

The Women's Archive and Research Center at the University of Houston: A Resource from the Past for Research in the Future

by Sarah E. Frazer

A group of university and community women combined efforts to found the Women's Archive and Research Center (WARC) as a unique resource for the city of Houston and for the University of Houston. The movement from idea to reality took several years, but the Women's Archive, supported by the Friends of Women's Studies and the Women's Studies Program of the University of Houston, is now housed in the department of Special Collections & Archives within the University of Houston Libraries. The WARC is available to students, researchers, and the general public as a resource for exploring the history of women in Houston. The story of the founding of the WARC shows how a group of women successfully created a new service in one of Houston's major universities.

The WARC story began with the inception of the Women's Studies program in the fall semester of 1991. Cynthia Freeland, a professor of Philosophy, became the first director of the Women's Studies program, which had been established "in response to vocal student demand and in recognition of broad faculty expertise."¹ Recognizing the need to generate funding and to promote the Women's Studies Program to ensure its success, Freeland and community volunteer Carey Shuart proposed forming a Friends group for the Program. Shuart had recently assumed a volunteer role at the University of Houston as the Ufriends Coordinator, working with various departments within the University to publicize programs and activities. A community volunteer, native Houstonian, and former student of the University of Houston, Shuart would become a key supporter of the Friends of Women's Studies and the WARC.²

In late 1992, Cynthia Freeland articulated the vision of the WARC by drafting a proposal for an archive and research center.

The proposal outlined its vision and mission, how it would be distinctive, and possible models for its formation. The archive would provide a "focal point for the systematic collection of women's papers," and the research center would "[provide] for the active use, study, and dissemination of archival materials by visiting scholars." Together, the archive and research center would offer the community other resources, such as a lecture series, conferences, a speaker's bureau, facilitation of networking opportunities, and assistance with public histories.³

The details of setting up a structure and process for the WARC would occupy the Friends of Women's Studies for the next two years.

In the fall of 1993 the Board of the Friends of Women's Studies focused on the founding of the Women's Archive and Research Center as their top priority.⁴ The Board initially utilized the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe as a possible model for the WARC. Cynthia Freeland had used this model in her 1992 proposal, and the Friends of Women's Studies had brought in Dr. Florence Ladd, Director of the Bunting, for

consultation in early 1993.⁵ Although it was a powerful model, the Bunting Institute enjoyed a heritage and resources totally different from the situation at the University of Houston. The Board investigated other research centers, based on issues such as funding, focus, structure, association with an archive, affiliation with a Women's Studies program, and importance of regional identity.⁶ Interest began to shift from the Bunting model toward a "modular" research center focusing on particular areas, such as women in Texas politics, women in space, women in the professions, etc.⁷ The Lecture Series Committee of the Friends also saw this modular format as a good way to dovetail the structure of a planned lecture series to the structure of the WARC.⁸

In addition to defining its structure, the Board addressed the



(r-l) Carey Shuart, Cynthia Freeland, and Elizabeth Gregory, current Director of the Women's Studies Program. Photograph by Audrey Crawford.

issues of content and the location of the archive. It initiated research on local women's groups regarding their materials and interest in donation and began discussions with the University Libraries about potential level of commitment and available space. In addition, it created a brochure and a directory of women's organizations and began designing potential modules and identifying sources of funding.⁹ At this time, the Board members had a variety of ideas regarding their vision for the WARC, two of which ultimately formed the basis for the design of the collection. The WARC would collect oral histories, and the archive collection would reflect the diversity of the city of Houston.¹⁰

After nearly two years of work by the Friends of Women's Studies and the Women's Studies program, the Board sought collaboration with the University Libraries. In February 1994, Carey Stuart initiated a meeting between Robin Downes, then Director of Libraries, and the Board. While pointing out the need for space, personnel, and staff and budget lines, Downes affirmed the willingness of the Libraries to assist in the creation of the WARC.¹¹ He subsequently requested budget lines for an archivist and an archival assistant, paving the way for integration of the WARC with the University Libraries.

A meeting in October 1995 brought together the leaders who would put the WARC in place. Elizabeth Gregory, who had succeeded Cynthia Freeland as Director of Women's Studies, met with representatives from the Libraries to clarify connections between the University Archives, the University Libraries, and the WARC. The Libraries' representatives at that time were Dana Rooks, Assistant Director of Libraries, who would be named the Libraries' first Dean in 1997; Pat Bozeman, Head, Special Collections & Archives, the department that would house and administer the WARC; and Andrea Bean Hough, Special Collections Librarian, who would assume the role of University Archivist on January 1, 1996.

This meeting clarified the issues of library space, responsibility for the collection, and the collecting process. Whereas earlier meetings had assumed that the UH Library would not necessarily be the long-term or permanent location for the archives portion of the WARC, by this time the Friends of Women's Studies was no longer looking at other spaces and wanted to use UH library space on condition that the materials would be "accessible." The decision about responsibility for the collection and the collecting process provided for a shared process between the University Libraries, the Board of the Friends of Women's Studies, and the Women's Studies program. In consultation with the Board of the Friends and other Women's Studies constituencies, the Archivist would decide what collections would be accepted. The University Archivist would oversee the Women's Archive and, together with the University Archive, the WARC would form a unit within the Department of Special Collections & Archives of the University of Houston Libraries. This positioned the Women's Archive within the policies and procedures of the University of Houston and the University Libraries, while the Friends of Women's Studies continued to provide funding for the processing of collections.¹²

By January 1996, the processes that formed the Women's Archive were in place and the Library was preparing to receive collections. At a meeting with the Board of the Friends of Women's Studies, Andrea Bean Hough, then University Archivist, urged the Board to develop a collection development policy and to identify organizations with which to begin working toward the acquisition of records. The Library was in the process of renovating space and hiring staff for the Women's Archive, and Hough proposed hiring history interns to assist in the processing of the collections. Hough also anticipated the development of future resources, such as a web site, online finding aids, online cataloging of collections, and announcements of new collections as appropriate.¹³

The Friends of Women's Studies developed a collection policy focused on the papers of Houston area women's organizations. The acquisition of the papers of the Houston Area Women's Center (HAWC) in June 1996 marked the beginning of the Women's Archive. Other early collections included materials from local activist Marjorie Randal relating to the 1977 International Women's Year Conference; the papers of Hazelwitch, a local production company; the papers of Nikki Van Hightower; and the records of Top Ladies of Distinction. The Marjorie Randal International Women's Year collection and the Van Hightower papers would be the first collections to be processed. In September 1996, renovation of the space for the Women's Archive was completed and over a hundred guests attended the inauguration of the new facilities on the seventh floor of the M.D. Anderson building at the University of Houston-Central Campus.

The collections now cover a wide variety of women's organizations including cultural development and social action groups, philanthropic and professional associations, and sports and garden clubs. Since 1996, almost two dozen collections have been brought in, the majority of which have been quickly processed. In addition, the WARC initiated an active oral history program that augments the papers in the archive with narratives by women active in the community and in the organizations whose papers are collected in the archive. In addition, the Women's Archive functions as an active community resource. Groups continually add to their collections, and donors use their processed collections to locate information about their own history. Local organizations consult the papers of similar groups for ideas and insights.

The archivist and author has participated in public events, such as the 1999 Women United Conference in Houston, providing best practices for women interested in maintaining their own histories or preserving the papers of their organizations. The Women's Archive also ensures visibility for Women's Studies and for the collections by displays, such as an exhibit for Table Talk (the annual fundraiser of the Friends of Women's Studies) and a semi-permanent display at the University Library.

The WARC is actively engaged in carrying out its two-fold goal: the acquisition, processing, and maintenance of records of women's organizations; and the use of these collections by researchers. With carefully processed acquisitions and a growing set of collections, the Women's Archive offers an invaluable resource for scholars exploring twentieth century women's history, particularly the history of women in Houston. Graduate students

tap the collections for thesis and dissertation work, and Women's Studies courses have taken advantage of the archivist's expertise and the Women's Archive collections to introduce students to archival research. In support of its goal to encourage research, the WARC offers scholarships for students and fellowships for Women's Studies graduate students and faculty.

In the nine years since Carey Shuart and Cynthia Freeland initiated the Friends of Women's Studies and first proposed the mission and vision of the WARC, many of their ideas have come to fruition. The product of a unique collaboration between the university and the community, the WARC continues an active involvement with the community, while preserving the records of Houston history for students and scholars.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Cynthia Freeland, An Overview of the Proposed Women's Archive and Research Center (W.A.R.C) at the University of Houston DRAFT, November 8, 1992, 2.
- 2 Carey Shuart, letter to interested parties, 1992, Unprocessed Records of Friend's of Women's Studies, Special Collections & Archives, University of Houston Libraries.
- 3 Freeland, 1.
- 4 "New Community Outreach Board Formed," *New Voices: A Newsletter of the Women's Studies Program of the University of Houston* (Fall 1993): 3.
- 5 Carey Shuart, generic letter, Fall 1994, Unprocessed Records of Friend's of Women's Studies, Special Collections & Archives, University of Houston Libraries.
- 6 Freeland, 3.
- 7 Community Outreach Board WARC Committee, Informal Minutes of Meeting November 29, 1993, Unprocessed Records of Friend's of Women's Studies, Special Collections & Archives, University of Houston Libraries.
- 8 Community Outreach Board Committee Minutes, December 6, 1993, Unprocessed Records of Friend's of Women's Studies, Special Collections & Archives, University of Houston Libraries.
- 9 Informal Minutes, 1-2
- 10 UH Women's Studies Community Outreach Board 1993-1994: WARC Visions, Unprocessed Records of Friend's of Women's Studies, Special Collections & Archives, University of Houston Libraries.
- 11 Carey Shuart, letter to Robin Downes, January 30, 1994, Unprocessed Records of Friend's of Women's Studies, Special Collections & Archives, University of Houston Libraries; Robin Downes, letter to Carey Shuart, February 18, 1994, Unprocessed Records of Friend's of Women's Studies, Special Collections & Archives, University of Houston Libraries.
- 12 Memorandum of Agreement Regarding the Women's Archives, Archivist's Files, Special Collections & Archives, University of Houston Libraries.
- 13 Talk to Women's Studies Board by Andrea Bean Hough, Archivist's Files, Special Collections & Archives, University of Houston Libraries.

University of Houston Libraries Women's Archive and Research Center Archival Collections

PROCESSED

Brigid's Place
Church Women United in Houston Records
Debby Tucker and Toby Myers Texas Council
on Family Violence Collection
Carolyn Farb Papers
Federation of Houston Professional Women
Greater Houston Women's Foundation
Hazelwitch Records
Hispanic Women in Leadership
Houston Area Women's Center: Ephemera,
Photographs, Records
HAWC Council for Abused Women/Family
Violence Program Records
Houston Women's Caucus for Art
Marjorie Randal National Women's Conference
Collection
River Oaks Blossom Club
Top Ladies of Distinction
Stewart [Josephine Harris] Papers
Van Hightower [Nikki] Papers
Women in the Visual and Literary Arts
Women's Fund for Health, Education, and
Research (HER)
Women's Studies and Resource Service Records

IN PROCESS

Friends of Women's Studies

OTHER COLLECTIONS (Unprocessed)

River Oaks Business Women's Exchange Club
(ROBWEC)
Women in Action

To view finding aids for many
processed collections, visit the website
http://info.lib.uh.edu/sca/collections/faids/fa_women.html

For more about the Women's Archive and
Research Center, visit the website
<http://www.hfac.uh.edu/WS/WARCpr.HTML>