

## SHOPWITHMEANING | TOPDRAWERTHRIFT

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**Austin is not lacking for thrift stores. Top Drawer Thrift stands out by offering wild, affordable fashions, with all proceeds dedicated to supporting the HIV and AIDS community.**

If you remember pairing shoulder padded jackets with prairie skirts, suspenders with Z. Cavaricci acid-washed jeans, Bon Jovi T-shirts, and fingerless lace gloves, and double-layered colored socks with fluorescent pink leg warmers, be warned that the 1980s fashion craze has returned. Remember the rule that if you wore it the first time around, you should not partake in the style upon its return. Who would think that the fashion era with hairstyles that could poke an eye out would reappear in today's popular culture? The trend is occurring at various vintage thrift stores across Austin, including Top Drawer Thrift, run by Project Transitions which provides hospice, housing, and support to people living with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency virus (AIDS); it is a partner agency of the United Way Capital Area.

A darker aspect of the 1980s includes the AIDS epidemic; a condition first labeled as a homosexual disease, but soon included heterosexuals and blood transfusion recipients. The disease crossed all boundaries, killing over 25 million people worldwide since 1981. AIDS has orphaned 12 million children; an estimated one million people currently living with HIV in the United States. HIV and AIDS is called "a young person's disease" with half of the 5 million new infections each year occurring among people ages 15 to 24.

In Austin, 20 percent of Top Drawer Thrift's proceeds go to enhancing the lives of those living with the illness. Some services provided include hospice, subsidized housing, job training, education, and counseling. AIDS Services of Austin also provides vouchers for shopping purposes at Top Drawer Thrift.

The funky shop opened in 1993 as the brainchild of Project Transitions board member Sandra Martinez and has grown into a neighborhood mainstay, offering customers a variety of fashion choices. The aisles are packed with men, women, and children's clothing, purses, jewelry, wigs, hats, and shoes. The store also offers books, electronics, household goods, linens, and furniture. "The great thing about

**facing page** in 113 years, many children have left their hand print in the helping hand home, a safe place for abused, neglected, and abandoned children



Austin is that people are not afraid to create their own trends,” said store manager since 2003, Molly Staffa. “I am always surprised when I see a trend revisited, but people usually somehow personalize it. It is strange to see a kid wearing something that I wore in high school, but I guess that is how to whole fashion cycle works.”

“I like to see a girl wearing a classic, pretty dress with high-top tennis shoes and a blazing tattoo, or a guy sporting a tweed pants with a rock T-shirt,” said Staffa. “A thrift store is the perfect place to shape a new style identity. It is great that Austinites are proud to show their creativity with fashion.”

Staffa has noticed more teenagers sporting classic rock T-shirts, such as the Ramones and Sex Pistols, as well as fluorescent colors and tights with lace sewn underneath. “I think people are drawn to thrift store clothing because of the cost value and also for the immense variety,” said Staffa. “We cater to all kinds of shoppers, including college students, low-income families, tourists, and everything in between. Fashions are not pigeon-holed here according to seasonal trends, and customers are free to mix and match.” Top Drawer Thrift offers a flexible pricing system and is recognized for its reasonable costs. After one month, an item is discounted 25 percent. After two months, it is discounted 50 percent. Finally, after three months, the item is discounted 75 percent.

“Many people are unaware that we are a nonprofit and are happy when they realize that their money is donated to a worthy cause,” said Staffa. “The store exudes such a

**this page** austinites can volunteer at the home by reading to the children just before bed time

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positive vibe, and I can say without reservation that this is my favorite job yet. HIV and AIDS changes the focus of the store, and it is amazing to watch the volunteers adhering to the same strong work ethic as a paid job.”

Top Drawer Thrift is staffed by two full-time employees and between 25-30 active volunteers. Chuck Dachis, a nine-year volunteer, is rejuvenated by giving back to the community. “I collect a particular brand of antique radio communication and am always on the hunt,” he said. “That special item could come in the door the next minute or hour, and that is what attracts me to the store. Volunteering energizes me and makes me part of a larger cause.”

Dachis has watched Top Drawer Thrift evolve into a sleeker, cleaner, more aesthetically appealing store, selling higher quality resale items. “We rely completely on donations and are lucky to have a strong donor base with high quality merchandise,” said Staffa. Last summer the building received a carpet and ceiling facelift and is known for the eye-catching furniture sculptures atop

the roof. A funky new sign, designed by artist Chuck Watson, also now welcomes thrift shoppers during their treasure hunts.

While Top Drawer Thrift depends on the community’s donations, there are certain items that the store cannot accept due to space constraints, including mattresses and box springs, refrigerators, washers and dryers, dishwashers, and other household appliances. The staff asks people to donate items during store hours to avoid theft and inclement weather and ask that donated clothes are washed. “A large portion of our clothing comes from seasonal closet cleanings,” said Staffa. “If possible, we encourage people to bring clothes that match the current season, since we have very little storage space. Of course, we appreciate all donations and share what we cannot store with the Salvation Army.”

The hip thrift store hosts a variety of fashion events, including the premier of Top Drawer Couture, hosted by Almost Impatience in May. “Everything was donated and volunteers created fabulous styles

based on our clothing inventory,” said Staffa. “The show was a huge success and all of the proceeds were donated to Project Transitions. We look forward to making it an annual event.”

Top Drawer Thrift also celebrated its 13th birthday in August with fire dancers, hula hoopers, live music, food and drinks, and BBQ. Clothes were priced 75 percent off the original cost.

Remember that fashion is all about individuality, which is Austin’s mantra. Feel free to mix and match styles to your heart’s delight, but know there is fine line between fashion excellence and a fashion emergency. Rain coats that once transformed from jacket to purse might once have been all the rage—that does not mean today’s fashion world is ready. Incorporate your 1980s fashion sense with caution and know a little goes a long way.” **AC**

*To learn more about Top Drawer Thrift, visit [www.topdrawerthrift.org](http://www.topdrawerthrift.org) or call (512) 454 5161. The store’s hours are Mon.-Sat., 10am-7pm.*