



The Houston Furniture Bank moved to its current location at 8220 Mosley Road in 2015.

All photos courtesy of the Houston Furniture Bank.

HOUSTON FURNITURE BANK – A BANK THAT WANTS TO GIVE

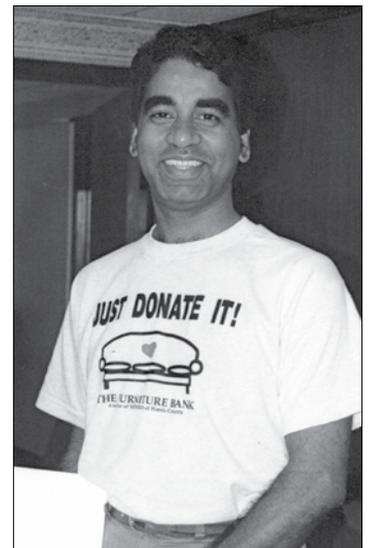
By Ruben Castro

Imagine how it feels to be without a bed, a table and chairs, or a dresser and a couch. “It is estimated that three hundred thousand children sleep on the floor in this great city of Houston, Texas,” exclaimed Oli Mohammed, founder of the Houston Furniture Bank, which celebrated its twenty-sixth anniversary on March 30, 2019.¹ What exactly is the Houston Furniture Bank, you might wonder. For starters, it is not a typical bank, which created some confusion initially. Oli recalls with amusement that, when founding the furniture bank, he had to get permission from the Texas Banking Commission before the organization could register the name using the word “bank.” The Houston Furniture Bank was not dealing with money, but with something worth more, the love for families who were looking at financial hardship, facing life transitions, or had come to the city as newly arrived refugees. The furniture bank’s slogan is “to make empty houses homes,” and with it, they provide “a little bit of dignity” to the people living in those homes by taking care of their needs with furniture.

The man behind the Houston Furniture Bank (HFB), Oli Mohammed, is a buoyant, optimistic person. He was born and raised in Bangladesh in the city of Dhaka. While attending school there and acquiring his master’s degree in political science from the University of Dhaka, he earned the opportunity to work for the United Nations Environmental Programme as an intern consultant in Nairobi, Kenya, in the 1980s. In 1987 Oli immigrated to the United States, where he worked at a transmission shop and delivered pizza and newspapers to make ends meet. He then volunteered for UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund)

and helped pioneer a Bangladesh Community Center in Houston.²

As a UNICEF volunteer, Oli met Dr. Walter Black who helped him join the Mental Health and Mental Retardation Authority of Harris County in Houston (MHMRA), now the Harris Center for Mental Health and IDD (Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities). His official title was housing specialist, and his job was to find apartments for people coming out of the mental health facilities. Due to the low subsidies, the only apartments Oli could find for his clients were in rough neighborhoods considered “slums.” This was an eye-opener for Oli, who witnessed poverty not seen in his homeland of Bangladesh. Intellectually he knew poor people lived in America but not at the level he witnessed. Not only were the apartments substandard, but the residents also had no furniture to start their new lives. After seeing families and especially children sleep and eat on the floor, Oli spoke to his then boss Dr. Steven Schnee



HFB founder Oli Mohammed sports a t-shirt with the organization’s slogan “Just Donate It” in 1995.

and the rest is history – the HFB was born in 1992.³

The first years presented challenges that required a lot of footwork. Oli borrowed a truck and started going to apartment association meetings and knocking on the doors of furniture companies and retailers. Jodie Hoffer, owner of Hoffer Furniture, was one of the original supporters of the furniture bank. Initially, the mission of the Houston Furniture Bank was to provide furniture to families or individuals who were transitioning from mental health facilities back into society, but the mission eventually expanded. The first pilot program was a success and the furniture bank collected furniture for 140 families.

From 1992 into 1995, the furniture bank served the MHMRA clients only and, in the middle of 1995, opened its doors to other agencies. By 1997 the bank provided furniture to 487 clients and donations were organized through companies like Star Furniture, Oak Crafters Furniture, Hoffer Furniture, Tandem Staffing, Kaplan Educational Centers, Houston Apartment Association, Cotton Moving & Storage, and Bankhead Thompson Media. The furniture bank's slogan at the time was "Just Donate it!"⁴

The Harris Center for Mental Health and IDD (HCMH) is the biggest organization in size and has brought in the most clients since 1992. Other agencies include the YMCA, St. Vincent de Paul, Star of Hope, Catholic Charities,

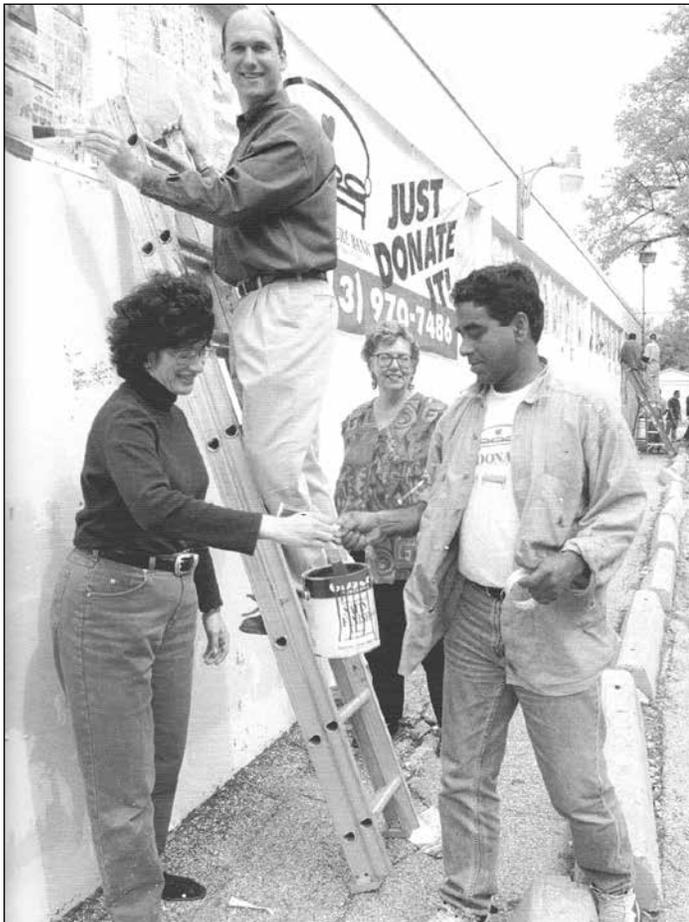


The 2100 Hussion Street warehouse was located off I-45, the Gulf Freeway.

Bridges over Troubled Waters, Houston Area Women's Center, and many more, totaling eighty-five agencies. The Houston Furniture Bank also started working with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) through the Healthcare for The Homeless Veterans Program (HCHV) and the Texas Veterans, thus helping many veterans struggling financially with acquiring furniture. Former mayor of Houston Lee P. Brown proclaimed March 5, 1998, as the Furniture Bank Day in recognition of the organization's service.

By 1999 the Finger and Hoffer families donated a 20,000-square-foot building with two acres of land on Bowling Green Street. HFB started to grow not only with furniture and volunteers but also love throughout Houston. In 2003 HFB became a 501(c) (3) enabling it to help many Houston families through donations. On April 15, 2004, another former mayor, Bill White, again bestowed the honor of Furniture Bank Day.

Unfortunately, the following year, the roof caved in on the furniture bank's Bowling Green warehouse, forcing it to relocate. The search brought HFB to 2100 Hussion Street, where it was settled in time to assist new Houstonians driven from their homes by Hurricane Katrina, which struck the Mississippi and Louisiana coasts on August 29, 2005.



Shown left to right, Pam Goodfriend, member of the board; Steve Finger, chairman of the board at that time; Susie White, member of the board representing the Houston Apartment Association at the time; and Oli Mohammed, founder, paint the new warehouse in 1998.



The Furniture Outlet opened to the public with great furniture at a fraction of the retail cost.

THE FURNITURE OUTLET CENTER

The first few years were tough for the furniture bank financially. Oli explains that the organization collected furniture and distributed it to clients but struggled to run its operations within its means. It is said that “necessity is the mother of invention,” which proved correct as the furniture bank looked at avenues to increase its revenues. To reduce dependence on monetary donations, the Houston Furniture Bank created the Furniture Outlet Center in 2008. Select pieces of donated furniture, such as those that are oversized or impractical for the average family, are sold through the retail store, adding to the income. The outlet offered a variety of great furniture pieces in a place next to the HFB then at 2100 Hussion Street and the Gulf Freeway donated by the Finger family to make this possible.

Anyone can come to the Furniture Outlet Center and look for and purchase furniture like mattresses, bed frames, dressers, mirrors, dining tables, couches, and much more. This helps people save as much as a couple of hundred dollars or more per item, especially for people with limited or fixed incomes and those just starting out in life like newlyweds or college grads.



Used mattresses are recycled into carpet padding and other items, keeping 15,000 mattresses from the local land fill in 2018.

The Furniture Outlet became the HFB’s first “social business,” a model inspired by Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohammed Yunus. The social business concept allows non-profit organizations to be self-reliant and not depend on charitable funding. This was Oli’s vision and so far it has covered about 40 to 45 percent of the operating budget.⁵

MATTRESS RECYCLING

Another social business venture began taking shape by 2010, after Oli learned about a Saint Vincent de Paul Society program in Eugene, Oregon, that had been recycling mattresses for about twenty years. Oli got to work, and in 2012, with the help of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and a private grant from Larry Cress he was able to buy equipment and begin recycling mattresses in Houston.⁶

At first many of the mattresses donated by the public had to be discarded due to their condition. HFB was taking in mattresses for free and losing money with a sky-high dumpster bill to dispose of them. Recycling mattresses, on the other hand, could protect the environment by keeping mattresses out of landfills and add revenues to the furniture bank. The foam and padding from mattresses are recycled into carpet padding and the wood and metal are used for other things.

In 2018 the furniture bank recycled 15,000 mattresses, but that is just scratching the surface. Every year Houstonians send roughly 750,000 to one million mattresses to landfills according to the International Sleep Products Association. Oli puts that in perspective, saying, “You can fill NRG stadium twice all the way to the top with the number of mattresses going to our landfill yearly.”⁷ Although the Houston Furniture Bank currently recycles over 1,000 mattresses a month, Oli would like to see that number reach 10,000 mattresses a month in the future. Today, people can donate their mattresses by dropping them off and paying a \$10 fee to cover the cost of recycling the mattress. The HFB will also pick up mattresses for a fee of \$25 by sending a truck and two men.⁸

In 2015 the Houston Furniture Bank had a major blow to its future when the warehouse near I-45 Gulf Freeway on Hussion Street was engulfed in flames when a fire broke out in the middle of the night. The fire may have turned out to be a blessing in disguise in some ways, though. The furniture bank moved its operation to a 75,000-square-foot warehouse near Hobby Airport that looks and feels like a good fit to handle the furniture donations, the outlet center, and mattress operations. It also includes five acres of land that will be helpful when expanding operations and new construction in the future. This move was made possible through a Housing and Urban Development program with assistance from the City of Houston, and Housing and Community Development.



Oli (right) walks through the warehouse with an employee inspecting all donated furniture.

HURRICANE HARVEY

Houstonians will never forget 2017 after Hurricane Harvey hovered over the city for days. The storm left most of Houston under water, and the disaster caused \$125 billion in damage, the second most costly hurricane since 1900. An estimated 13 million people were affected by Hurricane Harvey alone, and nearly 135,000 homes were damaged or destroyed throughout Texas.⁹ Although the Houston Furniture Bank could not open for a few days after Harvey, when the doors finally did open, Oli got to work calling many companies in the mattress and furniture business to ask for help. The excitement to help caused shipments of trailers after trailers, totaling twenty-three trailers of furniture and mattresses, from within Houston and nationally.

In mid-September, people started to line up outside the furniture bank, which caused problems since HFB can only serve up to seventy families per day. People had to show some proof of their damage, usually from FEMA. When Oli came in at 5:00 a.m. he started noticing people sleeping outside on the parking lot. The crowds got difficult, and it had to come to a halt. The furniture bank began to reroute people through agencies, requiring them to come in by appointment, which made things go smoother. To speed up the process, HFB issued families a Harvey package, which included a mattress, box spring, and an individual furniture piece. The furniture bank has helped three thousand families affected by Hurricane Harvey thanks to a \$750,000 grant from the Greater Houston Community Foundation. Grants have also come from the Red Cross and other organizations totaling over \$1.5 million to purchase furniture and mattresses since the storm hit. The Harvey program came to an end in September of 2019.

MATTRESS FACTORY

Always striving to go the extra mile to help those in need, the HFB invested in equipment to start manufacturing mattresses in 2018. This social business was birthed out of the need created by Hurricane Harvey. A person can purchase a new mattress made at the furniture bank at a fraction of the price charged in a furniture store. Moreover, the quality, feel, and appearance are just as good as what you find at a



Flor Espinoza sews a new mattress together at the HFB.



Oli assists an HFB recipient picking out furniture.

mattress store. Currently, production of mattresses and box springs each average 680 monthly. Oli would like to see that average reach 2,000 a month for each.¹⁰

As the HFB provided furniture to those in need, it also began providing jobs for people fresh out of the prison system, giving them hope of getting back to work as productive, self-supporting citizens. Most of them are assigned in the warehouse with the hands-on operations in recycling and manufacturing mattresses; others unload new furniture and organize the warehouse or distribute furniture. So far the HFB has been providing work and a future for six months to a year to those who would otherwise find it almost impossible to get employed. In addition to holding a job, some have taken on leadership responsibilities, moving into a managerial position.

In another program HFB works with the court system to let those assigned to community service fulfill their duties by helping in the warehouse. Recycling mattresses, cleaning, or performing other needed tasks, they work a minimum of four to eight hours a day, depending on the total hours they are required to serve. Some might only have ten hours to complete, while others have two hundred hours. The number of community service workers ranges from fifty to one hundred a month.

Volunteers represent another important group working with mattress recycling, manufacturing, and warehouse needs. Summer is the busiest season for volunteers. For example, a local high school brings about thirty students for a weekend volunteering four hours a day. The University of Houston and Rice University also have groups of students volunteering at the furniture bank, with most of them helping in the warehouse, mattress recycling, and organizing.

To receive free furniture, families are required to go through one of the 85 partnering agencies. A representative provides vouchers, assists in making an appointment at the furniture bank, and then accompanies the family to pick out their furniture during their appointment.



Richard Mitchell, the HFB distribution manager, and Romie de Leon attend the twenty-sixth anniversary celebration; Romie was one of the furniture bank's beneficiaries. Visit the Houston History website to hear Romi's story.

The furniture bank accepts both furniture and monetary donations to make this possible. Companies that continue to donate furniture, or have done so in the past, include Hoffer Furniture, Finger Furniture, Gallery Furniture, Landmark Furniture, Mattresses For Less, Rooms To Go, Serta Mattress, and many other Houston companies. Furthermore, the furniture bank also receives donations of gently used furniture and décor from hotels undergoing renovation, which is made possible through the Hotel & Lodging Association of Greater Houston.¹¹

Currently HFB helps about 100 families a month, and its goal is to increase that. At this time they make up to eight appointments a day and families get to choose from bed frames, dining tables, dressers, mirrors, lamps, and more. The process takes about an hour per family to choose furniture, which is one of the reasons they can only take a few appointments a day. The Houston Furniture Bank has received donations of almost a quarter-million pieces of furniture, which has made it possible to serve over 21,000 families in the first couple of decades. Over 50,000 children have slept in beds rather than on a cold, hard floor and have been able to be seated at a table to share their meals instead of using discarded cardboard boxes. In total, the Houston Furniture Bank has served more than 80,000 individuals since 1992.

Romie de Leon was one of the furniture bank's beneficiaries. She came to Houston in 2007, and through the help of organizations like Bridges over Troubled Waters she was able to overcome and had furniture delivered to her apartment by HFB in 2008. She now works for HCMH and was invited to the twenty-sixth-anniversary celebration with current Mayor Sylvester Turner. She shared her experience and says, "There are no words to describe the joy in my heart when the Houston Furniture Bank brought furniture for

my apartment. It was the beginning of a new life for me and they were there to help me succeed."¹² Romie now does the same for other families in need. Through the HCMH, she sets up an appointment and takes them to the HFB and gets to rejoice with the families when they pick out their furniture, bringing the experience full circle.

The biggest furniture need is for bunk beds since most families have more than one child and limited space. However, HFB receives few donations of bunk beds. Ever the entrepreneur, Oli is working with the environmental director from the Port of Houston to make use of the approximately twenty-three to twenty-five shipping containers of wood pallets going to the landfill or being burned for energy at the port per year. Those pallets may soon be the much-needed bunk beds if the right woodshop and crew can be found. Oli has approached the Windham School District and the Texas prisons to get assistance in possibly working together with the wood-working shops inside of these institutions.

The HFB is only twenty-six years old but has already made a big impact on Houston and Houstonians from the humble beginnings to the current location at 8220 Mosley Road. Oli still sees much work to be done and he is not about to quit. If the past is any indication, the Houston Furniture Bank has a bright future ahead ... making empty houses homes.

Ruben Castro is a U.S. Marine Corps Veteran attending the University of Houston and majoring in supply chain logistics technology and minoring in political science. Throughout his life he has shown a passion for history and is currently an intern at the *Houston History* magazine and for the UH-Oral History of Houston Project.



At HFB's twenty-sixth anniversary celebration, Mayor Sylvester Turner proclaimed March 30, 2019, as Houston Furniture Bank Day in the City of Houston. Shown left to right: Mayor Turner, Oli Mohammed, HFB board chairman Hal Lynde, and HFB board vice chairman Larry Cress.