



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.² 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.³ 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.”²⁴

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.⁵

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.⁶

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.⁷ 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.⁹

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.¹⁰

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.⁸

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."¹¹

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.¹²

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ 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."¹⁶



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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ 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.