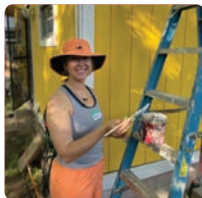




# HALFF IS ALL HEART





## THE FIRM PUTS PURPOSE AT THE CENTER OF ITS VOLUNTEER EFFORTS

BY MICHELE MEYER



Employee engagement increased to **60 percent** last year, when employees donated over **\$119,000** to support **118** charities, while logging **2,327** volunteer hours at **98** events.

**H**ow many engineers does it take to build a three-story dollhouse?

Last December, it was 16.

Employees from Halff stayed past their shifts to complete the dollhouse while volunteering at Frisco Family Services, a nonprofit that helps members of the Frisco, Texas, community facing homelessness, hunger, and other urgent needs. The group also built a baby bassinet, a doll table, and chairs that were given to families in need over the holidays.

"They spent so much time to make some little girls very happy," says Randie Osgood, volunteer services manager at Frisco Family Services.

The event was just one of many corporate social responsibility efforts that Halff participates in throughout the year. The company's generosity, mission, and local focus drives its work—and benevolence—in the communities where its 31 offices in Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Florida are located.

"We're a purpose- and people-driven firm," says Mark Edwards, president and CEO of the employee-owned engineering firm named for its founder and continued inspiration, Dr. Albert H. Halff. (See sidebar on page 52.) "We're all in this together."

Even the business itself has a noble cause: "Everything we do benefits society," Edwards says of the multidisciplinary designs developed by the firm's 1,400 engineers, planners, architects, landscape architects, and other staff. "We take it one step further to help those less fortunate."

### TAKING ACTION

In 2017, company employees formed the Halff Community Initiative (HCI) to ensure their largesse could make an impact close to home. The firm had long donated time and money, but HCI formalized those efforts.

A 501(c)(3) nonprofit, HCI enables all offices to contribute locally via volunteering and donations. Funds come from voluntary payroll deductions, with 100 percent awarded to the charities employees choose.

"We want to help where our employees are passionate," says Edwards. "They're in touch with their communities and know what's important there."

Halff prioritizes events where employees can take action, says Melanie Cleavelin, public works/transportation team leader and head of the HCI steering committee. For instance, volunteers often gather at lunch to pack meals or toiletries for the homeless. "We can pack 200 bags in 30 minutes," Cleavelin says. "It's a nice break, and you're doing something good for the community."

When possible, they distribute the meals in person. "Seeing how much someone appreciates the meal you hand them is pretty impactful," Edwards says.

Halff's causes include Meals on Wheels, Ronald McDonald House, food banks, and park cleanups. The firm also gives time and money to help the elderly, children, the homeless, and victims of abuse through such charities as Rebuilding Together Austin.

Whether because of donations or volunteering, employee engagement increased from 28 percent in 2017 to 60 percent last year, when employees donated over \$119,000 to support 118 charities. They also logged 2,327 volunteer hours at 98 events.





## A COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY

**A larger-than-life Texan** who wore a Stetson hat, Dr. Albert H. Halff was known for innovative solutions for flood control, public works, transportation, and other urban challenges—as well as for his generosity and caring. He founded the Halff firm in 1950 and built his company around kindness.

When a flood devastated a Dallas neighborhood, he knocked on doors to learn how the Halff firm could help. One woman said, “You can wash these dishes while I clear out stuff.” And he did, while learning how his firm could serve her family.

“He cared deeply for his employees and those in need,” says Mark Edwards, president and CEO of Halff. “But he never broadcasted his largesse. You’d find out years later.”

Dr. Halff once paid bills for an employee with cancer, and then paid for her children’s education after she died. He also saw potential in Cuban refugee Jose “Joe” Novoa and, after hiring him for survey work, paid for his civil engineering degree at Southern Methodist University.

Novoa then rose in the ranks, becoming chairman after Dr. Halff’s semi-retirement in 1986. Dr. Halff remained chairman emeritus till his death at age 97 in 2013—and, incidentally, won three swim meets the weekend before he died.

Dr. Halff inspired a spirit of generosity that continues to this day. “You’re not just a name on a list here,” says Melanie Cleavelin, public works/transportation team leader. “It’s a family. You’re cared for.”

To honor its founder, the Halff Stetson Award was created in 2021 for employees who best carry on Dr. Halff’s tradition of caring and sharing.

## TAKING THAT EXTRA STEP

Adam Kane, transportation team leader and HCI committee member, volunteered with his team the week before Frisco Family Services’ Holiday Store Program, which allows those in need to choose gifts for family members. The group from Halff did the heavy lifting, helping to decorate, make toys, and set up the experience. “We’re happy being the ‘muscle’ because we know our efforts are greatly appreciated—and we’re improving lives,” Kane says.

Frisco Family Services Development Director Brian White calls Halff “an invaluable partner”—and not just due to more than \$5,000 in donations.

“For many years Halff employees have volunteered their time, talents, and skills,” White says. “They always volunteer with a large group and have the best camaraderie.”

With similar zeal, Halff’s Central Texas colleagues built a ramp for an elderly wheelchair user in Austin, and then they asked to meet her, says Jesse Porter, executive director of



**“We’re a purpose- and people-driven firm. We’re all in this together.”**

**MARK EDWARDS**  
PRESIDENT AND CEO, HALFF



Halff employees build a dollhouse while volunteering at Frisco Family Services, a nonprofit that serves the local community in Frisco, Texas.

## 4 WAYS TO CELEBRATE AND MOTIVATE VOLUNTEERS

The Halff Community Initiative (HCI) honors its volunteers not only with awards but also with shoutouts. Here's how your firm can follow Halff's example:

### 1. TAKE LOTS OF PICTURES.

"We post pictures of every event for *Halff Times*, our biweekly newsletter," says Melanie Cleavelin, HCI steering committee leader and public works/transportation team leader.

### 2. SHARE YOUR STORIES.

Email campaigns, videos, and testimonials from those who Halff has helped are posted on the company's intranet and Instagram.

### 3. ACKNOWLEDGE SUCCESS.

HCI shows the impact of largesse—the results from donations and volunteer time. "We also give the numbers," says Mark Edwards, president and CEO. "We show where the money goes and the follow-up."

### 4. START AN ANNUAL EVENT.

The firm celebrates employees who have volunteered throughout the year during HCI Giving Week every September. During that event, Halff leadership has done everything from making pancakes to being doused in dunk tanks. "If it motivates somebody to do more, we're all in," Edwards says.



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**MELANIE CLEAVELIN**  
PUBLIC WORKS/  
TRANSPORTATION TEAM LEADER  
HALFF

Rebuilding Austin Together, which provides and repairs homes for the vulnerable.

Halff also took the initiative to set Porter up on a Zoom call with leaders of Engineers Without Borders so the charity could get further help.

"Other groups volunteer and move on," Porter says. "Halff kept thinking of ways they could help us more. There was no 'This is good enough.' They're not one and done. They're committed. The positive attitude, the respect, the compassion of everybody at Halff to our homeowners was endearing. They were so productive. They're also funny, upbeat, and compassionate. It was clear their hearts were in it."

"We are very proud of our purpose," Edwards says. "We believe it. It's our why." ■

**Michele Meyer** is a management and marketing writer based in Houston. She has written for *Forbes*, *Entrepreneur*, and the *International Association of Business Communicators*.



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REBUILDING AUSTIN TOGETHER