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# history

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## LATINOS IN HOUSTON

*Trabajando para la comunidad y la familia*

UNIVERSITY of **HOUSTON** | CENTER FOR PUBLIC HISTORY

# What is Houston's DNA?



Debbie Z. Harwell,  
Editor

“Discover your ethnic origins,” find the “source of your greatness,” trace your “health, traits, and ancestry,” and “amaze yourself...find new relatives.” Ads proliferate from companies like AncestryDNA, 23andMe, and MyHeritage enticing us to learn more about who we really are.

People who send a saliva sample for analysis may be completely surprised by the findings or even united with unknown family members. For others it either confirms or denies what they believed about their heritage. For example, my AncestryDNA report debunks the story passed down by my mother and her blonde-haired, blue-eyed siblings that their grandmother, whom they never met, was a “full-blood Cherokee Indian.” Instead, my DNA analysis shows zero percent Native American ancestry.

Our intern Johnny Zapata thought of himself as Mexican and one-sixteenth Chinese before receiving his surprising AncestryDNA results. For starters, he is 55% Native American, which was unexpected since his skin tone is light and his family comes from Northern Mexico where higher percentages of European ancestry predominate. The test confirmed he is 6% East Asian or Chinese and 6% Italian, which solved the mystery of his great-grandmother's ancestry. She was known to be half Chinese, but no one knew if she was also half French or Italian. Looking deeper into his results, the 4% British, 2% Western European, 1% Irish, and 2% North African reveal the centuries-long migrations of Visigoth, Celtic, and Arab peoples from across Europe and the Mediterranean to the Iberian Peninsula and then to the Americas. Like many who do DNA testing, Johnny began to reassess his identity. As he explains, “In the United States all people from south of the border are given a blanket label, Hispanic or Latino...The racial binary constructed in this country does not fit the reality of centuries of racial mixing that occurred in Latin America. Previously, when asked my race I would select ‘white,’ but after taking this DNA test, I now proudly select Hispanic or Latino for my ethnicity and, when given the option, check three boxes for my race: white, Native American, and Asian.”

As we worked on this issue about Houston's Latino community, it raised the question, what does Houston's DNA look like? Today a DNA test would reveal Houston is the most ethnically and culturally diverse large metropolitan region in the United States, based on the distribution of the four largest racial/ethnic groups in the population. The 2010 Census showed Houston to be approximately 41% Hispanic, 33% White, 18% Black, 7% Asian, and 1% other. But Houston's DNA has not always reflected such a diverse heritage.

Populated originally by Native Americans, Mexicans, and Tejanos before empresarios parceled out the land, Houston quickly became an Anglo town, developed by

savvy businessmen making it a commercial hub. By the 1840s, Germans were coming in large numbers, as were other European immigrants. The numbers of Mexicans and Tejanos remained low until the 1910s-1920s, reaching about 5% in 1930. African Americans made up almost a quarter of the population, with their numbers growing during the Great Migration and with the influx of Creoles throughout the 1920s.

Houston's DNA, like the nation's, remained largely European due to federal laws: The Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882, 1892, and 1902; the Immigration Act of 1924, which imposed quotas mirroring each ethnic group's representation in the population and maintained the existing racial order; and the Mexican Repatriation Act of 1930, which permitted deportation of Mexicans — even some U.S. citizens — to relieve the stress they allegedly placed on the economy. American attitudes toward Mexicans changed during World War II. The U.S. and Mexican governments signed the Mexican Farm Labor Program Agreement, which brought in Mexican workers to fill U.S. labor shortages, but these *braceros* were not allowed to stay here.

The fortunes of hopeful emigrants changed with passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that allowed people to enter the country based on new criteria, including their technical skills, family reunification, and political persecution. The law opened the way for waves of new residents who came to Houston, altering our DNA and expanding the breadth of our city's culture. Beginning in the 1970s through 2010, the number of Latinos and Asians in Houston rose dramatically, with Latinos going from 11% to 41% of the population and Asians shifting from less than 1% to 7% of the total.

In thinking about the people discussed in this issue, I cannot help but be grateful that our DNA is so diverse! Latinos have continuously worked for our community and families, even when they were not treated as equals. Club México Bello eased the transition for immigrants and maintained their cultural traditions, which have become integral to our community at large. Yolanda Black Navarro, who served on *Houston History's* board, spearheaded vital civic programs and impressed on the community the power of Latino voters — not to mention making Villa Arcos a mainstay of East End restaurants. Gracie Saenz paved the way for other Latinas in Houston politics and served the community through her legal work, her time on City Council, and working with numerous nonprofit organizations. Hispanic Women in Leadership, whose members included Yolanda and Gracie, equally assisted in developing leadership skills and serving as community advocates. The *braceros* performed demanding labor, which the country desperately needed, for the opportunity to send a little money home and the chance to settle here someday.

Latinos and people of other ethnicities are now a fundamental part of our DNA. They make us who we are as a city that proudly wears the badge of diversity and does so with a degree of inclusiveness rarely seen elsewhere. As Gracie Saenz so aptly noted, “Diversity is a good thing.”

**LATINOS IN HOUSTON:**  
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**COVER PHOTO:** Man with Girl/Hombre con Niña, acrylic on paper. Artist Gabriela Magaña offers her perspective on the bracero history through rich and colorful paintings. Born and raised in Mexico, she now lives in Houston where she is an art student. The granddaughter of bracero Eduardo Lopez, she believes art is in everything and through it lives can be saved and others can be honored.

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# El Club Cultural Recreativo México Bello: Raza, Patria, e Idioma

By Adriana Castro



*Club México Bello celebrated holidays in style, as this Cinco de Mayo coronation in 1938 at the City Auditorium illustrates. Dorothy Farrington (Dr. Dorothy Caram), the child to the left of the queen, and her brother Phillip Farrington, at right, carried the queen's train with help from the little girl sitting next to Phillip.*

Photo courtesy of Dr. Dorothy Caram.

Dressed in elegant floor-length gowns and formal white suits, men, women, and children, flanked by flags from the United States and Mexico, crowded together for a picture in 1938. At the center stood the queen, holding a scepter and wearing an extravagant crown. This magnificent scene was captured at an event hosted by Club Cultural Recreativo México Bello, which became a model for many local Mexican American organizations. Still operating today, Club México Bello reached success and fame among Houstonians by creating a familiar environment for Mexican immigrants and introducing Mexican culture to non-Mexicans. It made a lasting imprint on Houston's Mexican American community, by giving Mexican Americans an opportunity to attend sophisticated social events and present themselves as outstanding citizens to the Houston community.

Club México Bello traces its origins to 1924 when ten men from Houston's Hispanic community formed a social club to fulfill a want that can only be described as "nostalgia for their native country." The club's goal was to maintain Mexico's culture for immigrants living in Houston. As

historian Arnolde de León writes, "[T]hrough 'México Bello' the traditions and customs of the mother country would be preserved and the name of Mexico kept sound and safe." In 1974 Reverend David Adame wrote a history of Club México Bello for the fiftieth anniversary in which he outlined the club's initial goals: "The idea of that club was to get as many people together with the idea of maintaining the Hispanic culture that they had brought from Mexico and to integrate with the Anglo society."<sup>1</sup>

From the name "México Bello" we can also see that the founders wanted to portray a positive image of their "Beautiful Mexico" not only to Houston's Latino community but also to its white community. Rev. Adame describes the humble beginnings of Club México Bello, saying, "They ventured to go and try to socialize with the Anglo community. The purpose of the club was to not only gather the people within the Hispanic community, but to get acquainted with the Anglo community and be part of the city of Houston. So they organized by having a party in one house and then another party in another house."<sup>2</sup>



*Club México Bello opened the doors of its clubhouse on Shearn to other cultural clubs and LULAC, in keeping with its mission to serve as a cultural outlet in the Mexican and Mexican American community. Club members also projected an elegant and sophisticated image of Mexicans to Houston's Anglo community.* Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0282-072-0006.

The need to form an organization of like-minded individuals of Mexican heritage can also be ascribed to ongoing discrimination or, as Rev. Adame phrases it, “misunderstand[ing[s],” that Mexicans faced in the 1920s. With this in mind the founders believed Club México Bello would benefit the Mexican American community. De León explains “Thus, cultural activities would be vehicles by which stereotypes and prejudice might be combated, and to that end, Club ‘México Bello’ in 1927 began holding formal black and white dances in prominent halls as an effort to display the ‘proper behavior’ of Mexicans. Once Anglos saw Mexicans for what they were, they would accept mexicanos on their own terms, according to this logic.” This carried distinct similarities to activities by African Americans also seeking racial uplift by setting an example of proper behavior to achieve equality.<sup>3</sup>

Among the club’s founders were Isidro García and Alejandro Martínez, the group’s first president. Dr. Dorothy Caram describes the founders, including her grandfather, as “prominent business and professional men, many of whom had fled Mexico after 1909. Many came to Houston in the early ’20s since there was still a lot of political turmoil in Mexico. My grandfather, Col. Felipe Santander came to Houston in early 1924 and brought my mother, Elena Santander, who was fifteen years old, and his wife, Luisa

*The club’s officers worked diligently to overcome community prejudice toward Mexicans and Mexican Americans and maintain their cultural heritage.*

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0330-0011.



Lopez de Santander.” Many members were, as de León notes, “attracted to the club primarily because of its emphasis on *lo mexicano*. Others were of more prominence, attracted by its cultural and nationalistic theme.” The club started out for men only, and those of Mexican descent actively sought membership because “the club clearly represented the most popular organization in the colonia, a who’s who of young, aspiring Hispanic Houston.”<sup>4</sup>

The men began hosting parties, with the help of their wives, at each other’s houses, but neighbors often complained to the police that the club’s parties were too noisy. The police then told the club members to quiet down or stop the party. Rev. Adame recalls one of these parties where Mayor Oscar Holcombe was present:

*On one of these occasions, when the Mayor was a guest, and the party was in full swing, a representative of the police department appeared and said, “Look, we are told that you are making a lot of noise, and we want you all to take your stuff out, and shut down your party and let’s have some quiet.” When the Mayor heard what the police were telling the president of the club, he came out and he said, “There is no noise, everything is calm, and this party is not going to close. If you want to come on in and join us, you are welcome.” From what I understand, the police*

*came in and also enjoyed the party. There was no such thing as being loud; it was just that the neighbors didn’t like the idea of the Hispanics having a party and having such a good time when they didn’t know how.”*<sup>5</sup>

In 1927 Club México Bello began holding its annual Black and White balls, elegant dances that took place in polished ballrooms with guests dressed in formal attire. Members strictly enforced a dress code of long, formal, black or white evening gowns for the women and black tuxedos with black bowties for the men — no exceptions. During the summer, Club México Bello also organized Pink and White balls. Like the Black and White balls, the dress code was strict with ladies in pink dresses and men in white tuxedos. Dr. Caram recalls, “Even if a man showed up [to the Black and White ball] in a black tuxedo and his shirt was not pure white he couldn’t come in.” She adds, “Sometimes they were sent back home because this is part of the rules, part of the regulations. This is tradition, and the club has wanted to keep it that way.”<sup>6</sup> This policy may seem a bit rigid, but it was in tune with the club’s goal to put forth the best image of Mexicans to the Houston community, especially the Anglo community. The dress code proved successful, enabling Club México Bello to integrate many of Houston’s elegant dance halls with their Black and White balls.

*El Club Cultural Recreativo México Bello formed in Houston in 1924 to maintain the members’ Mexican culture – offering a little bit of home away from home – and to dispell prejudice. The motto “raza, patria, e idioma” means “race, country, and language.”*

Photo courtesy of Dr. Dorothy Caram.





*Although women had been involved with planning events and supporting the club at large, they formed Club Femenino México Bello in 1954 as a women's auxiliary.*  
 Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0108-033.

De León recounts how the dance impressed the owner of the Aragon ballroom in the 1930s: “For their annual Black and White ball... the Club’s officers went to the skeptical owner of the Aragon ballroom (in downtown Houston, 1010 Rusk), who, wary of Mexicans desecrating the salon, asked them for a steep deposit and other assurances. Once they gained his cautious approval for using the Aragon, the membership impressed the proprietor so deeply by their dress and comportment that he freely confessed afterwards: ‘We Anglos have much to learn from Mexicans.’ With that singular demonstration of behavior... were torn down racial barriers and thenceforth, Mexicans had access to the rest of Houston’s elegant ballrooms in the best hotels or those privately owned.”<sup>7</sup>

México Bello also hosted Debutante balls or annual quinceañeras starting in 1958 to provide young girls an opportunity to make their debut into society with stylish elegance. Dressed in lavish white dresses, the debutantes were escorted by young men in black tuxedos. The lucky girl crowned queen of the ball received a crown and scepter. The club hosted these balls, which included members of other local Mexican American organizations, so Hispanic girls in the community could enjoy an extravagant party whether or not her family could afford a quinceañera.<sup>8</sup>

México Bello also undertook many philanthropic efforts to better Houston’s Latin American community. In its Official Charter of 1937, it stated its main purpose: “This club is formed for the support of benevolent, charitable and educational undertakings, being more particularly for the purpose of encouraging and promoting matters and undertakings of public interest and for civic benefit to the

City of Houston, Texas, and for the purpose of rendering benevolence and charity to such persons as may from time to time be found to be in need of such benevolence and charity, and to assist worthy persons to become educated in



*The front and back of these colorful programs from the Debutante balls in 1960 and 1961 make it possible to imagine what a special evening this was for the young ladies who attended. One program has the imprint of the woman’s lipstick inside.*

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0194b5f13.

Scrap Book for the first year of  
 the "Girls Mexico Bello Auxiliary Club"  
 October 20, 1953 thru October 20, 1954



Anita Maria Garcia  
 Presidenta



MARGARET GONZALES  
 Secretary



ROSEYDA POIRIE  
 Vice President



JO ANN OLIVARES  
 Treasurer



FRANCES GONZALES  
 Fin. Treasurer



MARGALITA MARTINEZ  
 Reporter



VIRGINIA MARTINEZ  
 Program Chairman



STELLA REYNA  
 Editor



ANGELINA RAMOE  
 Sgt. at Arms



Secretary,  
 Margaret Gonzalez

The Houston Metropolitan Research Center's collection for Club México Bello contains many treasures, including a scrapbook prepared to commemorate the inaugural years of the Girls México Bello Auxiliary.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGE0024b5, Scrapbook.

the use of the Spanish language, and to bring a closer understanding between the peoples of Mexico and other Latin-American countries and the peoples of the United States.”<sup>9</sup>

Club México Bello participated in community events including Mexican holidays such as Cinco de Mayo, Día de la Independencia (Mexican Independence Day), and Día de la Raza (Day of the Race). Celebrating these holidays allowed the club members to stay in touch with their Mexican roots and to share part of their heritage with other Houstonians. By reaching out to people of all ages — such as sponsoring girls’ sports teams and a Boy Scout Troop with LULAC — the club “sought to furnish an outlet for the social, athletic, and cultural activities of the young.” During the Depression, the club suffered financially, yet, in the midst of it all, it continued working in a less visible manner. Club México Bello raised funds for the city’s poor Mexican community by organizing benefit dinners and dances at the Rusk Settlement

House. Club members also handed out clothing and other articles to the needy children at Rusk Settlement. Through many of its charitable efforts, Club México Bello “opened doors for the whole community to participate in any projects whether they were civic, political, or benevolent.”<sup>10</sup>

Even though Club México Bello’s membership was strictly limited to men, the members’ wives made major contributions to the club as well. The wives organized teas in each other’s homes and coordinated arrangements for the Debutantes dance. Dr. Dorothy Caram, wife of club member Dr. Pedro Caram, taught the debutantes to dance and hosted many teas for the members’ wives. In 1954, the ladies formed a women’s auxiliary, Club Femenino México Bello, with Virginia de la Isla as its first president.<sup>11</sup>



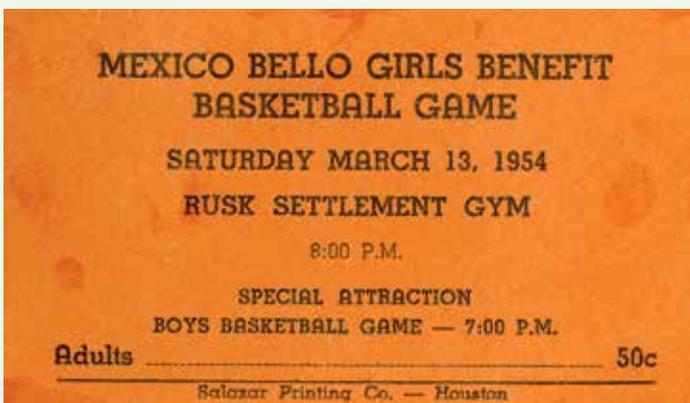
*Dr. Dorothy Caram speaks at a Black and White ball in the Shamrock Hilton Grand Ballroom in the 1980s. Working on the galas from 1960 to 2000, she recalls the affairs reached close to 1,000 guests. Her husband, Pedro C. Caram, M.D., served as president for many years and ensured people of all social strata were welcome at the balls and quinceañeras.*

Photo courtesy of Dorothy Caram.

After the 1960s, the club limited its activities, primarily because other organizations filled the community’s needs. De León explains, “By the 1970s past its fiftieth year of existence, [Club México Bello] had decided to revise the club’s statutes as they seemed inapplicable to the changing times. Instead of trying to perpetuate ‘lo mejor del carácter mexicano’ as it had done previously, it now sought to instill young people with ethnic pride in their Mexican heritage.”<sup>12</sup> Initially Club México Bello had served as a vehicle for social change by altering public perceptions about Mexicans through its elegant balls and events. Within the Mexican American community, it helped to alleviate the nostalgia felt for the old country by recreating a piece of Mexico in Houston. Moving forward, however, Club México Bello shifted its focus to maintaining Mexican cultural traditions and pride in residents’ Mexican heritage. Today, the club still hosts its Black and White and Debutante balls. They remain as family traditions passed down from the first generation of club members and Mexican immigrants in 1924.

Club México Bello began with a mission to put forth a positive image of Mexican Americans and to maintain Mexican tradition by creating a little Mexico abroad, “*hacer un México chiquito en el extranjero*.”<sup>13</sup> By hosting elegant dances, participating in community events, and providing an outlet for Latin American expression, the club fulfilled its mission of creating a “Beautiful Mexico” in our Houston community.

**Adriana Castro** is a junior in the University of Houston Honors College, majoring in history and minoring in education and Phronesis. She has interned with *Houston History* since the fall of 2016. Upon graduation, she plans to teach high school history.



*The young women had basketball and volleyball teams, but this fundraiser for the México Bello Girls featured the boys basketball game as the star attraction at Rusk Settlement.*

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGE0024 Scrapbook.

A small red building stands out on Navigation Boulevard, luring customers inside with the mouthwatering scent of freshly cooked tortillas. Upon entering, the restaurant's loyal customers see red and white walls decorated with honors and recognitions, one of Houston's best menus, and, usually, a line. The family-owned restaurant Villa Arcos was established in 1977 by Velia Arcos Rodríguez Durán (1922-1986) and continues to thrive today under her family's care. In 1986 her daughter Yolanda Black Navarro purchased the business and, upon her passing in 2015, it was handed down to her only child, Christian Navarro.<sup>1</sup>

Velia was born in San Antonio, Texas, in 1922. Growing up there, she inherited her cooking skills from her mother, who was from the Arcos family in Hondo, Texas. Velia always worked in small restaurants or *panderías*. In 1939 she moved to Houston's Second Ward (East End), where she raised six children – four girls and two boys – and became an active member of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church.<sup>2</sup>

Through the church, Velia got to know “Mama” Ninfa Lorenzo, who at the time owned a tortilla factory and later became a widely known restaurateur, especially among Tex-Mex aficionados. Like Mama Ninfa, Velia opened her restaurant at a time when Mexican restaurants were few in number and primarily served Mexican communities. This differed greatly from Houston's current culinary scene, where Mexican and Mexican-influenced foods are celebrated and cuisines from across Latin America can be found easily.<sup>3</sup>

Villa Arcos enabled Velia, as a single mother, to provide for herself and her children. By choosing to open a restaurant, she utilized skills like cooking that she and other women already used in their daily lives at home. In addition, Velia found herself in an overwhelmingly positive environment with little competition. Coupled with perseverance, there was little chance for failure. Velia began first by gathering investors and parties willing to contribute money toward her goal of one thousand dollars to purchase a building and equipment.<sup>4</sup>

Villa Arcos opened in 1977 “by word of mouth,” servicing mostly Latino truck drivers and acquaintances, operating

## Yolanda Black Navarro: East End Reina

By Denise Gomez



*Yolanda Black Navarro (1947-2015): mother, grandmother, sister, businesswoman, community leader, activist, and advocate for others.*

All photos courtesy of Christian Navarro unless otherwise noted.

from five in the morning to three in the afternoon, and manned by Velia, a cook, and a lady who made tortillas. Initially the restaurant's customers ordered and were served at a window on the side of the building, but it has since expanded to include an indoor dining area and, recently, outdoor seating.<sup>5</sup>

Velia's eldest daughter, Yolanda, who had graduated from the University of Houston and was working for Southwestern Bell at the time Villa Arcos opened, helped her mother on weekends by writing checks, making deposits, and minding the financials. Later, under Yolanda's direction, the restaurant came to reflect her political activism and began to attract customer-politicians such as then Houston City Council Member Melissa Noriega, Harris County Commissioner Sylvia Garcia, and Mayor Bill White. The stimulating political discussions attracted people to Villa Arcos just as much as the delicious tacos. Although Yolanda died three years ago, her legacy continues to grow, which is hardly surprising after a life filled with accomplishments that impacted the community.<sup>6</sup>

A native Houstonian, Yolanda grew up in a two-story house at the corner of Palmer and Navigation Boulevard, next to where Villa Arcos stands today. Childhood memories include bus trips downtown, as well as visiting Wayside and Harrisburg Streets and Settegast Park. Parks offered space for her family's great Easter celebrations attended by all the aunts, uncles, and cousins on her mother's side of the family.<sup>7</sup>

Yolanda received her primary school education at the historic Our Lady of Guadalupe School and then proceeded to the all-girls Incarnate Word Academy. Although she remembered growing up in a predominately Hispanic community with Hispanic-serving schools, as a child she was unaware that she herself was Hispanic and therefore different from the majority. In her eyes, her peers were “just kids growing up.” Reflecting on her youth, Yolanda believed her surname, Black, had the potential to hide her ethnicity because it did not sound “stereotypically Hispanic or Mexican American.” Yolanda first confronted a sense of ethnic discrimination in high school. Although she was a very involved and successful student, she could sometimes



*One of six children in her family, Yolanda attended school at Our Lady of Guadalupe and Incarnate Word.*

the first time, were able to donate time and raise money for political campaigns. The Viva Kennedy campaign launched in support of Senator John F. Kennedy's presidential bid targeted and succeeded in capitalizing on the Latino vote and mobilizing those voters. Yolanda's introduction into grassroots political work included going door-to-door to encourage people to vote on behalf of the Kennedy campaign. Afterwards Yolanda was briefly involved with the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations (PASO), a regeneration of the Houston Civic Action Committee (CAC) that organized Viva Kennedy Clubs and supported his election. These seemingly small, early tasks impressed young Yolanda with a sense of community belonging that directed her entire life.<sup>8</sup>

Yolanda's family constantly encouraged her to pursue higher education, which instilled in her an extreme desire to go to college. As a high school student, she lacked access to the resources a child has today, and as a minority woman,

sense a change in other people's looks and body language when it became clear she was a Latina.

Yolanda first became politically involved during her teenage years. Two of her uncles, brothers Alfonso and Guadalupe Rodríguez, were active members of a plumbers' union—Guadalupe actually served as president of the Plumbers Local Union 68, and Alfonso was the subject of a book, *Chicano Go Home!*, written by Tomás Lopez. The Rodríguez brothers joined the huge wave of Latino American citizens who, for

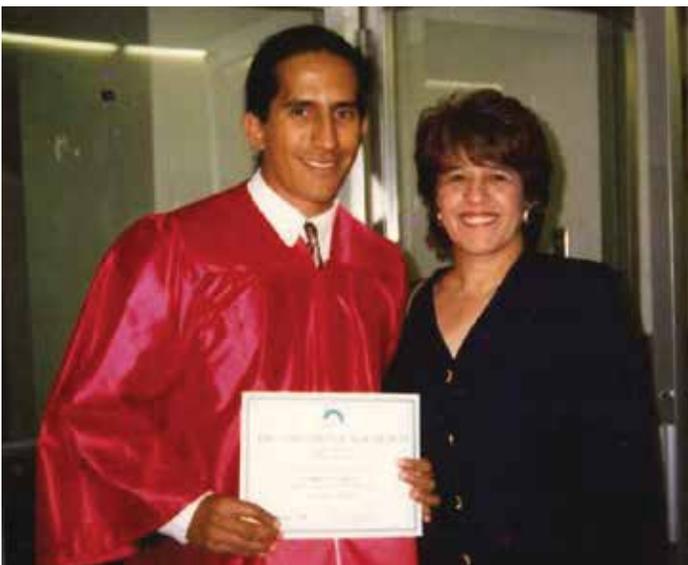
she had big hurdles to overcome. Undeterred Yolanda enrolled at the University of Houston in 1964 with intentions of becoming a lawyer, although she switched her major to business administration. Initially she took on a full course load but had to lighten that after a year because she felt she needed to work and help her family financially. She enrolled in night classes and worked full-time during the day, graduating in 1973 with her beloved year-old son, Christian, and a bright career ahead of her.<sup>9</sup>

After graduating Yolanda worked for the Texas Employment Commission, followed by brief stints at Stude Construction and Humble Oil Company. She sought assistance in her professional development through the Minority Women Employment Program, whose mission was to help minority women obtain corporate positions. Through this program, which was an expanded version of black women's employment programs, Yolanda found a position with Southwestern Bell (now AT&T). The Women's Bureau had a program, Minority Women in Leadership, that helped Yolanda secure her position at Southwestern Bell. The first black woman to head the bureau, Elizabeth Duncan Koontz, took her position in 1969, and throughout the 1970s, the bureau focused on bettering working conditions for women and ending discrimination for working minority women.<sup>10</sup>

Yolanda entered the workforce at a time when women were encouraged to remain in traditional roles—if they were not stay-at-home mothers, they were expected to take jobs in the service industry, teaching, nursing, or clerical work. Those that did seek jobs in male-dominated spaces faced prejudice at every turn. Often white male employers looking to fill managerial positions had a preconceived idea of who made the ideal candidate: a college-educated white man, with a bachelor's or business administration degree. Generally, women were seen as less qualified, and especially minority women, who had to deal with prejudices surrounding their gender and ethnicity or race. Employers openly worried whether language barriers or cultural differences posed future problems, specifically for prospective Latino employees. Even with a college degree in hand, Latinos held lower-ranked managerial positions on average.<sup>11</sup>

Yolanda's career at Southwestern Bell spanned almost twenty-four years, from 1974 to 1997. Yolanda first manned positions ensuring quality customer service as a group manager, until she moved into another department, Real Estate Management/Building Operations, concerned with maintenance, air conditioning systems, and the like. Here she not only held a managerial position, but she held it over men, a nontraditional position for a woman that presented both a significant change and a challenge. In spite of the era's prejudice surrounding women in the workforce, Yolanda happily remembered her time at Southwestern Bell and was thankful for the positive experience.<sup>12</sup>

Mistreatment of minority groups was not limited to workplaces and often tensions played out in the very spaces that were meant to be a community's safe haven. In a notorious case of Houston police brutality, officers were convicted of negligent homicide in the 1977 death of Jose Campos Torres, which preceded the Moody Park riots in response a year later. As park goers congregated to celebrate Cinco



*Yolanda's son, Christian, received his bachelor's degree from the University of New Mexico in 1995. He completed his law degree at The University of Texas.*



*Yolanda Black Navarro and her dear friend Lolita Guerrero attended the 2011 AAMA Gala. An honored community leader, Guerrero is the community liaison to Texas Senator Sylvia Garcia.*  
Photo courtesy of AAMA.

de Mayo, a fight broke out and the police were called. A confrontation erupted between the officers and park goers, who reportedly overwhelmed the street, destroyed properties, and started fires. Police arrested forty people. Yolanda recalled similar issues of brutality during confrontations between police officers and black Houstonians on Dowling Street. Although she did not witness these clashes, she remembers reports indicating that they were caused by the use of aggressive tactics by police officers, resulting in situations she described as “police versus community.”<sup>13</sup>

As a concerned community member and activist, Yolanda was among the founding members of two important local organizations. The first was the Association for the Advancement of Mexican Americans (AAMA), formed in 1970, alongside other influential Mexican Americans—Froilan Hernandez, Roland Lorenzo, and William Navarro—concerned with the East End’s social problems, ranging from drug abuse to school dropout rates.<sup>14</sup> Her personal motivation for forming this organization was to help children. Yolanda felt that children in the community did not have enough recreational or extracurricular options to keep them busy and away from drugs and trouble. Since its establishment, the association has been very successful. Its first grant, received in 1971, was for \$40,000. AAMA’s projects focused on meeting the Latino community’s needs and facilitating social mobility. In 1973, the George I. Sanchez Charter School was founded. One of the first charter schools in Texas, the Sanchez school serves at-risk students in pre-kindergarten and grades six to twelve. A drug prevention program followed three years later. In 1976, AAMA established its adult education program, Adelante, which focuses on adult literacy, GED preparation, and ESL services. In 1991, AAMA partnered with Houston Independent School District (HISD) to prevent dropouts.

During this time, Yolanda also worked with different programs recruiting women, especially disadvantaged women, into better jobs.<sup>15</sup>

Always looking for new opportunities, Yolanda opened a business for a brief amount of time, near the location of El Mercado del Sol (Alexan Lofts today), where she sold goods from Mexico.<sup>16</sup> In 1987 she teamed up with other business owners to form a non-profit organization, the Navigation Area Business Association (NABA), which is still in operation, to give back to their neighborhood. A celebratory Hispanic Festival was the first project organized by the association, which ran for two years at a time when Houston had few such events. The group’s success and duration can be credited to like-minded, dedicated Houstonians like Yolanda.

The idea for NABA’s biggest project was born during a casual lunch when Yolanda spoke with her friend Bill Woodby of Navigation Bank. As he told her about his childhood memories of walking to school without shoes, he wondered how the two of them could help kids today facing the same problem. After much discussion and brainstorming the two had an idea: gifting shoes to children in need around Christmas time.

They gave their idea a name, “Shoes for Kids,” and sent letters to their contacts. In its inaugural year in 1988, Shoes for Kids met at Ripley House and serviced fifty families who enjoyed dinner and gift baskets. The kids, of course, received brand new tennis shoes. The program continues to be held at Austin High School, where approximately 2,300 children received shoes in December 2017 with the support of the Navigation Area Business Association and local business owners. At least 30,000 pairs of shoes have been donated to Houston families through the program, and it is amazing to think how many lives have changed as a result of two friends meeting for lunch.<sup>17</sup>

Mayor Bob Lanier, who served Houston from 1992 to 1998, appointed Yolanda to the Houston Parks Board where she served three mayors across fifteen years. She particu-



*In 2009 Yolanda, with Sanchez high school students, attended the ribbon cutting for the new AAMA Learning Center, which houses Sanchez Charter School. One of Texas’s first charter schools, Sanchez serves pre-K and sixth through twelfth grade students, including dual credit and workforce readiness courses through Houston Community College, along with other services.*



*Yolanda and Bill Woodby conceived the idea for Shoes for Kids to give children shoes around Christmas time, with support from the nonprofit Navigation Area Business Association (NABA) and other community members. At least 30,000 pairs of shoes have been donated as of 2017.* Photo courtesy of NABA.

larly enjoyed serving on the board because of the positive impact parks have on people’s quality of life and because parks offer spaces for families and children to spend time together, as she remembered from her Easter celebrations.<sup>18</sup>

The need for parks was one of the issues Yolanda focused on when she twice ran for office. In 1997, she ran in Houston’s general election for Council Member At-Large Position 1 against six other candidates. Annise Parker, who later held several city positions including mayor, won and Yolanda came in fourth place. When Felix Fraga’s term expired, Yolanda ran for District H against four people. Although she made the runoff, Gabriel Vazquez won that race despite not having nearly the connection to the East End that Yolanda had. Regardless of the results, she did not regret running and maintained a positive perspective on both races. The two campaigns were invaluable learning experiences for her, especially in understanding the difference between being the voter and the person receiving the votes, learning more about issues, and recognizing mistakes she may have made. The issues she focused on mirror her life’s work: community concerns about safety, security, infrastructure, equality, jobs, and education.<sup>19</sup>

Yolanda also believed in clarifying what “Latino community” meant. Historically it was safe to assume “Hispanic,” “Latino,” or “Spanish” could be used interchangeably to refer to Houston’s Mexican population, and although each word had been used in different contexts for different purposes, they usually described the same thing. In Yolanda’s eyes it was necessary to clarify who were members of the Latino community, which included Mexican Americans as well as immigrants from South and Central America. Immigration was a strong issue that bound Latinos from different places together through a shared experience.

The Esplanade on Navigation Boulevard, a strip of land located in front of the Original Ninfa’s Restaurant and other eateries, was revitalized and reopened in 2013. The

goal of the update was for the Esplanade to become, once again, “*el corazón de la comunidad*” or the heart of the community. The new esplanade has connections to the Houston Ship Channel, which provides many jobs for Houstonians, and is decorated with “faux wood benches, artistic bike racks, picnic tables shaded by some large trees, and a sculpted anchor.” Without a doubt the esplanade looked beautiful, but it lacked something important in the eyes of Yolanda and other community activists.<sup>20</sup>

The design had nothing representative of the East End’s Latino culture despite its rich, well-known influence on the area. The community largely felt ignored and replaced. Suggestions for a more accurate representation of the area ranged from a visible use of the Spanish language or more vibrant colors traditionally associated with the culture. Locals argued that people come to East End because of its relationship to Latino culture. Yolanda asked for better communication as well as a final product that represented East End’s culture and history.<sup>21</sup>



*Yolanda, pictured here with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, became a force in politics, recognizing the growing importance of Latino voters and officeholders, as well as those who supported issues important to the Latino community.*

Yolanda intervened in a similar situation, one year later, for Guadalupe Plaza. Driving down Navigation, Yolanda noticed that Guadalupe Plaza had been invaded by bulldozers. As it turns out, the Greater East End Management District (GEEMD) decided to renovate the area which, according to the GEEMD, “received virtually no use by the community and was occupied by homeless people.” What angered Yolanda was that the management district had not consulted the area’s businesses, much less the people, and the GEEMD took action without notifying the community. Instead of a green space, Yolanda advocated for something to serve as a tribute to the community’s Hispanic heritage and history. In response Yolanda and the Houston chapter of LULAC coordinated a press conference to alert the media, protesting the way in which the GEEMD disregarded the community. Eventually the GEEMD renovated the space while maintain-



*Yolanda takes a swing at a piñata during the East End Foundation's PiñataFest on Navigation Boulevard. The foundation is dedicated to highlighting the area's unique Latino culture, connecting the community through education, arts, culture, the local economy, and heritage.*

ing its historic integrity, and Yolanda organized the creation of decorative panels of notable Latino Houstonians like Ninfa Laurenzo, Yolanda's mother, and the Fraga family, detailing their life and contributions to the East End.<sup>22</sup>

Even a partial list of Yolanda's accomplishments and honors is long and impressive. She was appointed to the Metropolitan Transit Authority Board and the Land Assemblage Redevelopment Authority; served as co-chair of the Mayor's Hispanic Authority Board; was a founding member of Latina PAC and LULAC 634 and a member of the American Leadership Forum, El Centro de Corazón, the Greater Hispanic Coalition, and the Hispanic Women in Leadership. She received the Hispanic Heritage Award



*Respected community leaders Yolanda Black Navarro and Felix Fraga were named Reina y Rey (Queen and King) at the Second Annual Street Fest in the East End on October 19, 2013. The festival was held on the recently completed Navigation Esplanade, near Villa Arcos.*

Photo courtesy of AAMA.

for Lifetime Achievement, the Willie Velasquez Community Service Award, and the East End Chamber of Commerce Small Business Award; was recognized as a Woman on the Move and a member of The Mujeres Legendarias of Houston; and the City of Houston celebrated November 3, 2015, as "Yolanda Black Navarro Day." In 2013, she received the fitting title of "East End Reina."<sup>23</sup> The list could and does go on.

Recently Yolanda posthumously received two more recognitions for her dedication to Houston. In October 2016 Houston Independent School District (HISD) held a celebration to rechristen one of its schools the Yolanda Black Navarro Middle School of Excellence. (It was formerly named for the Confederate general Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson.) By using Yolanda's name, HISD better represented its values and, at the same time, honored a local hero. Of course naming the school for a Latina carries great significance as Yolanda's life not only offers inspiration but also serves as an example of the possibilities for other Latino/a students. In addition, Harris County Precinct 2 working with Buffalo Bayou Partnership converted a former East End construction site into a beautiful ten-acre park, Yolanda Black Navarro Buffalo Bend Nature Park, with ponds, trails, and native flora for locals to enjoy and honor Yolanda's contributions and civic leadership.<sup>23</sup>

Above all else Yolanda was extremely devoted to engaging her community, celebrating Latino American heritage, and empowering families. In her lifetime, she saw Latinos move from isolated enclaves to neighborhoods throughout the city and country and witnessed the increased influence of the Latino vote compared to the days of her youth. As a woman who remembered looking up to and working alongside "Houston's firsts"—meaning some of the city's first Latino leaders—she talked of her community's voting strength, its political presence and buying power, describing the community as a "sleeping giant." She believed that the percentage of Latinos in Houston should be reflected in the percentage of Latinos holding political office as well as management and other high-level positions. Houston has seen a big change in the last few decades, but a great deal of work remains to be done.<sup>24</sup>

Yolanda was one woman effecting change for her family, her community, and her city, in addition to the wider history of Latinos in the United States. Just a few decades ago, the idea of a woman like Yolanda—independent, entrepreneurial, educated, politically active, unapologetically Latina American—was difficult, if not impossible, to envision. In many ways she is an example of trailblazing and perseverance, of a person who experienced change firsthand and also drove it. In the simplest terms, she was an everyday person who did extraordinary things, and her legacy in the city of Houston continues to grow.

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Gracie Saenz waves to spectators at the Cinco De Mayo Parade in Houston during her campaign for Houston City Council.

All photos courtesy of Gracie Saenz.

# Laying the Groundwork: Gracie Saenz's Life of Public Service

By Stephanie Gomez

"Are you crazy? You have no name recognition, you have no money, you have no experience...what's wrong with you?" the doubters asked Gracie Saenz as she considered running for an at-large seat on Houston City Council. Undeterred, she won and opened a door for others to follow in her footsteps. This forward movement, as she explains, benefitted *"not only the Latino community, but everyone as a whole. ... knowing that having diversity is a good thing. It's the right thing."*

Although Houston is celebrated as one of the nation's most diverse cities, it was largely segregated with little intersection across race and ethnicity into the mid-twentieth century. African Americans primarily resided in Third, Fourth, and Fifth Ward, which also had a large Creole population. Mexicans and Mexican Americans settled initially in Second Ward, but, as their numbers grew, they moved into First, Sixth, and parts of Fifth Ward, as well as Magnolia Park. Escaping sharecropping, violence, or political unrest in the early 1900s, migrants and immigrants generally came to Houston from East Texas, Louisiana, and Mexico. Although Houston offered better employment and educational opportunities than the places they left, many of these new arrivals lived in poverty. Nevertheless, the communities and their cohesiveness played a positive role in determining their character and raising their potential for future success socially, economically, and politically.

One of the success stories to come out of the city's ethnic

communities is that of Gracie Saenz, who dedicated her career to improving Houston for all of its inhabitants through public service. Graciela "Gracie" Guzman Saenz was born at her parents' home in Houston's Fifth Ward in the 1950s. She was raised in a four-room house where she lived with her parents, a great aunt and uncle, and nine siblings in the barrio *El Crisol*, named for the nearby creosote plant.<sup>2</sup> Like many Mexican American families at this time, the Guzmans faced their share of struggles due to their ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Regardless, Gracie's upbringing, her experiences, and the support of friends and family enabled her to rise to the top as one of Houston's most influential citizens.

While Gracie's family has strong roots in the Mexican state of Michoacán, her family also had ties to Houston. Her father, Juan Guzman, was a U.S. citizen by birth and lived in Houston until he was sent back to Mexico under the Mexican Repatriation Act of 1930 during the Great Depression. Ignoring citizenship and visa status, the U.S. government used this act to round up *mexicanos* and send them back to Mexico, some of them in boxcars. Estimates indicate that approximately one million Mexican and Mexican Americans in the southwestern United States were removed to Mexico, although some agreed to go voluntarily rather than face deportation. Guzman was a grown man with three children before he returned home – one of the fortunate few who could prove he was born in Houston in 1926 by his baptismal records from Our Lady of Guadalupe Church.<sup>3</sup> Due



*The Guzman family. On the back row are Gracie and Samia. The front row (left to right) are Louis, Francisco, Lupe, Concepcion, Guadalupe, Juanito, Juan Sr., Eva, and Cruz.*

to his deportation experience and the repeated questioning that Spanish-speakers endured from police at the time, he always carried his U.S. birth certificate in his wallet.

When asked how the forced repatriation affected her father, Gracie recalls, “Dad always felt as if he was robbed of an American education...he knew the value of an education.” Without a degree, Guzman had to support his family of eleven through manual labor, like many other Mexicans and Mexican Americans. As the family patriarch, he took care of the family financially while the women performed the domestic duties, which was common in most Latino families, even though it is a family dynamic that might seem outdated today. Gracie adds, “Dad was a laborer...it was very difficult. I grew up with a lot of the discrimination, depression, and basically, the poverty... It implicated in me a desire to get an education as a way to get out.”<sup>4</sup>

Gracie’s family and their story played a pivotal role in her understanding the value of an education. From a young age, Gracie loved learning, despite the discrimination and racism she saw carried out in schools without a second thought. Gracie often experienced insensitive treatment from her teachers. One teacher, who punished students for speaking Spanish, referred to Graciela as Gracie-Ella, despite being told that the correct pronunciation was Grăc-ě-ā-la. When the teacher grew tired of being corrected, she decreed, “I’m just going to call you ‘Gracie.’” Although the name sounded foreign to Gracie at the time, it stuck. When retelling the story, she cannot help but laugh at how such an incident ended up affecting her personal brand.<sup>5</sup>

Fortunately other teachers provided Gracie a good education and instilled in her an appreciation for lifelong learning that led her to graduate from high school, college, and, eventually, law school. In addition to her parents, Gracie credits Mr. Garcia and Mr. Dominguez with establishing a communicative connection with parents who did not speak English. These educators’ efforts were significant in ensuring student success and demonstrated how Latino community members took care of each other. From the teachers’ examples, Gracie, too, developed a desire to help others, and she has stayed in contact with several of her teachers, who have played active roles in her life.

The Fifth Ward neighborhood where Gracie grew up was typical of Houston’s minority neighborhoods. Even as parents stressed education as a key to upward mobility, poverty hung over the heads of residents, with many children exposed to violence, gang activity, and drug use. Once as Gracie and her siblings walked home from school, between the Carnegie Neighborhood Library and Marshall Middle School, she witnessed a man come up and shoot her teenage neighbor in the head, allegedly because the youth had slashed some tires, although that was never confirmed. Gracie’s neighbor died at the same location where Josue Flores, a fifth grader, was eulogized in 2016 after being stabbed to death by a homeless man as the child walked home. Gracie points out how the response to Josue’s death differed, with people in Houston and the nation saddened and enraged upon hearing news of the child’s senseless murder. By contrast, the teenager’s death, though tragic, did not spark the same outrage and shock because Gracie’s neighborhood was perceived as violent. While attitudes have changed since the first tragedy, Gracie agrees that Josue’s death should make us wonder how much farther we still have to go.<sup>6</sup>

When Gracie went on to Jefferson Davis High School (now Northside High School), she continued to experience discrimination. Elected major of the girls’ drill team, the Carlton Cadets, and excited to begin her responsibilities, Gracie faced brash resentment from the school’s principal, who told her that team founder, Mrs. Carlton, would be “rolling in her grave at the thought of a Mexican major.” The principal asked Gracie and the other officers to refrain from performing under the Carlton Cadet name lest they lose their funding and support.<sup>7</sup> The young women refused to change the name and, instead, organized a series of fundraisers to raise money for uniforms and instruments to compete. The Carlton Cadets has survived many years with many more Latina leaders.

This type of discrimination against Latinos followed Gracie into her college years at the University of Houston where she earned her bachelor’s degree in Spanish in 1978 and her juris doctorate (JD) in 1986. During Gracie’s tenure as president of the UH Chicano Law Student Association, the group discovered that many financial aid cases for minority students took an extended time to process, leaving



*Gracie Saenz with her parents, Juan and Guadalupe Guzman.*



*Gracie enjoys a day parachuting with her eldest son, Daniel, and her granddaughter Lucia.*

distribute the aid through the center. In response, several community leaders organized a roundtable discussion and pressured the Law Center to assist the students. The roundtable included several attorneys, prominent local Latinos, and Dr. Tatcho Mindiola, a Latino activist and director of the UH Center for Mexican American Studies. Thereafter, the Law Center quickly accepted the funds and responsibility for distributing and maintaining the account.<sup>9</sup>

After completing her bachelor's degree, Gracie had worked as a paralegal at Tindall & Foster with Charles Foster, a nationally prominent immigration attorney, who helped her develop the skills to grow professionally and gain confidence for her future political career. Gracie wanted to attend law school but was unsure that, as a wife and mother of two living on a police officer's salary, she could complete the program. Judith Cooper, a Venezuelan native and renowned immigration attorney, inspired Gracie by explaining that she had come to the United States with three children and lacking English proficiency, yet she managed to get her law degree. Thus, in May 1986, after giving birth to her third child in the middle of her final semester, Gracie graduated from the UH Law Center, receiving the faculty's Distinguished Student Award.

Gracie became an assistant district attorney, but she vividly recalls a moment as a prosecutor that changed her outlook on life and the consequences of her work. It was a typical day as she walked into the jail cells behind the courtrooms. Being bilingual, she was normally asked to process the prisoners. This time, however, as the door opened, a light shone on one particular young man's face, and Gracie thought she was looking at her oldest son, Daniel. After experiencing what she called a "freak-out," Gracie felt relief when she recognized it was not her beloved Daniel. Dread soon replaced relief, though, as she comprehended that little difference existed between the incarcerated boys and her son. "Oh, no, Gracie," she thought, ". . . They're all your sons." She realized she had contributed to the mass incarceration of minority men and saw how easy it had become to assign prison sentences to offenders, shaking her view of the U.S. justice system.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout this time, Judge Al Leal, a young Hispanic judge Gracie had met while in the D.A.'s office and who

them feeling discriminated against and unable to purchase books or class materials, which caused them to fall behind.<sup>8</sup>

Gracie, with other Chicano students, helped organize taco sales and fundraisers to aid students short of money. Although the Chicano Law Student Association raised all the funds, the UH Law Center was reluctant to let the organization

greatly influenced her, supported Gracie as she thought through what the next step in her life should be. He began dropping hints that Houston needed a strong leader to run for office—an educated, charismatic individual who understood the issues of the barrio and its inhabitants. Gracie responded, "Well, let me know when you find them and I'll support them."<sup>11</sup>

Although Gracie considered running for office, she did not make the decision hastily. It was important that the people she loved, her husband Eloy Saenz, her family, and her church, be on board. Gracie smiles as she recalls, "I kept waiting for someone to tell me no!" but no one did. Gracie's 1991 city council campaign was tough, with constant reminders that she was a minority woman, without name recognition, running for an at-large seat. Plus she faced nine other candidates, including the incumbent.<sup>12</sup>

Like Judge and Mary Leal, Gracie believed that the voices of Latinos, women, and other minorities needed to be heard at all levels of city government, and she made that central to her campaign. Her position in an influential elected office would inspire members of all communities deprived of a political voice. Gracie wondered why "we," meaning minorities and women, were not present when decisions were made that affect them, nor did they have access to city resources.

Change required sympathetic people in positions of power. Despite the odds, Gracie won the election, becoming the first Latina elected at-large to Houston City Council. Mayor Bob Lanier then appointed her mayor pro tem, another first for a Latina.

Gracie singles out Mayor Lanier (1992-1998) as someone who helped her understand city council politics. She also credits Judge Leal and his wife with helping her appreciate the responsibility she accepted as an elected official.<sup>13</sup> Quickly becoming one of the busiest, most influential council members appointed to chair several committees, Gracie worked on improving the environment for children and developing after school programs, as well as the Neighborhoods to Standards program to construct sidewalks and bring basic city services to areas that lacked them. She maintained her law practice at the Law Offices of Brooks, Baker and Lange, LLP, and headed the nonprofit Houston International Initiatives, which conducted trade missions to Latin America.

Houston children, particularly in underserved communities, were among the biggest beneficiaries of Gracie's time on city council. Those in positions of power generally came from economically privileged backgrounds and rarely



*Judge Al Leal and his wife Mary Leal inspired Gracie to seek political office. One of Judge Leal's key messages was to provide ethnical representation for the community.*



*Members of the Houston City Council pictured left to right: Felix Fraga, Ray Driscoll, Al Calloway, Graciela Saenz, John Kelly, Eleanor Tinsley, Mayor Robert C. Lanier, Helen Huey, Michael Yarbrough, John W. Peavey, Jr., and Judson Robinson III.*

thought to look in Houston's poorest neighborhoods to develop talent. Remembering growing up in the barrios, Gracie argued that by ignoring students in underprivileged areas, Houston was impeding their success as adults. Much of the poverty and violence grew from a cycle fed by inadequate resources in minority communities that led many youth to drop out of school and join gangs. Dropping out left them stuck in unfulfilling, low-wage jobs, making them increasingly unhappy with life and prompting them to turn to drugs, alcohol, and, potentially, crime and violence.<sup>14</sup>

To generate understanding about what was happening to children and the dangers, Gracie helped implement the Joint City/County Commission for Children and Youth. President Bill Clinton also appointed her to the National Coalition for Children and Youth, which drafted positive programs and government policies to improve children's lives. She became involved in the 1990s with the non-profit Project GRAD, which began at Gracie's high school. The program aims to

provide low-income, minority, and inner-city students with the support and motivation they need to achieve their goals, including graduating from high school and attending college. The program stressed communication between schools and parents, and the development of reading, language, math, and science skills.<sup>15</sup> Project GRAD has helped over 7,900 students to date, and Gracie continues to volunteer on the board.

Additionally, Gracie along with Mayor Lanier helped implement after-school and summer enrichment programs to reduce the chance of youth getting into trouble. The city renovated libraries, parks, and other public spaces to give students alternative activities for learning, recreation, and self-development. The city saw significant support from residents, the police and fire departments, and several community leaders. This allowed the city to introduce several after school programs, such as Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.), Peer Assistance and Leadership (PAL), and others, which have seen national success. On the Gang Task Force Committee, Gracie assisted in introducing plans to reduce youth and gang violence in schools, including Marshall Middle School, Patrick Henry, Austin, and Jeff Davis High Schools. All of these efforts helped provide a safer environment for Houston's children.

Gracie's dedication to education can also be seen through her sustained support of the University of Houston. While on city council, Gracie advocated for university improvements, the Center for Mexican American Studies (CMAS), and its minority students. Gracie, Tatcho Mindiola, and Olga Soliz presented a CMAS proposal, asking the Houston Foundation to provide financial support for CMAS's efforts to introduce recruitment and retention initiatives, such as the Hispanic Family College Project and the Urban Experience Program. Further, Gracie and her staff helped secure funding for the Urban Experience Program and the Hispanic Family College Project, both of which provided scholarships, tutoring, mentoring, and internships to "propel Latino students towards graduation and their future career goals."<sup>16</sup>



*Gracie worked with Charles Foster at Tindall & Foster before attending law school. He has been a mentor and loyal supporter, especially during her time in office.*

Gracie's public service extended to assisting minority and women-owned businesses, which she and others saw as vital to Houston's economy. Gracie worked to ensure smaller businesses had access to large, influential markets to empower minority and women-owned businesses. Although smaller companies could not compete at the same level as big corporations, they could grasp their "piece of the pie."

Since Houston's earliest days, city leaders recognized the opportunity a deepwater port creates for international trade and continually worked to increase the Port of Houston's shipping capacity. As head of the Houston International Initiative, Gracie saw a chance to expand Houston's options. Founded by former council member Eleanor Tinsley to expand Houston's trade mission to its Latin American neighbors, the initiative generated trade and business opportunities for local companies. An international city, Houston housed fifty-six consulates and had a large population that identified as Central and South American, making it a natural link. As mayor pro tem, Gracie facilitated Houston's relationships under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), introduced in 1992 under President George H. W. Bush and enacted under President Bill Clinton two years later, prompting a Houston visit by Clinton and Vice President Al Gore. Fluent in Spanish, Gracie represented Houston's interests at several meetings to discuss NAFTA's implementation and development, which she credits with improving Houston's economy and helping push the city forward. Additionally, she assisted with implementing the World Energy Cities Partnership to unite potential energy capitals worldwide and aid their economic development.<sup>17</sup>

In 1997, with Mayor Bob Lanier facing term limits, Gracie seized the opportunity to run for mayor. She certainly had experience as a leader with community support,



*Gracie has met with many national and world leaders, including Pope John Paul II, and presidents George H. W. Bush, George W. Bush, and Bill Clinton. Here Gracie and U.S. Representative Ken Bentsen, Jr., meet with Clinton during his visit to Houston after enacting NAFTA.*



*Active on behalf of many causes, Gracie and her husband Al Castillo attended a function for the Memorial Hermann Foundation.*

and many people believed her candidacy made sense with her progressive ideas and aspirations for Houston. Her campaign focused on community unity, economic development, government that worked to strengthen families and make the city safe, and generally improving opportunities for Houstonians. As with her city council run, Gracie had the unwavering encouragement of her family and friends. Several fundraising events pushed her candidacy into the spotlight, such as the "20 for Gracie" campaign, in which her backers reached out to five individuals for support, these five then reached out to another five, and so forth, spreading the message to cast their votes early for Gracie.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, everyone was asked to donate five dollars toward the campaign's media expenses, which were hefty in a city Houston's size. Although she received tremendous support, Gracie did not make the runoff, and Lee Brown ultimately won the election. She, nevertheless, brought attention to important issues, most significantly the need for unity among Hispanic Houstonians.

Today Gracie lives in Houston's East End with her husband, Al Castillo. She has a solo practice with an office located on Lawndale Avenue. Her dedication to public service continues, as does the legacy from her accomplishments as a member of city council and a tireless advocate. For many Houstonians, the presence of someone who understood their background and struggles working within the local government was priceless. Gracie Saenz stands alongside other Houston Latinos, such as Jose Gutierrez, Maria Jimenez, Tatcho Mindiola, and Yolanda Black Navarro, who dedicated their careers to ensuring that Houston's growth as an inclusive city benefits all of its citizens, regardless of their background or country of origin. Yes, diversity is a good thing.

**Stephanie Gomez** is pursuing joint master's degrees in the Graduate College of Social Work and the Hobby School for Public Affairs at the University of Houston. A political activist and advocate, Stephanie became a fan of *Houston History* as an undergraduate student, when she interned with the magazine.

# El Programa Bracero: “La experiencia de bracero nunca se te olvida”

By Jadsia Roopchand



Inspired by the history of the Bracero Program, artist Gabriela Magaña offers her perspective through rich and colorful paintings, including this one of her grandfather Eduardo Lopez. Gabriela believes that through art lives can be saved and others can be honored.<sup>1</sup> Photo courtesy of Gabriela Magaña.

“You never forget the bracero experience,” former bracero Aurelio Marin commented, perfectly summarizing the triumphs, tribulations, and turbulence of the highly controversial and highly impactful Mexican Farm Labor Program. Commonly known as the Bracero Program, it began in 1942 to supply able-bodied Mexican laborers to U.S. industries suffering shortages at the outset of World War II.<sup>2</sup> In exchange for their labor, the workers received temporary legal residence for the duration of their contract. Braceros worked in almost every region of the United States, finding themselves employed in everything from railroad construction and industrial maintenance to agriculture, the largest area of employment. Of the 4.5 million braceros admitted, California received the largest number of men with Texas ranking a close second.<sup>3</sup>

For Americans, the program offered a critical source of support for the wartime economy; for Mexicans, particularly young men, it presented an opportunity to come to the United States for employment and send money home to their families in Mexico. Houstonian Victor Escalante remembers what a boost it was for his family every time his father sent money home, “We were poor, and in those days that was a lot of money... [for] ordinary expenses.”<sup>4</sup> On the surface, the program appeared to reap rewards for the United States and Mexico, but these gains were made off the backs of men who labored tirelessly for a better life.

## CENTRO DE RECEPCIÓN

“In the center they put you up against a wall, and the contractors came like they were coming to buy livestock.”  
— Isodoro Ramirez<sup>5</sup>

A bracero’s journey began at a reception center, in either the United States or Mexico, where several criteria distinguished him from the thousands of other *aspirantes* (hopeful men) lined up outside the facility. Were his hands calloused? Did he have his back teeth? Did he carry tuberculosis? Did he look fit for hard labor? After the man passed the examinations conducted by doctors and employers, he received his Alien Laborer’s Identification Card. Some cards only contained their names, birthdates, reception dates, and cities of origin, while others had photos of the men and detailed descriptions about their positions in the program. Several ex-braceros reported extortion by the reception officers who required them to pay a processing fee — a measure that the government agreement did not sanction.<sup>6</sup>

Before being transported to a holding facility or his place of employment, the bracero was stripped naked and sprayed with dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) — a pesticide later banned because it causes cancer and other health problems.<sup>7</sup> From this point, braceros’ experiences differed based on the region where they worked, the type of labor required, and their employers. Regardless of the unique experiences that followed, however, this invasive reception process haunted many braceros long after the program ended.

## ALOJAMIENTO

“900 of us lived in one barracks. ... I was there a week. ... Who is going to sleep with all those people?”  
— Guadalupe Mena Arizmendi<sup>8</sup>

Employers often housed braceros in barracks-style, make-shift accommodations created from chicken coops, old barns, stables, or shacks. These facilities rarely contained enough showers or bathrooms for the number of men housed within them, leading to sanitation problems and rampant illnesses in some labor areas. A typical bracero’s accommodation provided him a bed and one shelf for his belongings. Although contractors were supposed to supply braceros with beds and food under their contract, some businesses charged the men for these necessities, deducting it from their wages and making it difficult for braceros to send money home.<sup>9</sup>

Many of these housing units, built onsite or within driving distance to the job site, effectively isolated the men from the closest city. Although the remoteness made life monotonous, it also gave the men opportunities to bond over their shared experiences and to teach each other new trades during their time off on Sundays. Some ex-braceros recalled learning valuable skills, such as sewing, barbering, and cooking, while in the secluded camps.<sup>10</sup>

Many contractors gave their workers a set amount of foodstuffs for the week, making the workers responsible for cooking their meals and distributing them equally. After working ten to fourteen hours in the field, the men returned to their camps and ate meals that rarely satisfied them. For example, in Texas authorities convicted a judge of serving braceros sub-standard meat that was intended to be used as dog food.<sup>11</sup>

### TRANSPORTE

*"They brought them in trucks and some in trains, and not passenger trains but cargo trains...like sheep."*

— Cecilio Santillano<sup>2</sup>

To keep costs down, contractors often transported braceros to and from worksites in sub-standard vehicles, the most common being a cattle car outfitted with two wooden benches. These cars sometimes held up to fifty men crammed onto the benches with all of their work equipment. Dangerous and unregulated, the vehicles were believed to have contributed to countless underreported fatal accidents.

One of the most critical and well-reported accidents happened in 1963, resulting in the deaths of twenty-eight braceros en route to their worksite. More than fifty workers were riding in a cattle car crossing a railroad track when a train hit the car, which immediately caught fire. Twenty-three braceros died on impact and five more died later from their injuries. The driver, a bracero who survived the crash, claimed that he never saw the train and that many of the deaths occurred because the men could not escape the burning vehicle. Historian Lori Flores, author of *Grounds for Dreaming*, argues that the negative publicity generated by this accident encouraged the two governments to finally terminate the Bracero Program. The U.S. government initially intended to dissolve the bracero agreement after World War II, but petitions from farmers and contractors, who benefited from the cheap labor, argued against it. After this incident, the U.S. and Mexican governments acknowledged the inhumane treatment many braceros received and ended the program the following year.<sup>13</sup>

### SALARIO Y TRABAJO

*"[The fields are] where we encountered el cortito, or what's called the short-handled hoe. And for sure, that is where I shed my tears."*

— Jose Natividad Alva Medina<sup>14</sup>

The word bracero comes from the Spanish word *brazo* — meaning arm — and translates to “one who works using his arms” or “manual laborer.” Whether a bracero built railroads in the Northwest or farmed vegetables and cotton in the Midwest and South, he did backbreaking labor for a fraction of the wages American workers received. Although recruiters promised braceros the “prevailing wage” for their work, contractors often undercut them or failed to pay them at all. In 1964, when the program and contracts ended, many contractors sent their workers back to Mexico without

Nombre (name) -----	Número de Contrato (Contract Number) -----
Domicilio (address) -----	Número de la cuenta en el Banco del Ahorro Nacional, S. A. -----
Edad (age) ----- Estado Civil (married or single) -----	(Account Number in Banco del Ahorro Nacional, S. A.) -----
Dependientes Económicos (economic dependents) -----	
Familiares Acompañantes (nombres y domicilios) -----	
Acompañing Family Members (names and addresses) -----	

<b>INDIVIDUAL WORK AGREEMENT</b>	<b>CONTRATO INDIVIDUAL DE TRABAJO</b>
Entered into between the Government of the United States of America acting by and through the War Manpower Commission hereinafter referred to as the "Patron" and	que celebran el Gobierno de los Estados Unidos de América por conducto de la "War Manpower Commission" y que en el cuerpo del mismo se denominará "El Patrón", y el trabajador mexicano
a Mexican laborer hereinafter referred to as the "Worker".	a quien en el cuerpo del mismo se denominará "El Trabajador".
<b>DECLARATIONS</b>	<b>DECLARACIONES</b>
1. The Government of the United States and the Worker mutually desire that the Worker be beneficially employed in the United States of America with a view to alleviate the present shortage of non-agricultural workers in that country and to cooperate in the successful prosecution of the war.	1º—El Gobierno de los Estados Unidos y el Trabajador mutuamente desean que el Trabajador se emplee ventajosamente en los Estados Unidos de América con el objeto de resolver la presente escasez de trabajadores no-agrícolas en ese país, y para coadyuvar en el éxito de la guerra.
2. The Worker declares that he is a Mexican national by birth.	2º—El Trabajador declara ser de nacionalidad mexicana por nacimiento, quedando señaladas sus generales en cuadro especial al principio de este contrato.
3. The War Manpower Commission of the United States of America is represented in the execution of this contract, by Mr.	3º—La War Manpower Commission de los Estados Unidos de América está representada, en la celebración de este contrato, por el señor

*Santa Fe Railroad contracts for braceros in Texas outlined responsibilities of both workers and contractors. They spanned several pages and were written in both English and Spanish.*

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0004B136F1.



*The poster by artist Leon Helguera produced by the Office of War Information in 1943 promoted the unity of purpose between the United States and Mexico in creating the Mexican Farm Labor Program.*

Photo courtesy of the University of North Texas Government Documents Digital Collection.

HINTS ON THE EMPLOYMENT OF IMPORTED MEXICAN LABORERS

Following are items of information gleaned from experience of various carriers in the employment of imported Mexican laborers:

(1) Transportation

Workers may arrive at work locations with-  
out supervision of train move-

(3) Climate

It should be remembered that Mexican workers come from a mild climate and high altitude. When they arrive in the summertime or are assigned to work locations in hot sections of the country, care should be taken to permit them to "break in easy". The amount of cold drinking water should be limited, and salt tablets should be provided. They should be permitted to rest when necessary and prompt and adequate attention should immediately be given to any worker who suddenly ceases perspiring. Workers who are to remain during the winter months should be reassured that they will be afforded adequate protection from the cold and should be transferred, if possible, to work locations in a warmer climate.

(4) Diet

Mexican workers have difficulty in becoming accustomed to American food. Efforts should be made to provide Mexican food whenever possible. Mexican diet is relatively simple and of no great variety. Attached are several recipes for Mexican dishes compiled by the Threlkeld Commissary. If Mexican workers are assigned to section gangs or remote locations where it is necessary for them to do their own cooking, arrangements should be made for them to travel to nearby towns to purchase supplies, if possible, to localities where supplies necessary for Mexican food can be procured. They should also be instructed in the rationing system and assisted in purchasing supplies.

The Western Association of Railway Executives provided participating railroad companies with "Hints on the Employment of Imported Mexican Laborers."

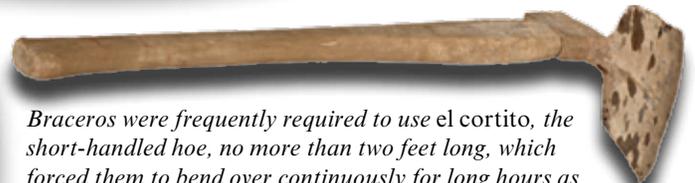
In addition to the instructions (left), which call for limiting cold drinking water, the hints warn against placing Mexican laborers in close proximity to the contractors' gangs lest the braceros find out their pay is not comparable as promised. To fulfill the diet of "relatively simple" Mexican foods lacking variety, the final two pages of instructions include recipes for beans, rice, chili con carne, and huevos rancheros.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0004B136F1.



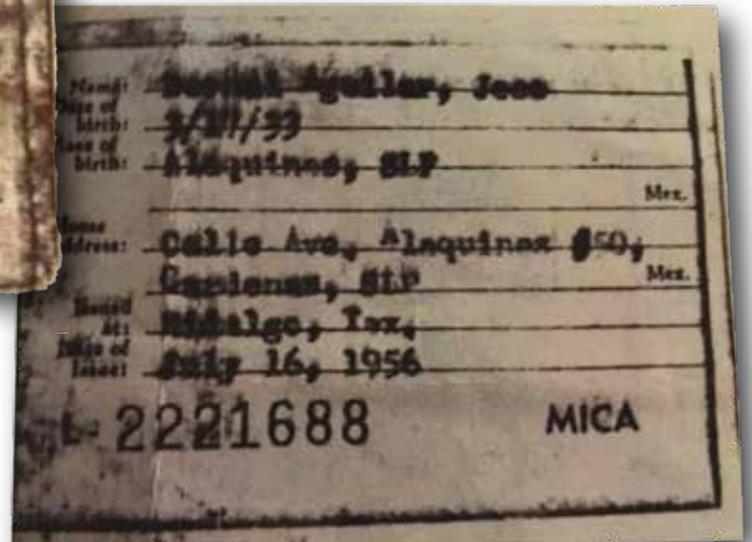
When the bracero program ended, José Bernal's children suggested that he make copies of his Alien Laborer's Identification Card. One day, he went to file a compensation claim with the Mexican government and gave the officials his original card without hesitation. Unfortunately, the Mexican government never compensated him nor returned the card, leaving just the copies as evidence of his bracero experience.

Photo courtesy of Laura Bernal.



Braceros were frequently required to use el cortito, the short-handled hoe, no more than two feet long, which forced them to bend over continuously for long hours as they worked in the fields. The short-handled hoe was later outlawed.

Photos courtesy of Wikicommons.



paying them or supplying the required fare for transportation home.<sup>15</sup>

One of the best predictors of wage inequality between braceros and American workers was the region where they worked. In Texas, braceros received \$0.40 per hour. For the same agricultural labor in California, workers received \$1.00 per hour, and for railroad labor in the Northwest, \$1.25 per hour. In both western regions, general prejudice was less prevalent than in the South.<sup>16</sup>

Agriculture represented the most common use of the Bracero Program's labor force. Although Flores mentions that the braceros worked in almost every surviving industry during the war, the majority farmed, doing anything from growing corn to picking cotton. Growers insisted that field workers use a tool called *el cortito*, the short-handled hoe, because they believed it "made workers more careful and kept crops from being damaged." *El cortito* required workers to bend over to make their way through a row of crops, not standing upright until they reached the end of the row. This tool gave new meaning to "back-breaking labor" and was later made illegal.<sup>17</sup>

Though some ex-braceros reflect on their experience in the United States as one of adventure and nuance, many others remember hardship and poverty. Low wages, greedy contractors, and an obligation to send money home to Mexico made it hard for some braceros to buy necessities like durable work clothes. Braceros considered denim blue jeans and leather work boots prized possessions, but few could afford these essentials on their meager salaries. Those who could not afford them toiled in the fields wearing linen pants and pueblo sandals they brought from Mexico. Historian and museum curator Mireya Loza mused that one could tell a seasoned bracero by his boots, his denim jeans, and his radio — one of the first American luxuries that a prosperous worker brought back to Mexico.<sup>18</sup>

## PREJUICIO

*"They discriminated against us and the Blacks...they removed us from white restaurants and stores...they intimidated us."*  
— Alejandro Ruteaga Rivas<sup>19</sup>

Braceros faced ongoing prejudice because of cultural differences, xenophobia, and job competition. Although the U.S. government initially told braceros that their efforts were vital to the American economy — and the American people — their reception in the country often told another story.

Texas was infamous for its intolerance and prejudice towards braceros, causing the Mexican government to regularly cancel contracts with the state, which reapplied several times to remain in the program. The South, still operating with a Jim Crow mindset, expelled braceros from white-only spaces and treated them as second-class citizens. Beyond the prejudice expressed by Anglos, braceros also experienced racism from Tejanos and Mexican Americans. The mixed Tejano culture clashed with the braceros' Mexican culture because braceros were neither Americans nor had they assimilated into Mexican American culture. As the program progressed through World War II and the rise of the Cold War, a generalized fear of foreigners caused braceros to be targeted as outsiders who did not belong in the country. At this point, any gratitude felt towards brace-



*Workers in Mexicali, Mexico, wait to enter the United States legally for bracero jobs in February 1954, just three months before the U.S. government implemented Operation Wetback to stop unauthorized workers.*  
Photo courtesy of Wikicommons.

ros for supporting the war effort and the U.S. economy in its time of need was replaced with suspicion and intolerance.<sup>20</sup>

When World War II ended and the search for employment by citizens and permanent residents began, braceros became symbolic of foreign labor, making them pariahs among fellow agricultural workers of Mexican, Mexican American, and Tejano descent. Braceros could not organize in the field, received no form of representation, lacked legal recourse, and provided contractors an endless stream of cheap labor without the risk of unionization. Some employers used braceros to break strikes and supply labor teams, often preferring Mexicans over non-braceros. A 1962 *Los Angeles Times* article reports that falsification of bracero pay books was encouraging "the employment of Mexican nationals... [and the] unemployment of domestic farm workers."<sup>21</sup>

Contractors could choose to pay "piece labor" — a set price per unit of product farmed — or "hourly labor" — a set wage per hour worked. It served the contractors' interests to discourage piece labor so that the workers could only make a single, set wage per day. Because the domestic workers knew the difference in earning potential within the two platforms, they lost jobs to braceros who believed that they were making a similar wage. Unfortunately, the stunted legal position of braceros allowed unscrupulous contractors to take advantage of their labor, their wages, and their working conditions.<sup>22</sup>

## LAS RELACIONES Y LA EXPERIENCIA AMERICANA

*"I always prayed that if I married this person that he could stay here...and he wouldn't go back."* — Antonia Duran<sup>23</sup>

For some men, the Bracero Program offered an opportunity to cross the border and experience a world they never imagined. Loza mentioned that unmarried men made up a sizeable portion of the bracero population. While these men still sent money home to their families, they had the chance to wholeheartedly experience the vibrant culture of vice and excitement beyond the watchful eyes of their kin. Without obligations to wives and children, the men who had access

to nearby towns could spend their extra money visiting nightspots and absorbing the American way of life.<sup>24</sup>

Mary Helen Cavazos, whose father was a contractor and transporter of braceros, talks about the amicable relationships her family had with them.<sup>25</sup> She and her family worked alongside braceros as migrant workers and forged relationships with them. She recalls that her father likely took braceros into town on the weekends, which was common among generous contractors. Trips into town allowed braceros to experience life outside the farm and meet local men and women. Some braceros even met their wives while in the United States and filed for residency or citizenship to stay. Even though the Bracero Program represented a hard and harrowing experience for many of the men, others found a gem of an opportunity and enjoyed it for all it was worth.

### EL IMPACTO DEL PROGRAMA BRACERO

*“The program opened the door for thousands of families to come to the states. On one level it was hard for a lot of farm workers, but on another level they desired [to make the] sacrifice to prepare the ground for the generations like myself. . . . [It] was a good thing when you considered the positive byproducts of the food that it yielded, the sacrifice by one generation so the future generations could have an education and a better life.”* – Victor Escalante<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the duration of the Bracero Program, many Mexicans crossed the border with forged papers to work alongside bona fide braceros. A long reception process, competitive criteria for employment, and limited space drove workers to bypass the official Bracero Program and work under knowing contractors. This wave of immigration resulted in a movement, which began in Texas, calling for a halt to the illegal border crossings. President Dwight Eisenhower authorized Operation Wetback in 1954 to round up the unauthorized workers and send them to Mexico. Although no evidence indicates raids were conducted in Houston, the local Houston League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) Council #60 lent its support to other Texas councils that supported the deportations because they believed the program displaced American workers, kept illegals in peonage, and jeopardized LULAC’s communication with the Anglo community.<sup>27</sup>

As U.S. funding dried up for implementation and enforcement, Operation Wetback met with resistance in Mexico when workers died as they tried to escape the transport ship taking them to Veracruz. Houston, a major city in the throes of forming Mexican American communities and cultivating the Chicano Movement by the 1960s, was a hub for men who had immigrated through and around the Bracero Program and chosen to stay in the United States.<sup>28</sup>

The Bracero Program ended abruptly in 1964 when the U.S. and Mexican governments determined that they could not enforce the laws governing it. Doris Meissner, a senior fellow with the Migration Policy Institute, calls the abuse of workers the “central characteristic of the Bracero Program” and attributes its termination to the government’s inability to reconcile it “with civil-rights-era sensibilities about how people should be treated in a democratic society.” The abuses were not one-sided, however, as the Mexican government received over \$23 million through the Bracero Program.<sup>29</sup>

INVOICE  
**JOYCE & COMPANY INC.**  
INSURANCE AGENTS  
SURETY BONDS  
105 WEST ADAMS STREET  
TELEPHONE STATE 0044  
CHICAGO  
June 30, 1943

DATE OF EXPIRATION

**DUPLICATE**

Panhandle & Santa Fe Railway Company INDEF.  
9th & Polk Streets  
Amarillo, Texas Lic. No. \_\_\_\_\_

ACCOUNT OF H.T.H.

EFFECTIVE DATE	NUMBER	DESCRIPTION	PREMIUM
6/28/43	624954	CONTRACT Blanket Alien Bond for im- portation of 175 Aliens from United States of Mexico U.S.A. \$3500.00 (Special Rate Promul- gated)	\$52.50

BILL TO: W. E. Davis, Gen'l Auditor  
The Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Ry. Co.  
50 E. Jackson Blvd.  
Chicago, Illinois

PREMIUMS PAYABLE IN ADVANCE. PLEASE RETURN THIS BILL WITH REMITTANCE.

The United States and Mexican governments agreed to provide transportation for laborers to and from the entry points in their respective countries, which was guaranteed by bonds.<sup>30</sup> This invoice for the Panhandle and Santa Fe Railroad in Texas indicates they received a hefty discount on the bond rate for 175 workers who came in 1943.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0004B136F1.

When ex-braceros and their families discovered how much money their government withheld, they began to feel as though the Mexican government had sold their lives and their labor while claiming to protect them and offer them economic opportunities.

Mexican American immigration patterns that began during the 1960s and 1970s have had an enormous impact on immigration reform, cultural amalgamation, and the roots of the Mexican American identity in Houston. The Bracero Program contributed to this immigration wave by providing a new source of jobs and by bringing people from many regions and cultures in Mexico. Many braceros brought their families or started families in the United States during and after their contracted labor periods, and passed down stories of their experiences to the next generation. Victor Escalante, for example, vividly recalls the bracero stories his father and uncle shared whenever the family got together. Today, other former braceros and their families living in Houston also enjoy sharing their stories of working in South Texas before returning to the city to make a life, setting down critical and invaluable roots throughout the Houston region.

**Jadsia Roopchand** graduated from the University of Houston in May 2017 with a bachelor of science in psychology and a bachelor of arts in English literature. She plans to pursue medicine with a focus on psychotherapy and, in her free time, enjoys studying urban history and immigration culture.

# MUJERES UNIDAS, TAKING THE INITIATIVE: The First Decade of Hispanic Women in Leadership

By Christian Kelleher

On March 11-13, 1988, about 200 women attended the YWCA Hispanic Women’s Leadership Conference in Houston, Texas, “Celebrating Excellence.” It had been ten years since the last such conference. Soon after, twenty of those women, inspired by their experience organizing and attending the YWCA women’s conference, launched their own Hispanic Women’s Leadership Conference Committee with the goal of continuing the celebration as an annual forum to encourage and promote the development and advancement of their community. Beginning with its first independent conference the following February, Houston’s Hispanic Women’s Leadership Conference Committee, later rebranded as Hispanic Women in Leadership (HWIL), quickly made a consequential and enduring impact to enable, empower, and uplift the city’s Hispanic women. The Hispanic Women in Leadership Records archived at the University of Houston Libraries Special Collections document how, within just the first decade of the organization’s activities, Hispanic Women in Leadership both embodied and demonstrated wide-ranging leadership for its community.<sup>1</sup>

As a true grassroots effort from its founding, the Steering Committee members of the Hispanic Women’s Leadership Conference Committee (HWLCC) recognized in the invitation to their first gathering that, “Success can be achieved only if women such as yourself become active participants” in realizing the vision.<sup>2</sup> Less than a year later, with over one hundred \$10-dues-paying members and even more women — and men — in attendance, HWLCC held their second annual conference, “The Hispanic Woman — Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow,” featuring noted keynote speakers psychiatrist Dr. Ninfa Cavazos and educator Dr. Guadalupe Quintanilla. The conference’s two keynote speakers exemplified what became the core purpose of the organization: to further the health and

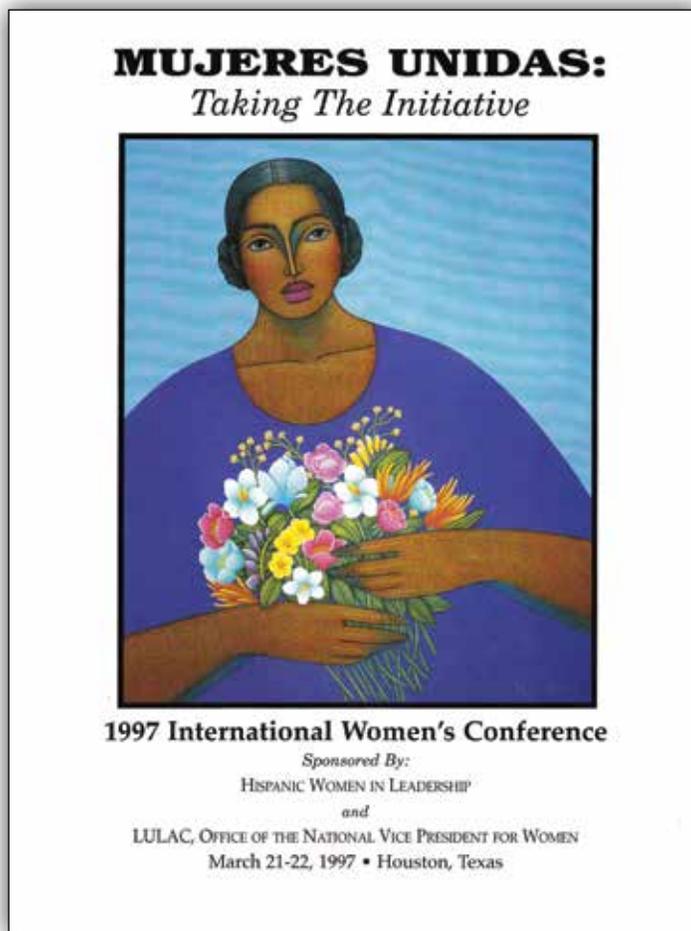
well-being and to promote the education and advancement of Hispanic women everywhere.

Today, the annual conference remains the primary activity of Hispanic Women in Leadership’s efforts. But the organization’s deeper purpose, as can be discovered in its historical archives, has had a more acute and meaningful impact on its community. The conference itself was the vehicle for networking, connecting community members with career-oriented Hispanic women role models, encouraging training and skills development, and promoting the appreciation for Hispanic culture and heritage.

Nevertheless, a successful conference was not, in itself, the sole motivation for HWLCC. Dr. Ninfa Cavazos’ presentation at the 1988 conference likely inspired the organization’s first significant community outreach efforts — an accomplishment that continues to reverberate today — targeted to aid battered and abused Hispanic women and children. HWLCC’s leadership and membership took seriously their mission to encourage and promote Hispanic women in all walks of life. From its very first forum,

HWLCC set its goal to use conference proceeds to establish a shelter for Hispanic women and children.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary research at the time recognized the exceptional challenges that Hispanic women — especially the community’s most vulnerable members — confronted as they struggled to build healthy, safe, and prosperous lives. Researchers found that Hispanic women in shelters had substantially lower levels of education, employment,



*Program for the tenth annual Hispanic Women in Leadership Conference and International Women’s Conference co-sponsored with League of United Latin American Citizens Office of the National Vice President for Women.*

Photo courtesy of the Hispanic Women in Leadership Records, box 7, folder 2.

All photos courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



Hispanic Women in Leadership and Houston Area Women's Center partners meet in 1990 to plan programs and outreach to aid Hispanic women and children.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Area Women's Center Records, box 4, folder 78.

and income than any other group. Hispanic women were the most likely to tolerate abuse and were the least likely to reach out to friends, a minister, or a social service organization for help. They remained socially isolated. HWLCC recognized at the same time as the social services researchers that Hispanic women "need more economic and educational supports to help them in their crisis, as well as in general."<sup>4</sup>

In 1988, HWLCC established a Shelter Ad-hoc Committee to investigate and plan their own Hispanic Women and Children's Shelter. Diva Garza and other committee members met with Houston Area Women's Center (HAWC) director Lori Swenson, who encouraged the group to reach its goal. She also proposed a partnership to jointly fund a new bilingual staff position at HAWC, serving as a starting point. Through the HAWC, the new staff member would recruit and coordinate a large group of bilingual volunteers desperately needed to serve the Hispanic community. The Women's Center identified language and the lack of knowledge about available services as major barriers for helping battered Hispanic women in Houston. HAWC also recognized that the number of Hispanic women seeking the

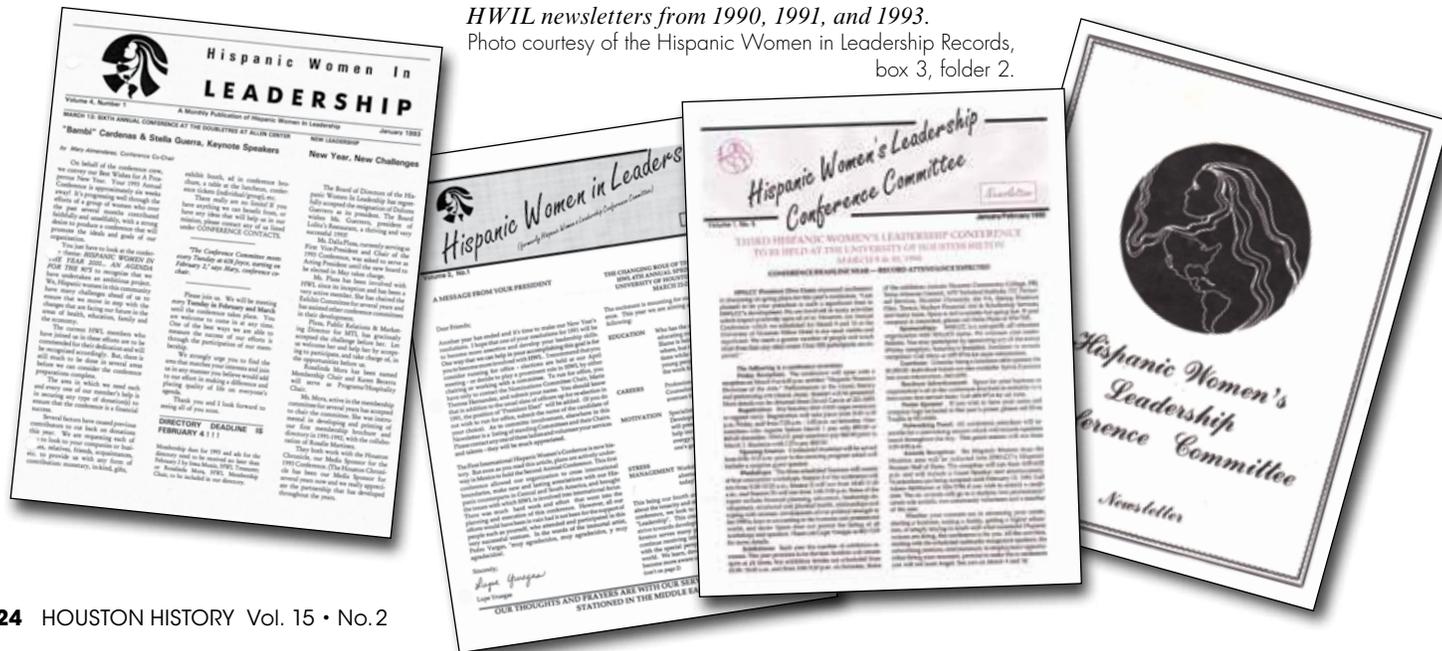
organization's services was not proportional to other groups, dropping from 24% in 1988 to only 14% in 1989. The center had bilingual staff members, but volunteers did most of the work with the women, and most of the volunteers only spoke English. At one point, the center even produced a Spanish language public service announcement to broadcast on television but felt they could not air it for fear they would not be able to handle the expected response. At a general meeting for HWLCC members on December 19, 1988, led by the organization's first elected president, Mary Almendarez, the group decided that it would raise \$10,500, half of the salary for the shelter's bilingual volunteer coordinator.<sup>5</sup>

In March 1991, just in time for the newly renamed Hispanic Women in Leadership's fourth annual conference, the Houston Area Women's Center hired Dora Alejandro as its Hispanic Outreach Project coordinator with HWIL's \$10,500 and an additional \$25,000 grant from ARCO Chemical Foundation, made possible by the partnership between HWIL and HAWC. Within her first three months, Alejandro reported to the HWIL board that she had recruited eight new bilingual volunteers. By the end of the year, that number had increased to seventeen volunteers, along with a 200 percent increase in the number of Hispanic clients enrolled in the center's Family Violence Program. The center served 765 Hispanic clients who came in for help with family violence issues in 1992, and by 1994, that number had increased to over 1,000 clients. HWIL's goal of a separate Hispanic Women and Children's Shelter ultimately proved unattainable, but the organization's foundational support and continued dedication permanently changed the level of services available for battered Hispanic women and children in Houston.<sup>6</sup>

As conference attendance numbers continued to grow in the mid-1990s, HWIL held regular networking events featuring speakers for members, along with outreach and fundraising activities. With funding and support from the Sisters of Charity Health Care System in 1992, HWIL produced a series of women's health educational programs called *Mujer a Mujer*. The free programs, centered on health screenings and education, also took into consideration food, transportation, and childcare for attendees.

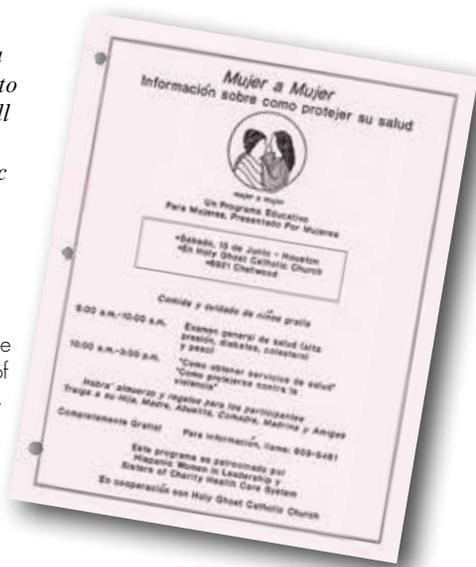
HWIL newsletters from 1990, 1991, and 1993.

Photo courtesy of the Hispanic Women in Leadership Records, box 3, folder 2.



To maximize *Mujer a Mujer*'s accessibility to Hispanic women of all backgrounds, HWIL hosted it at a Catholic church and provided childcare for participants, who received lunch and free health exams.

Photo courtesy of the Hispanic Women of Leadership Records, box 1, folder 11.



From its earliest discussions, HWIL prioritized support for young women. In 1992, HWIL awarded its first \$500 Hispanic Heritage Scholarships to six women from the Houston area. Among those first recipients were one student who had been ranked in the top five of her high school class, another who was a single mother of three children, and a first-generation American. One scholarship winner, a refugee from war-torn El Salvador, wrote her application essay on “Mi Cultura: What My Culture Means to Me,” which can be found in the archive:

*Se trata de ayudarnos unos a otros, de darnos la mano para poder todos tener acceso a escalar la muralla del triunfo. Es necesario que los que van más alto ayuden a los que van abajo, a los menos afortunados, a los que necesitan un estímulo para despertar en ellos el deseo por la superación y el afán por la excelencia. Mi cultura entonces, representa para mí, la más grande de las familias integrada por miembros capacitados con los más diversos talentos que esperan solamente ser despertados.*

[It's about helping one another, of lending each other a hand for all of us to have access to climb the wall of triumph. It is necessary for those who are higher up to help those who are at the bottom, the less fortunate, those who need a stimulus to awaken in them the desire to excel and the eagerness for excellence. My culture then represents for me the biggest of all families made up by members equipped with the most diverse talents that are only waiting to be awakened.]<sup>7</sup>



One of the ways that the Houston Area Women's Center tried to reach out to the Hispanic community was through brochures, which informed women of their rights. Today the HAWC website includes a resource section for Spanish speakers.

Photo courtesy of Houston Area Women's Center Records, box 10, folder 8.



Women gather for the Hispanic Women's Volunteer Training, fall 1991.

Photo courtesy of Houston Area Women's Center Records, box 4, folder 82.

By 1998, HWIL awarded twelve Hispanic Heritage Scholarships, due in large part to the success of the popular annual Style Show fundraiser, an event first held in 1993. A memorable feature of that first Style Show, hosted with Willowbrook Mall fashion show coordinator LaShandra Brew (“wearing a mint green pant suit and accessories from Casual Corner”), was the model escorts from the Houston Police Organization of Spanish Speaking Officers, including then HPD officer Adrian Garcia.<sup>8</sup>

A highlight of the 1994 Style Show was naming rebozo-clad Laura Murillo as the first place winner in the modeling competition. Murillo, a graduate student and founding director of the Urban Experience Program of the Office of the President and the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Houston — and future president and CEO of the Houston Hispanic Chamber of Commerce — became HWIL president just three years later, in 1997. In a message to HWIL leaders and members, Murillo acknowledged the personal significance of the organization to her, writing, “I am a product of Hispanic Women in Leadership and many of you have served as my mentors and role models over the years.”<sup>9</sup>

It took ten years for Hispanic Women in Leadership to fully grasp the historic value of the organization's accomplishments—and to begin thinking about collecting and preserving its archives. In 1998, HWIL members elected Delfina Flores as the organization's first historian. That same year, members approved a budget for the permanent storage of HWIL materials, along with the decision to collect and centralize HWIL documents. Today, a permanent record of the early years of Houston's Hispanic Women in Leadership is preserved and available at the University of Houston Libraries Special Collections to excite the memories of members, to inspire students, and to further scholarship on the history of Houston's Hispanic women.

Christian Kelleher, MLIS, MA, is the Head of Special Collections at the University of Houston Libraries.

# Olympians in Houston: Their Success Is Houston's Success

By Asit Shah



*Zina Garrison became one of the first African American women tennis players to compete at the global level. Now, through the Zina Garrison Academy, she gives back to her community by providing a space where young people can flourish through tennis.*

*Photo courtesy of the Zina Garrison Academy.*

A fifteen-year-old swimmer for Team USA, Michael Phelps, gave it his all in his Olympic debut, taking fifth place in the 200-meter butterfly in the 2000 Summer Games in Sydney, Australia. Although Phelps did not stand on the medal podium that year, he became the most decorated Olympian in history, amassing 28 medals, 23 of them gold, by the time he retired from competition in 2016.<sup>1</sup> Phelps's first Olympics was also an important moment in my life — it was the first time I watched the Olympic Games. Surrounded by my family in the comfort of home, I remember, as a six-year-old, watching Sydney open its doors to the world. By the end of the twenty-seventh Olympiad, I begged my parents, “May we pleee-ase go to the Olympics?” Reminiscing on this naïve question after the 2016 Summer Games inspired me to explore the connection between the Olympics and Houston.

Since 2000, I have religiously cheered on Team USA for nine summer and winter Olympics. Every Olympic Games in recent decades has attracted more athletes, more viewers,

and, consequently, the games have become more expensive for the host city and country. Even with widespread criticism towards the seemingly inverse relationship between the price tag for hosting the games and the return on investment, athletes worldwide continue to expand our understanding of humanity's physical and mental capabilities. In addition to their athletic feats, an Olympian's post-Olympic endeavors offer a unique perspective for understanding the economic and cultural return on investment in local communities like Houston.

In the most recent summer games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Michael Phelps won six medals in his final Olympics, and gymnast Simone Biles quickly won the world's admiration after earning five medals in her first Olympics. Simone's infectious smile and success sparked my curiosity to explore her journey to the Olympics. Among the stories in her autobiography, *Courage to Soar*, one fact stood out—Simone grew up and trained in and around the Houston metropolitan area. But she is not alone. Stories about the athletic



Zina Garrison, Lindsay Davenport, Venus Williams, Monica Seles, Serena Williams, and Billie Jean King at the Sydney Olympics in 2000.

Photo courtesy of Zina Garrison Academy.

careers of more than seventy former Olympians with ties to the Houston region reveal that, for many, their post-competitive lives immensely contributed to the development of sports culture in their respective communities.<sup>2</sup> Examining what motivated a few of Houston's Olympians to prosper and create a positive long-term impact on the community's sports culture reveals how their outreach helps.

### From Training at MacGregor Park to Impacting 30,000 Hearts

At the tender age of forty-two, Mary Garrison was concerned that she had a tumor. To everyone's surprise, instead, on November 16, 1963, the Garrison family welcomed their seventh child, Zina. Despite her parents intentionally choosing a name that begins with the letter "Z" to signify the last addition to their family, Zina's life reflects an ambitious drive to become "#1" in women's tennis. Today, Zina Garrison remains best known for being an Olympic gold and bronze medalist at the 1988 Summer Olympic Games in Seoul, South Korea.<sup>3</sup>

Much like her arrival to the world, this two-time Olympic medalist stumbled upon tennis unexpectedly. In the early 1970s, Zina's brother took her to MacGregor Park near the University of Houston for baseball practice. While waiting on a bench for her brother's practice to end, Zina recalls a man walking up to her and asking, "What are you doing sitting there and just using God's air?" Describing herself as a cocky kid, Zina responded, "Nothing." Her next response changed the course of her life. When John Wilkerson continued by asking if she wanted to try her hand at tennis, a simple, "Yeah," started her journey as one of the first African American women to compete in tennis at a global level.<sup>4</sup>

Born and raised in Houston, Zina credits Houston's athletic and demographic environments as influential factors in her journey. Having started the sport at the age of ten,



Houston's environment helped encourage Zina's transformation into a world-class athlete. She attributes this to the community at MacGregor Park and the diversity of people and talents found there.

Photo courtesy of the Zina Garrison Academy.



*When Zina Garrison first spoke to John Wilkerson at MacGregor Park, she did not plan for tennis to become her life, but it has. She in turn inspires other young people to find their future through tennis, even if they never become professional athletes.*

Photo courtesy of the Zina Garrison Academy.

Zina remembers MacGregor Park as an inclusive, diverse space that attracted top athletes from around the nation to live and train in Houston, calling the park “the mecca [of] everything.” The community-oriented atmosphere naturally invited some of Houston’s greatest athletes. Zina reflects, “I think about this a lot. The area I grew up in had a lot of great athletes. [Athletes] in football, basketball, and from all over the world would come to [MacGregor Park] and just hang out. It is one of those things where, back then, we all knew it was a great place to train, and we would tell other athletes and they would come and establish their lives. It was a lot to do with diversity.”<sup>5</sup>

Having future Olympians like basketball player Clyde Drexler as her classmate at Ross Sterling High School and track athlete Carl Lewis as a buddy at MacGregor Park, Zina found Houston to be a natural catalyst for her career. Under the watchful eye of Coach John Wilkerson, she earned the title as the number one junior in women’s tennis before graduating from high school. Zina then devoted her post-high school life to training for tennis opens in Australia, France, the United States, and Great Britain, and, eventually, the Olympics. With the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympic Games offering one of the first Olympic opportunities for women in tennis, Zina notes that the domestic competition was fierce, and she devoted all her energy and focus towards earning one of four spots. Zina recalls wanting to win so badly that once her nerves got the best of her, causing her to struggle to finish one of many qualifying tournaments that led her to the world stage. Training in Houston her entire career prepared her for a challenge like this. As she explains, “Even though it was hot, ... you felt like if you could deal with Houston, then you could deal with any situation in the world.”<sup>6</sup>

Facing Houston’s summer heat and overcoming her nerves were just the beginning; being a minority in tennis presented Zina with another set of challenges. She recalls that Houston had its share of cliques, ethnic and racial silos, and socioeconomic barriers, adding, “Back in my day, you knew where to go and where not to go.” Being an African American female in a predominantly white-male sport, Zina asserts that MacGregor Park’s inclusive community prepared the athletes for embracing and cherishing the diversity associated with competing globally. One of her greatest memories about competing in the Olympics was “the camaraderie of being able to meet with other athletes from all different places and sports,” and MacGregor Park, similarly, was always “very diverse. [It] was the center of everything where all different types of people came to play sports.”<sup>7</sup> Clearly, Houston’s diversity was a catalyst in helping athletes grow and for fans to share their love for sports.

As her athletic career started to wind down in 1992, Zina, her coach John Wilkerson, and a few fellow athletes founded the Zina Garrison Academy to give back to the

Houston community. Today, twenty-six years later, the Zina Garrison Academy has touched the lives of over 30,000 young people through their mission, “To develop stars in the classroom, on the tennis court, and in the community by providing educational support, positive role models, parent education, and excellent tennis instruction.”<sup>8</sup> As the founder and CEO of the academy, Zina hopes that her initiatives provide youth an opportunity to engage in tennis. She is also leading an effort to develop a multipurpose facility that aims to involve youth and adults in other sports as well.<sup>9</sup>

While winning on the Olympic stage put Zina “on the map,” it was Wilkerson’s investment in her journey and the support she received from Houstonians that inspired the creation of the Zina Garrison Foundation. When asked about her thoughts on Houston as a host for international events like the Olympics, Zina responded, “The Olympics are great. But what [comes] afterwards? I [do not] think anyone has conquered that [question] yet.” She continued by pointing out that so much money is invested in recruiting an audience and building the necessary infrastructure for the games that little remains to create a lasting impact for the host city’s post-Olympic athletic programs.<sup>10</sup>

Houston has an extensive sports history, and Zina notes, “There was so much winning in [her] time that the city was known for its athletes, many of whom have chosen to stay in Houston.” The problem is that when the city is ahead for a while, “People become complacent after wins.” Zina contends, as does Wilkerson who still plays tennis at MacGregor Park at the ripe age of seventy-one, that Houston “has to continue to grow” in its commitment to sports to host an event as notable as the Olympics. Zina Garrison’s journey from MacGregor Park to the Olympics inspired her to give back by becoming a catalyst for engaging

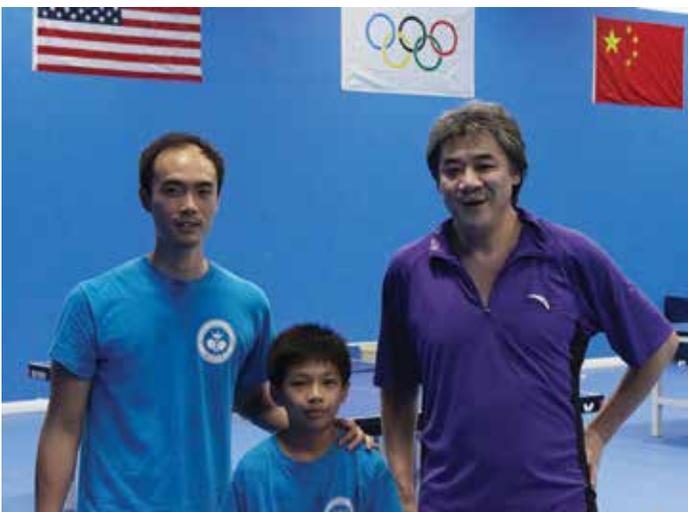


*Timothy Wang (left) is the co-founder of the Houston International Table Tennis Academy (HITTA). By providing a space where Houston-area table tennis students can train, Timothy Wang and HITTA keep future talent from going elsewhere, as he did early in his career.* Photo courtesy of author.

the community in tennis. For the Olympic community, her post-Olympic career hits the quintessential aspiration of all Olympians: “to contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sports practice without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit.”<sup>11</sup>

### Coaching the Next Generation of Table Tennis Olympians

When most of us think about the Summer Olympics, prominent sports come to mind, such as gymnastics, track and field, and swimming. In the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, over 10,000 athletes competed in twenty-eight sports.<sup>12</sup> Timothy Wang is making his mark in a sport similar to Zina Garrison’s tennis, only his version of the game uses smaller balls, paddles, and a significantly smaller court. Timothy Wang, born to Taiwanese parents in Houston on August 17, 1991, competed in table tennis at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, United Kingdom, and in Rio de Janeiro in 2016.<sup>13</sup>



*Timothy Wang (left) offers classes to a wide range of students, from those who just want to improve their game to those who have the promise to be future Olympians.* Photo courtesy of author.

When I set out to find Olympians, I was surprised to learn that athletes from Houston compete in table tennis. So, naturally, my first question to Timothy was, “How did you get involved in table tennis?” He explained that table tennis is a popular sport among Asians, and with many Asian cultures being family-centric, his family used table tennis as an outlet to spend quality time together while exercising their bodies and minds. While his parents and two older brothers actively played the sport, Timothy was not originally a fan. He began to enjoy table tennis around the age of sixteen, when he started to play for his own enjoyment rather than as an obligation to his family. Timothy’s newfound passion for the sport helped accelerate his table tennis career and began his journey to national and international competition.<sup>14</sup>

Because Houston’s interest in table tennis was limited at the time, most of Timothy’s early training took place at the Houston Table Tennis Association (HTTA). To be globally competitive, Timothy moved to California and continued his professional training. His transition to a professional competitor marked a defining moment in his life. He shares that “many Asian children know [that there] is a lot of pressure” in their family to do well in school rather than in extracurricular activities like table tennis. To Timothy’s surprise, his family supported his sports pursuits. His father encouraged him to continue and “believed that you do not always have to do everything in the conventional way.” With the support of his family, Timothy successfully competed for a spot on the United States National Team and, afterwards, competed against the Canadian National Team for one of four spots allotted to the North American continent at the 2012 Summer Olympic Games in London.<sup>15</sup>

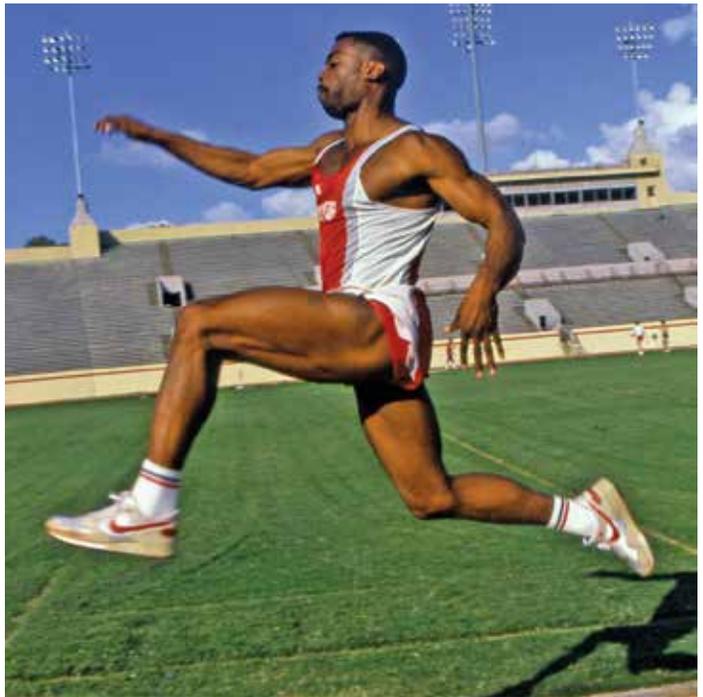
Although Timothy did not earn a medal at the 2012 or the 2016 games, his post-Olympic contribution to Houston is remarkable. In 2016, Timothy co-founded the Houston International Table Tennis Academy (HITTA) in Katy, Texas. The academy facilitates training for over sixty students every day of the week, a number that is “totally unheard of in Houston.” Timothy’s goal for the 11,000-square-foot facility is to bring out the best in Houston and to provide the next generation an opportunity to learn and play table tennis competitively. Having had an accomplished career in table tennis, he observes that local “interest [in table tennis] is rising.” As with any niche endeavor, however, overcoming the struggle to find funding is key in proactively nurturing the next generation of table tennis Olympians. Timothy’s persistence and entrepreneurial spirit have already transformed the sport’s landscape by providing a facility for youth and adults to learn table tennis.<sup>16</sup>

Among those who have been positively impacted by HITTA is Thuan Dao, a biology student at the University of Houston (UH). Thuan started the Table Tennis Club at UH and discovered that the university’s diversity was so remarkable that you “never know who is actually a [professional] or [an amateur] at table tennis.” Over time, he explains, “the club grew and got bigger, [motivating] me to step it up and become more competitive. After a quick Google search [for table tennis in Houston], I found the perfect table tennis club [led] by the best player in Houston, Olympian Timothy Wang. [HITTA] provides the resources that gives an edge to

any player of any age and skill range. This facility [has] not only sharpened my skills, but it [has] turned my hobby of table tennis into a passion.”<sup>17</sup>

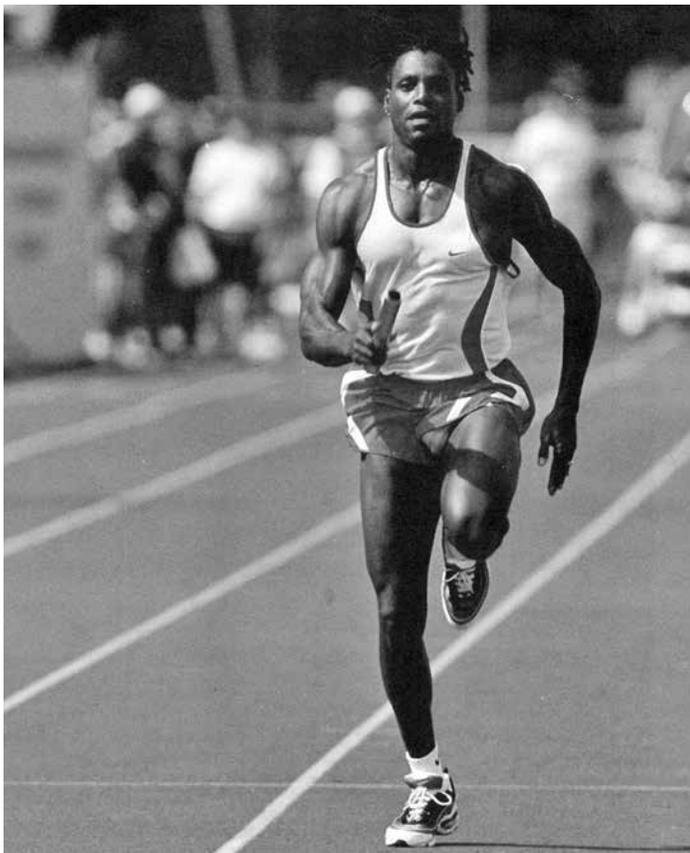
Much like the role that HITTA played in helping Thuan grow his passion, Daniel Nguyen also realized his talent for table tennis. An Tran, Daniel’s mother, shares that their family’s journey with table tennis originally started as an after-school activity for both Daniel and his older brother, Michael. After moving from Minnesota to Texas, the Tran family enrolled Daniel and Michael in classes at HITTA. Timothy is convinced that Daniel will likely grow up to compete in the Olympics since, at only nine years old, he is already nationally ranked among table tennis players in his age group.<sup>18</sup>

Similar to Timothy, the Tran family hails from an Asian country, Vietnam. Mrs. Tran states that while both of her children are involved in table tennis, the sport can be expensive and time-consuming, critical hurdles that can hinder academic performance. Even though the boys were born in the United States, An’s concern represents a struggle many Asian Americans face: balancing the expectation of competitive academic performance and the hope that their children pursue their non-academic interests freely and wholeheartedly. As many families face similar concerns at HITTA, Timothy’s journey provides parents and children alike a source of mentorship and guidance.<sup>19</sup>



*In 1986, Leroy Burrell broke UH’s freshman long jump record held by Carl Lewis when Burrell leaped 26’9” at a dual meet against UCLA. As a senior in 1990 he won the NCAA indoor long jump title for the second time with a 27’ leap. He won gold at the 1992 Barcelona Games in the 4x100 meter relay with Michael Marsh, Dennis Mitchell, and Carl Lewis.*

Photo courtesy of UH Alumni Association.



*Carl Lewis ran his last race in 1998 in front of approximately 17,000 fans at UH’s Robertson Stadium, where he began his college athletic career. He won nine Olympic gold medals and one silver. At the 1992 Olympics, the U.S. 4x100 meter relay team of Michael Marsh, Leroy Burrell, Dennis Mitchell, and Carl Lewis set a world record at 37.4 seconds.*

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

Timothy’s fondest memories competing in Houston are limited to a few early matches in 2009. Growing up in Houston in a Taiwanese family provided a support system that enabled him to reach the Olympics, the highest stage for a professional table tennis player. While he is currently undecided about his pursuit for the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo, Japan, he remains involved in the sport through his local efforts to grow HITTA. As a two-time U.S. Olympian, three-time U.S. National Men’s Singles Champion (2010, 2012, 2013), two-time U.S. National Men’s Doubles Champion (2011, 2012), and a 2015 North American Men’s Singles Champion, Timothy hopes to see the club produce “a lot of international athletes as well as many more American national team members.” With over eight full-time instructors at the facility, Timothy reflects that if this had been accessible during his training years, he would not have moved to California for advanced training. He states, “[The facility] would have made things a lot easier for me [by] having my family around to support me and make sure my day-to-day operations ran smoothly.” Like Zina’s contribution to Houston, Timothy’s journey is a reflection of how the Olympic Games directly contribute to building sports communities locally.<sup>20</sup>

### Answering Zina’s Question: What Comes after the Olympics?

Thirty-two years after the modern Olympics began, Houston sent its first known athlete to the Olympics. Creth Hines, a competitor in the men’s javelin throw, attended the 1928 Summer Olympics in Amsterdam, Netherlands. Since then, both Houston and the Olympics have grown. As of 2017,

Houston is the fourth-largest city in the United States with over ninety languages spoken here. Houston has hosted the Super Bowl three times and is home to more than five professional sports teams. The nine-county Houston Metropolitan Statistical Area's GDP in 2016 was \$478 billion, larger than the GDP of Austria or Saudi Arabia.<sup>21</sup> The Summer Olympic Games have grown to include more than 10,500 athletes, facilitated a growing list of sports disciplines, and garnered more than three billion television viewers, all the while becoming increasingly more expensive to produce.<sup>22</sup> With Houston as an economic powerhouse and the Olympic Games as a catalyst for bringing the world together to advance the human condition, it seems natural to ask, "How have the Olympics impacted Houston?"

Zina and Timothy are not the only Olympic athletes giving back to the Houston community. Leroy Burrell, who won a gold medal at the 1992 Barcelona games, is entering his twentieth year as the head coach of UH track and field.<sup>23</sup> He has led UH to thirty-two conference championships and coached sixty-nine NCAA All-Americans. Carl Lewis, one of the most decorated track and field Olympians of all time, competed in four Olympics, winning ten medals, nine of them gold. Today he is in his fourth season as a UH assistant coach, training the next generation of Olympic athletes at his alma mater, where he and Burrell trained under Coach Tom Tellez.

Simone Biles, who competes as a professional gymnast, founded World Champions Centre (WCC) with the support of her parents, Ron and Nellie Biles, in hopes of creating a world-class, accessible gymnastics facility near Houston. WCC offers classes in gymnastics, taekwondo, dance, and many other disciplines. To complement the lives of hopeful professional athletes, the facility hosts a homeschool program, "which is incredibly helpful when training at the elite level!" Simone shares that "gymnasts from all over the world come to WCC to visit and train," and she hopes to "see lots of gymnasts from Houston in the future representing both WCC and the United States." Simone men-



*A gold medalist in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, Leroy Burrell has coached at his alma mater, the University of Houston, for over twenty years.* Photo courtesy of the University of Houston.



*Four-time Olympian Carl Lewis with author Asit Shah at the University of Houston.* Photo courtesy of author.

tions, "Everything that a gymnast needs to train at the elite level" can be found in Houston. Kelly Tolar, a social media specialist at WCC, adds that the multipurpose facility trains both men and women competitively. Because the time commitment is intense, Kelly's own daughter, who is competitively training in gymnastics, attends WCC's homeschool program where Simone's own teacher educates elite-level athletes. As people move from places as far away as Hawaii to train at WCC, Houston continues to grow as a hub of sorts for the sport.<sup>24</sup>

Athletes and coaches with Houston connections have contributed to the development of first-rate competitors in other sports as well. Hakeem Olajuwon, Shannon Miller, Ken Spain, and more than sixty other Olympic athletes have also proactively given back to Houston's sporting community through coaching, establishing new businesses, performing charitable work, and, most importantly, serving as inspirations.

As Houston strives to host world-class sporting events like the Olympics, the city must consider the impact that veteran athletes have made and partner with them to extend the influence of their initiatives. The driving force behind athletes like Zina Garrison and Timothy Wang who continually reinvest in their communities extends beyond the altruistic urge to give back; it stems from the need to help their communities succeed, empower new generations to redefine what we as a species are capable of doing, and share their love for sport. When these athletes succeed, Houston succeeds.

**Asit Shah** is a passionate advocate for the Olympic Games and a proud member of the University of Houston Alumni Association's Senior 27 Honor Society. He graduated in May 2017 *summa cum laude* from the Bauer Business Honors Program with a BBA in management information systems and supply chain management with minors in energy and sustainability, finance, and marketing.

# Past, Present, and Future: The Women Shaping Houston's Architecture

By Alicia Islam



*In front of Joan Miró's Personage and Birds, Sally Walsh proudly stated, "I walk through Houston buildings today and find good contemporary design, whether or not I had a hand in it, I find myself taking credit ... because on this specific turf it flourished with my help."*

Photo courtesy of Paul Hester.

**A**rchitecture has helped cities create identities and given the citizens a sense of home. Few people can look at their skylines without having a sense of pride. The people who help shape these spaces often work in the background — especially women. With architecture being one of the last fields to integrate women into the industry, Houston women may have had a slow start but they have made a lasting impact and are here to stay.

Before the 1960s women in the industry were few and far between in Texas, let alone Houston. Not only was it a boys' club of sorts, but their female counterparts had to overcome hurdles that the men did not face. Ila Nunn, who married famed Houston architect Stayton Nunn, was a Rice Institute architecture student in 1922. Although the men could work on campus all night, female students had to "vanish" from campus at 5:00 p.m., making it impossible for Nunn and other women to complete the required amount of work. She did not complete the architecture program but did as much as she could until her fourth year, ultimately leaving Rice with an art degree.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Nunn is believed to have helped her husband in his design work.

Houston's earliest architecture graduate was Lavonne Dickinsheets Scott who graduated from Rice in 1934. Though Scott practiced a bit in Houston, the first female architect to actively practice in the city was 1947 Rice graduate, Betty Jo Jones. Jones received some recognition for her work as early as 1957. She began her business in 1952 and was in demand as a residential designer in less than two decades—fast by architectural standards. She told a *Houston Chronicle* reporter, "Had I been a man, I probably would have tried to get more commercial work. Boards of directors ... do not normally choose a woman architect." Nonetheless, she broke into smaller commercial work. Jones is also considered a pioneer for



*Sally Walsh is seated in the Jones Building of the Houston Public Library, which she designed.*

Photo courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Archives.

Houston women in architecture, being the first to operate her own business. She was a member of the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architecture (AIA) and was one of the twenty-two female architects of its 1,221 members.<sup>2</sup>

Other women had a hand in Houston's architecture through the Women's Auxiliary to the AIA, whose mission was to urge all wives of AIA members to join in order to "encourage fellowship, aid the Chapter, and stimulate greater public interest in and understanding of the architectural profession." They hosted events throughout the year, including design competitions that benefitted the community and a couples event. Though the organization was intended to bring together the wives of professionals, both men and women led meetings to further education.<sup>3</sup>

Another organization that was nearly exclusively women was the Houston chapter of the Architectural Secretaries Association (ASA). Begun in 1959 in Miami, Florida, for members to enhance the profession and community, ASA received pushback early on from architects who believed that it was either a union or a place where the secretaries discussed private office material.<sup>4</sup> Less than a year after its formation, the ASA put those rumors to rest and validated its status as an organization. Despite the initial opposition, the group has grown to include other industries pertinent to architecture and is now the Society for Design Administrators (SDA). For some, being a secretary was a stepping stone to understanding the ins and outs of the industry, but other former secretaries became major players in Houston's architectural scene.

Interior designer Sally Walsh was one of these early trailblazers who is credited with bringing modern design to Houston through her interior design work and is known nationally for her contributions to the industry. Walsh received

recognition from the AIA and, in 1986, became the first Houstonian inducted into the Interior Design Hall of Fame. These recognitions left her unfazed. She said that although it was flattering to be recognized by one's peers, awards did not impress her because she did not belong to anything.<sup>5</sup>

Walsh may have been referring to her lack of formal architecture and design training. Everything she learned had come from serving as the assistant to the renowned Hans Knoll, of the design firm Knoll in Chicago, Illinois. He considered her perfect for the job because she was a blank slate; someone he could train completely. Walsh went above and beyond as his assistant – from walking his dog to writing correspondences – but traveling to meet with other firms and access to the latest designs and fabrics allowed her to develop into a holistic designer.<sup>6</sup>

Walsh arrived in Houston in 1955 because her husband, Bill, a prominent criminal lawyer, had found work in the city. She intended to open a Knoll showroom to bring its modern designs to the rapidly growing business community, but Hans Knoll's sudden death halted her plans. Beginning her career anew, she initially worked at Suniland Furniture Company but soon accepted an offer with Wilson Stationery & Printing, where she began to work on her craft. In 1971 Walsh became a partner at S. I. Morris Architects, a prominent Houston firm, where she made some of her greatest strides. Her major local contributions include: the Transco Tower offices, Lehman Brothers offices, and the Jones Building of the Houston Public Library. Walsh began revolutionizing the interiors in corporate Houston during the 1950s, but many of those contributions were eclipsed by Gerald D. Hines, the development magnate credited with modernizing Houston's architectural scene, largely during the 1970s.<sup>7</sup>

Walsh went beyond the corporate world later in her career, acting as a role model for other women in Houston. She was considered quick-witted and outspoken, refusing to hold back her individuality. Both her male and female colleagues took notice and many of her co-workers strove to emulate her. Her intensity did not go unnoticed, even prompting her partner S. I. Morris to call her the "toughest son of a bitch in the partnership." Even with all her commercial success, Walsh spent her time after work working. After toiling all day at Morris, she went to her personal office among Houston's downtown skyscrapers to continue working on her personal projects, never content to slow down.<sup>8</sup>

The 1970s saw a wave of women entering the field in stark contrast to earlier times. The Houston chapter of AIA had twenty-two registered female professionals with just as many female students enrolled in the Rice School of Architecture and a few Houstonians scattered throughout Texas. One of these women was Carrie G. Shoemake. A native Houstonian, Shoemake grew up with very open-minded, supportive parents for a girl in the 1960s, which enabled her to go through five different majors at three different institutions. She jumped from being a humanities major to a pottery major, an art history major, and eventually an architecture student at The University of Texas at Austin (UT). Shoemake recalled being impacted by two images: one from an article she had read in *Ms.* magazine about



*New Hope Housing at Brays Crossing was designed by GSMA, which renovated former housing for NASA contractors in the sixties as well as low income housing units. The award-winning project has prevalent themes of Mexican heritage that tie back to the surrounding neighborhood.*

Photo courtesy of GSMA.

a woman who had gone through a bad divorce and breast cancer, ultimately leaving her with nothing; and another of a cartoon that showed a woman running around the kitchen trying to get all the chores done for her family. These images nagged at her until she realized that she did not want to be like those women and needed to pick an occupation.<sup>9</sup>

When Shoemake finally landed on architecture, her father, sure that she would excel, warned her that while he was in medical school, the women had a more difficult time and were not treated the same as men. Shoemake was one of six women in the program at UT. Having been exposed to a range of subjects and being somewhat older than the other students, she better handled the intensity of the curriculum. Even so, it was not always easy. When she presented in class, she recognized that the professor made jokes he did not make with the male students; and after discussing it with one of the two female professors with whom Shoemake became close, she saw the differences in how men and women were treated. She felt like an “other” at times due, in part, to being older and because she worked at home instead of staying late at school with her peers. Nevertheless, Shoemake enjoyed being the “other.”



*Carrie Glassman Shoemake, FAIA, has been involved in architecture in Houston for most of her life and is a founding partner of Glassman Shoemake Maldonado Architects (GSMA), the AIA Houston 2013 Firm of the Year.*

Photo courtesy of Carrie Shoemake.

Shoemake found the differentiating treatment sometimes benefitted her because when she outshined the male students, the professor took notice and praised her. Reflecting on the 1970s now, she feels women tolerated these differences in treatment because the expectations of them were lower, despite having to prove themselves more than their male colleagues. When looking for work during her final year of school in 1972, an employer once asked how quickly she could type and about doing interior design work, areas suitable for women. Shoemake insisted that she would only accept an architecture position. Her friend Bill Stern, who later taught at the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture at the University of Houston (UH COA), told her that these assumptions were not that big of a deal. Shoemake retorted, “Did anyone ever ask you to type, Bill?” To which he responded, “Well, no, of course they wouldn’t ask me.”<sup>10</sup>

Eventually Shoemake went on to take an architect’s job at Caudill Rowlett Scott Architects, where she was one of two women of 300 employees. Shoemake vividly recalls an incident when one of her colleagues had done a detail section of a receptionists’ desk and the head of construction documents thought she had done it. When walking across the office, he furiously demanded she come over to him. He put his hands around her neck yelling at her that she should not have done the detail. Shoemake thought to herself, “What is this?” She had to decide to either stay calm or react. Realizing he looked like a fool, she relaxed. Eventually, one of the partners, Charles “Tiny” Lawrence, came over, telling the man he could not act like that. At the time she realized how inappropriate the sight was, but she just kept working.<sup>11</sup>

Shoemake felt like she almost fell into architecture. Choosing a profession she loved was a lesson that her parents engrained in her. Her ultimate decision to stay in Houston and practice resulted from a shift in the architectural culture during the 1970s. Houston was attracting

some of the nation's top architects to design. Eventually in the 1980s Shoemake and her husband, also an architect, moved to Austin so he could receive his MBA. She had a small practice there, which she dissolved once she became pregnant, but agreed to do a residential project in Houston. The design received an AIA Award and sparked an interest in her designs, allowing her to open a new practice in Houston.<sup>12</sup>

Natalye Appel, who has lived in Houston since the age of one, has also made her mark on Houston's architectural scene. When taking various career aptitude tests, every one directed her to a career in the restaurant or food industries and architecture. Though she had and still has a love of



*Principal of Natalye Appel + Associates Architects, Natalye Appel, FAIA, has been involved in educating aspiring architects in Houston at Rice University and the University of Houston, and in practicing architecture since the eighties.*

Photo courtesy of Natalye Appel.

the restaurant industry, a discussion with her guidance counselor at Lamar High School solidified her decision to study architecture in 1976. The person recommended she *not* choose architecture because she was a woman, which prompted Appel to gladly take on the major. Appel decided to pursue the architecture program at Rice University as it had female faculty members, though few, and an encouraging environment. A notable role model there was Elinor Evans. One of the female faculty, she taught every Rice architecture student

during their first year for twenty-one years.<sup>13</sup> Evans opened her students' eyes to the art behind architecture, pushing them to see the world and profession differently. Evans's eclectic manner and style attracted Appel – like many others — to enroll at Rice instead of an out-of-state university.

Appel's husband, John Casbarian, a fellow architect and professor at Rice, and his business partners, Danny Samuels and Bob Timmy, are some of her fond mentors and a reason she chose to remain in Houston. Though they have separate practices, the spouses helped each other advance their work. Timmy, a former dean at UH COA, extended Appel a job to teach first-year studios. Appel knew nothing about teaching, but the faculty environment and her experience at Rice allowed her to pick it up quickly. Teaching became a natural fit for Appel and offered a perfectly balanced opportunity to work and teach. She knew that to continue, however, she needed her master's degree. Appel returned to Pennsylvania where she had done an internship in the final year for her bachelor's in architecture, and attended the University of Pennsylvania. She enjoyed her time there, but when it came time to pick a city to establish her career, Houston was a natural contender. By the time she completed her degree, architecture in Houston had become exciting. Unlike older cities in the North, which have strict zoning regulations, Houston has none, the only major city in the nation with that freedom. Appel was drawn to the possibilities of what this could mean for architecture.<sup>14</sup>

Although she moved back to Houston and married, Appel accepted a teaching job at Texas A&M and commuted to College Station. Three years later she accepted a tenured-track position teaching at UT, all while commuting to Houston for her family and projects, which included a West End project involving experimental neighborhoods for artistic clients, small-scale residential work, and renovating warehouses. Appel continued to live between two cities after she had her first child and taught through the following

*The Caldwell Residence was completed by Natalye Appel + Associates Architects in 2015. The residence is a LEED Gold Certified home that focused on the ideas of light, health, durability, and sustainability.*

Photo courtesy of Natalye Appel.



spring semester. She realized that juggling a major teaching position, a practice, and her family meant something would suffer. She loved all three intensely, and the thought of letting one go was nearly impossible. However, when she finally made the decision to leave UT, she immediately felt relieved. Once she settled back in Houston, she began teaching part-time studios at Rice and UH, which suited her growing practice. Appel has not taught for the past twenty years, however, due to how her practice has grown.<sup>15</sup>

Shoemake and Appel are each named a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects (FAIA) in recognition of their outstanding contributions to the practice of architecture. It is an honor only three percent of members have received. They had different educational experiences, but ultimately settled in Houston to open their own successful practices. They have fiery personalities and took their “disadvantage” as females entering the field more as a blissful challenge than a threat. Women in the field commonly either do not marry until later in life or marry another architect, and both women did the latter. On top of that, they had their own practices and families relatively early in their careers. When Shoemake was asked how she juggled a family and a practice, she looked me straight in the eye, smiled, and said, “I just did it,” followed by laughter. Appel did not find it to be much different from what most families must face, but she realized at a younger age the amount of time and dedication it would take to make it all work.<sup>16</sup>

Based on Shoemake’s and Appel’s experiences in college, architecture school in Houston has come a long way. Dramatic shifts have occurred in the field, with both Rice and UH boasting nearly 1:1 male and female student bodies in their most recent classes. In 2014 at UH COA, 43 percent of its incoming undergraduate architecture class and 56 percent of its master’s in architecture class were female. That same year, 59 percent of Rice’s incoming class were women.<sup>17</sup> In 2015, at UH COA, both the undergraduate and graduate valedictorians were females. In addition, the youngest licensed architect in the state of Texas is not only a Houston woman but also graduate of UH COA.<sup>18</sup>

Megan Tegethoff graduated from UH COA as the salutatorian in 2014, earning her bachelor in architecture degree. Like Shoemake and Appel, she is a native Houstonian but grew up with closer ties to the field. Her father, a civil engineer, recognized her talents at a young age and planted the idea for her to pursue an architecture career. Coupled with support from family and friends, Tegethoff’s strong desire to become an architect distracted her from



*University of Houston graduate Megan Tegethoff is the youngest licensed architect in the state of Texas.*

Photo courtesy of Megan Tegethoff.

any negative influences throughout her education. Though very dedicated, the summer before her second year of college, Tegethoff was diagnosed with a rare blood disease, idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura (ITP), causing her to be dependent on steroids. The second year at UH COA is very intense for most students as they completely dive into architecture, and many students drop out of the degree plan. However, Tegethoff’s professor Sharon Chapman showed compassion to help guide her through the year.<sup>19</sup>

Although the renamed University of Houston College of Architecture and Design (UH COAD) has competitive ratios of female and male students today, it had one female for every five male students when Tegethoff was in studio. These numbers did not deter her; instead she used her intense passion for architecture to push her to bigger things. During the fall semester of her fifth year she became certified as a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Accredited Professional (LEED AP), and three months after graduation, she took the first of seven Architectural Registration Exams (AREs). Tegethoff passed her final exam one year after graduating from college and officially became licensed August 2015 after completing her final required Intern Development Program (IDP) hours. Her philosophy in approaching the exams was to accept being miserable for a year and reap the benefits sooner rather than later. Now healthy and cured of ITP, Tegethoff is enjoying growing into her “architect skin” and looks forward to a long career where every day she learns something new, keeping her on her toes and living life to the fullest.<sup>20</sup>

The Houston architectural community is strong, and the women in the field are making strides. Appel has heard from young women in the profession today that it has been hard to have all their needs met, whether professional or personal, but she feels that the industry has made great strides to allow women and men to accommodate their lifestyles.<sup>21</sup> It is commonly said that architects in the city know each other, and that is in part due to the organizations that bring them all together. AIA hosts several events where local firms and student organizations compete against one another, such as the annual sandcastle and gingerbread competitions, allowing firms to showcase their studio culture and who they are as companies.

Organizations like Women in Architecture (WIA), a part of the AIA, provide an outlet for other aspiring and registered architects to come together and host activities such as mentorship events, social hours, and lectures. Sharon Chapman, a professor at UH COAD and a board member of Houston’s WIA, pointed out when gathering information from other chapters that other cities envy Houston’s sense of community and sheer numbers that their cities lack.<sup>22</sup> Women in the field have slowly made their mark in the industry, here and around the nation, but they are coming in masses now more than ever.

**Alicia Islam** is a native Houstonian who graduated from UH Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture and Design with her bachelor’s degree in architecture and a minor in energy and sustainability in the fall of 2016. An aspiring architect, she hopes to contribute to Houston as Sally Walsh, Carrie Shoemake, and Natalye Appel have done.

# The M.D. Anderson Memorial Library: A Legacy of Growth

By Khalid Sheikh



*Today, the M.D. Anderson Library has a light shining through the A, A sculpture at night, projecting quotes from famous works of literature in their native language onto the side of the building.*

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston.

The M.D. Anderson Memorial Library lies at the crossroads of the sprawling University of Houston (UH) campus.<sup>1</sup> Situated between the Cullen Family Plaza and the Student Center, thousands of Houstonians pass by the massive limestone building every day. Those who enter the library's glass doors are greeted by a three-story atrium bustling with activity: students rush up and down the Grand Staircase, chatter around group study tables, and scramble behind oversized computer screens to complete assignments. Beyond the atrium, students pile into elevators for a short ride to the much quieter Brown or Blue Wings. The library is the heart of the university, serving as a retreat for students in between classes and a resource for the experienced and aspiring scholars. The 250,000-square-foot behemoth — representing just one part of the UH Library System — began quite modestly, however, as merely a few shelves of books over ninety years ago.<sup>2</sup>

When Houston Junior College was founded in 1927, administrators at San Jacinto High School (SJHS), where the college classes met, granted the fledgling school a section of the high school library to call its own. For the next few years, the college's book collection grew slowly, as President E. E. Oberholtzer focused primarily on securing space for the college's classes rather than the library. This changed in

1933 when Ruth S. Wikoff became head of the junior college's library. Even in the depths of the Great Depression, Wikoff wasted little time in adding to the collection and building a library that met her standards. In 1934, Houston Junior College officially transitioned to a four-year university and became the University of Houston. By this time, 900 students were enrolled in classes at UH, which met in various buildings throughout the day and at SJHS at night. By 1935, Wikoff's efforts had overwhelmed the high school's library, which overflowed with study tables and books. Something had to be done. In response, President Oberholtzer, who was also superintendent of the Houston Independent School District, conveniently arranged to build a new music room for the high school, thereby freeing up the old music room for the university's library.<sup>3</sup>

By 1936, President Oberholtzer and other administrators realized that the university needed its own space. The original plans called for a new campus in Memorial Park, but the deal fell through after controversy erupted over oil drilling stipulations in the contract. The controversy's press coverage proved helpful, however, when shortly thereafter the Settegast family and Captain Ben Taub agreed to donate over 100 acres of land for the university's campus. Following an aggressive fundraising campaign, which included the first



*Ruth Wikoff, shown here (second from right) in the 1949 Houstonian yearbook, spearheaded the growth of the University of Houston Library with her indomitable vision and leadership.*  
 Photo courtesy of the Houstonian Yearbook Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

of many donations by Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen, the university drained the swampy land and began construction on its first two buildings. On Monday, June 5, 1939, classes met in the new Roy G. Cullen Memorial Building; soon after, the Science Building was completed nearby.<sup>4</sup> After twelve years, the University of Houston had its own home.

The first library space on the new campus was in the Roy Cullen Building, and consisted of a single classroom and two smaller storage rooms. In her characteristic refined manner, Wikoff continued to compete, often successfully, for funds to build the collections she felt the university should have. Shortly, the library's new quarters proved no match for Wikoff, and she began filling other classrooms with library materials. President Oberholtzer reportedly remarked, "We've got to give the library space or she'll take over the whole building!"<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the library was not alone in needing more room. UH's enrollment had skyrocketed in the post-World War II era, growing from less than 2,000 in 1944 to 10,968 in the fall of 1948. This growth was largely due to the influx of former soldiers eager to use the education benefits under the new GI Bill. With this rapid increase in the student body, course offerings expanded and campus life took off. By 1948, the university had over fifty extracurricular organizations registered. In their free time, students could try their hand at fencing through the Foil Club or develop an appreciation for pharmacy through the Mortar and Pestle Club. This increase in enrollment came at a cost as overcrowding became the norm, even though UH added two buildings. For the library, which could only seat 150 of the nearly 11,000 students, the growth was overwhelming.<sup>6</sup>

This increase in student enrollment was not surprising. President Oberholtzer had predicted the university's growth and had begun planning a \$12 million campus expansion in 1945. The plans included the grand Ezekiel W. Cullen Building, new dormitories to attract out-of-town students, and a dedicated library building. At a meeting of the board of regents in 1946, Colonel William Bates, a trustee of the M.D. Anderson Memorial Foundation, pledged \$1.5 million from the foundation to build the M.D. Anderson Memorial Library.<sup>7</sup>

Officially opened on Christmas Eve in 1950, the new, three-story Anderson Library covered in 11,000 square feet of high-grade marble could seat 1,400 students. The builders ambitiously planned the new library to accommodate 120,000 volumes, vastly exceeding the existing collection, which was likely less than 20,000. Wikoff voiced her concern over these figures shortly before the library had finished construction. Upon hearing this, Houston businessman and philanthropist Leopold Meyer founded the Friends of the Library, an organization of bibliophiles dedicated to supporting the University of Houston Libraries. Through the efforts of this new organization and yet another donation by Hugh Roy Cullen, the library's collection grew to over 56,000 volumes by its dedication in early 1951.<sup>8</sup>

The new library was designed to be cohesive with the campus architecture without overshadowing the new Ezekiel Cullen Building, which was to be the pride of the campus. Nonetheless, the Anderson Library boasted details the Cullen Building did not have. Architectural historian Dr. Stephen James explains, "The architecture that was popular during the 1930s and 40s was trying to allude to the ancient Greek temples. The tops of these temples, or friezes, were often decorated with images of gods and goddesses. Modeling after that, the architects [of the M.D. Anderson Library] carved the names of philosophers and writers on the top of the building to give an idea of the knowledge contained within the building." Chosen by the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, R. Balfar Daniels, the names included Homer, Plato, Shakespeare, Kant, and Swift.<sup>9</sup>

With nearly \$12 million of campus additions in progress — including the construction of the university's first permanent dormitories — the Cougar experience was



*Students study in the one-room library housed in the Roy G. Cullen Building in 1945. The building, which opened in 1939, was the first one completed on the permanent campus site.*

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston Buildings Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



*The original M.D. Anderson Library building, now known as the Red Wing, occupied in 1950 and dedicated on April 1, 1951, has since seen three additions, the Blue, Brown, and Gold Wings.*

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston Buildings Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

transformed. In the fall of 1950, an article entitled “Two Campuses” appeared in *The Daily Cougar* highlighting the campus’s makeover for the last two years:

*Worms, (Frosh was the freshman’s title 24 months ago) on their way to the north campus have no more bridge to backrack upon, but reverse their steps in chalked-off areas before the wide entrance walk to the “Zeke” building. With its stately frontal appearance and internal modernism hands down it’s the most elegant educational structure on this and many another college campuses. The sign board which went up in 1948 to the west of the Reflection pool, the future site of the Ezekiel W. Cullen Building, in capital letters, was an understatement.*

*With first the Anderson Memorial library and behind and to the left of it the un conspicuous [sic] but eye-catching rear of the new power plant, the Worms haven’t a visual chance of forgetting the progressive material development of this University.*

*What can we expect in 24 more months?<sup>10</sup>*

The new library was a sanctuary for students, many of whom lived with their families and rarely had a quiet place of their own. The library gave students access to typewriters, photocopiers, and, of course, plenty of reading material. The library was so popular that students began demanding extended operating hours. As the 1950s wore on, the library continued to fill its shelves and serve an ever-increasing number of students.

By 1959, UH, still a private university, began experiencing budget deficits that student tuition and donations alone could not cover. To solve the crisis, the board of regents decided to join the state university system to provide a steady source of funding for the young university and secure support for future growth. After a few years of planning and lobbying the Texas legislature, the University of Houston began its first term as a public institution in 1963. Tuition

fell from \$700 to \$100, and student enrollment rapidly increased to nearly 17,000. Once again, the university began to feel growing pains.<sup>11</sup>

Starting in the 1960s under President Philip Guthrie Hoffman, UH underwent a second building boom that saw twenty-five new buildings added over fifteen years. With library collections creeping into the student study areas, the boom included a \$2.7 million addition to the library: an eight-story tower dubbed “the Blue Wing.” Built behind the original building, the limestone tower was flanked on either side by two smaller, three-story structures for library storage. Like the original structure, names of great thinkers adorned the tops of these additions, adding sixty-nine names that included da Vinci, Moses, Galileo, Franklin, Tolstoy, and Freud.<sup>12</sup>

The original names that once greeted students at the front of the library are no longer visible after being removed during later expansions. Only a small fraction of the names remain on the library’s rear exterior, where curious students can occasionally be spotted peering up between the trees to read the remaining names. As a freshman, I stumbled upon them while gazing up at the pine trees on my way to class. Seeing the names of familiar figures in such an unusual place intrigued me and left me wanting to know more about the great stone building I passed by every day.



*A vestige of an earlier architectural style, the names of great thinkers can still be seen on the rear of the library. Photo courtesy of Trinity Rinear.*

President Hoffman’s building campaign in the 1960s and 1970s not only relieved crowded conditions but also fostered an improved learning experience and sense of community at UH. The construction of the eighteen-story Moody Towers, the A. D. Bruce Religion Center, and a 186,000-square-foot University Center deepened students’ connection to the campus and truly provided a home away from home. This was an exciting time to be a Cougar. The football team under legendary Coach Bill Yeoman was dominating opponents with the Veer offense, and the 1968 “Game of the Century,” saw the UH basketball team led by Coach Guy V. Lewis beat the first-ranked UCLA Bruins in the Astrodome. With a record number of students living on campus, the library offered movies in its theater every Sunday to entertain them.<sup>13</sup>

The library had its share of the excitement in the 1960s as well with high-profile donations such as Colonel Bates’s Collection of Texana and Western Americana, The George Fuerman Collection, and the Franzheim Memorial



Librarians Bill Jackson and Deborah Dawson work at the *New York Times* Information Bank terminal, which accessed the *New York Times* newspaper through a dial-up connection, circa 1980s. Librarians administered searches for the users.

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston Buildings Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Collection in Architecture. Referring to the Fuerman Collection, Nancy Clark, Alumni Legacy Programs officer, recalls, “It was fabulous, and a lot of doctoral students used it as a primary source in Texas history and Houston history.”<sup>14</sup> Both UH academics and athletics were on the rise.

In 1971, enrollment hit a record 27,000 students. With enrollment projected to continue increasing, it was clear to administrators that even the recent eight-story addition would be unable to meet the university’s needs for much longer.<sup>15</sup> In 1975, famed architect and UH alumnus Kenneth Bentsen (‘52) was hired to develop a three-phase plan for library expansion. Phase I of the plan, a five-story addition to the north side of the library, was completed in 1978 and is



The *USS Houston* (CA-30) was sunk on March 1, 1942, during the Battle of Sunda Strait. Shown left to right, survivors Howard Brooks (EM3/c), David Flynn (RM2/c), Clarence “Skip” Schilperoort (EM2/c), and Jordan “Joe” Garrett (SI1/c) visited the *Cruiser Houston* exhibit on the second floor of M.D. Anderson Memorial Library in 2007.

Photo courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

commonly referred to as the “Brown Wing.” The remaining two phases never came to fruition, as the hard economic times of the 1970s and 1980s drastically limited state funding for construction projects.

For the next twenty-five years, the library’s exterior remained relatively unchanged. The interior, however, continued to be reconfigured as new needs developed. In the early 1980s, a group of survivors from the *USS Houston*, a cruiser sunk in the Pacific Theater during World War II, approached the library’s development officer Liz Wachendorfer to open a room dedicated to displaying items they had collected. Realizing that the *USS Houston* was built by the Brown Shipbuilding Company, Wachendorfer set her sights on company cofounder George R. Brown to fund the room. “Getting to Mr. Brown was like getting to Fort Knox,” Wachendorfer recalls. “So I went to Leopold Meyer, who founded the Friends of the Library. He said, ‘You feel really passionate about this, don’t you? Okay, I’ll call George.’” After some pushing and prodding by Wachendorfer the aging Brown agreed to fund the room and allow it to bear his name. The library dedicated the George R. Brown Room, located on the fifth floor of the Brown Wing, on May 15, 1981. The *USS Houston* exhibit, which includes a model of the ship, uniforms of crew members, artifacts, and one of the ship’s bells, serves as a tribute to the approximately 1,100-member crew, most of whom were lost at sea when the ship sunk, and the approximately 360 officers and enlisted men captured by the Japanese.<sup>16</sup>

The Brown Room provided a popular venue for organizations to host meetings and events. The Friends of the Libraries, which had reemerged in the 1980s from a decades-long hiatus, held events in the room with notable guests, such as sports writer George Plimpton and radio host John Henry Faulk. The first organization to offer a UH scholarship, The Houston Assembly of Delphian Chapters, or simply Delphians, also met regularly in the Brown Room.

“The Delphians began as an organization to help women complete college,” explains Ann Herbage, a Delphian of thirty years. “Eventually, we decided that we wanted to contribute to something that benefited the whole student body, so we began to support the library.”<sup>17</sup> In 1956, the Delphians awarded their first grant to the library and continue to provide support to this day. Now, the once-prominent space is occupied by rows of bookshelves and study tables — a totally nondescript section of the library. Although the Brown Room no longer exists, the artifacts from the *USS Houston* can still be found in a more prominent location on the second floor of the Red Wing, interspersed between group study tables.

After nearly two decades without major renovations, the M.D. Anderson Library underwent a \$20 million construction project in 2004 that nearly doubled the amount of space available.



*The foyer of the library hosted a month-long exhibit showing samples of books donated by the Houston Assembly of Delphians. Shown left to right are Dr. Mary Elizabeth Schlayer, regional director of the Delphian Society; Dr. Edward G. Holley, director of libraries for UH; and Mrs. C. W. Hammond, Jr., immediate past president of the Houston Assembly of Delphians.*

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston Archives, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

The entire library was renovated, and the Gold Wing was added to the south side of the building, where Bentsen had originally planned Phase II. The renovation enabled the library to keep up with the rapidly growing pace of technology and the shift away from libraries as strictly silent spaces. Johanna Wolfe, who oversaw the renovation's fundraising campaign as executive director of major gifts, explains that the new library space was designed to meet the students' changing needs. She adds, "The way that people interact with libraries now is very different. Studying, and doing projects and assignments are much more collegial and more partnership-driven, while they used to be more one-on-one." Pam Covington, who worked in the library as a student in the early seventies, agrees, saying, "What we did then, and what libraries did then, was store information."<sup>18</sup> Today the scope goes far beyond that. The large computer labs and open study spaces included in the renovation facilitated accessing information and working cooperatively.

One area that has become a mainstay of the library's outreach to the university community was the addition of the Rockwell Pavilion in honor of 1996 UH Alumni Association Distinguished Alumnus Elizabeth Rockwell. A fourth generation Houstonian, Rockwell endowed the chairs for the deans of the M.D. Anderson Library, the College of Education, and the Cullen College of Engineering, and provided funding for numerous other facilities at the university.

The renovation also saw the addition of *A, A* (pronounced A comma A), a bronze sculpture built by Jim Sanborn. Shaped like a comma and placed in the center of the walkway, the structure displays quotes from famous works of literature in their native language, including Gustave



*A student takes advantage of the peace and quiet found in the library study carrels. Although today the library offers numerous places for students to talk and study together, these quiet respites are still favored by many researchers.*

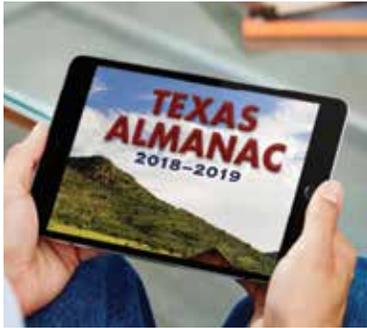
Photo courtesy of the University of Houston Buildings Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in French, *The Neggesto Azeb* in Ethiopian, and *An Ideal Husband* by Oscar Wilde in English.<sup>19</sup> Not unlike the names that adorned the top of the original M.D. Anderson Building, the piece provides a powerful reminder of the beauty, and diversity, of words and the library's role in preserving them.

Established in borrowed space for a noble cause, the library has grown with UH to serve generations of students and Houstonians on their quest for knowledge. The M.D. Anderson Library holds the memories of thousands of students who have entered its doors and the stories of countless authors whose pages fill the shelves. The library also tells a story of its own. The names carved into the limestone, the bells ringing from the Blue Wing's carillon, and the portraits hanging from the library's walls all tell part of the library's—and the university's—story. All one has to do is look closely and ask questions.

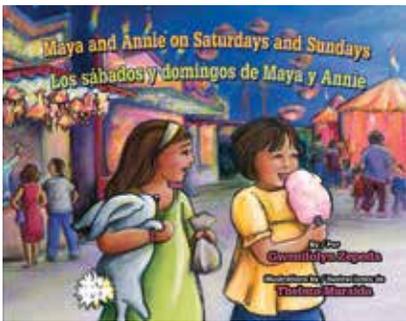
Khalid Sheikh is a graduating senior majoring in biology and minoring in history and medicine and society. Although born in Houston, he spent most of his life in West Dundee, Illinois, a small suburb of Chicago. A semi-finalist for a Fulbright U.S. Student Program grant at press time, Khalid enjoys reading and working out when he is not studying.

## BOOKS



The Texas State Historical Association has released the *Texas Almanac 2018-2019* eBook and *Road to the Texas Revolution* eBook Series for free download. The *Texas Almanac 2018-2019* comes with articles, pictures, and maps, and is the foremost refer-

ence guide “for anything Texan.” The *Road to the Texas Revolution* eBook Series tells the story of the people and events leading up to the Battle of the Alamo in 1836. The third in the seven-book series, *William B. Travis: Victory or Death*, about the co-commander of the Alamo’s forces, recounts the preparations for the defense of the mission. Visit [www.tshaonline.org](http://www.tshaonline.org) for more information.



*Maya and Annie on Saturdays and Sundays/Los sábados y domingos de Maya y Annie* by Gwendolyn Zepeda, illustrated by Thelma Muraida (Arte Público Press). In this bilingual picture book for children ages four to eight, Maya and Annie

learn about each other’s heritage. Recalling her own experiences, Zepeda explores blended families and cultures from a multicultural perspective, shedding light on both Asian and Latino foods and traditions. A unique addition to any classroom or home library for young children, the book will delight with its colorful illustrations of Maya and Annie’s family celebrating posadas and Lunar New Year, and spending their weekends deepening their friendship. Gwendolyn Zepeda is the author of four children’s picture books, including *Level Up*, *Kick the Ball*, and *Growing Up with Tamales*. A designer and artist, Thelma Muraida also illustrated *Clara and the Curandera*, *My Big Sister*, and *Cecilia and Miguel Are Best Friends*.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS



**The Texas State Historical Association (TSHA)** welcomes its new interim CEO **Jesus F. de la Teja**, following the departure of Brian Bolinger. De la Teja was the book review editor for the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* from 1997 to 2014 and served as the TSHA president and the inaugural Texas state historian from 2007 to 2008.



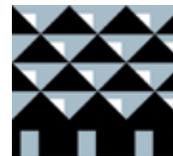
**The Heritage Society** has a new executive director, **Alison Ayres Bell**. Bell previously served as development director for The Heritage Society, executive director of the Construction Workforce Coalition, president of the Lamar High School Parent Teacher Organization, a vestry member of Christ Church Cathedral, and board member of

The Beacon, among her numerous community service roles.

**The African American Library at The Gregory School (GRE)** welcomes **Sheena Wilson** as an archivist and **Emmalee Miller** as a digital technician. Wilson manages, organizes, and preserves documents and other materials of historical importance. Miller digitizes archival collections that provide historical information about the African American experience and puts them online for public use.

The GRE archival collection documents the experience of African American residents, businesses, institutions, and neighborhoods throughout the Houston region. To help build this historical collection, the archive welcomes donations from your personal collections. Visit on Walk-In Wednesdays to bring items to be viewed by archivists or discuss a possible interview with their oral historian.

Recognizing the value of funeral programs, the GRE created the Funeral Program Initiative to collect and index funeral programs of African Americans who lived in or had ties to Houston and Texas. This collection provides a rich source of local history, personal histories, and a collective history of African Americans.



**Project Row Houses (PRH)** is celebrating its **25th Anniversary**. Marking twenty-five years in Houston this fall, PRH continues to transform the Historic Third Ward community through art and African American history and culture. The organization’s

new mission statement indicates: “We empower people and enrich communities through engagement, art, and direct action.” As it has always done, PRH will work to empower individuals and communities through creativity, collaboration, and sustainable opportunities. To celebrate, PRH will host several events that are listed in the calendar below. For more information on locations and times visit [www.projectrowhouses.org](http://www.projectrowhouses.org).

## EVENTS

**Until June 2** — *Chasing Perfection: The Legacy of Architect John S. Chase* can be viewed at the African American Library at the Gregory School. John Chase was the first African American graduate from The University of Texas and the first licensed African American architect in Texas. This free exhibition offers insight into the man and features the work of several architects who worked with Chase as well as those he influenced. [www.thegregoryschool.org](http://www.thegregoryschool.org).

**May 9-August 24** — *Dumped and Forgotten Below the Milam Street Bridge*, an exhibit at The Heritage Society, will showcase a never-before seen archaeological collection of forgotten Civil War weaponry that was dumped into Buffalo Bayou near the Milam Street Bridge to prevent the approaching Union forces from obtaining Confederate equipment and supplies after the war ended in 1865. [www.heritagesociety.org](http://www.heritagesociety.org).

**May 23** — *See Interesting Places (SIP) Series* sponsored by The Heritage Society will visit the historic home of a man who served as a Texas Representative, Harris County judge, and mayor of Houston where the idea of a covered sports stadium was first discussed, resulting in the construction of the Astrodome. [www.heritagesociety.org](http://www.heritagesociety.org).

**June 2, 9, 16, 23** — *Founding Artists Tours* will show off the public art created by the founding artists of Project Row Houses and will include discussions with founders Jesse Lott, Bert Samples, and George Smith. [www.projectrowhouses.org](http://www.projectrowhouses.org).

**June 29** — A fundraiser for the mural *Mexican-American Culture in 20th Century Houston* will be held at The Heritage Society. Orlando Sanchez and Christina Morales are co-chairs of the fundraising campaign for the mural by artists Jesse Sifuentes and Laura Lopez Cano. Mural themes include immigration to Houston by people fleeing the Mexican Revolution, the jobs that new immigrants filled in the railroad and ship channel industries, life in El

Segundo Barrio, community institutions, the importance of extended family, and key Hispanic figures. The process of painting the mural will be an event in itself since it will be completed in place at Sam Houston Park. To attend the fundraiser or donate, visit [www.heritagesociety.org](http://www.heritagesociety.org).

**July Film Screenings** — *Project Row Houses* will collaborate with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston to showcase filmmakers of color with films that act as extensions of Black Life and demonstrate how art is interwoven into everyday life. [www.projectrowhouses.org](http://www.projectrowhouses.org).

**September 7-8** — A symposium with artists, curators, and organizers will captivate and investigate the junction of art and community, the founding principles of Project Row Houses, and the practices of socially engaged artists. [www.projectrowhouses.org](http://www.projectrowhouses.org).

**October 6** — HHA's Houston History Conference, "Houston Women: Agitating, Educating, Advocating," will offer conversations with women who have lived the history and explore how women continue to lead. [www.houstonhistoryalliance.org](http://www.houstonhistoryalliance.org).

**October 13** — *Round 48 Opening and Block Party* will explore the connection between artists and activism in contemporary art at Project Row Houses with games, food, and performances. [www.projectrowhouses.org](http://www.projectrowhouses.org).

**October 26** — *The Project Row Houses 25th Anniversary Gala* will close PRH's celebration. Table sponsors and individual ticket holders will receive a twenty-fifth anniversary book. [www.projectrowhouses.org](http://www.projectrowhouses.org).

## Thank you!

The *Houston History* team would like to thank Ann and Dan Becker of Becker's Books, Mister McKinney with the Houston History Bus, and Stephen James for making the fall launch party a fun and enlightening evening for all. It is a rare occasion that we are able to incorporate three articles in one event, but they made it possible by including the history of Houston bookstores with a tour on the Houston History Bus that visited the Memorial Creole Apartments designed by Lucian T. Hood Jr. We are also grateful to everyone who came out to join us.



Houston History intern Johnny Zapata and editor Debbie Harwell greet guests at Becker's Books with owner Ann Becker, who, along with her husband Dan, hosted the launch event. Photo courtesy of Adriana Castro.



Visitors enjoyed a tour on the Houston History Bus with Mister McKinney (right). The bus went by the Memorial Creole Apartments designed by Lucian T. Hood Jr. and featured in the article "Attention to Detail: The Architecture of Lucian T. Hood, Jr." written by Stephen James (sixth from right) who answered questions along the way. Photo courtesy of Christopher Daigle.

# ENDNOTES

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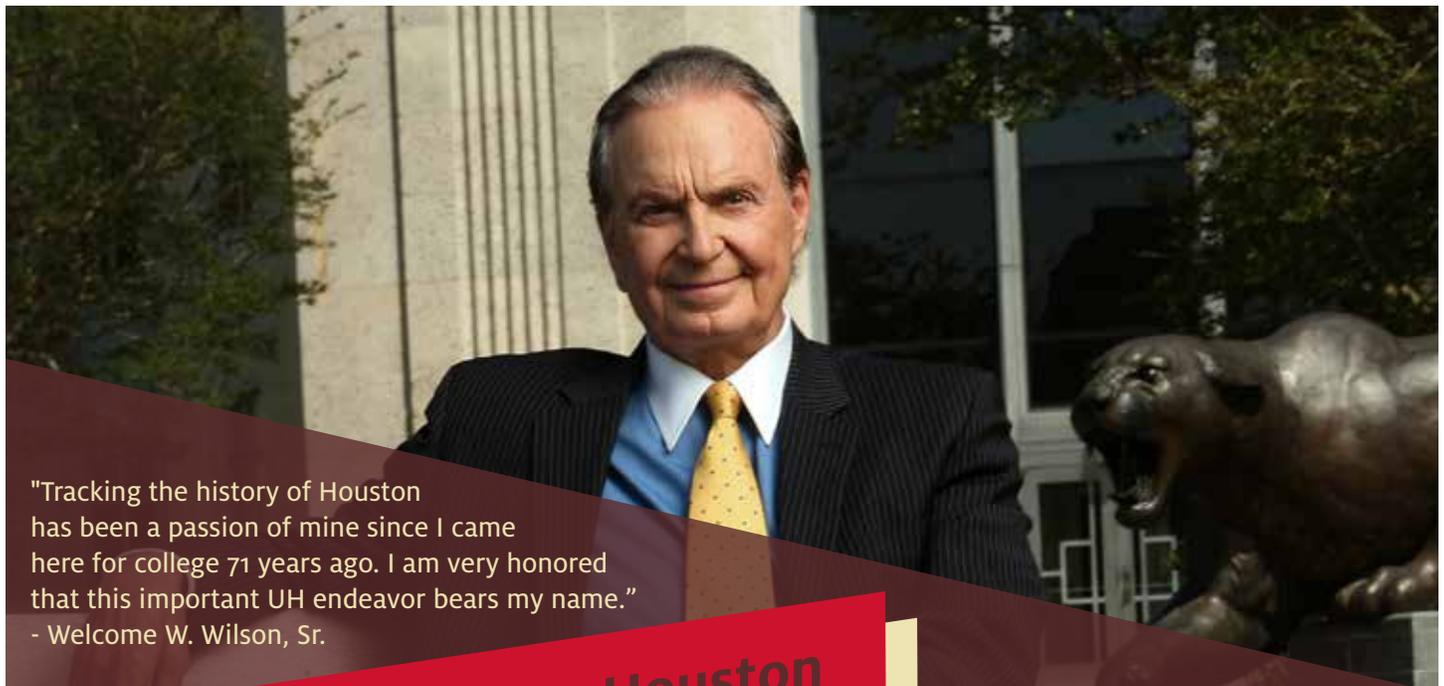
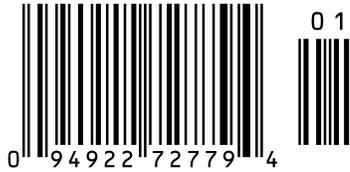
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