
The Heart of Houston: The Early History of the Houston Council on Human Relations, 1958-1972

Barbara Thompson Day

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

The Declaration of Independence

We believe that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness should be made real in this community for all people.

Constitution of the Houston Council
on Human Relations

Organizations such as the Houston Council on Human Relations (HCHR) have embodied the essence of American democracy. Combining a traditional emphasis on self-reliance with our Constitutional right to gather in association with other individuals of like mind, the volunteer group has been a vehicle through which to work for change. Such associations create a base from which adherents can strive to influence the majority to follow their way of thinking.

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The association

... numbers its partisans and engages them in its cause; they, on the other hand, become acquainted with one another, and their zeal is increased by their number. An association unites into one channel the efforts of divergent minds and urges them vigorously towards the one end which it clearly points out.¹

These inbred patterns have allowed Americans to press peacefully for change over the years. Existing institutional arrangements have great resiliency. Those who benefit from a system are staunch opponents of those who would tamper with the status quo. They are unwilling to give up power to try untested schemes and tend to see those who propose them as irresponsible, if not dangerous. Even those who do not prosper in a given social setting frequently fear to exchange the known for the uncertain path into the new, not assuredly better, way. Nevertheless, social needs change and the majority is sometimes forced to yield to a minority when it becomes organized and articulates its demands convincingly.

The early history of the Houston Council on Human Relations constitutes a case study of such private associations in the urban Southwest during the era of civil rights reform from the late 1950s into the 1970s, a time when the majority was being asked to respond to the demands of minorities. The Council acted both as a pioneer and as a promoter of human rights. Its focus on preserving and extending human rights put it in the mainstream of the American value system, yet its position on a specific issue sometimes pitted it against the established way of doing things. HCHR was often one among many pursuing a common goal, but at other times it stood alone in advocating an innovative solution to a problem. By refusing to allow convenience or expediency to deter them from seeking change in the area of human rights, HCHR and its counterparts in other cities across the nation helped move the United States toward a more open and humane society. The history of HCHR, therefore, encompasses not only the people and politics of Houston, but also illuminates the process of grass roots reform in the United States.

Background for Change

The term "grass roots politics" implies that the motivation for action came from the ordinary people, not the elite of the power structure. In Houston in the mid-1950s, it was not socially or politically fashionable to be involved in furthering racial interaction. The conservative wing of the Democratic party

¹Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Phillips Bradley et al. (New York, 1945), 1:198-199.

dominated. Houston newspapers followed a very moderate editorial policy concerning racial affairs, and the city government did not actively concern itself with human rights issues. From 1952 until 1969 the Houston Independent School District Board was dominated by extremely conservative people who tended to combine fanatical anti-communism with opposition to integration. They resisted court orders to desegregate and put whatever obstacles they could in the way of positive accommodation.² In short, those who held political power in the 1950s and before were not seeking social, economic, or political change.

Despite the conservatism of the city, however, there had always been a nucleus of people working in the field of race relations who rejected the ideology of the conservatives: in particular the theory and practice of segregation. They were "ordinary" in the sense that they did not represent the existing social or economic power structure. Their experimentation challenged the existing order and laid the groundwork for later organizations, including HCHR. For example, in 1934 the YMCA held its first interracial conference in Houston. Both blacks and whites attended the three-day conference, and ate together, which was illegal at the time.³ At the conference were some of the people who later helped to found HCHR.

Building on such beginnings, people like those at the conference helped push for action in the 1950s throughout the South. In Houston,

Five Negroes filed suit to use the municipal golf course in 1950; the Public Library integrated facilities without publicity in 1953; the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People protested segregation in the cafeteria of the new county court house in 1953; segregation on city buses ended in 1954 . . .⁴

During the early 1950s there was also a group actively working for political integration, the Harris County Democrats. They

... had been organizing black precincts through the efforts of . . . Frankie Randolph, Hobart Taylor, Lonnie Smith, and Mrs. [Christia] Adair who had been the NAACP secretary for 25 years . . . At that time the sheriff's department would go out in black precincts, often to Precinct 25 where Mrs. Adair was precinct judge, and take pictures of black people at the

²David G. McComb, *Houston: The Bayou City* (Austin, 1969), 230-231. See also Don E. Carleton, "McCarthyism in Local Elections: The Houston School Board Election of 1952," *The Houston Review* 3 (Winter 1981); Carleton, *Red Scare! Right-wing Hysteria, Fifties Fanaticism, and Their Legacy in Texas* (Austin, 1985).

³Bess Attwell, interview by author, May 7, 1982, Houston Council on Human Relations Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library (hereafter cited as HCHR Collection).

⁴McComb, 230; *Houston Chronicle*, July 28, 1955.

polls, in sheriff's uniform, and frighten blacks who might have an outstanding ticket against them, a traffic ticket, to intimidate them.⁵

The men of the sheriff's department were responding to the prevailing attitudes of the majority, and probably did keep some people from the polls. Despite many attempts at intimidation, however, the work of the Harris County Democrats, the NAACP, and others began to show results. For example, in 1957 Lewis Cutrer ran for mayor against longtime Houston politician and incumbent mayor Oscar Holcombe. "Holcombe made the statement that if Lewis Cutrer was elected the locker rooms at the public golf course in Hermann Park would be integrated so that blacks could come in."⁶ Such a dire threat, along with others of similar ilk, was intended to bring out the anti-black vote and defeat Cutrer. But it also had the effect of motivating white liberals and blacks, who were now better organized and ready to meet racial slurs head on at the polls. Holcombe's defeat stemmed from various causes, but an "attack on blacks in an overt way never took place again" in Houston.⁷ The work of the Harris County Democrats was at least partially responsible for this change, and among its leadership were people like Woodrow Seals who later became very active in the Houston Council on Human Relations.

The political activism of the Harris County Democrats and the NAACP absorbed much of the energy of the civil rights movement of the late fifties and early sixties, but some people were motivated to broaden their attack on segregation by including the full range of social and economic disabilities minorities faced. One such person was Jim Noland, who came to Houston in 1954 to head the Houston Council of Churches. At that time:

One of the concerns of many of the church people . . . was race relations. Houston had no Urban League, the NAACP was very weak, and there was a very small black leadership class, nothing like other Southern cities like Atlanta where there had been for a long time strong leadership in the black businesses, four or five colleges, and so forth. Texas Southern University was the only black university here and it was very young. One of the things we felt would be very helpful at the time would be to have a council where leadership of the various communities . . . Mexican American, white, black, Jewish, Protestant, Catholic . . .⁸

could try to begin a dialogue about some of the human relations problems in

⁵Woodrow Seals, interview by author, August 17, 1983, HCHR Collection. See also Barbara Jordan and Shelby Hearon, *Barbara Jordan: A Self-Portrait* (Garden City, N.Y., 1979), 110-111.

⁶Seals interview.

⁷*Ibid.* See also Kenneth Neal Parker, "The Politics of Race and the 1957 Houston Mayoral Campaign: Oscar Holcombe's Last Hurrah," *The Houston Review* 6, no. 2 (1984).

⁸James R. Noland, interview by author, May 11, 1982, HCHR Collection.

the city. So Noland and a friend, Irwin Glatstein, Director of the Jewish Community Council, gathered together an integrated group of people to set up such a council. These pioneers came from a variety of backgrounds but often found themselves involved at the same places: the YMCA and YWCA, the Contemporary Arts Museum, the United Nations Association, the International Institute for Education, the Harris County Democrats, Frankie Randolph's Wednesday Club, and the more progressive wings of their respective churches. Eleanor Freed recalled:

We sat around and talked to ourselves for nearly a year, maybe more, before we had strength to get a letterhead and have a luncheon. We wanted very much to change the situation and ameliorate things for the black citizens of Houston . . . The only place that black and white people could meet together was either in a labor hall or a church. We wanted to change that. We also wanted . . . equal job opportunities and an easy relationship where people could sit down and talk to each other. There were so many closed doors then that today it is hard to remember them . . . Things that were so maddening, frustrating, humiliating, and insulting that went on day after day where blacks were refused service . . .⁹

Bolstered by these mutual concerns, the group decided to establish a separate, secular organization, and in 1958 the Houston Council on Human Relations was founded. In this initial phase the group faced the problems of most fledgling organizations: structure, clear purpose, and finances. In all these areas a great deal of help came from the Southern Regional Council (SRC). As the oldest biracial civil rights organization in the South, the SRC had valuable experience which it shared with human relations councils across the South.

First Steps

The first steps for HCHR were to write by-laws and a constitution and to elect a formal board of directors. Drawing on the aspirations expressed by the SRC and other human relations groups, as well as the ideals of American democracy, the preamble to the 1960 Constitution pledged to carry on an educational program geared to an expansion of opportunity for all the people of greater Houston in economic, civic and cultural areas based on freedom from discrimination on racial or religious grounds.¹⁰ HCHR planned to achieve these ideals through research, education and

⁹Eleanor Freed, interview by author, May 5, 1982, HCHR Collection. See also Correspondence 1959-1961 File, HCHR Collection. The Wednesday Club was an informal lunch meeting at which anyone was welcome. It served as a forum where people could exchange ideas in the 1950s.

¹⁰Constitution of the Houston Council on Human Relations, June 1, 1960, Constitutions-Previous Revisions 1959-1966 File, HCHR Collection.

action, "thereby reducing intergroup tensions and their causes and promoting intergroup understanding."¹¹ While the constitution was revised several times over the years the purpose of the Council received only minor shifts in emphasis.

Before any of these general principles could be translated into a program, however, a board of directors had to be selected. Following their creed, the first board members represented the religious, political and ethnic diversity of the city, and HCHR continued to structure its boards in this way throughout its history. As Reuben Askanase, one of the early board members, described the Council:

It cut right across the entire fabric of Houston. It wasn't River Oaks, it wasn't Southwest, it wasn't Fifth Ward, or the Fourth Ward. It was just people. There was no question of what you do, where you come from. The question was how do we get together and clear up misunderstandings.¹²

The core membership was composed of people who felt very intensely about change . . . Any time you bring together a group of intense people at the beginning of an undertaking . . . it takes a long time for everybody to separate their own emotional stresses and tensions and pressures and come together and listen to each other and be reasonably objective about sorting out some meaningful goals that might get something done for the whole community.¹³

Those who were part of this process all testified that it was fascinating and that they "learned an enormous amount" through the interaction of personalities. A clear definition of direction failed to emerge, however. The dynamism of the early days of the Council resulted from personal resolve rather than from a coordinated program or professional direction.

Despite the goodwill and purpose, structure remained a problem. Therefore, in 1963 the board of the Council decided to hire an executive director, the Reverend Charles Kelly. Kelly, a Methodist minister, was already one of the Council's partisans as well as a civil rights activist. The board hoped that stronger leadership coming from a paid director might better coordinate HCHR's increasing activities and membership (about 600 in 1964). The presence of Kelly created tension within the organization, however. While most active members recognized the need for greater control over the Council's varied interests, they were also committed to volunteerism and the spontaneity of informality. They wanted people to be involved, to prove that people do make the difference. The slogans from various brochures put out in the 1960s

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Reuben Askanase, interview by author, May 5, 1982, HCHR Collection.

¹³Henry Groppe, interviews by author, August 1, 1983, and August 16, 1983, HCHR Collection.

reflected this spirit. You were urged to join the Council because, "If not you . . . Who?" This basic conflict remained unresolved in the early years.

Finally, the Council had to find a financial base for its operations. The Southern Regional Council contributed an initial grant and continued to award an annual gift into the 1970s. HCHR desperately needed these grants, because "like all organizations of this type the Council was always short on cash and long on work." The need to fund an event or an undertaking would arise and they would simply say "Well, it's going to take \$50. Now let's each put in \$3."¹⁴ Members gave more than three dollars on many occasions for a variety of causes. This crisis-oriented financing could not provide the basis for a stable organization, however, and someone was constantly seeking funds in hopes of eliminating the cycles of feast and famine. In the 1960s these campaigns were headed by volunteers such as Barbara Jordan, then a young black lawyer; Houston architect Howard Barnstone; HCHR founder and longtime civil rights activist Joyce Shaw; and others. Their efforts were moderately successful. In addition, a few large gifts came from well-known Houston humanitarians such as Nina Cullinan, Jane Blaffer Owens, Mrs. Newton Rayzor, and John and Dominique DeMenil.¹⁵ In the late 1960s, corporation contributions formed the primary basis of support.¹⁶

Assistance in the form of publicity also helped to establish HCHR's credibility in the eyes of the community and bring in financial backers. Bill Hobby, whose family owned the *Houston Post*, gave favorable coverage to HCHR on a number of occasions. Lastly, membership drives served the dual purpose of gaining converts and raising funds. None of these endeavors brought the hoped-for financial security, though. Finding the money to survive remained a perennial problem.

Those who worked on membership, financial, and other campaigns, who made a commitment of time as well as of money, found bonds of friendship and trust that kept them loyal to the Council despite its many difficulties. In the early 1960s these bonds of friendship were more important than the financial worries and vague program of the organization. For dedicated workers, HCHR became a vehicle for expressing their concerns. As one of the early members told Gertrude and Howard Barnstone, "Here at the Council is where you can go and work toward this integrating of society with some really terrific people."¹⁷ And what happened to the Barnstones happened to many

¹⁴Askanase interview.

¹⁵Board of Directors' Minutes 1960-1963 File, HCHR Collection; Schlumberger Stock 1964-66 File, *ibid.*; Freed interview; Noland interview.

¹⁶Stewart Wilber, interview by author, August 6, 1982, HCHR Collection.

¹⁷Gertrude Barnstone, interview by author, July 29, 1983, HCHR Collection.

others. As Gertrude Barnstone expressed it,

It was terribly moving and dramatic . . . History was happening and one could become part of it . . . Once we got into it, it . . . became quite absorbing and took a lot of energy . . . I don't recall that I knew many of them [other Council members] before, but it was a place to get some quick bonding with people who felt the same . . . We got a real good feeling of energy . . . It was sort of a cutting edge and there were things to be done and you didn't have to weigh how this was going to seem. What you were involved in was trying to accomplish something.¹⁸

Because of their zeal and the loose organization of HCHR in the 1960s, it was not always easy to distinguish clearly between the activities of the Council and those of individuals who just happened to be members of the Council. For example, Joyce Shaw and Barbara Jordan helped to organize the city's first civil rights march. The demonstrators began at the YMCA on Wheeler Street and marched to City Hall. Barbara Jordan patrolled the parade in a car. The marchers were mainly black people "with a smattering of whites that always showed up, like myself," Shaw reported.¹⁹ This was not an officially sponsored HCHR march, but Shaw and Jordan were Council members. Similarly, HCHR members appeared when People for Upgrading Schools in Houston (PUSH) organized a demonstration of 3000 to 5000 people before the Houston Independent School District Building to protest the failure to integrate the public schools. The council's official action consisted of sending telegrams offering to mediate to the president of the school board, the mayor, and Rev. Bill Lawson, chairman of PUSH.²⁰ In the meantime, Council members were on the picket lines.

Public demonstrations were one way to express concern, but advocacy also took the form of private acts, of someone willing to make a phone call. "Black people couldn't go to the picture show in 1961," except at a few black theater houses. So Woodrow Seals, then a U.S. attorney,

called Jack Binion, a Houston lawyer, who at one time represented the *Post*, the *Chronicle*, and the *Press*. He had done me a lot of favors, and he also represented Allstate Theaters. I called him and said, "Jack, we are going to have to integrate the theaters." He said, "Well, I'm in favor of that." He was a very liberal person . . . I said, "Well, if you'd tell the management of Interstate Theaters to let people who are black come in when they buy a ticket we won't say anything in the newspaper. I'll get some blacks to go." So I got some blacks to go to the theater one week. Never got in the paper, never publicized.²¹

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Joyce Wheelock Shaw, interview by author, August 5, 1982, HCHR Collection.

²⁰*Ibid.*; *Newsletter*, May 1965, HCHR Collection.

²¹Seals interview.

The HCHR *Newsletter*, May-June 1963, announced that local theaters were open to anyone.

Not every attempt to get cooperation succeeded so easily. The crusading spirit, official or unofficial, sometimes engendered anger and reprisals against Council members. Eleanor Freed recalled:

We got a lot of flack from the community. We didn't do it for appreciation . . . I was told by . . . a wheeler and a shaker in the business community who was furious at me . . . one evening at a dinner, "What's wrong with this community is the little people like you who are giving the people who are running Houston all of this trouble. It is the little people like you with nothing at stake that are trying to raise issues. We are trying to cope with these issues, but it all has to be done in a gradualist way."²²

People on the Houston Council on Human Relations felt otherwise, and said so. In response, some employers transferred individuals to other cities because they became too actively involved in civil rights causes. A man working in the area of race relations with Jim Noland in the early 1960s

had a letter written about him and circulated to all the businessmen saying he had studied under a Communist at Columbia University and that he had served on the committee in Chicago that had welcomed a Communist speaker from England. He was literally thrown out of the community for these things.²³

This was not an isolated case. "That is the mentality that was here in Houston. Unbelievable now." Jim Noland "never did any marching . . . He was an organizer and a provoker."²⁴ Nevertheless, his work in race relations became known in the community with the result that

time and time again, I [Noland] got all kinds of phone calls, hate calls, letters and postcards, many that were not signed. It sometimes got so intense that my wife and I had to move our children to the back bedroom in case our house was bombed . . . You teach your children what you think is right and they become objects of derision.²⁵

Other Council members were also harassed. Ben Russell, president of the board in the late 1960s, found that the police were keeping a file on his activities, and he believed his phone was illegally tapped. The Shaws had a cross burned in their yard. Despite threats and unpleasantness, though, most remained committed. Opposition gave strength to the Council and its faithful. Members felt they were "part of a larger movement . . . really trying to make things happen."²⁶

²²Freed interview.

²³Noland interview.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶Barnstone interview.

Priorities and Dialogue

The challenge was to translate HCHR's vague, if sincere, principles into programs. In the 1960s the Council remained a loosely knit organization of dedicated volunteer workers with minimal professional staff, but the board tried to channel its energy by establishing a committee structure and adopting three broad priorities. First, it wanted to encourage dialogue to promote better human relations among Houston's various ethnic, religious, and economic groups. Secondly, it wanted to know the facts: what employment, what housing, what education was really available for blacks in Houston. Thirdly, it hoped to be a catalyst within the city by generating ideas, carrying out pilot projects, and then finding backers to take over worthwhile endeavors. It encouraged many self-help programs in a similar way. All three goals were interrelated and helped to set the perimeters within which the Council acted.

In addition to these general priorities, the board also established standing committees after its first formal community-wide event, a forum consisting of a series of six Saturday workshops entitled, "Houston and Its Minorities in: Education, Cultural Life, Health, Housing, Juvenile Delinquency, and Employment." It was held during October and November 1961 at the First Christian Church at the intersection of Sunset and Rice Boulevards. The twenty-eight member staff of these workshops included doctors, lawyers, teachers, ministers, artists, and musicians, many holding substantial positions in Houston's universities, its politics, or its cultural centers. The impressive group of specialists and community leaders gave credibility to the workshops. In addition, the audiences and the panels were integrated. The press felt it sufficiently newsworthy to report that at one session, out of sixty people in attendance, fifteen were Negroes.²⁷

More importantly, the press reported on some of the sensitive issues before the city that were openly discussed at the series. For example, Carroll Simms, former Fulbright scholar and an assistant professor of art at Texas Southern University, said, "Fine music means a lot to Negroes. But we have discouraged T.S.U. students from attending the symphony because of its segregation policies." Simms cited his own experience in this regard. Having purchased a ticket to attend the symphony, he found that the usher, instead of seating him where his ticket indicated, shuffled him off to "a seat in the 'crow's nest.' That was my last humiliation at the symphony. I have not been back."²⁸ The symphony manager denied such a policy existed, but the point had been publicly made and now the symphony needed to clarify its position.

Based on these workshops the Council established six standing committees

²⁷Unidentified newspaper clipping, *Scrapbook 4:12*, HCHR Collection.

²⁸*Ibid.*

to give some structure to their priorities: education, cultural life, health, housing, youth, and employment. Working through these arms, volunteers reached out into the community to create dialogue, collect facts, and stimulate action. The activity of any given committee was totally dependent on the energies of those who volunteered to serve, however. Some flourished while others became moribund. New committees also appeared in response to new issues. Some committees blended their work with larger projects, growing in an organic way, out of the council's general goals.

Of the three basic priorities, the most instinctive one was to create dialogue among the city's diverse population in an effort "to understand and to respect one another." Sometimes dialogue simply meant a letter, and missives regularly went out acknowledging, encouraging, congratulating blacks in their achievements, and pressing for specific action such as desegregation of lunch counters, theaters, and public facilities. For example, in the HCHR files from 1959 through the 1960s are copies of letters commending Wyatt's Cafeteria for serving "a member of the Negro race" and Finger's Furniture Company for hiring a black salesperson. There was correspondence extolling the decision by the Retail Merchants Association to serve all people, encouraging Weingarten grocery stores in relabeling their water fountains, and congratulating Dr. Thelma L. Patten for being the first woman and first black to be appointed to the city Health Board. In the context of Houston's race relations in the 1960s, such gestures were unusual.

There were other kinds of person-to-person attempts at bridging the gap between people of a segregated world. Again, simple things like house visits between white and black couples, being a host to an African dignitary visiting under the auspices of the Institute for International Education, or helping to set up the first host family program for African students at Texas Southern University.²⁹ The Council also tried to communicate with the city as a whole by sponsoring a public relations campaign using billboards that urged Houstonians to "Be Color Blind—Hire the Best Man" and to ask, "What Color is an American?"

On another level, dialogue was encouraged through public events, private parties, and HCHR's annual dinner. The dinners, for example, were always integrated and from 1963 to 1967 were occasions for presenting an annual human relations award in honor of Charles Shaw, a dedicated member who died suddenly. In 1964 that award went to Barbara Jordan and in 1966 to Ken Rachal, two black Houstonians of outstanding character.

The Council's most ambitious public undertaking of this kind was a speaking engagement for the distinguished black man, Ralph Bunche, then

²⁹Groppe interviews; Freed interview.

Under Secretary of State to the United Nations. He spoke on international relations at the University of Houston, March 24, 1964. In connection with the talk, John and Dominique DeMenil held a dinner party for Mr. Bunche at their home. They invited a number of prominent Houstonians along with the HCHR board members and their guests, "with the express purpose of trying to broaden the acquaintanceship in Houston with what we were trying to do."³⁰ Among those seated at one of many small tables were Charles F. Jones, president of Humble Oil Company (Exxon), and Ken Rachal, a black member of the Council.

Someone asked Charlie what he did and he said, "I'm president of Humble Oil," and Charlie asked Ken. Ken said, "I'm a mailman."³¹

To members of the HCHR this typified what the organization was all about—people seeing others as individuals without regard to their cultural or institutional trappings and living the Judeo-Christian credo, that all men are created equal in the eyes of God.

Ken Rachal came to hold a special place in the Council's history. His interest in HCHR grew out of the kind of personal touch and commitment to dialogue that was the trademark of the early Council.

Ken delivered the mail to the original Council offices . . . Joyce Shaw and others would invite him for coffee and gradually he asked the question, "What are you doing?" Over a period of time, he became interested and Joyce and others invited him to come to . . . our meetings, and ultimately Ken was president of the organization.³²

Ken Rachal died an untimely death in 1968. In the 1970s the Council's human relations award was given in his name in recognition of his contributions.

Of all the things Rachal did, the one best remembered was the bus tours which allowed him to acquaint fellow Houstonians with parts of the city they probably had never encountered before. The idea for the tours came from the Housing Committee, which wanted to show "the terrible conditions in which some people lived."³³ The bus would take people

down to the ship channel . . . to Fourth Ward, the Bloody Fifth. Ken would narrate . . . show them things that had happened, that hadn't happened: churches, stores, playgrounds deteriorated, police statistics out of those areas. He was great at it and he loved to do it.³⁴

It was perhaps naive of the Council's members to suppose that letters, billboards, awards, and bus tours could have any meaningful influence on the

³⁰Groppe interviews.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²*Ibid.*

³³Ethel Dumbauld, interview by author, April 15, 1982, HCHR Collection. See also Board Minutes 1964 File, HCHR Collection.

³⁴Wilber interview.

very complex social and economic arrangements surrounding race relations. On the other hand, the times called for reassessment of social values so the public was unusually receptive. In the end, social behavior is the sum of individual decisions. Perhaps the cumulative effect of the personal and public appeals of the Council did have an impact.

Responses to Facts

The Council's second general priority was to find out what the facts were. As Henry Groppe, HCHR president from 1964 to 1966, said:

We decided early . . . to collect good data, and . . . have that published as widely as possible with the idea . . . that there was a . . . reservoir of people who, if they knew the facts, would help whenever and wherever they could all around the community to produce some change.³⁵

The impetus for beginning HCHR's fact-finding mission came from the Southern Regional Council. The SRC was gathering information on conditions in cities all across the South in the early 1960s, using human relations groups to collect the data. HCHR received a grant to survey what places of business in Houston were integrated. Dr. Art Gallager, Associate Professor of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Houston, coordinated the survey and helped draw up the resulting employment profile for the city. Very few of the major employers had integrated work forces. As the survey report concluded, the question was posed:

How long can a major city of the United States continue to undertrain a sizeable segment of its young people, limit their opportunities for entry into the labor market, hamper and restrict their employment advance, underutilize their professional skills, deprive them of job security, without serious consequences to the city's own economic and social advance?³⁶

Once the facts about the job market for blacks began to surface, HCHR and other groups designed programs to inform the public and to influence employment policies. The Council followed its usual technique of attacking on many different fronts, sometimes within the committee structure, sometimes not.

Jim Noland approached the lack of opportunity in employment for blacks by seeking to establish a branch of the National Urban League in Houston. As a representative of the HCHR he went to see Lester Granger, the head of the Urban League in New York. Noland pledged to raise money locally if the national office would open a branch in Houston. Granger replied that

³⁵Groppe interviews.

³⁶*Newsletter*, December 1961, HCHR Collection.

although the Urban League would be delighted, they were currently losing support from their sponsor, the United Fund, throughout the South. Granger explained that the Urban League held a dance which was attended by a number of prominent people, including Mrs. Nelson Rockefeller, wife of the governor of New York.

Someone took a photograph of Mrs. Rockefeller dancing with a black man and that picture was distributed throughout the South and all of the funding for the Urban League in the South was drying up.³⁷

After this setback, Noland contacted the Society of Friends (Quakers) in Philadelphia. From that meeting an agreement was reached to establish a Friends Service Merit Employment Commission. Together the Friends and Council members raised the funds to run the organization. Council people also served as staff for the commission. This group worked to increase job opportunities for minorities in Houston for several years, beginning in 1960.

Lack of opportunities was only one aspect of the problem, however. Even when employers began to open doors, the number of qualified minority applicants fell short because of the limited vocational training and poor equipment available to students in black schools. The immediate response of the Council was to organize skill workshops and citywide employment conferences at Texas Southern University, Rice University, and elsewhere. At least one workshop was financed by a grant from the city.³⁸

While these workshops were helpful, the Council recognized that institutional priorities had to be changed to significantly alter existing patterns. The most fundamental institutions in determining job preparedness were the public schools. Consequently, the makeup of the school board and its policies came under scrutiny very early in the Council's history. HCHR members, along with the more progressive elements in the city, viewed HISD's anti-desegregationist attitudes as both futile and counterproductive. They accepted the premise that a new board, more in tune with national trends, needed to be elected. Therefore, while the Council never endorsed candidates, it did informally help those believed to be "right-minded" and its members provided a nucleus of workers who could be called upon for support.

Longtime HCHR members Reuben Askanase, Bob Childress, and Pliny Shaw regularly sought candidates to run against school board incumbents. It was not an easy job. Calling endless lists of possible candidates might not produce even one who would run. However, the Council was finally

³⁷Noland interview.

³⁸Attwell interview; Miscellaneous 1963 File, HCHR Collection; Board Minutes 1963 File, *ibid.*; Board Minutes 1964-1968 File, *ibid.*

responsible for a major break in the makeup of the school board with the election of Gertrude Barnstone in 1964. Mrs. Charles E. (Hattie Mae) White was the first black woman elected to the school board, in 1958. The board majority ostracized Mrs. White and treated her rudely, as became apparent on local broadcasts of board meetings. A report was brought to the school board that some students had cheered upon hearing of the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963. The school board members clucked their tongues at such unpatriotic behavior. Mrs. White chided the others, asking what attitude they expected the students to have when the board members did nothing but denigrate the federal government and all it stood for. The other members were highly indignant and called for her resignation, not for the first or last time. Gertrude Barnstone, HCHR activist, did not know Mrs. White at the time, but was outraged at the attack. She felt that "here was this wonderful woman who was the only voice of logic and reason and heart" on the board and she was being treated shamefully. In this mood Mrs. Barnstone went to the Council offices. Woodrow Seals happened to be there and told her to

have a large public tea honoring Mrs. White. Make a public show of support for her . . . I said, "OK, I'll do it." . . . Joe Alessandro Marks . . . and I and Joyce Shaw and several of the people worked on this . . . The long and short of it is, we had a mob down . . . at the Rice Hotel on a Sunday afternoon not long before Christmas . . . It was a raging success.³⁹

A few months afterward Armstrong Prescott, who had been very helpful with planning the tea, approached Mrs. Barnstone and said, "If you feel strongly about these things you've got to run for the school board." She found support and leadership for a campaign from the Council members. In fact, Mrs. Barnstone's decision to run for the school board and the success of her campaign revolved around the HCHR. "Oh, it would just never have happened without HCHR. The subject would not have come up and . . . the support group would not have existed."⁴⁰ Her success resulted from the combination of widespread community discontent and a cohesive group of people willing to work hard for change.

Once elected to the school board, Mrs. Barnstone worked with Mrs. White and HCHR on many issues. Mrs. White even joined the HCHR board in 1964 and served through 1970. Often, Mrs. Barnstone recalled,

Issues would come up . . . that I wanted to push on and the Council, either the members individually, or the Council as a whole, were just marvelous supports. They would bring the pressure from the outside while I was pressing from the inside and so we worked together.⁴¹

³⁹Barnstone interview.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹*Ibid.*

An example of the cooperation between the Council and Mrs. Barnstone involved the HISD student orchestra. This orchestra was "invited to go to Europe and lo and behold it was lily white, absolutely lily white."⁴² HCHR's Cultural Committee had already been working to change this and now came to Mrs. Barnstone's support. In the end the orchestra was integrated and the Council was also instrumental in setting up scholarships for black students to study music.

The Council's involvement with education and the school board politics continued throughout its existence. In 1967 George Oser had run as a liberal for the school board. He had been defeated, but, building on his foundation, in 1969 a group founded Citizens for Good Schools (CGS) which ran a full slate of candidates: George Oser, Eleanor Tinsley, Dr. Leonard Robbins, and Rev. D. Leon Everett. CGS was composed of a wide diversity of people, many young, who believed Houston should leave the past behind and work for a better school system based on the law of the land, which required positive action to integrate and upgrade education for all students. The list of CGS members included many who belonged to HCHR as well as new faces who later became leaders in the city and HCHR board members, officers, and supporters.⁴³ The trail from employment surveys for the SRC to the election of a new school board majority was blazed by many people, but the Council clearly played an extremely important part.

Housing was another area in which the Council's committee work grew far beyond the initial plan of gathering data. The inadequacy of housing for low and moderate income families had attracted national attention, through the pledges and legislative proposals of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, through riots which emphasized the frustrations of the urban poor, and through the reports of the Kerner Commission on Civil Disorders and the Kaiser Committee on Urban Housing.⁴⁴ While Houston did not have the high density tenement ghettos found in northern and northeastern cities, its housing for low and moderate income families failed to meet the need by most standards. As a real estate developer's town, Houston had no zoning, had not participated in any of the urban renewal programs of the 1950s and 1960s, and had not built any public housing for twenty years.

The Council felt the time to examine Houston's housing problems was ripe. The activities of the HCHR Housing Committee, headed by Dr. Stewart Wilber, culminated in a citywide conference on housing in April 1966. It was

⁴²*Ibid.* See also *Newsletter*, May 1965, HCHR Collection.

⁴³Citizens for Good Schools File, personal papers of Jonathan S. Day, Houston.

⁴⁴Tom Forrester Lord, *Decent Housing: A Promise to Keep: Federal Housing Policy and Its Impact on the City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), 1.

held to survey areas which were "representative of slum areas of a middle class neighborhood that has been integrated and a similar neighborhood which has not been integrated."⁴⁵ The information gathered was to be used to help stabilize Houston neighborhoods where integration was taking place and to prevent, or at least discourage, "block busting."⁴⁶ John Wildenthal, Council member and now attorney for the Houston Housing Authority, attended the meeting and became involved in the Council's activities related to housing.⁴⁷ He was important in gaining the support of City Hall in all subsequent developments.

Pleased with their initial success, the committee decided to undertake a major housing report and began to seek funding. With the help of Mayor Louie Welch and of an executive officer of the Houston National Bank, the Council received a \$5000 grant from the Houston Foundation late in 1966 and gathered a small, but very talented, group of volunteers to work on the project. John Stewart of TRW, a space industry company, headed the project and brought to the study business and management skills that were vital in producing a polished product. The report discussed economic and political tools used by other cities: public housing, building codes, zoning, a comprehensive community plan, Model Cities programs, and rent supplement programs. It analyzed neighborhood resources and needs and looked at possible ways to improve Houston's housing stock such as establishing a non-profit foundation under Section 221(d)(3) FHA program of the Housing Act of 1961.⁴⁸ The report was well received and widely distributed to Houston's civic leaders, as well as to officials in other cities.

The committee realized that the report would only have lasting meaning if some concrete actions followed, however. John Stewart, John Wildenthal, and others convinced Mayor Welch to create a Mayor's Citizens Advisory Committee on Housing in 1967. In order to give it clout, Welch enlisted important businessmen to serve on the committee, along with many experienced members of HCHR's Housing Committee. Jackson C. Hinds, Jr., Executive Vice-President of Houston Natural Gas Corporation, agreed to chair the committee. George L. McGonigle, Manager of General Services

⁴⁵*Newsletter*, April 1962, HCHR Collection. See also Housing Committee 1966-1977 File, HCHR Collection; Housing Committee, Houston Council on Human Relations, *A Report on Housing for Low Income Families* (Houston, April 1967).

⁴⁶Neighborhood Stabilization Committee, Houston Council on Human Relations, "Block Busting Techniques," in *HCHR Neighborhood Stabilization II* (Houston, n.d.). See also Barry J. Kaplan, "Race, Income, and Ethnicity: Residential Change in a Houston Community, 1920-1970," *The Houston Review* 3 (Winter 1981).

⁴⁷John Wildenthal, interview by author, April 19, 1982, HCHR Collection.

⁴⁸Lord, *Decent Housing*, 11.

Department for Humble Oil, served on the committee and provided an office in the Humble building. John Stewart's company, TRW, allowed him time off with pay to be the executive director. Under Stewart's direction the committee organized in task forces based on the outline of the HCHR Housing Report.

Of particular importance were two subcommittees working on the feasibility of forming a Houston Housing Development Corporation under the Section 212(d)(3) FHA program for financing housing for low income families, and the feasibility of qualifying for a Model Cities grant under the Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act of 1966. Under the FHA program a corporation using nonprofit and limited dividend sponsors could receive "below-market interest rate loans for projects designed for moderate income families."⁴⁹ In May 1967, George McGonigle and Whitfield Marshall recruited Tom Lord from Urban America, a Ford Foundation-backed Washington organization that assisted cities in establishing such corporations. In December when John Stewart had to return to TRW, Lord became the new executive director of the Advisory Committee. He made the FHA housing corporation a top item on the committee's agenda. Between January and March of 1968, Exxon, Shell, Foley's, Sears, Houston Natural Gas, Houston United Gas, and the Houston Home Builder's Association pledged over \$600,000 and foundations over \$200,000 to provide the capital to start the corporation. In May, in a formal ceremony in the mayor's office, the Houston Housing Development Corporation was created and twenty-eight business and civic leaders formed a board of directors.⁵⁰ Since its beginning, HHDC has assisted directly in the construction or rehabilitation of over 3200 homes for low and moderate income families in Houston. HHDC also created the Houston Housing Management Corporation to provide expertise in managing properties serving this population.⁵¹

The second subcommittee, working on a Model Cities proposal, had a more difficult task, even though the program offered a great deal to the city. Under the act a locality could

target a specific area in their city, an area which had the most poverty, the worst housing, the least education . . . [I]nstead of having each . . . program involving education, health, and welfare (and in the 1960s there were between 400 and 500 such federal grant programs) coming to it through a

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁵⁰Tom Forrester Lord, interview by author, April 10, 1982, HCHR Collection; Lord to All Members of the Citizens Advisory Committee on Housing, May 22, 1968, Citizens Advisory Committee 1968 File, HCHR Collection.

⁵¹Houston Housing Development Corporation, information packet, 1984, HCHR Collection.

separate channel, the federal government . . . would set up a program which would flow into the cities through one channel . . . in a coordinated fashion. The carrot for the city to do this was . . . an additional cash grant, a 100% non-matchable grant.⁵²

To the advocates of Model Cities this seemed too good a deal for the city to pass up, notwithstanding the city's bias against federal aid. During the spring of 1968 the work was divided. One subcommittee set out to write and obtain city council's approval of a housing code as a prerequisite to being eligible for a Model Cities grant. They received assurances from Welch that passage of a code would be non-controversial. To their dismay, when the code was submitted to city council in April 1968, it was denounced and voted down. In the succeeding months opposition clarified along three lines. First, those who benefited from the lack of a code—slum landlords, builders, etc.—preferred the status quo. Secondly, some Houstonians clung to an entrepreneurial credo which resisted accepting federal dollars and their accompanying bureaucratic rules. Thirdly, and related to the second premise, some opponents rejected the code on the grounds that, while a housing code was not a bad thing per se, its passage would be a step toward qualifying Houston for federally funded programs. In this last assumption they were correct.

The other subcommittee on Model Cities, headed by O. Jack Mitchell of the Rice University School of Architecture, put together an application for a Model Cities grant. It required the approval of the City Council as well, and was also quite controversial. Ultimately two things worked to assure its passage. Through a friend in the governor's office, Tom Lord obtained an endorsement from then Governor John Connally, a very respectable conservative. The governor said,

I believe that this particular federal program holds promise as a prototype for a more flexible approach to federal grants-in-aid. This will certainly be the case if cities with innovative leadership, such as Houston's, participate and strongly press for local flexibility to meet diverse needs.⁵³

In addition, the vote on the application came before the city council the day after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Feelings were running high in Houston and throughout the nation. The council felt it would be a gesture of good faith to the black community to approve the application.⁵⁴

Submission of the application did not assure HUD's selection of Houston as one of its Model Cities, however. Because Houston had never participated in any housing programs, nor developed any plan for housing low income

⁵²Lord, *Decent Housing*, 81.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 86.

⁵⁴Lord interview; Lord, *Decent Housing*, 86.

families, it was hard for the HUD people to take Houston's application very seriously, and they turned down the application in December 1968. Rather than accept this ruling, Tom Lord, who happened to be in Washington, called on various friends and contacts. The result, after considerable negotiation and explanation, was a meeting between Mayor Welch and President Lyndon Johnson. The major obstacle to approving the Houston application was that

Houston does not even have a housing code, so how could it expect to clean up its slums? The Mayor shot back immediately that a code would soon be passed. He promised that. And with that promise LBJ turned to Califano, [his] chief domestic aide . . . and said, "Give Houston a Model Cities grant."⁵⁵

The mayor promised that the housing code would pass; now he had to make good on that promise. The city council steadfastly refused to cooperate, so the mayor and the committee decided to go directly to the people in a referendum. Approximately \$100,000 was raised from corporations and individuals who believed Model Cities would be good for the city. The referendum passed by sixty-three percent and the city council adopted the Housing Code in November 1969, thus assuring the Model Cities grant.

The actual grant was received over a period of six years, beginning with a year of planning in 1969, and extending through 1974. After the planning phase about \$13 million a year was allocated in one hundred percent cash grants. In addition, the Model Cities Program allowed Houston to receive millions of dollars from other related federal programs for which they could now qualify.⁵⁶ Model Cities also meant that many people, those running the projects and citizens participating in the process, were now seriously tackling some of the city's housing problems in a coordinated way. Poor housing did not disappear, and Model Cities came in for its share of criticism, but Houston was moving in a more positive direction than it had in many years.

Responses to Needs

The last three areas of major concern for HCHR were the cultural life of the city, Houston's youth, and police-community relations. They cannot be neatly tied to one or another of the Council's priorities. Rather, they grew out of a combination of concerns. For example, the cultural committee grew out of HCHR's first forum, "Houston and Its Minorities," which brought out the confusion in policy followed by Houston's major cultural institutions. Members of the Council's Cultural Committee began gathering facts and

⁵⁵Lord, *Decent Housing*, 87.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 76.

ultimately called a conference in October 1961 to secure reliable information. Representatives of the Museum of Fine Arts, the Contemporary Arts Museum, the Alley Theater, the Houston Public Library, and the Houston Symphony participated. The representatives for all but the symphony made it clear that they followed non-discriminatory policies in membership and use of facilities and that these policies had worked without incident, although the number of minority patrons was limited. Once again, HCHR served as a prod to the community:

Now that the facts are clear, it is important to encourage full use and participation by racial groups in the cultural life of Houston. Doors, now open, must not be permitted to rust shut through disuse.⁵⁷

The Cultural Committee went beyond fact finding and also arranged a number of public lectures, exhibitions, and plays that introduced black cultural themes, poets, artists, writers, and actors to the community. In the fall of 1963 HCHR sponsored an exhibit of African art in conjunction with a lecture by Louise Jefferson. The Barnstones also held a reception for Miss Jefferson at their home on North Boulevard following the lecture. Louise Jefferson was Art Director of the Friendship Press, the publishing house of the National Council of Churches, and a representative of the Women's African Committee of New York.⁵⁸ The audiences for the event were good, and even more gratifying to HCHR, they were integrated.

A more ambitious undertaking was the production of "Raisin in the Sun," December 11-14, 1963. The first showing took place at the new Jones Hall of the University of St. Thomas in the Montrose area. Here, in the heart of white Houston, a play about black people with a local, all-black cast, was a success.⁵⁹ The Cultural Committee continued to put on programs about race relations, and also tried to reach out to the Mexican American community by sponsoring a Fiesta at Miller Outdoor Theater in Hermann Park in conjunction with the Mexican Consul and various Latin American organizations. The Cultural Committee had gathered facts, created community involvement, and tried to be a catalyst for expanding cultural awareness and participation.

Another important committee that arose from the 1961 workshops focused on youth. The early boards

spent a lot of time trying to decide how to get the most done quickly. We felt that it was probably most effective to work with the youngest people. If their attitudes were changed they could carry this on with them as they

⁵⁷*Newsletter*, April 1962, HCHR Collection.

⁵⁸*Houston Post*, September 22, 1963; *Ibid.*, September 27, 1963.

⁵⁹Attwell interview.

grew older and went through the various institutions.⁶⁰

Out of this impetus, and two successful workshops on intergroup relations for high school students, a Houston Youth Council on Human Relations (HY-COHR) was created in 1963 and functioned through 1968. Depending to a large degree on availability of leadership, as many as 200 young people actively supported HY-COHR activities at one time. They approached human rights issues in a variety of ways, including seminars on intergroup relations for junior high through college age students, vocational training seminars, tutoring programs for children in Allen Parkway Village and Cuney Homes, distribution of Job Corps information and ballet and art classes for deprived youngsters.⁶¹

Of particular benefit to the community were HY-COHR's efforts in easing integration. In 1965 the patience of Houston's pro-integration faction ran out. In May between 3000 and 5000 people picketed the HISD administration building to protest the school board's policies. Organizers of the demonstration demanded "the immediate integration of the schools, an end to unfairly drawn boundary lines and full acceptance of federal aid to the schools."⁶² During the following summer HY-COHR encouraged eligible black students to enroll in predominantly white schools. They worked with fifty potential transfer students and the principals and teachers at Reagan High School and Hogg Junior High School. Thirty of the fifty chose to enroll that July and did so without incident.⁶³

Houston was fortunate in avoiding large-scale violent confrontations in its schools. The civil rights movement's drive against segregation in schools, public facilities, and transportation had frequently ended in bloodshed. The media coverage of clashes between civil rights workers and the police had focused Americans' attention on the treatment of minorities by police, which was perceived by most as insensitive and unjust. Added to this was a growing sense of frustration in the black community as the promises of the Kennedy-Johnson administrations produced little visible change in the lives of millions of ghetto dwellers. Part of this frustration was expressed in rioting and looting in cities across the land in the "long, hot summers" of 1965, 1966, and 1967. Biracial committees were appearing in many cities as a tool for dealing with police hostility and public fear in these tense times. Houston was working hard to keep the lid on, and a proposal in 1965 to create a biracial committee for the city became an issue in the mayoral race between ex-mayor

⁶⁰Groppe interviews.

⁶¹The Newsletters from 1965 to 1968 detail HY-COHR activities.

⁶²Newsletter, May 1965, HCHR collection.

⁶³Newsletter, November 1965, HCHR Collection.

Lewis Cutrer and first term incumbent Louie Welch. Both candidates wanted the support of the black leaders who favored such a committee, but they also knew there were many who objected. Stewart Wilber, a Council member, was a friend of John Wildenthal, Welch's city attorney. Together they approached Mayor Welch with an offer to help find a compromise in order to avoid a racial confrontation over the issue. Welch used this opportunity to adopt the politically expedient position that Houston did not need a biracial committee because HCHR was already fulfilling that function. This was not strictly true and ironically HCHR had favored a biracial committee since 1962. HCHR had no official power to advise the mayor and city council, or even to make recommendations. Nevertheless, by permitting Welch to use their name HCHR received some valuable publicity and opened the door for further work with the city.⁶⁴

Not long after Welch's reelection, the need to develop an HCHR committee specifically addressing the problem of police-community relations arose. In March 1966, an incident between police and blacks in the "Lucky Hill" area led to threats of violence from black citizens.⁶⁵ The Reverend Bill Lawson, an articulate black minister and Council member, catalogued a growing list of reasons why unrest existed in the city. This list cited the slow progress of the anti-poverty program, the no-billing of the officer in the Lucky Hill case, and the turning back of \$20 million from the federal Office of Economic Opportunity because the city lacked certain prerequisites. The Council set up an ad hoc Racial Tension Committee consisting of John Wildenthal, George Lloyd, and Bill Hobby, which worked with the mayor to find a way to ease the situation and answer some of the questions being raised in the black community.⁶⁶ Responding to a written proposal by the Council, Mayor Welch agreed to a pioneering "Meet the Mayor" series held throughout the summer and fall of 1966. The meetings took place principally on the north side and in the Fifth Ward. The committee

selected grass roots community meeting places and got the mayor to come with some of his assistants and respond directly to questions and concerns with citizens of that particular part of Houston . . . It was an effort to have the black citizens in those areas have an opportunity to express themselves directly to their elected officials . . . regarding the conditions in the

⁶⁴Wilber interview; Louie Welch to Henry Groppe, November 24, 1965, Correspondence 1965 File, HCHR Collection; Welch to George A. Lloyd, November 23, 1965, *ibid.* Welch sponsored a Human Relations Week for several years after his election. In 1966, he allowed HCHR to use copies of a proclamation and his inaugural address with fundraising letters.

⁶⁵Executive Committee Minutes 1966 File, HCHR Collection.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, specifically March 31 and May 13, 1966.

neglected part of the city.⁶⁷ More than 300 people attended some of the meetings. The black newspaper *The Forward Times* covered the events, and were usually critical of Welch and his administration. Mayor Welch "took a lot of heat" but continued to hold the meetings. The effect of these confrontations was hard to measure, but at least Houston's minority communities had the opportunity to vent some of their frustrations.

Other occasions on which a Council committee aided city officials arose out of the comparatively minor, but potentially explosive, incidents in Houston in 1965 and 1967 at TSU and at the University of Houston. The role of the Council in these crises varied, but, as in the "Meet the Mayor" series, it had one consistent aim—to promote dialogue. For example, in 1965 a controversy erupted in a cafeteria at the University of Houston "which was basically a food throwing contest." Because

blacks were throwing food at whites, and vice versa, it became a "riot" to the University of Houston... and the city... was asked to prosecute some of these rioters. To members of the Council this seemed a poor way to handle the University's internal discipline problems. An ad hoc committee was formed which offered to help mediate the situation. A meeting was arranged with the University administration, student activists, and Andrew Jefferson, Ben Russell, and Leonel Castillo from the Council. We had all the combatants in one room at one point trying to talk some sense into everybody and finally people started communicating and the problems went away and some progress was made.⁶⁸

The Council soon found itself called upon to mediate in other situations as Houston continued to work at avoiding the terrible riots that occurred in many cities. Matters were made more difficult because Welch's chief of police, Herman Short, was very unpopular in the black community. An especially tense situation developed from a scheduled convention of a black church group. The rumor was spread that it was coming to foster integration and generally stir up trouble. Some HCHR members

talked to Mayor Welch and... in part because of the relationship we had with him, he trusted the Council's advice and acted quickly to get the cooperation of the newspapers to defuse the situation.⁶⁹

HCHR also worked on problems of police-community relations by combining with other groups. The Council joined with the Grand Jury Association and city leaders in sending a recommendation to the mayor that

⁶⁷Groppe interviews.

⁶⁸Andrew Jefferson, interview by author, September 12, 1983, HCHR Collection.

⁶⁹Groppe interviews.

human relations training be made a regular part of police education. In 1968 HCHR was asked to act upon this recommendation and helped conduct a course for police officers. Similar courses were repeated off and on into the 1970s. When the report of President Johnson's Committee on Civil Disorders, the Kerner Report, was released in 1968, HCHR cosponsored a workshop to foster understanding of the causes of riots and ways to prevent them. A lengthy report was released through the Community Welfare Planning Association drawing out implications for Houston. It recommended that the city welfare department and the United Fund agencies should "redesign" and "streamline themselves" in order to eliminate duplication and better meet the needs of the poor. The city was also told to look to its police department.⁷⁰ Such advice was common in the 1960s and generally not welcomed by social service professionals anywhere. Not everything the Council tried was successful, but the fact that the pressure was there perhaps moved the bureaucracies in directions they would not otherwise have taken.

Self-Help and a New Era

From its inception, the Council looked upon itself as a stimulator of ideas rather than a provider of services. In particular, HCHR wanted to find ways to encourage people to help themselves and to draw together the resources of the community to meet their identified deficiencies. The Battaglia Project and VISTA epitomized this third priority.

The John Battaglia Project, "Citizens for Self-Improvement," was the Council's first major step toward implementing a plan to encourage self-help. The funds for this project came from the estate of John Battaglia, who was an immigrant truck farmer and vegetable peddler. Upon his death he left the bulk of his estate to the city of Houston "for charitable purposes on behalf of the people of Houston."⁷¹ These funds had remained with the city for twenty years before they were discovered by an HCHR member. HCHR decided to apply for a grant to support a two-year project researching self-help options. On April 28, 1964, the city council approved their application for \$15,000, an enormous amount of money for the Council at that time. Dr. Mary Ellen Goodman of Rice University headed the project and Rev. John Holt and twelve volunteers did the actual research. HCHR distributed the information they uncovered to needy neighborhoods and tried to serve as a go-between for residents and already existing agencies that were promoting self-improvement.

⁷⁰Benton S. Russell III, interview by author, September 7, 1983, HCHR Collection.

⁷¹Houston Council on Human Relations, *Citizens for Self-Improvement: The John Battaglia Project* (Houston, n.d.). See also John Battaglia Project Files and Board Minutes Files for period, HCHR Collection.

ment.⁷² HCHR also agreed to serve as a referral service for the city, and the Battaglia Committee held a series of workshops demonstrating to neighborhood residents what they could do on their own. The money also helped launch a pilot tutoring service in the spring of 1964. Thirty-four Rice University undergraduates tutored thirty-six selected students from Houston high schools. Mrs. Bess Attwell, project director, observed that not only did the Rice students help the high school students scholastically, but

they became friends with them . . . exposing them to all . . . kinds of things . . . We enlarged that program for the next year . . . to take in all the high school kids that would be transferred to what had formerly been all white schools and we did a tremendous job . . .⁷³

From the Battaglia project it was natural for HCHR to become attracted to national programs of similar intent. Americans were reading Michael Harrington's book, *The Other America*, and watching television documentaries such as Edward Murrow's "CBS Reports: A Harvest of Shame." Many were shocked that one in ten Americans lived below the poverty line, that the land of plenty could fail to house and feed and educate its own people. President Kennedy had formulated plans for a national effort to address the problems of the urban and rural poor, and upon his death Lyndon Johnson vowed to carry his dreams into reality.⁷⁴ In his first State of the Union Message in January 1964, Johnson called for "unconditional war on poverty." A major thrust of this Great Society policy, helping people to help themselves, was embodied in the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. It included the Job Corps, to help train high school drop-outs; a Neighborhood Youth Corps, to work with unemployed teens; Volunteers in Service to America, to assist poor people in their own neighborhoods; Head Start, to provide pre-school for culturally disadvantaged children; Upward Bound, to support bright but poor students wanting to attend college; and the Community Action Program, to encourage local participation in improvement projects.

Here was an array of federal programs, with federal dollars, tailored for human relations groups. Not surprisingly, HCHR had some involvement in all the anti-poverty programs in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This not only gave direction to the activities of the Council, but also changed its internal structure. By placing increasing emphasis on federal programs with their bureaucratic guidelines, required reports, and supervision, HCHR was forced to move beyond the freewheeling style it had adopted since its inception.

⁷²Houston Post, August 28, 1968.

⁷³Attwell interview.

⁷⁴VISTA, *In the Midst of Plenty* (Washington, 1980), 26.

Unfortunately, at the time the Council was struggling with the necessary changes its leadership faltered. Rev. Charles Kelly, who had been the executive director since 1963, resigned on August 5, 1965, to head the local War on Poverty coordination office. Over the next four years there were four executive directors. Because of the fragmentation in leadership, the transformation that was taking place was not well understood and this led to stress and unhappiness among the members. Paid staff increasingly took over the planning and execution of HCHR's activities. When volunteers participated, they usually carried out assigned tasks instead of initiating and completing whole projects.

This process of change began with the sponsorship of a pilot Head Start project at the urging of Hattie Mae White who was still a school board member. This monumental undertaking for HCHR required paid staff, in this case Dr. Marlin Roll, an instructor at the University of Houston, and Bess Attwell. They wrote the original proposal and coordinated activities. They recruited and trained approximately 1200 volunteers to work in the centers. There were a total of forty-eight centers in neighborhoods untouched by other federal programs: Sunnyside, Third Ward, South Heights, Studewood, Clinton Park, Galena Park, and Acres Homes. Each unit operated an eight week session with a full day of programs and a hot lunch. Children spent most of their time in the centers where they could hear stories, sing songs, draw, and play. The emphasis was on "enriching a child's experience, increasing his ability to talk about it, and supporting his confidence."⁷⁵ There were also field trips to the beach, the Astrodome, the museums and parks, and the supermarket.

In keeping with its philosophy, the Council allowed other sponsors to take over this successful pilot project. Internally, Head Start served as a natural bridge between the Battaglia Project and other federal programs. Before the year 1965 was over, HCHR began to look seriously at Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) as a possible next step.

VISTA's philosophy was based on three assumptions:

- (1) that private citizens can, on a voluntary basis, contribute to the solution of the nation's domestic poverty problems;
- (2) that the skills and energies of Volunteers are used most effectively when the Volunteers live and work with the low-income people whom they are serving, and
- (3) that the full-time presence and personal involvement of Volunteers bring an added dimension to the public and private institutions working to eliminate poverty.⁷⁶

⁷⁵Attwell interview. See also Head Start Files, HCHR Collection; *Newsletter*, May 1965, *ibid.*

⁷⁶Action: *VISTA Volunteer Handbook* (Washington, 1981), 1.

VISTA, like HCHR, argued that it was not necessarily poor people's fault that they had inadequate medical and legal services, and that even if it were, there was little they could do about it. VISTA and HCHR believed that "You had to change middle class attitudes, make them aware, make them willing to address these problems."⁷⁷ The volunteers would mobilize community resources on behalf of the poor with their help then phase themselves out, leaving the neighborhood in charge. In the end it would be the people who would force the system to their will. VISTA would give them the power to do so.

This precisely mirrored the Council's self-help ideals and the already existing Battaglia Committee simply expanded to include VISTA. The Council's application to be a sponsor was approved and its first volunteers arrived in March 1966.⁷⁸ By the end of 1970 HCHR had twenty-six volunteers, fourteen of whom were nationally recruited, and twelve who were from Houston.⁷⁹

Given the orientation of HCHR and its strong belief in volunteerism, it enthusiastically accepted the responsibilities of a sponsoring agency. But the active members found they were spending more time fund raising and overseeing staff, and less time actively doing the work. To an increasing degree HCHR supported the volunteers instead of providing the volunteers.

For a time, VISTA and HCHR were synonymous to many in Houston. Considering the conservative nature of the city, that was a mixed blessing. Generally, the people who became VISTA workers were social activists. They wanted to stir people up, to press issues, and were impatient with those who advised prudence. In appearance many of the young people looked like "hippies." The police, government, and business had limited tolerance for the look and activities of the volunteers, and it became difficult to raise funds in some quarters. In the late 1960s the Council also had problems keeping

⁷⁷Joe Bruch, interview by author, April 21, 1983, HCHR Collection. Mr. Bruch worked for the regional VISTA office in Austin in the 1960s and early 1970s and was personally familiar with HCHR's VISTA program.

⁷⁸Bruch interview. Initially, VISTA volunteers had been assigned to Houston through Houston Action for Youth. They were then transferred to LACK (Latin American Community Council, with the *k* added for emphasis) which was formed specifically to sponsor VISTA. For a time, both LACK and HCHR sponsored VISTA in Houston, until LACK merged with HCHR in 1969-70 due to financial difficulties.

⁷⁹Action: *VISTA Volunteer Handbook*; VISTA Files, HCHR Collection. I also want to acknowledge work done on HCHR-VISTA for the course History 4339: America in the 1960s, University of St. Thomas, Houston, Spring 1983, by the following students: Jean Garner, Thomas Hayden, Geoffrey Hutson, Stacey Jones, Kathleen McMahon, Alice Reuter, Edward Rodriguez, Betty Schoolar, David Slaughter, Robert Witliff, and Victor Zapata.

supervisors. The resulting administrative chaos in the Houston program caused the regional VISTA office to investigate. They discovered reports unfiled, mail unopened, and general disarray.⁸⁰ Lacking confidence in HCHR, the regional office declined to continue paying its share of the supervisor's salary, as well as other expenses. The Houston VISTA workers protested the cut backs. During one executive committee meeting a group of VISTA workers barricaded the board members in a room, while pounding on the walls and yelling obscenities. The Council president, John Wildenthal, pointed out the irony of the situation. "We were being attacked by our own VISTAs and we were the most liberal group in town."⁸¹ Protests or not, the decision of the regional office to deny funds, combined with the accumulated difficulties of managing the VISTA program, forced an end to this phase of Council history in January 1972.⁸²

The VISTA period had seen substantial changes. Until that time HCHR took pride in calling itself a 100% volunteer organization, but as it began to administer federal programs it became clear that tighter controls, greater financial stability, and less reliance on the time and efforts of part-time workers were necessary. In 1968 the executive director, Rev. John Murray, resigned due to conflicts with the HCHR board. After considerable soul-searching, the board decided that HCHR needed a new director who would recognize the transformation

from a volunteer organization with staff to an organization of staff with volunteers. It was an entirely different type of director that we looked for . . . We wanted . . . to make the organization . . . more involved in keeping track of what we were doing—take some of the "haphazard" out of it . . . Ten years after it had started it was time to make changes.⁸³

The mandate for change did not ease the metamorphosis, however. To a large degree the Council was a child of the sixties and not everyone perceived the internal shifts that had taken place in HCHR and in the nation. Some HCHR members still clung to the activism of the 1960s, resented being outsiders to the staff, and drifted away from the Council. They were matched, however, by others who remained loyal but were ready to relinquish responsibility to a strong director. That person was Larry Spencer, Executive Director of the Council from 1973 until it ceased activity in 1983.

⁸⁰Bruch interview.

⁸¹Wildenthal interview. See also Lord interview; Jefferson interview; Carole Pinckett, interview by author, July 24, 1983, HCHR Collection; Leonel Castillo, interview by author, May 10, 1982, *ibid*.

⁸²The Houston Metropolitan Ministries took over sponsorship of VISTA from HCHR.

⁸³Russell interview.

Through the 1970s, HCHR continued to work for change, expanding its programs to deal with the problems of Mexican Americans and women. However, action by the courts and federal legislation had created new bodies of law that protected equal educational opportunities, the right to vote, equal job opportunities, and fair housing practices. Much of what the Council had been doing on a volunteer basis was now institutionalized. The number and professional capacity of social agencies to deal with human relations problems had greatly increased. In September of 1970 the board issued a "Statement of Position" outlining the Council's new goals, program, and methods, which had continuity with the past but recognized the changed circumstances. HCHR now described itself as an organization that worked "in a manner which emphasizes volunteerism which is supported by adequate and able staff service."⁸⁴

* * *

The history of the Houston Council on Human Relations affords some insights into how local organizations have worked to protect human rights and promote intergroup communications in our highly diversified nation. Decades of pressure from black Americans and their allies finally produced legislative and judicial action at the national level, and created a climate of opinion which called for action in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The crusading spirit of that time gave the Council its start and it was able to pull together the liberal forces in the city to work for integration. As their network of supporters expanded, their potential for influencing decision makers in many areas of human relations increased, and eventually contacts with important people in business and government made it possible for HCHR to serve as a catalyst for significant social and economic change along the lines of national trends. Probably the relatively open politics of Houston also enhanced HCHR's effectiveness. A city with a tight political machine might have been more resistant to outside pressures. HCHR also survived the passage into a less emotionally demanding but equally important period. As the Council developed more sophisticated, less personally involving approaches to human relations problems in the 1970s, it became more

⁸⁴*Newsletter*, November 1970, HCHR Collection; "Executive Director's Report," *Newsletter*, March 1970, *ibid.* See also Larry Spencer and Milton Feiner, interview by author, March 3, 1982, HCHR Collection.

dependent on the support and approval first of government agencies, and then of Houston's corporations, and less tied to an active membership.⁸⁵ This did not diminish its commitment to improving intergroup relations, and the business community was very generous in its backing, but it reduced the Council's contacts with grassroots leaders. Influencing institutional and governmental policy that could affect great numbers of people seemed like a more meaningful role at that point. The weakness of this approach became apparent during the economic crisis of the 1980s. The vitality of the Council had been sustained in the 1960s and 1970s by a combination of local volunteerism, national moral and financial leadership, and business support. Its own evolution had reduced its use of volunteer help. The nation as a whole no longer emphasized dangers to human or civil rights. The recession, reducing corporate profits, combined with the Reagan administration's cutbacks in social service funding to erode HCHR's support. When asked to contribute to the Council, corporations responded that their first priorities had to be to direct service-oriented agencies. By the 1980s, therefore, the forces that had produced the critical mass for change were no longer working together. Human relations problems did not disappear, but the momentum to do anything about them diminished. Without these apparently crucial ingredients, HCHR could no longer function. However, Andrew Jefferson spoke for the Council's diverse members, supporters, and contacts when he said, "We are better off because it was here as long as it was."⁸⁶

⁸⁵Corporate contributions became increasingly important to the Council. HCHR president Tom Lord made corporate-community relations a major activity starting in 1972. Conferences and dinners involving the business community showed a profit as well as filling a need, and raised approximately eighty percent of the Council's budget from 1975 until the 1982 recession.

⁸⁶Kay Warhol, interview by author, July 24, 1983, HCHR Collection; Long Range Financial Solutions Committee 1983 File, *ibid.*; Corporate Fundraising Process for Information Update, June 7, 1983, Draft File, *ibid.*; Long Range Fiscal Solutions Task Force, November 1, 1982, File, *ibid.*