

“A miracle occurred!”

THE HOUSTON COMMITTEE OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S YEAR, HOUSTON, 1977

by Ellen Pratt Fout

The National Women's Conference in November of 1977 drew over 2,000 appointed commissioners, elected delegates and alternates, and volunteers to Houston, Texas, for a landmark event in the history of American women. The Houston Local Arrangements Committee, known as the Houston Committee, played a pivotal role in organizing this conference. Overcoming short deadlines, predictions of disaster from the local and national press, and a lack of concern on the part of the National IWY Commission, the Committee and its allies successfully coordinated this massive undertaking. The Chair of the Houston Committee, Mary Keegan, voiced the pride—and the relief—of the entire organization with her succinct statement: “Miracle occurred!”

Sponsored by the U.S. State Department, the National Women's Conference convened elected delegates and alternates from states and U.S. territories to debate and ratify a 26-point National Plan of Action for the federal government to improve the status of American women. The meeting was the culmination of a process initiated by the United Nations International Women's Year in Mexico City, Mexico, in 1975, which mandated that all participants in that year's Conference hold an additional conference in their home countries. President Gerald Ford signed Executive Order 11832 on January 9, 1975, to create the National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year.¹ Congress passed Public Law 94-167 in December 1975 to authorize funding for the Conference and, in June 1976, passed an appropriations bill for \$5 million dollars.² Public Law 94-167 stipulated the organization of the Conference, the holding of state and regional meetings to elect delegates to the national meeting, and recognition of the existence and the continuation of the National IWY Commission. The National IWY Commission subsequently authorized and created the Houston Local Arrangements Committee (Houston Committee).

In 1975, thirty-five national commissioners received their appointments from President Ford pursuant to Executive Order 11832. According to the Executive Order, they were to “serve without compensation, but . . . be entitled to receive travel expenses, including per diem, in lieu of subsistence as authorized by law (4 U.S.C. 5703).”³ Jill Ruckelshaus, a member of the Republican National Committee, served as the Presiding Officer.⁴ Ford's appointments represented a balanced group of politicians (Ella Grasso, governor of Connecticut; Mary Louise Smith, former Chair, Republican National Committee), academics (Barbara Bergmann, Professor of Economics, University of Maryland; Hannah Holborn Gray, Provost, Yale University), businesspersons (Randy Baca, Executive Director, Arizona Small Businessmen's Association; Paula Gibson, a life insurance underwriter), and

entertainers (Katherine Hepburn, Alan Alda, and Barbara Walters). Other appointees included Ellen Groves Kirby, a county Public Health nurse from West Virginia, and Doris Royal, a Nebraska farm wife.⁵ The composition of the group of commissioners sought to achieve racial, gender, occupational, and geographical balance, in conformance with Public Law 94-167, which specified “special emphasis on representation of low income women, members of diverse racial, ethnic, and religious groups, and women of all ages.”⁶

Carrying out its task stipulated in Public Law 94-167, the National IWY Commission surveyed women across the country and developed a report describing barriers to women's participation in public life and a set of recommendations about what Congress and the President might do to remove those barriers. They presented their report, entitled...*To Form a More Perfect Union...*, to President Ford in July 1976. Recommendations from this report became the basis for the subsequent meetings throughout the U.S. and its territories, which generated the 26-point Plan that made up the agenda of the National Conference. For a variety of reasons, subsequent to submitting the report, several members of the Commission resigned, including Presiding Officer Jill Ruckelshaus. In the final months of his term of office, President Ford refilled the Commission, appointing Elizabeth Athanasakos to replace Ruckelshaus.

In February 1977, President Jimmy Carter appointed new commissioners, with former Democratic Congresswoman Bella Abzug as Presiding Officer.⁷ He reappointed some of Ford's commissioners (Elizabeth Athanasakos, John Mack Carter, Martha Griffiths) and also added others such as Maya Angelou, Dorothy Haener, Coretta Scott King, and Gloria Steinem.⁸ Like Ford's appointees, Carter's commissioners represented every geographical area of the United States. Many members of both commissions met for the first time while serving their appointments. A paid staff, headed by Kathryn Clarenbach, handled the administrative and logistical details.

The National IWY Commission chose Houston for the Conference site on October 14, 1976, after touring and considering several other cities. Hilary Munson, Conference Coordinator, cited four factors that influenced the final decision: strong efforts by the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Council to bring the meeting to Houston; Nikki Van Hightower's position as Women's Advocate in the administration of Mayor Fred Hofheinz; “excellent headquarters' facilities” offered by the Sheraton-Houston and the Hyatt-Regency Hotel; and the “strong and wide volunteer support” offered by local groups.⁹ The National Commission then asked Van Hightower to schedule an organizational and planning meeting between Commission representatives

Judge Elizabeth Athanasakos, Hilary Whittaker, and Virginia Munson and key Houston women who committed to working with the Conference at a local level in December.¹⁰ The meeting, held on December 29, 1976, at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, identified Mary Keegan, Helen Cassidy, Elma Barerra, and Dr. Hortense Dixon as potential leaders of the Houston Committee.



Houston Committee Chair Mary Keegan excelled as an organizer throughout her life. She is pictured here, along with Sister Frances Klinger, when they co-founded the Houston Chapter of the End Hunger Network in 1989. Courtesy Houston Chronicle, ©1989.

Members of the Houston Committee came from both feminist organizations and charity fund-raising endeavors. All contributed their time as volunteers. Mary Keegan's prominent reputation in social organizations and among local philanthropists, as well as her attendance as a delegate at the 1975 United Nations' IWY Conference in Mexico City, resulted in her appointment as Chair. Keegan combined an interest in women's issues with traditional charity work.¹¹ Committee member Dr. Nikki R. Van Hightower recalls that the balanced mixture proved fortuitous for the group:

[W]e brought in women who had been traditionally involved in sort of 'do good' activities and feminists. That was very useful, because the women that had been involved in some of those charitable activities were very skilled organizers. They knew how to train volunteers. They knew how to discipline their workers, and feminists were a lot looser in that regard. You know, it was a lot less hierarchical. So a lot of ideas that were generated through feminist organizations meshed and were integrated with the more traditional women's organizations. That made for a very positive dynamic, and we learned a lot from each other.¹²

Many women knew each other from political activism (League of Women Voters, Harris County Democratic Party), feminist organizations (National Organization for Women, Women's Political Caucus), and philanthropic activities (Junior League, Houston Ballet Guild, and Bluebird Circle).¹³ Though the women

tended to divide along feminist/traditional lines, members such as Keegan bridged such factions and kept the group functioning smoothly.¹⁴

The Houston Committee divided its leadership into an Executive Committee and a Board of Directors. The Executive Committee consisted of eleven official members, led by Chair Mary Keegan and Vice-Chairs Elma Barerra, Helen Cassidy, and Dr. Hortense Dixon. Dr. Nikki R. Van Hightower served as liaison with the city of Houston; Reverend Sara Seeger and Derby Hirst functioned both as volunteer coordinators and Houston Committee office administrators. As the IWY hotel coordinator, Helen Nelson had the monumental task of coordinating accommodations for all commissioners, delegates, alternates, and staff members. Alice Pratt, Dr. Margaret Melville, and Allee Mitchell handled the international aspects of the Conference.¹⁵ The Board of Directors consisted of all members of the Executive Committee and heads of their respective committees: First Aid, Media, Parliamentary Procedure, Speakers, Information, Finance, Special Services, Transportation, Registration, Coliseum Arrangements, Child Care, Special Events, and Ushers.¹⁶ In all, the official membership of the Houston Committee listed in the Conference publication, *The Spirit of Houston*, totaled 39, plus "hundreds of other Houston Area Volunteers" not listed specifically by name.¹⁷

The Executive Committee of the Executive Board of the Houston Committee (hereafter referred to as the Executive Committee) met for the first time on August 16, 1977.¹⁸ Its foremost concern was the financial administration of the funds allocated by the National IWY Committee. Hortense Dixon expressed sincere concern over "the very lax manner of the process of allocating funds to the Houston Committee and how records should be maintained, both in Houston and in Washington."¹⁹

Vera Jackson, a local Certified Public Accountant, volunteered to serve as an advisor to determine "the most effective means of insuring the integrity of handling funds allocated to the Committee by the National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year."²⁰ Jackson recommended that the Committee bond Committee Chair Mary Keegan and a Committee Vice Chair (Dixon) and have these two women co-sign all monetary disbursements. At this meeting, the first of many conflicts between the Commission and the Committee surfaced over the selection of a local bank for the deposit of allocated funds, a sum of \$2,000. An agreement between the Commission and the Committee allowed this sum "for certain reimbursable expenses entailed in the conduct of the activity on behalf of the IWY National Women's Conference...Reimbursable expenses incurred by the volunteers with the Houston Committee may include, but are not limited to such out-of-pocket costs as child care, lunches, parking, cabs and coffee, and emergency supplies."²¹

The Commission favored a downtown bank, but the Committee resolutely believed that the utilization of a minority-owned bank or a woman-owned bank better served the goals of the Conference.²² The Commission's wishes prevailed, though the exact reason is not clear in existing sources. Perhaps the Commission felt it necessary and politically expedient to create

goodwill among the “good old boy” network of downtown businessmen. The Houston Committee eventually deposited the funds in the local account at Union Bank, an old downtown Houston bank noted for its expertise in dealing with the financial intricacies of oil, lumber, and cotton industries.²³

Executive Committee members further expressed their frustration that the Commission had not yet provided a finalized Conference agenda at such a late date. They found it peculiar that, ninety days before the scheduled Conference opening, no such document existed. Though Vice Chairs of the various committees believed that the Commission’s detailed “job responsibilities,” issued July 16, 1977, provided them with accurate descriptions of their tasks and responsibilities, they voiced concern that a final agenda was “badly needed by the Houston Committee in order for it to know its areas of responsibility and to grasp a better feel for the number of volunteers needed in specific areas.”²⁴ Even in the absence of concrete plans from the Commission, the Executive Committee members approved Hortense Dixon’s pragmatic plan to send an information sheet describing the Conference and the goals that it hoped to accomplish and cover letter requesting volunteer assistance to every local women’s group.²⁵

The Executive Committee next convened two weeks later, on August 30, 1977. After reviewing the volunteer application, it voted to revise it into a format that allowed the applicant to submit detailed information on her (or his) special skills. Keegan and the Vice Chairs finalized plans for the September 7th ribbon-cutting and for the official opening of the Houston Committee Office in the Federal Building, stressing that the event would have proper media coverage. Letters of invitation to the event would be mailed immediately to Federal personnel and elected government officials in the Building.²⁶ The Executive Committee then reviewed drafts of letters to Houston area women groups, such as the League of Women Voters and the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), inviting them to accept the “challenge” of either individual or group participation as Conference volunteers.²⁷ The Committee approved the letter, affixing it with official signatures, and authorized the reproduction of 1,000 copies.²⁸

The Board of Directors convened for the first time on September 7. Lee Novick, Conference Coordinator for the National IWY Commission, and Connie Plunkett, a national Commissioner, briefed the Board on the Commission’s plans and progress. In mid-September, the *Federal Register* would publish lists of all resolutions and delegates. A torch relay from Seneca Falls, New York, the site of the first U.S. women’s rights convention in 1848, to Houston had been arranged, with the torch’s arrival in

Houston to coincide with the Conference’s opening ceremony. The Commission even hoped to stage a parade in Houston resembling an earlier one in Washington, D.C., but no firm arrangements had been made. Mary Keegan announced the finalized plans for mailing the letters discussed at the previous meeting and for handling volunteer applications. Before adjourning, each Head of Committee met with their appropriate Vice Chair.²⁹

In late September, the National IWY Commission staff hired two Houston women, Poppy Northcutt and Helen Cassidy, as “special Conference consultants” to work with the Houston Committee.³⁰ Kathryn Clarenbach, the salaried Executive Director of the IWY Secretariat, negotiated a contract with Northcutt and Cassidy to handle the logistics of local arrangements.³¹ At this point, six weeks before the Conference, local preparations by the national staff consisted of reserving the official Conference hotels and the sites for the Conference and its

accompanying exhibitions. The Hyatt Regency and the Sheraton Houston served as the Conference hotels. The Coliseum would house the delegate sessions, while the Albert Thomas Convention Center served as the Conference exhibit area, dubbed Seneca Falls South. No move-in period on November 18 had been scheduled for the Coliseum or the Convention Center. In this brief amount of time, the National Commission expected Northcutt, Cassidy, and the Houston Committee to achieve the impossible: planning, organizing, and implementing the intricate details of this enormous gathering. After threatening to terminate the Commission’s contract, officials of the Houston Convention Center had insisted upon the two women’s employment to avoid potential disaster to the city’s image as a result of the National Commission’s lack of planning.³²

The two consultants proved equal to the task. Northcutt’s unusual career included jobs ranging from account executive for a Merrill Lynch brokerage firm to a groundbreaking position with NASA as a trajectory consultant and the first woman to work in Mission Control. Cassidy, one of three Vice-Chairs of the Houston Committee, was a local activist in the Democratic Party and the National Organization for Women (NOW).³³ Cassidy recalled that “I took care of the people, and Poppy took care of the things. We always say that I dealt with the ‘nuts’ and she dealt with the ‘bolts.’”³⁴

Cassidy and Northcutt certainly dealt with their share of each. Their greatest impediment was often the lack of effort and concern on the part of the National IWY Commission. A month before the Conference, Cassidy found herself dispatching memos to the general counsel of the Commission, Linda Dorian, requesting advice on the legality of the sale of alcoholic beverages by the



Poppy Northcutt (l) and Helen Cassidy reminisce at a local coffee bar in 1986. Courtesy Houston Chronicle, ©1986.

Civic Center concessionaire, Ogden Foods, a crucial detail in confirming final arrangements.³⁵ On the same day, Cassidy sent an even sharper memo to Lee Novick, the National IWY Commission Conference Coordinator, pleading for "definite guidance" for the Special Services Committee charged with making arrangements for handicapped attendees.³⁶ Cassidy forcefully inquired: "How many of the official souvenir programs should be printed in Braille?...Is there any count or projection or off-the-wall guess as to the number of wheelchair-bound attendees? Do transportation arrangements (wheelchair lift vans) have to be made for delegates and alternates only or for all attendees? How many vans are needed? Help!"³⁷

While confronting such practical problems, Northcutt and Cassidy had to take the National Commission to task for misrepresenting their involvement with the distribution of observer passes. In a memo to the IWY Secretariat Executive Director Kathryn Clarenbach, they noted that Commissioner Harry T. Edwards of the national Strategy Committee had stated in his September 16 report to the National IWY Commission that, "It is assumed that Lee Novick, in particular, will work with H.C. [Helen Cassidy] and P.N. [Poppy Northcutt] to implement the scheme devised by the Strategy Committee for distribution of several thousand so-called 'invited observer passes.'"³⁸ Northcutt and Cassidy acknowledged that, although no legal obligation existed requiring the Conference to be open to the public, the American taxpayers were aware that the Conference was financed by tax dollars. Filling the galleries with "invited observers" instead of the general public, without making the public aware that this was not an open meeting, was a potentially disastrous move. Northcutt and Cassidy succinctly stated: "We believe that to issue passes, other than courtesy passes to elected officials, is highly improper, certainly unethical, possibly illegal, and virtually certain to create immeasurable ill will among our supporters as well as our detractors. The smell of patronage and special privilege is distasteful to many."³⁹

The Board of Directors met again on October 4. National Commission staff members Susan Rubin, Gisela Taber, and Lee Novick gave reports on exhibits at the Albert Thomas Convention Center, housing, and overall conference progress, respectively. These women also notified the Committee that the Commission had set a deadline for the submission of any material for publication in the Official Conference Program. Houston consultants Cassidy and Northcutt presented an updated logistics plan with a proposed layout for the Convention Center. Heads of Committees offered positive progress reports on their special areas; however, all noted that "much work remains to be done in order to meet the November 18 deadline."⁴⁰

The Executive Committee held their last pre-Conference meeting on October 15. Committee Chair Keegan announced the receipt of \$2,000 from the National IWY Commission. The Committee established a firm policy concerning the distribution of passes to the Conference, limiting eligibility to "IWY volunteers, public officials, heads of educational institutions, heads of galleries and theaters who are participating in a special salute to IWY, and to a handful of substantial donors."⁴¹ Volunteer Coordinator Sara Seeger reported the receipt of over 500 volun-

teer applications. Most crucially, the Executive Committee asserted their authority by approving the composition and mailing of a letter to the National IWY Staff expressing their "intent to exercise leadership and control over the volunteer corps for the IWY Conference because of time limitations and necessities for pre-Conference training and local understanding of Houston."⁴²

The Board of Directors convened for their final pre-Conference meeting on November 1. Committee Chairs presented finalized plans for their individual areas: First Aid, Information, Interdenominational Services and Lounge Listening Area, Media, Parliamentary Procedure, Non-delegate Registration, Transportation, Security, Speaker's Bureau, Special Events, and Special Services. Keegan advised each Committee Chair that they were responsible for contacting each of their volunteers about attending one of two Conference briefing sessions to be held on Thursday, November 10, and Sunday, November 13, in the Jones Auditorium at St. Joseph's Hospital. Keegan stressed that these were not training sessions, but briefing sessions.⁴³

A large number of allies assisted the Houston Committee in their organization, planning, and preparation. Houston area women's groups responded enthusiastically to the invitation to participate. Linda May, of the National Panel of American Women, offered her organization's services for a panel presentation during the interfaith program.⁴⁴ Inga Vickers and Meda Levine of the YWCA offered the use of their offices for Executive Committee meetings and promised their attendance at a November 14 welcoming reception for Conference visitors at the Press Club.⁴⁵ The Bay Area Chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW), an organization based in Clear Lake, Texas, offered large numbers of volunteers, particularly in the crucial areas of registration and security.⁴⁶

The City of Houston provided support for the Conference as well. Mayor Fred Hofheinz supported the Conference, allowing his Women's Advocate, Nikki Van Hightower, to function as liaison between the city and the Houston Committee. Van Hightower worked tirelessly to fulfill her duties, which ranged from coordinating the December 1976 meeting to the unusual duty of castigating Lawrence Marcus, president of Neiman-Marcus, for his store's letter to the National IWY Commission inviting the commission "chairman" to include charge account applications in each conventioneer's packet. The letter further proffered "fashion, beauty, and home entertaining presentations" to the "women's program," which Van Hightower found unacceptable. She suggested that Marcus "use sex-neutral terminology and gear your programs for 'people' so that spouses or guests of both genders might participate."⁴⁷ The Houston Police provided off-duty police officers at a cost of \$22,500 to supplement the private security force hired by the National Commission. The supervisor of the project, Captain W.T. Higgins, of the Point Control Division donated his time for planning and organization.⁴⁸

Houston businesses also proffered valuable services to the Committee. Robert Sakowitz, then president of Sakowitz Department Stores, held a cocktail reception on July 14, 1977, at the Sakowitz Post Oak store's Colony Room to honor national and local dignitaries associated with the Conference.⁴⁹ Kidder,

Peabody, & Co., Inc., provided the complementary use of the company's board room for the Committee's final planning meeting in November 1977; and company executive C. Pharr Duson, Jr., thoughtfully arranged for the catering of coffee and dessert.⁵⁰ The Committee's strongest business ally proved to be Ben Yeakley, sales manager at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, one of the two downtown host hotels chosen as conference headquarters and official lodging by the National IWY Commission. Yeakley provided hotel meeting rooms free of charge for Executive Committee and Houston Committee board meetings throughout the four months prior to the Conference.⁵¹ Committee members consistently praised his exceptional commitment to the Conference and his tireless attention to detail. In one instance, Yeakley utilized the services of a wheelchair-bound hotel employee, Jimmy Terrell, to inspect the hotel's rooms for possible problems that might arise for handicapped guests.⁵²

Federal agencies in the Houston area contributed secretarial and clerical personnel for the Committee office. Dr. Christopher C. Kraft, Jr., director of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) Johnson Space Center, arranged for the assignment of twelve NASA secretaries to staff the office. Keegan, in a letter of thanks to Kraft, stated that "We were delighted to have such pleasant, enthusiastic, committed, and brilliant women helping with our tremendous workload. . . . The cooperation and poise [these] secretaries displayed reflected the competence under pressure which we have learned to expect from NASA."⁵³ Kenneth Durrett, area manager of the U.S. Civil Service Commission, and his staff member, Wilda Dugas, recruited clerical assistance from

their office to assist Committee members.⁵⁴ Additionally, Ted Myatt of the Veterans' Administration Regional Office sent one of his clerical staff, Edwina Jones, to perform clerical duties during the six weeks prior to the Conference.⁵⁵

In the final days of preparation, the National IWY Commission staff commandeered the Houston Committee headquarters. Writer Prudence Mackintosh of the *Texas Monthly* observed that the transition between the volunteer Houston Committee volunteers and the paid national staff "had not been entirely smooth." She noted that "at this crucial point the lines of authority were becoming tangled between the Texas volunteers and the mainly Eastern IWY staff."⁵⁶ Easterners were particularly uncomfortable with proper forms of address in Texas. Helen Cassidy recalled instructing them "that here in Texas we say 'please and thank you and yes ma'am'. They weren't too sure about the ma'am. 'Isn't that how people address the Queen?' . . . I assured them that any courtesies that they might afford the Queen would be standard procedure with any women from Texas or the rest of the South."⁵⁷

Mackintosh further observed that, even though no major confrontations took place between the local and national staff, the two groups displayed entirely disparate approaches to their tasks. She chronicles an argument that she overheard between two national staff members in the Hyatt Regency coffee shop: "You knew we'd have a demonstration on our hands. I told you to put that paraplegic woman from California on the committee, but you vetoed my recommendation. You should have anticipated this move. The militant handicapped from California could ruin us. I hear we don't even have ramps to the podium if one of them should speak. Who's



Barbara Jordan speaks at the National Women's Conference, with dignitaries looking on. (front row, l-r) Bella Abzug, Rosalind Carter, Betty Ford, Lady Bird Johnson. *Houston Chronicle*, ©1977. Courtesy Houston Chronicle Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

responsible for this kind of foul-up?' 'Foul-up? What about the dog show that got booked into the press room?'"⁵⁸

Conversely, Texas women displayed an easy, relaxed management style. During an interview with Mackintosh, convention decorator Ann Britt quietly supervised the "good old boy" male teamsters setting up the equipment. Britt trenchantly noted that "[s]ome of these women I'm dealing with don't have no more sense than a waltzin' pissant. In Texas we grew up knowing that if you really wanna get somethin' done, you first ask politely and you communicate as clearly as you know how what you want...I've never had trouble with my guys. Getting these teamsters to work this convention could have been a real mess; I work with guys who think we all oughta be barefoot and pregnant, but they respect me and do what I tell 'em."⁵⁹

Meanwhile, Northcutt found herself dealing with last-minute emergencies, some serious, some comic. She discovered that the Coliseum lacked handicapped bathroom facilities, which would present an insurmountable obstacle for such participants. Her quick action enabled the construction of handicapped stalls in all bathrooms, a change that required narrowing one regular stall to accommodate the addition. Helen Cassidy recalled that "[a]nybody with hips measuring more than thirty-six who got in line for that one was bound to be embarrassed."⁶⁰

Northcutt's volunteers posted Braille information at the Coliseum, the Convention Center, and the two main hotels to aid blind participants and delegates. A well-meaning commissioner unfamiliar with Braille informed Cassidy and Northcutt that, "I saw this very right-wing-looking young woman pasting some sort of secret code up in our elevator at the Hyatt. You'll be relieved to know I went around behind her taking them down."⁶¹ Volunteers had to be sent to repeat the task.

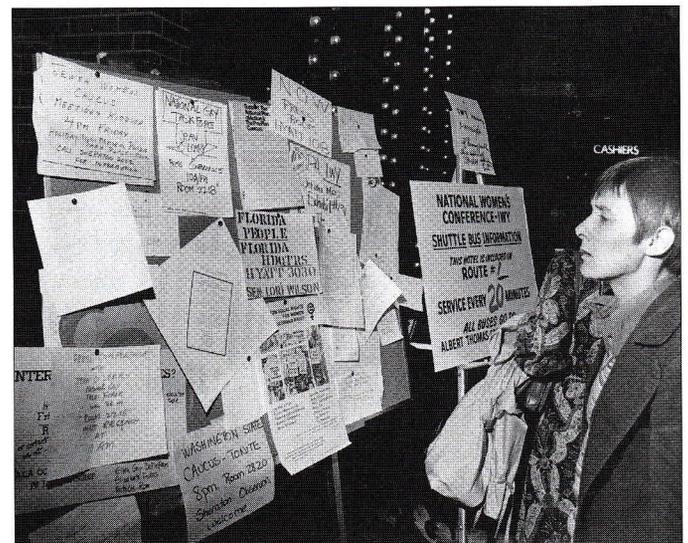
In the months leading up to the Conference, conservative groups threatened to disrupt the Conference proceedings and predicted dire consequences at the Conference. Phyllis Schlafly's STOP ERA organization astutely scheduled a counter-rally across town at the Astroarena in order to arouse New Right groups and politicians in Houston during the weekend of the Conference.⁶² The Grass Roots Majority Pro-Family, Pro-Life Coalition planned a rally at the First Baptist Church downtown on the same weekend. They sent mass mailings to Houston businessmen asking for support and warning that Conference Commissioners advocated the destruction of capitalism and the family.⁶³

Local and national media speculated upon the contentious nature of the Conference and predicted imminent disaster. *Houston Chronicle* journalist Mary Lu Abbott authored several pessimistic articles on the politics of the Conference, warning five days prior to opening day: "Brace up, Houston, the largest ever gathering of women is headed this way. . . . And large blocks of those people don't see eye-to-eye on anything, even that the Conference should take place."⁶⁴ Possible trouble on the Conference floor loomed in the form of the Mississippi state delegation. The delegation included five male Ku Klux Klan members who promised a "stormy confrontation" between feminists and anti-feminists on the Conference floor.⁶⁵ These threats presented a particularly challenging task for the Security Committee.

The Conference proved the doomsayers wrong. Delegates, alternates, and commissioners gathered for five lively, yet orderly, plenary sessions. Delegates debated and voted on the Plan of Action and passed all planks except the last one, which called for the creation of a cabinet level department concentrating on women's social policy issues. Parliamentarians, timekeepers, and microphone monitors kept close order on the floor, with floor tellers keeping accurate counts of votes on each plank. A sense of fairness and tolerance prevailed, with careful attempts to balance debates between pro-Plan and anti-Plan delegates. Chair Bella Abzug insisted that all sides be allowed to speak during the Reproductive Freedom plank debate, forcefully stating that "These people have a right to be heard."⁶⁶

The predicted brawl between the pro-Plan and anti-Plan delegates failed to materialize. Local women working as Security Committee volunteers faced a variety of challenges when trying to keep the meeting running smoothly with a minimum of disruption. The disruptions came from unexpected sources. Rather than pulling apart battling delegates and fending off right-wing demonstrators, volunteer Evy Whitsett of Bay Area NOW instead found herself coping with keeping non-authorized personnel out of the plenary session. These interlopers included "men from the snack bar 'just wanting to know what was going on,'" a "cleaning woman following [a] delegate," and a "boy (approx. 8 years old), charging about with a balloon on string in tow."⁶⁷

Marjorie Randal, of Bay Area NOW, held perhaps the most unenviable volunteer position at the Conference and contributed greatly to the "miracle" during those four days. She chaired the Houston Volunteer Committee for Delegate and IWY Commissioner Registration, charged with examining and register-



A Conference attendee deciphers the Conference bulletin board in the lobby of the Hyatt Regency hotel. Courtesy Houston Chronicle, ©1977.

ing delegate and commissioner credentials and then issuing the correct badges to grant access to various areas of the Coliseum during the plenary session. At the end of September 1977, Helen Cassidy asked Randal to head this committee and put her in charge of gathering volunteers to assist. Cassidy did not, however, mention the estimated numbers of attendance. Randal discovered

in the middle of the following month that the registration would involve at least 100 commissioners and over 2,000 delegates.⁶⁸

Randal recruited 36 volunteers, which she referred to as “the cream of available feminist volunteers in the Bay Area, not to mention parts of Houston.”⁶⁹ She had no opportunity to conduct training sessions for her volunteers because they lived in such disparate areas as Houston, Clear Lake City, Conroe, and Dickinson. Randal and nine volunteers performed the labor-intensive task of typing badge forms literally at the last minute. The registration procedure required a smooth process beginning with the presentation of the delegate’s letter of appointment, then the making of their photo I.D. (with color-coded background to indicate access), and finally, the collection of fees for the finished badge.

Remarkably, every volunteer showed up, allowing Randal’s carefully organized system to handle the incredible crush of delegates that lined up on Friday, November 18, for their credentials. One volunteer, Rema Lou Brown of Bay Area NOW and A.A.U.W, described a chaotic scene at the registration site, the Hyatt Regency Hotel: “The Hyatt’s a madhouse—the American Petroleum Institute refuses to vacate their rooms; the air-conditioning is off. WE SHALL OVERCOME—It’s our Conference and no one is going to force us to an angry reaction.”⁷⁰ Randal quickly revised and adapted her somewhat complicated security measures to hasten the process, though lines remained long throughout the day. Despite a few problems with stolen badges and some luckless Ohio delegates who kept appearing for their badges at times when the process was closed by Commissioner Harry Edwards, registration ended successfully at 5:00 p.m. Saturday. Randal later remarked, “I rather enjoyed it myself.”⁷¹

The Conference itself closed at 12:30 p.m. on Monday, November 21. Members of the Houston Committee and local volunteers gave a positive evaluation of their role in the Conference’s accomplishments. Despite incredibly short deadlines, the Committee successfully planned and organized the intricate and often tedious details that were crucial to the smoothness of proceedings during those four days. Keegan, the Executive Committee, and the Board of Directors closely monitored every step of planning and execution. They asked for and received generous support from the City of Houston and local businesses. Due to their efforts, the opening and closing gavel for the Conference took place at their appointed times, a feat not usually accomplished by many conventions of this sort. Committee chairs and their members provided flawless behind-the-scenes support that garnered compliments from visiting delegates and commissioners. Bella Abzug and the National Commissioners might have held the spotlight on the Conference stage, but the Houston Committee and its volunteers functioned as a well-oiled machine to keep events in motion. Helen Cassidy flatly stated that “[t]he Conference wouldn’t have happened without the Houston Committee.”⁷²

An even greater satisfaction lay beyond the physical accomplishments of the Houston Committee, its volunteers, and its allies. The Conference served to cement existing friendships between them, and for many, began new friendships and extended participation in activities concerning the welfare and status of local women. In 1978, Nikki Van Hightower established the

Houston Area Women’s Center (HAWC) to provide services for women who were victims of domestic violence, thus fulfilling an idea conceived during the event. HAWC still exists.

Even today, many Committee members and volunteers warmly remember the excitement and satisfaction of participating in such a groundbreaking event. Many attribute their participation in the Conference as the impetus for making substantial changes in their lives. Most crucially, they recall the enduring feelings of sisterhood, cooperation, and mutual respect that developed among them as they worked to accomplish their common goal. Perhaps, with the lasting legacy of these feelings of satisfaction, friendship, and respect, a miracle did indeed occur.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Caroline Bird et al., *The Spirit of Houston: The First National Women’s Conference. An Official Report to the President, the Congress, and the People of the United States, March 1978* (Washington, D.C.: National Commission on the Observance of International Women’s Year, 1978), 253-54.
- 2 “Public Law 94-167, 94th Congress, H.R. 9924, December 23, 1975,” National Women’s Year Conference Collection, RGO 001, Box 1, Folder 9, 1-4, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library. (Hereafter cited as National Women’s Conference Collection, Box Number, Folder Number).
- 3 *Spirit of Houston*, 253.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 9, 141.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 258-59.
- 6 Public Law 94-167, cited in *Spirit of Houston*, 10.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 243-49; 258-59.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 243-49.
- 9 Letter from Hilary Whittaker, Conference Coordinator, IWY Secretariat, to Mr. Jim Smither, Convention Sales, Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Council, October 14, 1976, Nikki Van Hightower Papers, 1967-1997, Box 6, Folder 16, Women’s Archive and Research Center, Special Collections and Archives, University of Houston Libraries. (Hereafter cited as Van Hightower Papers, Box number, Folder number)
- 10 Letter from Dr. Nikki R. Van Hightower to “Dear Sisters,” December 16, 1976, Van Hightower Papers, Box 6, Folder 16.
- 11 Oral Interview with Dr. Nikki Van Hightower, June 11, 1999, University of Houston Women’s Studies History Project, Women’s Archive and Research Center, Special Collections and Archives, University of Houston Libraries. Videotape and manuscript in possession of Archives.
- 12 Oral Interview, Dr. Nikki Van Hightower.
- 13 Oral Interview, Dr. Nikki Van Hightower; Poppy Northcutt and Helen Cassidy, interview by author, April 21, 1999. Transcript in possession of author.
- 14 Oral Interview, Dr. Nikki Van Hightower.
- 15 *Spirit of Houston*, 260.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 The terminology used to refer to the Executive Committee and its Board of Directors was often loosely interchanged in the official minutes in the archives, making the determination of which particular body was meeting difficult. *The Spirit of Houston* lists the two bodies as the Executive Committee, and the Board of Directors on page 260, listing the members of each body respectively. These terms will be used throughout this essay accordingly, using the attendance records given in the official minutes to determine exactly which group met on a specific date.
- 19 Minutes of the Executive Board Meeting, August 16, 1977, National Women’s Conference Collection, Box 3, Folder 1.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Agreement between Kathryn Clarenbach and Mary Keegan, August 9,

- 1977, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 2, Folder 2.
- 22 Minutes of Executive Board Meeting, August 16, 1977.
- 23 Minutes of Executive Committee, October 15, 1977, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 3, Folder 3.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Minutes of Executive Board Meeting, August 30, 1977, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 3, Folder 3.
- 27 Draft Letter from Amy Wilson, Coordinator of Volunteer Services to League of Women Voters, Executive Board, July 22, 1977; Draft Letter from Amy Wilson, Coordinator of Volunteer Services to Executive Board, Young Women's Christian Association, July 22, 1977, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 3, Folder 18.
- 28 Minutes of Executive Board Meeting, August 30, 1977.
- 29 Minutes of Executive Board Meeting, September 7, 1977, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 3, Folder 1.
- 30 Prudence Mackintosh, "The Good Old Girls", *Texas Monthly*, January 1978, 89.
- 31 Northcutt and Cassidy, interview by author.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Mackintosh, 89; Northcutt and Cassidy, interview by author.
- 34 Helen Cassidy, telephone conversation with author, April 12, 1999.
- 35 Memo from Helen Cassidy, Houston IWY to Linda Dorian, October 17, 1977, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 2, Folder 4.
- 36 Memo from Helen Cassidy, IWY Houston, to Lee Novick, IWY Washington, October 17, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 2, Folder 4.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Memo from Helen Cassidy and Poppy Northcutt to Kathryn Clarenbach, Executive Director, IWY Secretariat, October 17, 1977, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 3, Folder 19.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Minutes of Executive Board Meeting, October 4, 1977, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 3, Folder 3.
- 41 Minutes of Executive Committee, October 15, 1977, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 3, Folder 3.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Minutes of Executive Board Meeting, November 1, 1977, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 3, Folder 3.
- 44 Letter from Linda May, National Panel of American Women, to Mary Keegan, September 8, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 3, Folder 18.
- 45 Letter from Mary Keegan to Meda Levine, National Executive Director, Y.W.C.A., November 1, 1977, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 2, Folder 5; Letter from Inga Vickers, President, Y.W.C.A. of Houston, to Mary Keegan, November 8, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 3, Folder 9.
- 46 *N.O.W. News*, Bay Area Chapter, National Organization for Women 5, no. 12 (December 1977): 1-11. National Women's Conference Collection, Box 1, Folder 17, Women's Archive and Research Center, Special Collections and Archives, University of Houston Libraries. (Hereafter referred to as UH-National Women's Conference Collection, Box number, Folder number.)
- 47 Letter from Nikki Van Hightower to Mr. Lawrence Marcus, January 18, 1977, Van Hightower Papers, Box 6, Folder 17.
- 48 Letter from Captain W.T. Higgins, Point Control Division, Houston Police Department, to Andy Frain Florida, Inc., November 7, 1977, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 3, Folder 9.
- 49 Invitation to Cocktail Reception from Robert Sakowitz, Van Hightower Papers, Box 6, Folder 10.
- 50 Letter from Mary Keegan to C. Pharr Duson, Jr., November 4, 1977, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 2, Folder 5.
- 51 Letter from Ben Yeakley to Mary Keegan, August 19, 1977, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 3, Folder 8.
- 52 Letter from V.M. Bayles to Ben Yeakley, November 1, 1977, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 2, Folder 5.
- 53 Letter from Mary Keegan to Dr. Christopher C. Kraft, Jr., Director, Johnson Space Center, November 16, 1977, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 2, Folder 5.
- 54 Letter from Mary Keegan to Kenneth Durrett, Area Manager, U.S. Civil Service Commission, October 3, 1977, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 2, Folder 4.
- 55 Letter from Mary Keegan to Ted Myatt, Director, V.A. Regional Office, September 30, National Women's Conference Collection, Box 2, Folder 3.
- 56 Mackintosh, 89.
- 57 Ibid., 90.
- 58 Ibid., 90.
- 59 Ibid., 92.
- 60 Mackintosh, 89.
- 61 Mackintosh, 90.
- 62 Judy Wiesler, Chronicle Washington Bureau, "Staging 'pro-family' rally at Astroarena: Anti-ERA leader Phyllis Schlafly predicts Houston will be death knell for women's liberation," *Houston Chronicle*, November 3, 1977, section 7, 2.
- 63 Letter from Matthew T. Hamborsky, Chairman, Executive Committee, Grass Roots Majority to "Dear Sir," September 13, 1977, Van Hightower Papers, Box 6, Folder 18.
- 64 Mary Lu Abbott, "Houston, brace for biggest meeting of women in history of U.S.," *Houston Chronicle*, November 13, 1977, section 9, 1.
- 65 Quoted from Betty Blair, Detroit News, September 1, 1977, in "Summary Sheet of Press Reports on the Tactics of Radical Right Wing Groups," 1; also *Spirit of Houston*, 127.
- 66 *Spirit of Houston*, 163, 169.
- 67 Evy Whitsett, "Vantage Point-IWY-Vantage Point-NWC," *N.O.W. News*, Bay Area Chapter, National Organization for Women 5, no. 12 (December 1977): 4-5. UH-National Women's Conference Collection, Box 1, Folder 17.
- 68 Marjorie Randal, "Report: Houston Volunteer Committee For Delegate and IWY Commissioner Registration, National Women's Conference, Houston, 1977," UH-National Women's Conference Collection, Box 1, Folder 17, n.d., n.p.
- 69 Marjorie Randal, "Vantage Point-IWY-Vantage Point-NWC," 4.
- 70 Rema Lou Brown, "Vantage Point-IWY-Vantage Point-NWC," 3.
- 71 Randal, "Report."
- 72 Helen Cassidy, telephone conversation with author.