



Margaret Thatcher said, "If you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done, ask a woman." That's certainly true in the case of these **10 women**, who are working every day to make Austin even better in areas ranging from technology and business to transportation and theater. You'll meet entrepreneurs, executives, educators, creatives and more who are all simply exceptional. Read their stories and be inspired.



Women We Love

By MIKELA FLOYD and RAMONA FLUME
Photograph by BILL SALLANS

THE TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY

Linda Watson

When Linda Watson stepped in as Capital Metro's president and CEO in 2010, she was inheriting a daunting job. There was a nationwide recession, and Austin's public transit provider was experiencing heightened scrutiny in the wake of widespread budget woes, major delays of its long-anticipated MetroRail and a critical audit report from Texas' Sunset Advisory Commission. But Watson quickly went to work, taking CapMetro from underdog to community leader. "I've always been fascinated by cities—all of the different elements that have to coexist to create a vibrant place," says Watson, who hails from the tiny town of Henryetta, Oklahoma.

The UT Arlington grad has 30 years of transportation experience, overseeing transit systems in Orlando, Fort Worth and Corpus Christi, but says she's never lived somewhere as dynamic as Austin. "The growth is just phenomenal and people are so passionate about what's happening around them," she says. Watson was committed to restoring CapMetro as a trusted member of the community, starting with a top-down staff meeting on her first day. "I knew I had to align everyone and explain the importance of each individual role if we were ever going to be successful," she says.

Her mantra, "Just Do It," became a daily driving force resulting in swift company-wide changes. The MetroRail line launched in 2010 and has quadrupled its ridership; MetroRapid debuted in January 2014—on time and under budget—and CapMetro became the first transit system to earn the Texas comptroller's top honor for financial transparency. And the future is bright: More state and federal funding to double the growing fleet is on the way.



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THE STORYTELLER

Adrienne Dawes



"I was raised around things that 90 percent of people probably wouldn't understand," says playwright Adrienne Dawes, whose debut play, *Am I White*, received a B. Iden Payne award for Outstanding Original Script in 2015. Dawes, the second oldest of eight adopted children, was raised in Austin in what she describes as a mixed-race, postmodern household of siblings with varying mental and physical disabilities. "I learned what goes into the making of identity and family and human understanding early on," she says.

That unique upbringing ignited Dawes' lifelong fascination with identity and self-expression, from the first rap poetry she wrote in high school to the years spent honing her playwriting and performance abilities through classes at Chicago's famed Second City. While she was developing her diverse repertoire, playwriting remained Dawes' true calling. "I love having the power to tell my story and have people listen and understand," she says. Her new play, *Denim Doves*, runs through this month at the Salvage Vanguard Theater, where she's also directing a four-day run of *Love Me Tinder*, a musical sketch revue she wrote and developed in collaboration with her Heckle Her production company.

Dawes also manages to balance a job at Lifeworks, where she raises awareness and funds "for kids my mom probably would've adopted." She loves getting to know clients' stories, whether it's a homeless youth or pregnant teen. And as a woman and artist of color, she remembers why she strove to be a writer in the first place: to be a voice for anyone who has felt "othered" or misunderstood. "The thought that I could dream up an idea that inspires others to look at the world in a different way is such an exciting feeling," she says.

PHOTOS BY: WATSON AND VANDERVELDT, BILL SALLANS; DAWES, DEBORAH CANNON/AUSTIN-AMERICAN STATESMAN.



THE FEMALE CHAMPION

INGRID VANDERVELDT

Ingrid Vanderveldt's feet don't hit the ground in the morning until she's spent a few minutes meditating. But the rest of the day, the entrepreneur and philanthropist eats, breathes and dreams about her latest, most ambitious endeavor yet: Empowering a Billion Women by 2020, an initiative that seeks to motivate women through mentorship opportunities, mobile technologies and global entrepreneurial efforts. "Whether they're rubbing a few pennies together to feed their kids that week or multi-millionaires donating to charities, women give almost 90 percent of their income back to their families and communities," Vanderveldt says. "The faster we do that, the faster we create a more sustainable future."

Growing up in Maryland, Vanderveldt thought she'd one day become a missionary. "I had this idea I was put on earth to show other people their real potential," she says. But soon, she realized she was an effective capitalist and starting imagining a life as a "different kind of missionary." Vanderveldt went on to be Dell's founding Entrepreneur-in-Residence, wherein she created programs including the \$125 Million Innovators Credit Fund during her three-year term, and is currently on the advisory board for United Nations Foundation's Girl Up campaign, which empowers girls in developing countries through health, safety, education and leadership.

After years of navigating international platforms and male-dominated industries, Vanderveldt's advice for other women aspiring to do the same is simple: Just start. "Men are ready for women to show up," she says. "And there are more people making it possible for them." That's why mentorship remains a core tenet of her philosophy. "Find the best, smartest people," she says. "Even when we're discussing global impact, I always start small. You don't need big; you need the best."

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THE UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT

Colette Pierce Burnette

As the new president of Huston-Tillotson University, Colette Pierce Burnette realizes she has an important seat at the table. “When I go to meetings with other presidents, I’m one in a sprinkling of women. And one in an even smaller sprinkling of women or people of color,” she says. “We’ve gotten to a place where there is equality, but there is not equity. And there is a big difference between being treated equally and being treated equitably. People like myself don’t rest until we find that equitable place for all.”

Burnette assumed her role last July—the first woman to do so since Samuel Huston and Tillotson colleges merged in 1952. But the mother of two didn’t always have her sights set on higher education. After more than 15 years in the corporate world, bouncing all over the world due to her husband’s military service, the Cleveland native took the advice of friends and made the jump to higher education in the mid-’90s. She got her master’s degree, took a tenure-track faculty position at Pierce College in Washington and never looked back. “My sister thought I was losing my mind because I took half the pay,” she says, laughing.

A newly minted Austinite, Burnette is a firsthand witness to the change coming to the city, especially the East Austin neighborhood HT calls home. And she recognizes the school’s need to evolve along with its surroundings. “We need to act accordingly and become a thought leader, based on what’s happening in the community,” she says. “I call Huston-Tillotson a jewel in the violet crown of Austin, and I’ve got to make people recognize that and see us that way.”

BURNETTE PHOTO BY BILL SALLANS. HONEGGER PHOTO COURTESY NOONDAY COLLECTION.

THE PHILANTHROPIC FASHIONISTA

JESSICA HONEGGER



The earliest sparks of inspiration for Noonday Collection, the socially conscious fashion company Jessica Honegger founded in 2010, can be traced to her first trip to Africa at the age of 16. The San Antonio native vividly recalls seeing a woman operating a fruit stand in the streets of Kibera, the largest urban slum in Africa, during a church-organized mission trip. “She was this vibrant, colorful island in the midst of abject poverty,” Honegger says. She learned the woman had opened the stand after receiving a microloan, propelling her out of an abusive marriage and empowering her to not only support her family but also develop a thriving business.

That enduring image of entrepreneurial spirit changed Honegger’s life forever, leading her down a path of global activism and poverty relief, including traveling the world while studying at UT, working with international relief organization Food for the Hungry (where she met her husband) and taking a fateful trip to Uganda in 2010, where the couple decided to adopt their third child from Rwanda. While raising funds to cover international adoption costs, Honegger unwittingly created the blueprint for Noonday Collection by hosting a trunk show of artisan jewelry hand made by her friends in Uganda.

Today, about 1,000 Noonday ambassadors organize independent trunk shows with handmade goods that employ 2,000 artisans in vulnerable, poverty-stricken communities. Last year, *Austin Business Journal* named Noonday the city’s fastest-growing company, with a whopping 204 percent annual growth rate. Honegger attributes it all to female empowerment, seen in every Noonday artisan and ambassador. “Entrepreneurialism creates an arena to practice courage,” she says. “The more you practice courage, the more contagious it becomes.”

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SHAHBAZI-HARMON PHOTO BY BILL SALLANS. BHALLA PHOTO COURTESY BHALLA.



THE GLOBAL SECURITY EXPERT

REVA BHALLA



THE LISTENER

Khotan Shahbazi-Harmon

“Don’t let your story define you.” Those are the words Khotan Shahbazi-Harmon lives by—and they’re even more powerful when you learn her story. Born in Iran, she fled to the U.S. with her mother and brother at the age of 13. A year later, her father was executed. Her mother was imprisoned after returning to Iran three months later, and their family home was demolished. Her mother was eventually released from prison, escaped Iran and returned to the U.S., where her children had grown up under the care of three different families. Despite her mother’s hardships, “she wakes up every day with gratitude,” Shahbazi-Harmon says. “That, to me, is such a lesson.”

It’s a lesson that Shahbazi-Harmon makes sure she pays forward. As the director of communications and community accountability at E3 Alliance, she works to build a strong educational pipeline in the community. “I love the idea of building a capacity for service,” she says. And as the host of KOOP Radio’s globally minded interview program *Idea Lounge*, she welcomes guests who have unique stories to tell. “I really make sure to let my guests get to the heart of their story,” she says. “It should be more interesting to want to hear what the other person has to say.”

In 2010, she won a prestigious Gracie Award for her interview with Nobel Peace Prize winner and Iranian women’s rights activist Dr. Shirin Ebadi, a powerful moment she says was “the closest I’ve gotten to Iran since I left.” And look how far she has come.

At 4:50 a.m., Reva Bhalla’s alarm clock sounds. And from the moment she’s up, she’s at it—grabbing her computer and absorbing the world’s events that took place while she slept. As vice president of global analysis at Austin-based global intelligence firm Stratfor, Bhalla’s job is to essentially weed through the world’s information and make sense of it for the company’s clients, which includes defense contractors, energy firms, Fortune 500 companies and others. “We start with a map and look at what constrains nation-states and how that shapes their behavior and ultimately, their next move,” she says. “Then we help our clients anticipate those geopolitical disruptions and opportunities before you see them in the headlines.”

Some days, of course, are harder than others. The Austin native, who joined Stratfor as a college intern 11 years ago, says that incidents like the recent attacks in Paris leave time for nothing else. “We go into red-alert mode,” she says. “We collect information to determine what happened, what we know and what we don’t know. From there, we can wrap our heads around it and tell people, ‘OK, this is what’s happening.’”

Keeping a finger on the world’s pulse can make finding time for anything else difficult, but Bhalla, who’s getting married this spring, tries to create a work-life balance, even organizing community fundraisers like Austin Piñata Day. “It’s tough, though. Even in your private life, you’re still reading about everything that’s happening in the world,” she says. “You can never fully divorce yourself from it.”

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THE ART AFICIONADO

ANDRÉE BOBER



THE TECH DIVERSIFIERS

Gina Helfrich & Ashley Doyal

In 2015, only about 26 percent of technology industry workers were women. Gina Helfrich and Ashley Doyal are here to change that. As the founding partners behind recruitHER, this duo is aiming to diversify the face and ethnic makeup of the tech job market, one candidate at a time. After a career in academia, Helfrich landed in the tech realm and noticed quickly the diversity challenges facing the industry. Eager to help address them, she did what any 21st-century mind would do: She posted on Facebook. Doyal, who spent her post-college years in corporate HR, responded to that post on the Austin Digital Jobs group, and the rest is history. “I quit my job three weeks later,” Doyal says. “We realized no one else was doing this work at an agency capacity, and we were pretty uniquely positioned to do it together.”

With seven clients nationwide, recruitHER starts by assessing a company’s policies on inclusivity, parental leave and more. If a company meets their standards of inclusion, Helfrich and Doyal begin trying to place candidates. Despite their female-leaning niche, recruitHER seeks to help candidates from many walks of life. “People get confused when they see the name of our company and assume that we only work with women,” says Doyal. “We are just as dedicated to making sure that we are working with other marginalized communities—veteran candidates, disabled candidates and ethnic minorities, especially black and Latino candidates.”

With Austin’s job growth reaching record numbers, this twosome may need more office space. “We’re already facing many more people knocking on our door than we can possibly help right now given the size of our team,” says Helfrich. “Companies are clearly looking to make inclusion a priority, and we’re so excited to help with that.”

HELFRICH & DOYAL PHOTO BY BILL SALLANS; BOBER PHOTO COURTESY BOBER.

Andrée Bober passionately believes in the democratic power of public art. In 2008, the curator and arts administrator founded Landmarks, the UT public art collection that now includes 37 works throughout the 431-acre campus. “I love the idea of art without barriers,” says Bober, a UT grad whose expertise spans from a master’s in art administration from Columbia University to curatorial work at Cincinnati’s Contemporary Arts Center.

But the Beaumont native prefers to attribute the success and continued growth of Landmarks to her colleagues. Bober now telecommutes from her home in Washington, D.C., where she’s lived with her husband for the past five years. But the vicarious thrills of the art collection’s unique, trickle-down effects on other people’s lives haven’t subsided. “I can’t tell you how proud I am that 80,000 people go to [artist James Turrell’s] ‘Skyspace’ every year—especially since it only seats 25 people at a time,” she says. “That kind of accessibility provokes inspiration in such amazingly unexpected ways.”

That same democratic ideal also inspired what Bober calls her “moonlighting project.” Upon returning to UT in 2004, she was surprised to discover that a comprehensive record of the university’s full list of collections did not exist. “UT isn’t a museum; there’s no curator,” Bober says. “But we have this astonishing reputation as a collecting institution and the actual information of what we have seemed so elusive.” So she began a 10-year endeavor to chronicle more than 80 collections across the school’s institutions—from scientific specimens to literary manuscripts—in one unified publication. Her book, *The Collections*, was published last month. “It’s a story that needs to be told,” she says. ■

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