

Remembering “The Mouse that Roared”: Eleanor Tinsley and Houston

By Marina DonLevy Shimer

In the late 1960s Mrs. James Tinsley set a shining example of domesticity in the local press as the “clever hostess,” behind the University of Houston history department’s annual dessert and coffee party. The genteel mother of three rounded out this image teaching Sunday school and offering piano lessons to elementary-aged children at her home in southwest Houston. Eleanor Tinsley had been to dozens, perhaps hundreds, of dinner parties since she and husband Dr. James Aubrey Tinsley had moved to the city. As the couple zig-zagged through yet another crowded gathering in 1969, Eleanor could not have known that this event would affect the course of her life, career, and the progress of the entire city. When a member of Citizens for Good Schools (CGS) headed purposefully toward the Tinsleys, they first assumed he planned to talk to James. When the man instead addressed Eleanor, suggesting she consider running for the Houston Independent School District (HISD) school board, Dr. Tinsley reportedly looked down from his impressive height and said, “Who, her?”¹

That night, as James slept peacefully, Eleanor was up, thinking. One can imagine her standing in the cool dark of her blue-accented kitchen on Firestone, unable to get the idea out of her head. During the first twenty years of her marriage, she had happily dedicated her energy toward caring for her family and their home. On the night of that fateful dinner party, however, her two children still at home were sixteen and twelve, allowing her free time during school hours to pursue hobbies and other interests. For years she had been active in school organizations, church outreach groups, and she and Dr. Tinsley served as co-presidents of the Parents League. The group of over 1,500 families worked together to support legislation to raise the legal driving age in Texas, distribute educational material about teen drug abuse, and pilot social programs for school-aged children. She valued education immensely, and her interests



Eleanor Tinsley poses in her kitchen in 1969, only a few days after winning a seat on the HISD school board.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center,
Houston Public Libraries, RGD6N-1969-4711-9.

aligned perfectly with the position she had been asked to consider. As her family slept around her, suddenly she knew what she had to do: “It came like a bolt to me. I decided I could do some good.”²

At that time, few may have guessed that in just a few years, Eleanor Whilden Tinsley would make a name for herself as an influential member of the HISD school board during the city’s tumultuous attempts at desegregation.³ During her four-year term of service as a member and eventually president of the board, HISD schools experienced progress by leaps and bounds. At the end of her term, she left the district (and the city) better than she had found it, having played an important role in the creation of the Houston Community College system, the HISD magnet schools program, and much more. Although she was not

re-elected at the end of her term, her career in public service was far from over.

In 1979 Eleanor Tinsley made history again as the first woman elected as an at-large member of Houston’s City Council, defeating a twenty-year incumbent for the seat. As a councilmember, she consistently fought for human rights and a better quality of life, championing many causes whose effects can still be seen across the city and “going to bat” for under-represented Houstonians such as Asian Americans, the LGBTQ community, and African Americans. Although “small in stature,” Eleanor was not easily intimidated. According to daughter Kathleen Ownby, her mother “was very much aware of the rights of other people,” and fought hard for what she believed despite her prim demeanor. Her tenacity even earned her the nickname “the mouse that roared.”⁴ Although very little scholarly attention has been paid to Eleanor’s life and work, her career had a significant impact on Houston in the late twentieth century and beyond.

On October 31, 1926, Eleanor Whilden was born to parents W. C. Whilden and Georgiabel Burleson Whilden in Dallas, Texas. The two branches of her family, although

very different, both reportedly inspired her strength of character and “stick-to-it-iveness.”⁵ Having only achieved an eighth grade education, Eleanor’s father was a successful entrepreneur who “sold hominy and rags on the street,” eventually expanding his business through warehouse ownership and good investments “playing the stock market.” On her mother’s side, Eleanor’s great grandfather Rufus C. Burleson served as the second president of Baylor University from 1851 to 1861, then again from 1886 to 1897. This highly-educated, conservative Baptist background made descendants in the Burleson family “big wigs on campus” at Baylor, where Eleanor pursued her bachelor’s degree in English after attending courses at the College of William and Mary.⁶

After completing her degree, she ran into another Baylor graduate, James Aubrey Tinsley, “on the street in Dallas.” According to family lore, “they waved at each other and that was it.”⁷ The couple married in 1948 and intermittently relocated with their young family as James pursued his master’s degree at the University of North Carolina and his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin. After teaching history at Texas A&M and North Texas State University, Dr. Tinsley received a job offer from the University of

Houston. The family, including four-year-old Kathleen and infant Tom, moved to the city in 1953, where a third child, Marilyn, was born in 1956.

Kathleen Ownby, Eleanor’s eldest daughter, remembers her mother staying home during her childhood, teaching piano lessons and hosting recitals for her pupils in their home. Eleanor was also active at their local Baptist church, organizing youth group and Sunday school activities for young adults who enjoyed fellowship and hospitality on the Tinsleys’ enclosed back porch, which also served as a game room. Kathleen claims her mother always had a “strong moral compass,” as well as being “very ecumenical,” and willing to consider different points of view. For example, she belonged to a neighborhood discussion group attended by women of various faiths and organized an interfaith workshop at Willow Meadows Baptist Church in 1968.⁸

When she ran for a position on the HISD school board, she campaigned as part of a progressive slate of candidates intent on initiating court-ordered integration for the school district. Although the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision had declared the “separate but equal” system of segregated schools unconstitutional nationwide in 1954, the conservative bloc that dominated the HISD school board had stalled

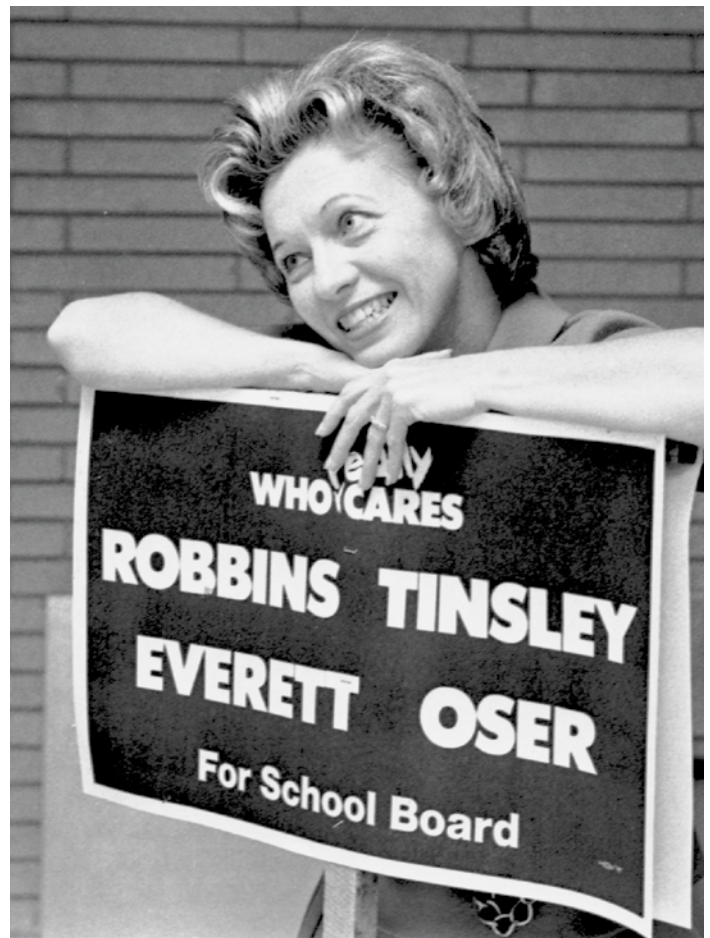


Four generations of the Tinsley family pose at the park bearing Eleanor’s name in September 2008. Shown left to right: Lucy Elliot, Emily Ownby Elliot, Eleanor Tinsley, and Kathleen Ownby.

Photo courtesy of Tom Collins Photography.

integration efforts for nearly fifteen years. Eleanor agreed to run, hoping that a change in leadership could create “a board that works together rather than the constant bickering we have witnessed,” especially surrounding the desegregation issue. Her candidacy was announced in several local papers, including the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Houston Post*, and the *Jewish Herald Voice*. In interviews Eleanor claimed that “as a mother, [she wanted] the best education possible, not just for [her] own children, but for every child in Houston.” Well-qualified for the position, Eleanor was “the leading vote getter on the reform slate,” even picking up an additional 308 votes when her opponent called for a recount. She was elected to Position 2 alongside George Oser, the founder of CGS. Although school board members were all volunteers, Eleanor “took [the work] very seriously,” often staying late at the district headquarters during her tenure.⁹

While Eleanor was in office, the school board enacted desegregation policies that included re-zoning principals and teachers as well as busing students to newly integrated schools. The community backlash was severe, but Eleanor and other reform school board members stood firm. Kathleen remembers her mother mentioning the “most afraid she ever was in political office was when the Ku Klux Klan came to a school board meeting,” to protest integration: “...there was so much hate in the room, and, I think that just empowered her more to think that something had



The campaign slogan from the 1969 HISD school board election claiming that Tinsley, Roberts, Everett, and Oser “really care[d]” played on their conservative opposition’s name, *Concerted Action for Responsible Education (CARE)*.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Libraries, RGD6N-1969-4711-29.

Our Legislators Support:

Hannah, Tinsley & Oser

MICKEY LELAND SENFRONIA THOMPSON CRAIG WASHINGTON ANTHONY HALL

“We urge you to go to the polls on December 4 and vote for JOHN HANNAH, ELEANOR TINSLEY and GEORGE OSER. They’ve done a lot to improve education in Houston. We can’t afford to turn back to the old days under a repressive school board. We need Hannah, Tinsley and Oser.”

Mickey Leland Senfronia Thompson Craig Washington Anthony Hall

Vote School Board Tuesday, December 4

HANNAH, TINSLEY & OSER

are citizens for good schools

Paid for by Citizens for Good Schools, 4905 Fannin, Houston, Texas
Jane Robinson, Campaign Chairman

CGS candidates for school board were endorsed by a number of HISD educators and local legislators pictured in this advertisement. Courtesy of Kathleen Ownby, personal collection.

to be done.” Concerned mothers picketed school buildings, and students fought against losing their administrators or being separated from their friends. One concerned parent even asked Eleanor, “What if my child catches something from being around a black student?” According to her daughter Kathleen, Eleanor “looked that parent straight in the eye and said, ‘I hope your child catches tolerance.’”¹⁰

Eleanor even faced opposition at home. As a senior at Westbury High School, Tom Tinsley begged not to be re-zoned so he could stay at the school where he held leadership positions and had many friends. Eleanor “could NOT make an exception for [her] own son.”¹¹ Although people threw trash onto the family’s lawn and called her nasty names, Eleanor refused to back down from what she believed was right.

In addition to working toward integration, Eleanor supported many other causes during her term. For example, she helped facilitate the installation of a more progressive superintendent, Dr. George Garver. She championed vocational training for HISD students and campaigned to establish the Houston Community College System because, as Kathleen explains, she “really believed strongly that people needed to come out of high school and have a plan... maybe they needed to go to a community college and learn a trade

so they can support their families.”¹² With Eleanor’s support, the school board also planned drug education courses, initiated the magnet school program, and began Volunteers in Public Schools. In 1972 Eleanor even served as president of the HISD school board.

In 1974 she ran for re-election with another slate of CGS candidates including John Hannah and Dr. George Oser. All three were defeated by conservative opponents backed by Concerted Action for Responsible Education (CARE). During the campaign and after her loss, Eleanor faced the anger of constituents on both sides of the aisle: “black carnations were left at [her office] door. Crumpled election flyers were strewn on [her] lawn. Many old friends stopped speaking to [her].”¹³

Although she was shocked and devastated by the defeat, Eleanor continued her work to make life better for Houstonians. She spent a few years serving on housing authority and children’s welfare boards, as well as sitting on a grand jury. Then in 1979 she decided to run for city council. Many of her advisors warned that the office offered little power to affect change and that no woman had ever been elected to the council before. On top of that, her opponent for the at-large position was venerable twenty-year incumbent Frank Mann. Eleanor’s chances looked bleak.

Against the judgment of her advisors, Eleanor proudly accepted the endorsement of the Gay Political Caucus because she believed she would “gain more votes than [she would] lose, and it’s the right thing to do. [She wanted] to be on the forefront of this civil rights movement.” Mann had openly worked against gay causes during his long tenure and mocked the LGBTQ community by calling them “queers and oddwads.” He insisted that Eleanor was not a viable candidate for office because she had earned their support. Quite to the contrary, she won the election with the help of voters from many marginalized groups, including members of the LGBTQ community, supporters of Planned Parenthood, and Asian Americans.¹⁴ At the time of her victory, she joined controller Kathy Whitmire and district councilwoman Cristin Hartung as the first women elected to city office in Houston.

She immediately set to work championing regulations to improve the quality of life for Houstonians, including ordinances to guarantee handicapped parking spots, improve city ambulance services, and require smoke detectors in apartments, hotels, and homes. She spoke out in support of affirmative action for women, initiating annual studies revealing the disparity in pay between white men in city government in comparison to women and minorities. Even as she fought against sexism, she experienced it herself as the first female to hold her office. For the first two years in the position, the other (male) at-large councilmembers forced her to office on a separate floor with the new district councilmembers. When she was finally invited to join them in 1982, she agreed on the condition that the “art deco aluminum lettering over the entrance to the reception area be changed from councilmen to simply ‘council.’”¹⁵ The edited sign can still be seen on the eighth floor of City Hall.

During her tenure, Eleanor focused much of her energy on health and safety causes. For example, she spearheaded a charge to add fluoride to the water supply on the eastern

side of the city.¹⁶ She also supported bike helmet regulations, DWI checks for school bus drivers, and smoking ordinances. The tobacco industry did all they could to keep these regulations from being approved, even organizing a television debate with Eleanor. Despite their best efforts, ordinances banning smoking inside public spaces passed and set an important precedent for city health and safety legislation for years to come. In 2006 a citizen argued in favor of an expanded smoking ban by pointing out that Eleanor Tinsley had started the conversation about second-hand smoke’s dangers over twenty years before.¹⁷

Eleanor took on another strong opponent in fighting to reduce the “visual pollution” caused by billboards and other signs. She supported legislation to remove existing billboards as well as prohibit future construction. When a general assembly attendee pointed out that the proposed legislation would put many sign company owners out of business, Eleanor reportedly responded: “Exactly.” She brushed off the industry’s attempt to blame her for ordinance-related job losses. Taking the display of a billboard reading “Tinsley Town” in stride, she declared, “the industry meant it to be a slam—I loved it!” Eleanor was even sued by a sign company owner for alleged business losses of \$21 million. The case was thrown out, and Eleanor initiated legislation to ban all billboards in Houston at the end of their useful lifespan. As was the case with many of the issues she championed, Eleanor refused to back down from the cause. She responded to the backlash of the billboard industry by saying, “As a public official, I’m not going to be squelched or have a muzzle put over my mouth.”¹⁸



Eleanor Tinsley after her 1979 City Council election victory.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Libraries, RGD6N-1979-3782-01.

One significant project pioneered by Eleanor, the SPARK School Park Program, still thrives today. SPARK is a unique program that encourages the cooperation of the private sector, school districts, and local government to “create more green space and critically needed recreational areas by transforming public school grounds into neighborhood parks.”¹⁹ When Kathleen and her family returned to Houston from the Dallas and Tulsa areas in 1988, she volunteered in her mother’s city council office and attended many SPARK events. She recalls the energy in Eleanor’s office as hopeful and accepting: “It was a privilege for me to see what a difference she was making, and to be in her office, which was like a think tank.... [She brought] everybody into the same room who had different viewpoints... Even if compromises had to be made, “issue[s] were] pushed forward because everybody had a voice at the table.”²⁰

Soon Eleanor asked Kathleen to take over a recently vacated assistant directorship in the SPARK program. After a year in the position, she took over as executive director and has been leading SPARK ever since.

In 1995 Eleanor was forced out of office by term limits. Still she did not stop fighting for what she believed. She served on Mayor Lee P. Brown’s transition team in 1998, continued to support Planned Parenthood and the rights of women, and campaigned for mayoral candidate Annise

Parker in 2009. She passed away on February 10, 2009.

Her legacy lives on in the legislation that keeps Houstonians safe and healthy, in the creation of over 200 SPARK parks under her daughter’s steadfast leadership, and in an HISD elementary school and a downtown park, which both received the honor of bearing her name. Just before her death, Eleanor was humbled and delighted by the news that a family member would also soon share her name: “How lucky can you be to have a park, a school and a great-granddaughter named for you?”²¹

Eleanor’s journey from a model housewife to a celebrated political force in Houston’s history ruffled a lot of feathers during her twenty-five years in local government, but her actions had profound effects on Houston’s progress during the late twentieth century. Being able to make a difference and “have a hand in making Houston a better place” ranked as one of her favorite parts of being in politics.²² It is undeniable that she was able to “do some good” during her career, just as she had hoped when deciding to run for the school board in the middle of the night in 1969 as her stalwart husband snored on, oblivious to the challenges and triumphs in their future.

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Eleanor cuts the ribbon at the dedication of a new SPARK park at Eleanor Tinsley Elementary School in 2004.

Photo courtesy of Kathleen Ownby.