



Breaking the Glass Ceiling in Houston Politics: A Conversation with Former Mayor Kathy Whitmire

By Cameron Thompson

Kathy Whitmire led Houston during a ten-year, five-term tenure as mayor from 1982 to 1992.

Photo courtesy of the Kathy Whitmire Papers Collection, box 5, folder 6, University of Houston Libraries.

Kathy Whitmire brought many firsts to Houston during her rapid rise in local politics. A native Houstonian, she spent her childhood in Huntsville and Houston, attending Berry Elementary School and Marshall Junior High in Northeast Houston, before graduating from San Jacinto High School. Acknowledging her keen interest in politics in her youth, Whitmire’s path towards a political career began at the University of Houston (UH), where she received her bachelor’s in business administration and master’s in accountancy, and where she met her husband Jim. After a few years in local activism and working as a certified public accountant (CPA), she launched her fourteen-year political career with her election as city controller in 1977. By the time she departed elected office in 1992, after five two-year terms as mayor, she had led Houston through multiple decade-defining crises, while spearheading reforms in city government and leadership.

UH history major Cameron Thompson met with Kathy Whitmire via Zoom on October 29, 2022, for the UH Center for Public History’s 100 Years of Stories: Documenting a Century at the University of Houston project. What follows are excerpts from their conversation.¹

Cameron Thompson: What made you decide to major in business at UH?

Kathy Whitmire: My very first semester that I was there, I had already decided on accounting. And that had to do with the way things were in those years; [1964-65 was] my freshman year, and opportunities for women were really not what they are today. ...

I didn’t know exactly how things would open up for women. I was not involved in the women’s movement at that point, which became a very big force in my life later. I had a math teacher who I liked very much, and she helped me in developing my interest in math. But I thought, “Why is she teaching?” It’s because she didn’t have any other job opportunities, and ... that wasn’t something I wanted to do.

I looked for a way that I could get involved in something that I enjoyed, and I was interested in business, and in the financial side of business. That’s why I took that path, and it ended up being the right one for me. ... My first semester, I took a job on campus, ... It didn’t pay very much, ... but every job I’ve ever had has taught me a lot. ... [Working as a temporary employee in several offices that summer] gave me the opportunity to focus on what I could do, and how I could use my accounting degree and what the opportunities would be. ... [I] learned about specific kinds of businesses that existed in Houston — everything from a mortgage company to an oil company to a company that manages the ships in the ship channel. I started in my sophomore year taking all my classes at night, so that I could take those jobs in the daytime. ...

There was one night that the professor didn’t show up, and we were all sitting around waiting for our next class. That was when I met my husband, Jim Whitmire. He was doing what I was, working a day job and going to school at night, majoring in economics in the College of Business Administration. We started dating, and five months later, we got married. That was the next part of my extracurricular activities, starting a home

Kathy and Jim Whitmire, shown here in a pamphlet from Jim's 1973 city council campaign, shared a dual passion for business and politics.

Photo by Jack Hay courtesy of the Kathy Whitmire Papers, box 1, folder 4, University of Houston Libraries.



with Jim, and the two of us working, finishing our [degrees], and then deciding what to do next. ...

CT: When and how did you get involved with the women's movement?

KW: [In] 1973, there was a national conference that was held in Houston for the National Women's Political Caucus, and by that time, my husband and I were both involved in campaigns. ... My husband was getting ready to run for city council that year. ... [I]n January, he saw something in the newspaper about the National Women's Political Caucus holding its first national convention ... in Houston at the Rice Hotel, [and he said], "You should go to this." ...

The Harris County Women's Political Caucus had not existed before the national group [held the] convention. They organize[d] a caucus at that time, I signed up..., and within a few weeks, ... we were having a meeting of local women who wanted to get something done in politics. That became a big part of my life. ... I always assumed I would be a politician's wife, and I did do that. But it was that turning point in 1973 that caused me to realize ... that I could also run for office.

CT: You said that was in 1973, but your first run for office was in 1977. Tell me about the years in between.

KW: ... Jim, my husband, was getting ready to run for city council. He had thought about running for city controller. [He] decided ... not to run that year in '71. Someone else stepped in, ... a man named Leonel Castillo. ... [He] won the election, and he, [like the incumbent], didn't have a background in accounting. ... [Jim] was going to run and say, "You know, we ought to have a CPA in this job." ...

Jim passed away at the end of November in '76. ... He was losing his vision to diabetic retinopathy, ... having end-stage renal disease, and had to go on dialysis during the last year of his life. Because of those developments, I decided I couldn't continue my career at the CPA firm.

I resigned ... turned back to [UH] and looked into going on the faculty at the downtown campus, which had just moved into the old M&M Building on Main Street. ... [T]he faculty members had a heavy teaching load, fifteen hours a semester, because we were not expected to do research at the same time, just to focus on the students. ... That was a lot of fun. I taught advanced accounting classes there and had a chance to work with students who were going to school at night like I did, ... keeping their jobs and trying to finish that accounting degree [to] become CPAs.

[Teaching] was something I enjoyed doing, but ... I had the political bug. As my husband's health declined, he did tell me that he thought I ought to run for office, and ... he [encouraged] me to look in that direction. Right before his passing ... Jimmy Carter was elected president, and Carter appointed my friend Leonel Castillo to be the head of the Immigration Service. ...

When Leonel got the appointment, the city council had a big fight over who they were going to appoint for the interim basis, and they finally decided to appoint someone who would agree not to run for reelection; that left it as an open seat. ... I ran on, "We ought to have a CPA for city controller." But another CPA was also running, ... and he and I ended up in the runoff....

Whitmire distributed cards like this one emphasizing her business experience as part of her campaign for city controller in 1977.

Her victory marked the first time Houstonians elected a woman to citywide office.

Photo courtesy of the Kathy Whitmire Papers, box 1, folder 17, University of Houston Libraries.

CT: What was your experience like as city controller?

KW: It was my dream job because I had a chance to be in the business world and learn about a lot of different industries and a bit about government accounting. Because Jim ran for city council twice, we had done some research on the city's finances. ... I was very excited to be the elected person who was responsible for producing those financial statements and overseeing the staff that did that work.

I had things that I wanted to emphasize. One was that most cities don't have an elected city controller. New York does, and at that time Minneapolis did, but there weren't many others. I thought it was a good system because it created an independent watchdog over the city's finances. What I emphasized in my campaign was not only that I had the professional experience but that I would be an independent voice. ... [That] didn't make me very popular with the city council because they kind of were a backroom in operation ... There were no women on the city council at the time, so they considered me an outside troublemaker who didn't fit in with the way things were at City Hall. But that did not slow me down because I had a lot of supporters. ...



Many Houstonians hosted bustling events in support of Whitmire's campaign. The jovial atmosphere of these events reflected the hopeful attitude she and her supporters held during the race.

Photo by John C. Lindy courtesy of the Jack Drake Collection, box 3, folder 1, University of Houston Libraries.

CT: What was your process in deciding to run for mayor in 1981?

KW: That was a very tough decision to make ... [B]eing city controller was my dream job and ... being able to break that glass ceiling of being the first woman elected to anything in city government, and then, two years later, ... no one ran against me; that was pretty amazing. City council was expanded from eight members ... to fourteen [that year, and] ... the first two women were elected. ...

I was enjoying what I was doing. I felt I was making a difference. ... If I wanted to run for mayor, I was going to be challenging Jim McConn. He and I were good friends at the beginning, but he was in a lot of trouble because he had some scandals in his administration, and he had [many] people wanting to run against him. ... I knew that odds might not be in my favor by taking on the incumbent, and I was having to give up the job of city controller. I thought long and hard about that. ... I had to face the fact I might lose. ... I decided that I enjoyed my teaching career so much that, if I did lose, I was going to enroll in a Ph.D. program and go back into education. But I didn't, and the rest is history.

I was running because I felt we could be making our tax money go further, which had not been a focus of [McConn,] and that my experience with the city finances would allow me to get some things done that were not getting done. ... I wanted to have a detailed capital improvements budget, which had not been done. ... City Council members just decided amongst themselves in the backroom, and then they would bring forward the projects. ... I wanted to have public hearings. ... I wanted to bring about some reforms in the police department. ... [The department] had been through several police chiefs. ... [R]eforms needed to be made in the civil service laws, and we needed to have more focus on professionalism and more accountability for police misconduct.

I thought there needed to be more transparency about the way contracts were awarded because there were many contracts that were being awarded for millions of dollars without any kind of competitive system. ... Bringing accountability to the city was the thing that I wanted to stand for.

As it happened, ... there were twelve other people besides me who decided to run against Mayor McConn and with so much opposition, [he] did not make it into the runoff, and that opened up the opportunity for me to be successful in that campaign. ... A lot of things just fell into place in terms of the people that I was able to recruit to work on my campaign. ... Until the runoff, we didn't raise nearly as much money as several of the other candidates ... but we had the energy and the enthusiasm of the volunteers. ... [B]y 1981, the women's movement had come a lot further and there were a lot of people interested in seeing the first woman elected to the mayor's office in Houston. ...

CT: What were your biggest accomplishments as mayor?

KW: The most significant decision that I made in my entire ten years ... was to bring in Lee Brown as the police chief because we never would have been able to make the improvements in the police department that we did had we not taken that step. ... The other accomplishments we had in



Kathy Whitmire delivers her inaugural address in 1982. She became the first woman elected mayor of Houston.

Photo courtesy of the Jack Drake Collection, box 3, folder 1, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



Kathy Whitmire stands with Lee Brown (center front) and members of her staff, celebrating his first day on the job. Whitmire's appointment of Brown as the city's first African American chief of police highlighted her efforts to increase diversity in city government.

Photo courtesy of Kathy Whitmire's staff and Twila Coffey.

our administration were improving our emergency preparedness. We were hit with Hurricane Alicia right towards the end of my first term in office, and ... we learned a lot about [our] lack of preparedness. ... [We] went through a revision of ordinances and restructuring of our civil defense activities, ... and that's been important because there's been even more weather and hurricane issues since then.

The development of the capital improvement program was another accomplishment that I was very proud of because the program didn't have much planning to it beforehand. It was basically a "pork barrel" program where each city council member got to decide on some things that they wanted. [I]nstead, ... we put together a long-term plan ... for capital improvements. We held hearings in every council district to let people have input before the council finally adopted it, and we passed ... a number of bond elections as a result. ...

We made some major reforms in our ambulance system, and ... I give a lot of credit to councilmember Eleanor Tinsley who [spearheaded that]. ... We upgraded our emergency medical service, brought in medical supervision for it, and got the technology set up so that a lot of lives were saved.

CT: What were some of the biggest challenges during your time in office?

KW: The biggest challenge was the economic downturn; there's just no doubt about that. That started in my first term, right at the beginning of my second year in office. ... Reporters started asking me, "Well, Mayor, what are you going to do about the fact that the economy is in trouble, and we're starting to lose jobs in Houston?" And I said, "Well, I'm really focused on trying to bring some reforms here at City Hall, and I really thought Chamber of Commerce would take the lead on working on turning the economy around." Well, that was the wrong answer. I had that one played back to me a thousand times.

[I] learned what it takes to be a leader in political office and in a large organization. While I was focused initially on the

city government, ... I had to learn that an equally important part of my responsibility was to provide community leadership. ... Whatever problem is facing the community [it] is something that the mayor and other political leaders have to give priority. ...

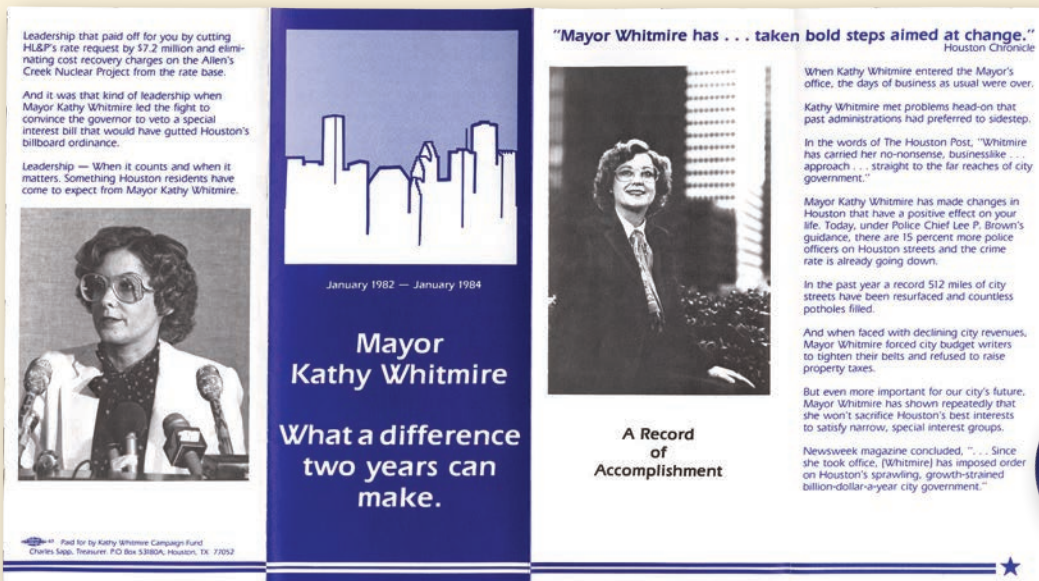
Another issue that came up that required public leadership was the AIDS epidemic. ... [U]ntil my first term in office we had not even heard of it. I had a lot of support, always, from the gay community in Houston because I believed in openness and participation for everyone. ... I can't even begin to tell you how many friends, people that I knew well, and people who worked on my campaign died of AIDS because, at the beginning, everyone who got AIDS was dying. It was a very long and difficult process to get anything done.

Ed Koch was Mayor of New York [City] the same time that I was mayor, and I can recall him bringing the [U.S. Conference] of Mayors together in New York to try to develop some strategies of what we could do. So many big cities were just being



Eleanor Tinsley, right, served in Houston's city government for decades, most prominently as a vocal member of the city council. She and Kathy Whitmire, shown here in 1982, paved the way for more women to run for and be elected to political office in Houston.

Photo courtesy of the Jack Drake Collection, box 3, folder 1, University of Houston Libraries.



Kathy Whitmire often took questions from the press during her time as mayor, as seen in this campaign pamphlet. These interactions offered valuable opportunities to show Houston residents the role she played in solving problems.

Photo courtesy of the Kathy Whitmire Papers, box 2, folder 16, University of Houston Libraries.

devastated with the AIDS epidemic, and it was creating a lot of fear in the community. [We were] dealing with that fear, . . . trying to provide resources for people who were suffering, and to try to encourage something to be done nationally. That was something that I ultimately got involved in, mostly through the U.S. Conference of Mayors. . . .

CT: It's good to hear that mayors around the country, yourself included, took the initiative on that.

KW: Ultimately, we did because no one else was, and we were the ones who were dealing with it on the front lines. I remember a woman volunteer . . . saying, "Well, Kathy, I can't see that you've taken any leadership on this issue." So, that really brought it home to me. . . . The county was managing the healthcare system, and of course, the private sector was managing the healthcare system, and the city didn't have a direct role. And yet, we did because we have a Public Health Department. Just as it has to deal . . . with COVID-19, the Public Health Department has to be the one to take a stand and say, "No, here's what the facts are." . . .

In my last term in office, [another challenge was that] we had two freezes in Houston that were colder than ever before. . . . [Houston] didn't get down to single digits and stay there for four or five days at a time, and yet, two years in a row, that happened. From the city government point of view, it was horrifying. . . .

We didn't have the foresight back in those years to really see that this was a process . . . that there were reasons that we were having weather disasters that were worse than we'd seen before.

CT: What advice would you give people my age, about getting into local politics?

KW: I think everybody needs to be involved in politics, both locally and nationally. That is what democracy is based on, the participation of the citizens. . . . You can run for office, or you can work on other people's campaigns, or you can give

money, or volunteer time to campaigns or issues. . . . There is no limit on the ways that you can get involved, and if you don't, . . . then you're just allowing somebody else to make all those decisions for you.

In the decades since her mayoral tenure, Kathy Whitmire has continued to promote her values. She pursued her teaching career at Rice University, Harvard University, and the University of Maryland. Though she moved to Hawaii, where she lives with her husband Alan Whelms, she remains active in local politics there with a strong focus on environmental protection. **HH**

Cameron Thompson is a student at the University of Houston, where he studies history and political science, with a focus on the intersection of the American legal system and American society. He served as an intern for the 100 Years of Stories project in the Center for Public History and *Houston History* magazine.



Kathy Whitmire and members of her staff met for a friendly softball game between "Whitmire's Winners" and the press corps team. Whitmire's decade as mayor relied heavily on the support of her loyal staffers.

Photo courtesy of Twila Coffey.