

# rejecting the word *‘cannot’*

**my first nonprofit job occurred by happy accident, and the work illustrated how fortunate I am and put me on the path to what I am becoming.**

In my 20s, with a brand-new degree in human resources management, I saw a position advertised with San Antonio Lighthouse for the Blind. My knowledge of the organization was limited. I knew the role would give me an opportunity to help change lives. Instead of making a difference in the lives of other people, the other people I worked with changed my life. This was my introduction to how much I took for granted.

Sensitivity training was part of orientation. Basically, we became blind for the day. At lunch we were blindfolded before leaving our facility and taken to an unknown restaurant.



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When you go to a restaurant, how many times do you review the menu? I bet you never thought about it. Imagine having it read to you and trying to remember the details. I must have asked my sighted guide to read it to me four or five times. Finally I chose something to end my frustration.

We ate the entire meal blindfolded. When I removed my blindfold later, I saw that I had smeared mashed potatoes on my black pants. I didn't realize that my napkin had fallen onto the floor during the meal.

This experience gave me insight into the struggles those with disabilities face. It made me stop feeling sorry for myself, start appreciating what I was able to accomplish, and demonstrated how much one can achieve with innovation and thinking differently. It shaped my attitudes about who I was, the basic resources I possessed, and what I needed to do with the rest of my life.

I joined Goodwill Central Texas in Austin in 1996 as a human resources generalist and have continued working for nonprofits to this day. Currently, I work for Heart of Texas Goodwill in Waco.

One of the best parts of my job is figuring out how to accomplish everything I can with the resources at hand. Making limited resources go as far as possible encourages creativity and innovation. Not only do I help to expand the opportunities of people with disabilities and disadvantages, I see and hear about the successes of the people we serve. What more can I ask than helping to change the lives of others?

My leadership journey with Goodwill started when I created a new job description for my position, a supervisory role. In addition to changing my job description, I modified my supervisor's job description by removing tasks I knew she did not enjoy.

Shortly afterwards, I presented her with both job descriptions and explained my vision. Fortunately, my boss did not take this as an opportunity to relieve me of my duties, as I basically had eliminated my current position and possibly overstepped my authority. It worked out: I was moved into the position of human resources manager. This taught me the importance of innovation and how innovation assumes different forms.

My current responsibilities at Goodwill include oversight of 14 retail stores producing \$12 million in annual revenue. We work in 20 counties, and the major operations are in McLennan, Bell, Coryell and Brazos counties. I am responsible for sales, production, transportation, quality and process improvement, and inventory. I attend board meetings and assist with board relations and strategic planning, helping shape the direction of our Goodwill and the people we serve.

**Work continues to be a day-to-day learning experience. Here are some of the lessons my nonprofit journey has imparted:**

**Don't accept the word "cannot."** Instead ask, "Why can't you?" Then turn the question around and ask "How can you?" For me, this lesson began in middle school when a teacher encouraged me to run for student council president.

My rejection of that idea started with "cannot," as in "I cannot get elected because I am not popular enough, strong enough, good enough." My teacher eventually convinced me to give it a try. I won the election, but then I had to be the president. My first task was to speak in front of new sixth graders and their parents to welcome them to the school. For me, that "why can't you?" moment turned into a cycle of gaining enough confidence to run, to speak, to trust myself to do other things, to attain even higher levels of confidence. From there, I got into pep squad, became pep squad captain, and joined the dance team. My leadership journey was beginning.

**Be a lifelong student.** Leaders are always learning, and the more they learn, the more they realize what they don't know. After obtaining my bachelor's degree, re-entering the classroom was not my vision. Even when a supervisor encouraged me to do so, I stubbornly refused. I feared school after spending so many years away from it. My supervisor persisted. My fear of walking in place for the rest of my life gained the upper hand. I took my supervisor's advice and returned to school.

I loved the experience of being a formal student once again. My executive MBA at Baylor helped me develop critical thinking skills, the ability to see things differently, gain confidence and expand my vision.

Classroom training and formal degrees are not the only ways to be a student. Those who want to learn new things can find ways to continue their education both on and off the job.

**Be honest with yourself about who you are.**

As an undergraduate student, I quit a job after two days. My duties included making outgoing calls, and employees were rated on how many calls they made in how many minutes, as well as the outcome of each call. We had a script to read, and we could not go off-script to have a conversation.

I didn't mind the goals or being held accountable, but disliked the lack of face-to-face contact. That job helped me realize I needed to be doing something else and showed me what I did not want to do.

**Stay true to yourself.** Recently, I realized I was becoming someone different from who I am. I knew I needed to change, as I did not like the person I was becoming.

Take a step back and look at who you are and what you are becoming. If you do not like what you see, make a change.

**Thoughtful leadership takes time.** In today's world, leaders tend to rush without stopping. We make decisions quickly and sometimes the results suffer, as well as the people we lead. Leading thoughtfully takes time, whether you are trying to understand new things or people. I am learning to take the time to listen to those around me.

Also, leaders never stand on their own. Surround yourself with those who have integrity, drive, respect and desire for excellence.

**Working with a nonprofit offers the best of both the nonprofit and the for-profit realms:** all of the challenges of leading an organization while making a difference in my community. Helping others succeed spoils you for any other kind of work. Goodwill is the place for me.