

# 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

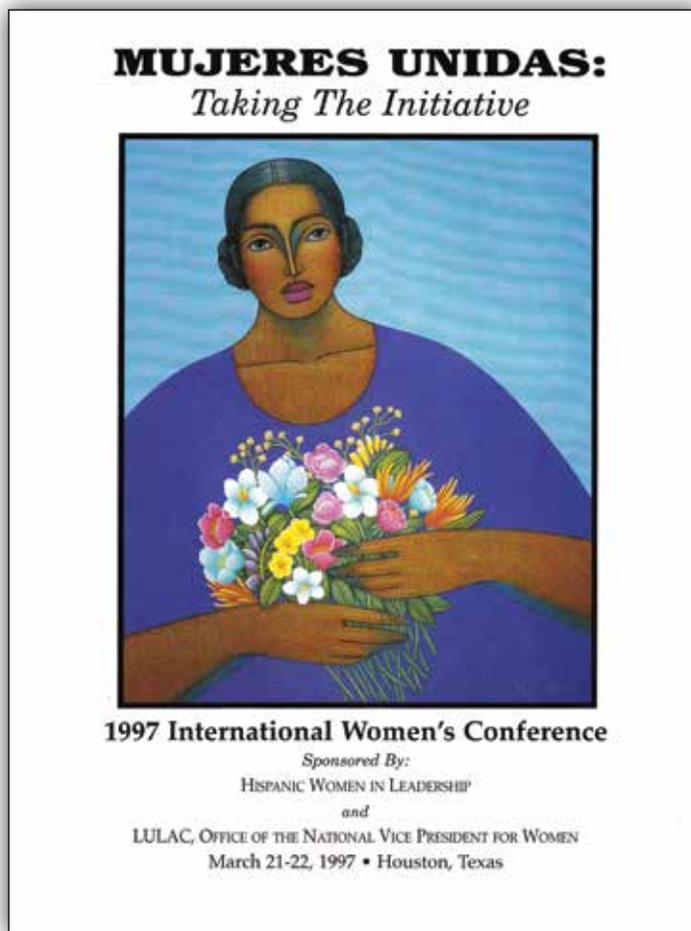
well-being and to promote the education and advancement of Hispanic women everywhere.

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

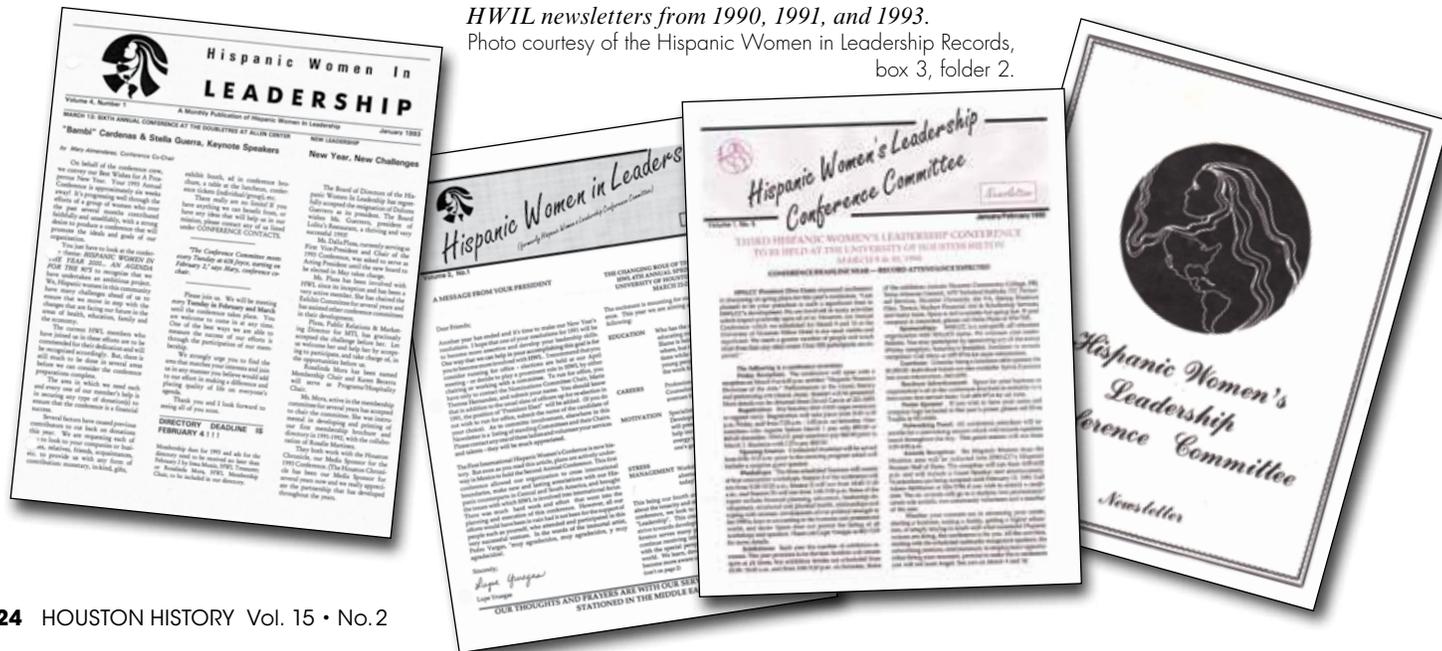
organization's services was not proportional to other groups, dropping from 24% in 1988 to only 14% in 1989. The center had bilingual staff members, but volunteers did most of the work with the women, and most of the volunteers only spoke English. At one point, the center even produced a Spanish language 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.

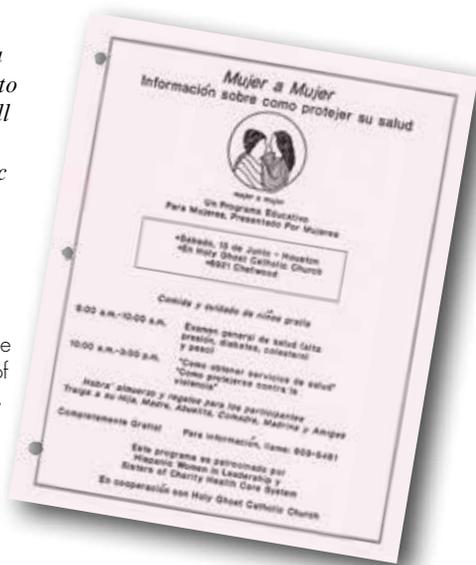
HWIL newsletters from 1990, 1991, and 1993.

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.

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