

## It's party time -- sort of

Nonprofits bypass expensive galas, hit donors at home

Austin Business Journal - by [Sandra Zaragoza](#) Staff Writer

John Thornton is happily leaving his tux in the closet for at least one gala this spring.

That's because Thornton, a partner at Austin Ventures LP, will be experiencing GENaustin's gala from the comfort of his own couch.

In lieu of its third annual gala, the nonprofit is hosting a "Gala in a Box" and asking its donors for 'non-table' sponsorship (sponsorships range from \$1,000 to \$20,000). The money collected will support programs and services aimed at fostering self-esteem in young women.



Sarah Kever

Leaders of GENaustin have embraced the party-in-a-box concept. Their version will contain treats such as cocktail ingredients and chocolate.

In return, GENaustin will be delivering gala boxes -- with contents meant to recreate the gala experience -- to a sponsor's home or office. A recipient will receive GENaustin's mint-honey martini ingredients, guaranteed reservations at a high-end restaurant, a crystal bowl, a box of chocolates and other festive treats.

Austin Ventures is sponsoring the virtual gala this year.

"This [gala alternative] is indicative of the kind of stuff GENaustin does. They are very innovative. It will raise a lot of money for the organization," Thornton says.

Virtual galas, or non-events, are gaining traction with charities across the country, says Michael Nilsen, director of public relations for the Association of Fundraising Professionals. Some nonprofits are even hosting galas entirely online, with virtual auctions taking place on Web sites, he says.

"These [non-events] are definitely a newer concept that we've seen develop over the past several years," Nilsen says.

A rise in the number of charities and a sophistication in fundraising is driving non-event and virtual gala activity, he adds.

"Donors are seeing more invitations. You have to find an innovative way to get people's attention, and this is a way to do that," Nilsen says.

Locally, GENaustin isn't the only nonprofit that's asking donors to jettison a traditional gala or event for a quiet evening at home.

College Forward, a nonprofit that puts economically disadvantaged young people on the college track, has decided to take a break from its College Challenge fundraiser typically held in mid-May, says Emily Steinberg, associate director and development manager.

"We are hosting our first non-event. It's all a big experiment," Steinberg says. "We see ourselves as a youthful and adaptable organization, and we are willing to try new things to get to the destination."

College Forward is sending a clever non-event invite asking donors to stay at home and relax. At a time when the nonprofit's staffers would be planning an event, College Forward is instead working on a new development strategy, Steinberg says.

"We see this time away from producing a special event as an opportunity to plan and create a business plan going forward," she says.

College Forward expects to raise between \$3,000 and \$10,000 through the non-event. To compare, the nonprofit spent \$3,000 on its fundraiser and netted \$4,000 last year.

Some charities recognize that special events can be very cumbersome and not worth the investment -- not only financially, but also with the time and resources that are soaked up, says Fayruz Benyousef, a nonprofit consultant with Dini Partners.

"People are trying new ways to raise money, and that can be good in select moments in an organization's life," she says.

The success of some non-events nationally shows that charities are indeed piquing donors' interest, insiders say. Charities are finding that donors are willing to give to non-events because they believe their money is going directly to help those in need as opposed to footing the bill for pricey dinners, bands and centerpieces, according to the Association of Fundraising Professionals.

That's the case for GENaustin, says Julia Cuba, director of the nonprofit. Last year, Genaustin spent almost \$29,000 producing a gala, which netted about \$80,000 in donations.

Christie Horne, a GENaustin board member and gala chair, says that although GENaustin's traditional gala had met financial expectations, they were eager to try something different.

"We were very successful. But we just found that it was a lot of work for such a small staff," Horne says.

Cuba and Horne are also positioning the "Gala in a Box" as environmentally responsible.

"There won't be any trash, no food will be wasted, you don't have to drive anywhere and no lighting will be used," Horne says.

GENaustin isn't even sending out paper invitations. Instead, its donor base will receive an email invitation starting this week.

The nonprofit is estimating that it will invest about \$20,000 on the boxed gala, and raise about \$100,000 this year.

Still, Benyousef and others question whether a virtual gala or non-event is a sound long-term strategy, adding that one possible risk might be the loss of face time with donors.

"If I was a new charity, I wouldn't think a non-event is a way to go," Nilsen says. "It has to be a well-established group of donors getting the invitation."

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