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Associated Press photos

This undated photo provided by Ryan Hughes shows Tiffany Ludwig, left, and Renee Piechocki, the authors of "Trappings."

A woman's power suit?

Two gals went looking for answers

BY MELISSA RAYWORTH
Associated Press

What do you wear that makes you feel powerful?

Artists Tiffany Ludwig and Renee Piechocki asked that question of more than 500 women from every region of the country. The wildly varying answers they've received, in the form of audio and video interviews and photographs, offer a window into the complicated relationship so many women have with the subject of personal power.

The interview sessions began in 2001, with Ludwig and Piechocki — who collaborate under the name “Two Girls Working” — planning to speak with just a handful of women. Seven years and 77 interview sessions later, they have spoken with women in 15 states and used those interviews to create several art installations, an online multimedia archive and a new book called “Trappings: Stories of Women, Power and Clothing.”

“We kind of co-opted the Tupperware party or Mary Kay party model, where we identify a host and then what the host does is bring together 10 women — friends, colleagues and neighbors — to come to an interview session,” said Piechocki, a public art consultant based in Pittsburgh.

Despite the presence of strangers with cameras and microphones, women came to those sessions in droves. And they spoke bluntly about the role that things such as stilettos and fishnets, leather jackets and cowboy boots, even face paint and boxing gloves can play in their lives.

Some described clothing as a means of self-expression. Others called it armor. But nearly all seemed conscious of the intense and often frustrating focus our society puts on women's bodies and clothing.

They spoke about their wardrobes “in wildly different ways,” said Ludwig, a media consultant who lives in Glen Ridge, N.J.

For many women, the interviews were a rare chance to speak publicly about themselves. During a session in Missouri, Ludwig said, a woman in her 50s revealed to friends and neighbors that she had survived breast cancer decades earlier.

“No one knew this about her, and she was like, ‘Well, I just thought this was the right platform, the right time for me to share this with you.’ ... She had the spotlight all of a sudden and people were focused on her. We've had women say, ‘Wow, no one has ever asked me to talk about myself.’”

The conversations progressed well beyond casual banter about clothes:

- Stephanie Rivera, of Santa Fe, N.M., spoke bluntly about the horrors she sees as a police officer. “When I go home,” she said, “I want to look like a girl.”

- Elizabeth Garlington, of Nashville, Tenn., described the perfect black dress and pearls she wore to a family party that, like so many previous parties, her husband refused to attend. “I put the pearls on, and I looked at myself, and I was really, really alone,” she said. “And for the first time in four years of that marriage I thought, ‘It's OK to be alone.’” She divorced her husband 60 days later.

- Anna Marie Ludwig of Jersey City, N.J., mentioned wearing red shoes to a Christmas party during the painful adjustment to widowhood. At the time, she said, “I didn't know what I was going to do, who I was gonna be. Fortunately, I decided I like the person I found inside.”

Some find power in black lace lingerie, others in hockey gear.



This undated photo provided by Two Girls Working shows “Trappings” participant Megan Jones from Memphis, Tenn.

“A lot of the stories we get are off the cuff, because when you begin to respond to this question, things are coming out that maybe you didn't even know you were going to talk about,” said Piechocki. “But the other part of it is that for two weeks you've known that you were coming to an interview session. And every time you've gotten dressed over those two weeks, you've had this opportunity to encounter, ‘Well, what does power mean to me, and how do I express it?’”

Amid all this introspection and

honesty, were Ludwig and Piechocki able to distill an image of the ultimate female “power outfit” — an equivalent to the male power suit or power tie?

“It's not even that we couldn't. It's that we wouldn't,” said Piechocki. “Because as artists, we've definitely seen our role in this as providing a platform for women to tell their stories. ... We're not making a Super Power Girl who's this weird conglomeration that doesn't really exist.”