



*Katy Caldwell, left, and Nancy Sims, right, celebrate Nancy's thirtieth birthday together in 1989. The pair met while working on a political campaign in 1984.*

All photos courtesy of Nancy Sims and Katy Caldwell unless otherwise noted.

# Nancy Sims and Katy Caldwell Talk on Political Junkies and Poodle Hair

*By Max Ward*

**K**aty Caldwell and Nancy Sims both grew up in Houston in the 1960s. One was raised in central Bellaire and the other in eastern North Shore. Born into different circumstances, these two women met and forged a friendship spanning more than forty years, weathering numerous political administrations and countless hardships. Both are leaders in their respective fields: Katy Caldwell is the former CEO of Legacy Community Health, and Nancy Sims is a political consultant and lecturer in political science at the University of Houston (UH), but it is their shared history and friendship that can inspire future generations of leaders. The women shared their stories in oral histories with me in 2021 as part of the 100 Years of Stories: Documenting a Century at the University of Houston project.

Katy Caldwell was born in 1956 in Bellaire, Texas. She grew up going to the opera and Houston's museums. In addition to giving their daughter an appreciation for culture at a young age, her parents supported her education and instilled in her the idea that going to college was a given.<sup>1</sup> Growing up in a conservative environment,

*Sophomore Katy Caldwell, left, visits with friends Michelle Carter and Randy Young on the UH campus.*

Photo courtesy of the *Houstonian*, 1976, Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



she wanted to go to a school that was more open-minded. Fortunately, during Katy's senior year in high school, a friend invited her to the UH campus, and Katy liked



the university's progressive atmosphere. So, when UH accepted her application, she quickly enrolled.

Katy began attending UH in 1974, majoring in biology. Her fondest memories were of The Quadrangle dorms. Reminiscing, she recalled, "We called it 'The Quad.' That's where I made friends that I still have today." She played on the dorm's intramural team called the Quad Squad, in addition to recruiting participants and managing the team in her junior and senior years.

When she was not competing in sports, Katy was studying. She planned to be a doctor but realized she did not have the grades or the desire for it. Despite that, she found herself working in healthcare eventually.

Nancy Sims was born in Harlingen, Texas, in 1959, but moved to the Houston area shortly after that, eventually settling in "Nor-Shore," where she stayed until finishing high school in 1977. Her father worked on the ship channel, and her mother was a teacher.<sup>2</sup>

Early on, Nancy developed a fascination for national news and grew up watching coverage of the Vietnam War on television. She remembered, "My parents didn't want me to watch it ... so when they were asleep, I would sneak down the hall and watch it." But it was the political scandal surrounding then president Richard Nixon that cemented Nancy's interest in politics. She explained, "In '72, Congress held these Watergate Hearings ... and I became obsessed. ... My friends would come by and want to play, and I couldn't. ... I was too busy watching these hearings!"



Katy actively participated in and recruited members for the Quad Squad's intramural athletic teams. Here, Nancy Matthews, Katy Caldwell, and Nancy Martini, left to right, take their positions at the Beauty Bowl.

Photo courtesy of the *Houstonian*, 1977, Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

After high school, Nancy attended Sam Houston State University and got involved in campus politics with the Texas Young Democrats. She was one of three women majoring in political science in her class. When the department chair asked why she was not pursuing a teaching degree, Nancy told him, "I don't want to be a teacher. I'm going to practice politics."

Nancy graduated from college a year early so she could work on Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign. Though she did not work with him directly, she was hired by the Steel Workers' Union to help organize his campaign, working at Carter's mobile White House based at Houston's Warwick Hotel. Nancy's job was to coordinate the celebrities who came out to endorse Carter. Through this, she met famous Astros players Joe Niekro and Joe Sambito, who she thought were, "the cat's meow." Nevertheless, she added, "I didn't get star-struck or anything [by them], which apparently impressed a lot of people."

In 1982, then lieutenant governor William P. "Bill" Hobby, Jr. asked Nancy to work on his reelection campaign, and he soon became her friend and lifelong mentor. She served as Hobby's driver whenever he made appearances in town. She remembered Hobby's "very dry sense of humor," and how no one would laugh at his jokes because "normally people ... were [too] awed by his power." But Nancy understood his humor and laughed when others were too afraid, which led her to conclude, "He took a shine to me. ... That was one of the biggest blessings of my life."

In 1984, Hobby assigned Nancy to work on the campaign of John Glenn, the first astronaut to orbit the



The Quad Squad's big rival in flag football was Moody Towers dormitory, with their annual game dubbed the "Beauty Bowl." The Quad Squad lost its first three contests but won Katy's senior year.

Photo courtesy of Bob Andrews.



Earth. She admitted, “I was awed by the space program. ... Hanging out with presidents and senators and all that, I never got very impressed. But the one thing that impressed me was astronauts. ... I almost couldn’t work; I was just so awed.”

Nancy and Katy first met at the 1984 Democratic Convention, both volunteering on the Gary Hart presidential campaign. Nancy claimed, “It was our shared love of politics that helped build our friendship.” That same year, they also both stepped up to help in the wake of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

In the 1980s the HIV/AIDS epidemic hit Houston’s LGBTQ community, which faced unparalleled troubles. Katy recalled, “It was the first time ... you saw civil disobedience and that kind of activism around a disease, at least in that part of the twentieth century.” Katy was part of the Colt 45s, an organization that helped people with AIDS by raising money to pay their rent and utilities so they could remain in their homes. Nancy remembered, “Katy held my hand when I was going through hell at City Hall. ... When my very best friend Randy was sick, Katy was like a rock for me. And she was friends with Randy too. She was there when I got the call he had passed.”

Nancy attended and still attends Bering Memorial



*In the 1980s, Nancy Sims worked on multiple political campaigns and met a variety of political and community leaders. She also became an ally and a helper to those affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Houston LGBTQ community.*

Photo courtesy of Nancy Sims.

Methodist Church (now Bering Memorial United Church of Christ) where she first witnessed the impact of AIDS when people started getting sick in about 1985. “My church ... got very engaged in serving the AIDS population,” she explained. The congregation was “about [one] third gay men. ... We were taking care of people that nobody wanted in their congregations[,] ... their medical facilities, nobody wanted them anywhere. My church [took] it upon itself to build a dental clinic for AIDS patients.”<sup>3</sup>

Nancy’s service to the LGBTQ community did not go unnoticed; Houston’s mayor, Kathy Whitmire, invited Nancy to work at City Hall passing local policy to help people with AIDS. “I was part-and-parcel to the public policy response to AIDS in Houston,” Nancy said. When the federal government started allocating money to help mitigate the crisis, Nancy’s job involved making sure that it was properly allocated for AIDS care.

Katy assisted the cause in a different way through the Montrose Clinic. Antiretroviral medications were being developed in labs on the East and West Coasts, which gave people access to experimental medications. To provide access to experimental medications in community-based settings in other parts of the country, amfAR, the Foundation for

AIDS Research, developed a network of clinics across the nation. Katy explained the process, “Montrose Clinic board and staff stepped up and applied to be part of the network. We were accepted, I think, to everyone’s surprise!” She added, “It was a huge benefit to Houston. ... There are, I’m sure, people alive today that had access to some of those medications that never would be alive if they hadn’t had them.”<sup>4</sup> Katy got more involved when



*Nancy is currently a member of Bering Memorial United Church of Christ, and was so at the height of the AIDS crisis. Bering offered assistance to those with AIDS when other organizations turned them away.*

Photo courtesy of WhisperToMe and Wikimedia Commons.



things got personal after her friend Jim was diagnosed with HIV. She recounted, “[T]hat really set me back ... [and we] started volunteering, actually, at the clinic for a time.”

In retrospect, Nancy observed, “Through its own strength, [Houston] built up Bering; it built up the Montrose Counseling Center, which is now the Montrose Center; Legacy, which was the Montrose Clinic at the time. ... These now-out-standing organizations that are thirty-five and forty years old actually rose out of the AIDS movement.”<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, having gotten a taste for politics, Katy ran for Harris County treasurer and won in 1991. She noted, “You had to learn how to work with both sides of Republicans and Democrats ... you really had to figure out how to get things done. What really prepared me was managing an intramural team at UH!” Her years with the Quad Squad taught her about leadership and how to manage people. Though her education inside the classroom is what got her jobs, what she learned outside the classroom led to her professional success. She remarked, “After I was summarily unelected in a Republican sweep in 1994, I did some public policy work with Nancy’s company. My friend gave me a wonderful supportive place to land.”

Katy served on the Montrose Clinic board which asked her to take the helm following the departure of the executive director. She recalled, “I took the job, figuring I’d be there three or four years ... and here I am twenty-five years later. It’s been a great career.” Having turned a small nonprofit clinic into one of the largest federally qualified health centers in Texas, Katy credits her success to her experiences in the financial sector where she worked after she graduated. She explained, “I had an analytical background from my degree in biology. And UH ... taught me ... how to critically think, and that has definitely played into my success at Legacy over the years.”

As a way of showing her appreciation for that education, Katy Caldwell is on the UH Alumni Foundation Board and hopes to see more involvement from other alumni, whether through donations to UH programs or by getting more involved on campus. She reflected, “When you’re my age and you start to look back ... all the way back to my time living in the dorms in UH, to now ... everything [you do] helps you become successful. ...



*Katy Caldwell became executive director at the Montrose Clinic, now Legacy Community Health, and served there for twenty-five years before retiring.*

*Photo by Alex Rosa/OutSmart magazine.*

Always realize that no matter where you are ... you learn something that will either help you be a better person or help you in the future. And never burn a bridge.”

Upon retiring from Legacy, Katy said, “I don’t know what I’m going to do next, other than relax, learn how to live without stress, enjoy participating and volunteering, and stuff that I want to do and not have to do. ... It’s just going to help make this next decade the best ten years of my life.”

In 1989, Nancy founded Quantum Consultants, a firm “redefining the science of politics.” She observed, “I had a team in place and had a big office and was making okay money for a Democratic political consultant.” She personally consulted Katy with her election to county treasurer. And when Katy became CEO of Legacy, Nancy noted, “She had to hire me to facilitate some conversations [with her staff]. Because it was all new, and people were learning, and everyone had an opinion.”<sup>6</sup> However, Nancy soon realized, “‘Oh my god, I’m still just a political hack at forty years old!’ So, within two years I got my



*Nancy Sims teaches numerous classes at UH, including Women in Politics. She says that class never gets old because there is always something new to discuss.*

*Photo courtesy of Nancy Sims.*



*Friends going on forty years, Katy, left, and Nancy, right, made a visit to Las Vegas together.*

Photo courtesy of Katy Caldwell and Nancy Sims.



master's degree, got married, and got pregnant, in that order." After the birth of her daughter, Nancy thought she needed a more family-friendly career. She worked at Pierpont Communications Inc. for sixteen years, while also serving as a pundit on the KUHF program *Houston Matters*. Having received her graduate degree from the University of St. Thomas, she became a professor at UH in 2002.

Nancy has taught Women in Politics for twenty years, as well as courses in U.S. government, Texas government, and political campaign management. She declared, "[The] Women in Politics class is my favorite. ... Somebody asked me, 'Aren't you tired of teaching that after twenty years?' I say, 'How can one ever get tired of it? Because every semester something [new] happens.'" The course includes "six weeks of 'her-story' because no one's ever been taught [that]." She covers topics from pre-Christian warrior women up to the time when women first gained the right to vote in the United States. The class then follows current events in "her-story" as well.

After teaching at UH for twenty years, Nancy said, "I always tease my students that I learn more from them than they learn from me, and it really is true. ... I've learned from my students that they're diverse, so incredibly diverse. So, I'm always learning culture from them. ... Teaching has become the greatest joy in my life."

Katy and Nancy met through politics, but their friendship was built through shared experiences. Nancy pointed out, "[When] Katy ran for county treasurer, and I was her consultant, then we really grew close." Katy reminded her, "Actually you helped me run for state rep in '88, but you were still working at City Hall, so you had to do it behind the scenes." Nancy agreed, saying, "Forty years later and we're still political junkies."<sup>7</sup>

Katy summed up their friendship, saying, "In both of our cases, we were plowing new territory for women ... but we were equals. We could say things to each other that we couldn't say to a mentor. ... The fact is that that's a big way we've supported each other, on the work side. We're a sounding board for each other. ... You always need

friends who tell you, you have 'poodle hair.' But what's also important ... is that you have someone who you know is not just going to blow smoke up your skirt. It's incredibly important: the trust factor, the honesty factor. And that takes time to build. But I think it's at the root when you have somebody you're close to. ... Over the years, that's just been built. I would lie down and die for Nancy."<sup>8</sup>

While the trajectory of Katy's life changed over time, one constant feature has been her desire to leave a lasting imprint on the lives of others. She achieved this by employing lessons first learned at the University of Houston and then applying them as a volunteer helping those affected by HIV/AIDS, as county treasurer, and as the executive director of Legacy Community Health.

Nancy nurtured her politically inquisitive mind from a young age. Her early association with politics at all levels, as well as her community service, laid the foundation for her future career path. It enabled her to become an authority on the local, state, and national political climate and to share her knowledge in Houston Public Media radio broadcasts and in classrooms at the University of Houston.

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I have known Katy and Nancy my whole life, yet only now, after sitting down with them to hear their stories, can I appreciate all that they have been through together. Their tenacity in the face of hardships and their steadfast loyalty serve as an example to friends and colleagues everywhere who want to make a difference. 🍷

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