

Mr. Field knows how these men feel. Once addicted to drugs and alcohol himself, he said, he joined a program for recovering alcoholics, bought a \$50 suit at a thrift store and regained control of his life. At 37, he graduated from New York University with a master's degree in social work, and eventually volunteered at Dress for Success. At the urging of Mr. Woolard, he created a similar program for men.

"I understand our clients because I am them," Mr. Field. "I tell them I should have been dead by age 30, and I say, 'If I can do it, so can you.'" □