

# A SCREAM or a Whisper: *Images of Activism in Houston*

By Lindsay Scovil Dove

Activism takes many forms. Although most easily recognized by the sights and sounds of protestors marching down the street carrying signs, activism is also demonstrated quietly through the comforting voice that calms a stray animal or in a roadside memorial communicating awareness for road safety. The people behind these social movements, regardless of the voracity or visibility, strive for justice, peace, and positive change for Houston.

A look back at Houstonians' activism offers a unique insight into the hopes and struggles of our area's earlier residents. It also highlights many of the issues that this growing, changing city continues to face today. Living in a social, racial, and economic melting pot, Houston's activists demonstrate their passion for causes that are as varied and diverse as they are themselves. This photo

essay explores just a few of these issues. One thing is certain, however; Houstonians actively and passionately work to better their community.

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*At the turn of the twentieth century, Houston public schools were deficient in many ways, and buildings frequently met only minimum standards for health and safety. In the absence of water fountains, students drank from a common cup passed from child to child. Schools lacked playground equipment, libraries, and hot lunches.*

*Determined to improve the learning environment, mothers in each school organized a Mothers' Club and began raising money to implement change. They also began lobbying for compulsory education, public kindergartens, stricter child labor laws, and female school board members.*

*Photo courtesy of Betty Chapman.*



*Nellie the elephant stands on Main Street, with the Rice Hotel in the background, to help Houston businessmen raise money to acquire a companion for her. The sign on the car reads, "This car donated by Raymond Pearson, Ford Dealer. Help Nellie get a mate. Bid on the Car. The Proceeds goes to Elephants Fund." Animal-related activism in Houston grew in popularity throughout the twentieth century, and the rise of animal shelters to assist stray companion pets such as cats and dogs in the 1970s spawned the robust animal activism and rescue community that thrives today.*

*Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0332-0340.*





*Houstonians often participate in activism on a national level as well as local. Here, suffragettes and Houstonians Mrs. Benigna Green Kalb (second from left) and her daughter, Miss Elizabeth Kalb (far right), stand in front of the National Woman's Party headquarters in Washington, DC, on June 2, 1920. The group was heading to Chicago to promote equality for women at the Republican National Convention the following week.*

Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC.

*Protestors gather outside the downtown courthouse following the arrest of the TSU Five. On May 16, 1967, TSU students led a demonstration on Wheeler Street demanding racial equality. A riot between the activists and the police broke out, multiple shots were fired into a campus dormitory, and a policeman was killed. Ultimately 489 students were arrested along with their five leaders, who were charged with inciting a riot. Only one, Charles Freeman, went to trial. The case was declared a mistrial when it was determined that the officer was killed by a ricocheting police bullet.*

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD6-2577.







Activists for Planned Parenthood show their support for safe and legal abortions. Originally opened in Houston in 1936 as the Maternal Health Center, Planned Parenthood strives to provide education and affordable healthcare for both men and women, advancing its belief that everyone has the right to make his or her own health choices.

Photo courtesy of Houston Area Women's Center Photographs (Box 10, folder 40), Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Residents of Near Northside show their support for Lionardo Matamores's testimony to the City of Houston planning commission in 2014 favoring a minimum lot size to prevent townhouse development.

German and Italian immigrants built many of the historic homes in the early twentieth century and concerned citizens have fought to retain the neighborhood's character. Fifty-nine percent of homeowners supported the lot size requirement, which some considered a surprise in the low-income predominately Hispanic neighborhood. Residents have seen nearby historic districts bulldozed and they organized to protect their neighborhood from a similar fate.

Photo courtesy of Rob Block.







Pro-life activists in Houston demonstrate in the late 1970s. Founded in 1976, Foundation for Life began actively working with the public following the Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade decision. Believing that life begins at conception, the group provides education on abortion alternatives as well as support programs for mothers and families.

Photo courtesy of Foundation for Life.

Protestors gather outside the Texas State Penitentiary at Huntsville before an execution. Opening in 1849 and nicknamed the "Walls Unit" for its surrounding red walls, the Huntsville prison performs all lethal executions in the state. From 1982 when the death penalty was reinstated in Texas through June 30, 2015, 527 prisoners have been put to death by lethal injection inside the Walls Unit. The Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (TCADP), seen here, is a grassroots organization that actively works to end the death penalty in Texas and beyond.

Photo courtesy of TCADP.







*Bryan Parras of TEJAS, the Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Service, speaks at a protest against Valero and the Keystone XL pipeline as part of the Tar Sands Blockade, a broader coalition of Texas and Oklahoma residents using nonviolent direct action to physically stop the building of the pipeline. The Valero refinery, nestled against the Manchester neighborhood in east Houston, is one of the destinations for the proposed tar sands pipeline. Among other issues, protesters object to the potential for dangerous leaks and intimidation of residents to sign contractual agreements for their land.*

Photo courtesy of TEJAS.



*Steve Sims, an activist with Houston Ghost Bikes, places a new placard on a "ghost bike" at the corner of Dunlavy and Westheimer to commemorate the life of Leigh Boone, who died in April 2009 shortly after being struck on her bicycle by two colliding firetrucks headed to a false alarm. Leigh's ghost bike, a white bike installed as a memorial near the place where a cyclist was killed, was one of the first in Houston. The hit-and-run death of Chelsea Norman in December 2013 on Waugh Drive mobilized the biking community, launching the Houston Ghost Bike movement led by activist Richard Tomlinson. Since organizing, the group has placed or has plans to place ninety-four ghost bikes in the area, which stand as silent protests to the dangers bicyclists face on Houston's streets.*

Photo courtesy of Melissa Sims, <http://houstonghostbike.org/>.



*Anti-war protestors gather in front of City Hall in downtown Houston on October 13, 1971, as a part of the nationwide Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam. Started in Washington, DC, two years earlier, public demonstrations such as this one were repeated each October. The peace movement embraced those taking a stand against the Vietnam War as well as those who fought for equal justice at home, such as activists in the Chicano movement.*

Photo courtesy of the *Houstonian* Yearbook Collection, Digital Library, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.





*Protests at the Human Summit Rally, June 7, 1990. The Houston Area Women's Center (HAWC) emerged from the Women's Information and Referral Exchange Service (WIRES) in 1977. During the 1990s HAWC aided in passing legislation that included stalking laws, the National Violence Against Women Act within the Crime Bill, and evidence laws pertaining to marital rapes. HAWC also assisted with creation of the Domestic Violence Unit within the Houston Police Department and a Task Force for Children within the Texas Council on Domestic Violence.*

*Photo courtesy of Houston Area Women's Center Photographs (Box 10, folder 40), Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.*



*Marchers show their support for marriage equality and against California's Proposition 8 at the 2009 Pride Parade in the Montrose neighborhood. Prop 8 effectively blocked same-sex marriage in California and sparked protests throughout the country as many gay rights activists feared the measure could be copied in other states and slow the LGBT movement. On June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court ruled bans on gay marriage are unconstitutional.*

*Photo courtesy of Pride Houston.*