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Not So Extreme Makeover tackles the stereotype, when the stereotype works for us, basics for your wardrobe and dressing for hot flashes

By Jenifer Grady, jgrady@ala.org

The session called Not So Extreme Makeovers covered the gamut of self-presentation. The panelists, library directors and a personal stylist, were a mutual admiration society for one another and passionate about the importance of image. They also concurred that image is affected by your attitude and confidence as much as it is about what you wear. Dr. Barbara Morrow Williams reminded us that as libraries and their services are being redefined and repurposed, so are we. The audience, female and male, waited anxiously to find out how they could repackage themselves and help others.

The program started at the beginning. The history of women in the workplace was outlined by Dr. Williams, who tied the pre-women’s and civil rights movements and necessity of hats and gloves to the post-movement era where more women were in the workplace in the 1970s, and when a more casual style was infused into the culture. Then the 1980s brought the menswear look to women. The question for designers and retailers was how to dress the influx of women in professional and support roles who did not have incomes to support costly wardrobes. In addition, bodies that were not size 6 and feet that were not size 7 had to be covered. Now we are in a time when everyone can find styles and fashions within their price and size ranges to dress for success. Dr. Williams ended her presentation by with a statement that we are specialists with irreplaceable knowledge, and if we present ourselves in ways that do not demand that respect, we are vulnerable.

Dr. Carla Hayden, former ALA-APA President, agreed that if, for example, children’s librarians present to administrators for budget hearings dressed as they would for patrons, they will be perceived as the people they serve – children. Dressing professionally is not “selling out” but ensuring that your appearance will not distract from your message. Dr. Hayden turned the table on the stereotype, however, and said that it can and has worked in our favor to be seen as brainy and organized as ALA fights against issues like the Patriot Act. Nevertheless, dressing well is critical to being successful at advancing your institution’s goals, in addition to your own. One way to do that is to discover your style. Dr. Hayden distinguished style and fashion a la Coco Chanel, style being what you like and reflecting your taste, and fashion as something that comes and goes at the whim of haute couture designers.

Expert Avis Cuffee, personal stylist manager of Nordstrom at Pentagon City, talked about how her staff help people find their style (for free!). She had almost everyone salivating as she rolled in clothing racks with brightly colored purses peeking out. She also started at the beginning, or rather on the inside, as she showed examples of undergarments that hide imperfections (for men and women) and extolled the virtue of proper fittings. After mixing and matching the basic five pieces of a wardrobe, she demonstrated how to personalize with accessories, color and detail. She talked a bit about fashion trends, but her main messages were to shop wisely and to smile!

Ten Not So Extreme Makeover Tips (primarily for women, but men are included):

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1. Five classic pieces in a woman’s wardrobe: neutral jacket, skirt, pants, white shirt and sleeveless sheath dress. For men: classic jacket, flat front pants, nice jeans and at least three good shirts.
2. Dress for the size and shape you are, not for what you used to be or aspire to be.
3. Finding your style may require research and experimentation. Shop in your closet, think of whose style you admire, and be courageous enough to try on clothing that you wouldn’t normally – after all, it’s just clothes and no one has to see your experiment but you and your personal stylist. Also, think about what you wear when you receive compliments and find similar looks.
4. Don’t wait for a big event – like a wedding, weight loss or gain milestone or recovering from an illness - to make a change.
5. There are shaper undergarments, again for men and women, that can make your clothes fit better.
6. When you buy an item of clothing, think about how many ways you can wear it.
7. Dress for the situation and culture of your workplace.
8. If you have hot flashes, wear layers and breathable fabrics like cotton.
9. If you have staff who are fashion-challenged, two methods to address it are to have staff develop a dress code and to invite a personal stylist or media specialist in to train staff on the relationship between apparel and customer service.
10. Making yourself over can be inexpensive and fun!

Look for an expansion of this article in an upcoming issue of Library Worklife, ALA-APA’s monthly e-newsletter. This was one of the ALA-Allied Professional Association’s Programs for the People. The panelists were Dr. Carla D. Hayden, Chief Executive Officer of the Enoch Pratt Free Library, in Baltimore, Maryland; Dr. Barbara Morrow Williams, City Librarian (Director) of the Monterey Park (CA) Bruggemeyer Library; and Avis Cuffee, Personal Stylist Manager for Nordstrom Pentagon City (VA).