



SOUTH CENTRAL
Association of Blood Banks

PULSE

A PUBLICATION OF THE SOUTH CENTRAL ASSOCIATION OF BLOOD BANKS

Funky Professionalism at The Blood Center of Central Texas

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Austin Texas is the “Live Music Capital of the World”. Travel north on Congress Avenue from South Austin and you’ll see tourists and Austinites visiting the unique and eclectic shops in the South Congress area. The cars driving ahead of you are likely to have “Keep Austin Weird” stickers plastered on their bumpers. One of those cars could be a particular model not easily afforded by someone working in a nonprofit industry. It’s being driven by a woman approaching retirement age who is definitely keeping Austin weird with her tattooed arm hanging out the window and Willie Nelson blaring from her car speakers.



Driving north across the Town Lake bridge just before sunset during early summer, you’ll see groups of people waiting for the famous Congress Avenue Bats to leave for their nightly hunting of bugs. You may see a real life Woody from the Toy Story movies waiting for the thousands and thousands of bats to emerge. Wearing Wranglers, a black Stetson, and a shirt taken from George Strait’s closet, he’s talking to two college kids wearing their University of Texas tshirts, ripped jeans, and flip flops, the boy has red hair, the girl has pink. They both are pierced on areas of their face that you were unaware could be pierced. Turn left on 6th street drive pass the bars and nightclubs and make a right on Lamar Boulevard. As you stop for the red light at 35th street a multicolored 40’ bus pulls next to you. This bus is bright and cheery

with a hippy aesthetic due to its airbrushed characters holding signs that say “Give Blood” and “Give Hope.” You smile. The bus turns in to the Parking lot of the Blood Center of Central Texas. You follow.

Once inside the Blood Center of Central Texas, you will be greeted with a cheerful “Are you here to save a life?” You may be confused and thinking, “Surely, this is not a Blood Donation Center?” The walls are brightly colored with painted designs by a local artist. The waiting room is open and donors laughing and talking amongst themselves. They’re relaxed and comfortable in this Austin-Weird environment. Behind you, you hear a person announce “Lisa Smith?” and one of the donor’s gets up and follows the lab coated phlebotomist into the donor room. You notice the phlebotomist’s shoulder length hair and goatee, and a tattoo on his wrist just below the cuffs of his lab coat. His jeans fall over camouflage printed Converse sneakers.

“No scrubs?” you wonder. “A goatee? What does that tattoo say?” The word “funky” comes to mind. The reason is because The Blood Center of Central Texas employees practice “Funky Professionalism”. In other words... they “Get Funky”.

In 2006, The Blood and Tissue Center of Central Texas’s Chief Marketing Officer, Linda Printz contacted Eric Poerschke, Managing Partner from NextLevel Thinking, about beginning a donor program similar to the successful “Commit For Life” program he helped create at Gulf Coast Blood Center in Houston. Soon the “Life is in Your Hands” initiative was created to help increase the number of first time donors and keep those donors coming back to make additional donations throughout the year.

One thing that became apparent during the creation of this program was the dual personality the blood center portrayed to the donors. Travelling the roads of Central Texas were brightly colored Blood Center buses going from community to community collecting blood. Additionally, the Blood Center’s Hospital Services Department had Honda Elements that had been covered with the same “give blood-give life” design as the busses and were traveling to Hospitals delivering blood. The Honda’s became known as “Bus Puppies” due to the appearance they shared with the much larger Bluebird mobile blood donation coaches. These vehicles successfully represented the “Keep Austin Weird” mentality and always brought a smile to the face of anyone who saw them.



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continued

Unfortunately, the personality of the Blood Center's appearance on the vehicles did not carry over into the donor room or anywhere else in the building at 4300 North Lamar. The donor room appeared typically drab and clinical. Staff wore scrubs in an effort to maintain a conformity that occasionally seemed to limit their ability to feel comfortable and at ease when making conversation with donors.

Making conversation and discussing the new "Life is in Your Hands" program with donors was going to be crucial if the Blood and Tissue Center expected the program to be successful. Additionally, the Blood Center wanted donors to feel the same cheerfulness when they walk into the Blood and Tissue Center as they do when they see the Blood Center's bus pull next to them at a stoplight.

During the development of the "Life is in Your Hands" program for the donors, the need to make the Blood Center's employees feel involved in the program became very evident. Allyson Mabry became the Employee Program Manager. Allyson and fourteen employees became the "Hands of the Employee" team. This team reviewed the ideas discussed in focus groups consisting of only front line employees. The team was able to determine that the employees would like for donors to see a staff that truly represented Austin's "weird" culture while not at the expense of great customer service. The team realized that the staff wanted to be themselves at work, and the notion of "Funky Professionalism" was born.

In order to define Funky Professionalism, another team was created. This team was the Individual Expression team and it consisted of frontline staff, managers, and directors. In addition, Allyson and the Director of Human Resources, Denise Ballinger, sat in on the meetings the goal of which was to reevaluate and rewrite the Dress Standards for the Blood and Tissue Center. Throughout the meetings, the team's discussions about what they would like to change were realistic, Denise recalls, and they "Policed each other well" when ideas that may be considered too liberal were presented. Ultimately the team developed a standard that allowed employees to dress in a manner that helped define the culture change that the Blood and Tissue Center wanted to achieve. The new standards allowed the staff to have tattoos and piercings, have multi colored hair, and wear their favorite tshirt and jeans all while maintaining professionalism with donors.

Before introducing the new standards to the public, the Individual Expressions team had to get a final

approval from the Blood and Tissue Center's Executive Committee. The team decided that the best way to present such a wild concept to the Executive Committee would be to present it in a wild manner. The team held a fashion show to display what would be okay for staff to wear and what would not. Chief Executive Officer, Marshall Cothran remembers the fashion show fondly, describing it as "hilarious". In Marshall's opinion the team had not come up with anything that appeared unprofessional, instead the team had stayed true to the concept and displayed an appearance that was truly "Funky Professional". They rewrote the dress standard while maintaining an excellent job complementing the multicolored Blood Center vehicles, the bright décor now covering the walls of the Blood and Tissue Center, and fit the "Keep Austin Weird" mentality of the city. One thing that really made Marshall proud was the fact that this was not a "top – down" program. It was created and implemented by the front line staff.

Since the introduction of "Funky Professionalism" (aka "Get Funky"), the overall donor response throughout the Central Texas community has been very positive. The appearance of the phlebotomists often leads to discussions about the "Get Funky" program with donors and those conversations inevitably turn into discussions about the "Hands of the Donor" program. This in turn motivates donors to sign up and return to donate blood. Though it would seem that some of the more conservative communities would balk at the change of the employees appearance on blood drives, it has become common for donors who have forgotten a particular employee's name to describe "The girl with blue hair" when they write a complimentary letter to the blood center. Linda Printz mentions proudly that since the program has been initiated, the number of donors that donate more than once a year has increased and that trend should continue into the future.

Though not all blood centers operate in such a liberal environment as Austin, it should not be a reason for them to not consider looking at internal changes they could make for their employees. ***The Blood and Tissue Center made their changes with the assistance of Eric Poerschke and NextLevel Thinking.*** It has also been accomplished through the tireless effort of Allyson Mabry and her managing of all the Employee Programs. Ask any employee what the best things are about working at the Blood and Tissue Center of Central Texas and they will tell you that it is the support that the Blood and Tissue Center gives them to be themselves.