

An aerial photograph of downtown Houston, Texas, taken in 1977. The image shows a dense urban landscape with numerous skyscrapers, including the Texas Commerce Tower (now JPMorgan Chase Tower) and the Houston City Hall. A complex network of highways and roads is visible, along with various commercial and residential buildings. The title "Making Houston Happen: Local Organizers and the Planning of the NWC" is overlaid in large, bold, yellow text.

Making Houston Happen: Local Organizers and the Planning of the NWC

The International Women's Year Commission chose Houston to host the National Women's Conference. The main venues and hotels were located in downtown, shown here in 1977.

Photo courtesy of Houston and Texas History Research Collection.

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

By Maya Bouchebl

In the months leading up to the National Women's Conference of November 1977, the staff of the International Women's Year (IWY) Commission was working hard to prepare for America's most diverse gathering of women. They had faced the formidable task of coordinating women's meetings in every state and territory beforehand, where just under two thousand delegates were selected to join the national conference. Thousands of women from all kinds of backgrounds were heading to Houston to develop a plan of action to eliminate gender discrimination in federal law, and thousands more came to watch. While many of the people involved were preoccupied with controversial political issues before the conference, coordinators had their hands full with the logistics of such a massive undertaking.

After selecting Houston as the host city for the conference, the IWY Commission chose the Sam Houston Coliseum as the main location and decided to use the neighboring

Albert Thomas Convention Center for public exhibits. They appointed a staff known as the Houston Committee for on-site coordination, but plans became alarmingly delayed due to a lack of coordination between the national commission and the local committee. The two groups disagreed on topics such as financing and distribution of observer passes, and the Houston Committee felt that the IWY Commission was not doing enough to prepare for such a large event. By July, the commission still had not produced a finalized conference agenda, and by September all they had done was reserve the venues and hotels. According to one staffer, "[T]he commission had people on staff who were supposed to move down here six months ahead of time and do all this on-site coordination, but had not done it. ... The convention center became very disturbed about how late everything was, that none of the pre-planning had been done."¹

The commission responded to these concerns by hiring Frances "Poppy" Northcutt and Helen Cassidy as local coordinators. Active in the Houston women's movement,



Poppy Northcutt (left) and Helen Cassidy had experience organizing prior women's conferences held in Houston, but the NWC presented challenges with a short timeframe.

Image courtesy of the Veteran Feminists of America.

the two had experience organizing feminist conferences for the National Women's Political Caucus and the National Organization for Women. They had their work cut out for them, as the conference required an exhausting amount of preparation. Most events of this size were planned five years in advance, but Northcutt and Cassidy only had six weeks.

Their responsibilities included handling the physical setup of the convention center, arranging services such as first aid and childcare, coordinating with everyone involved, and training and managing volunteers. They also traveled back and forth from Washington, DC, to work with the national staff. Interactions with the East Coast feminists from the commission reminded Northcutt and Cassidy that people from other regions of the United States had a rather out-dated view of Houston. Northcutt recalled that some participants "seemed to think that they were going to have to ride a stagecoach in from the airport."²

The organizers did their best despite numerous setbacks. For example, when they realized that the exhibit manager had absconded with the payment checks, the staff worked tirelessly and managed to salvage the exhibits. They also had to rush to prepare the convention floor in the early morning since a wrestling match had been booked in the Coliseum the night before. Three thousand volunteers worked alongside the organizers. Most were local women recruited from organizations such as the National Organization for Women, Young Women's Christian Association, League of Women Voters, and many others. Prudence Mackintosh, a reporter for *Texas Monthly*, described the outpouring of community support with this statement: "I saw women acting as security guards, floor tellers, microphone facilitators; they ran first-aid stations and information booths; they acted as interpreters for foreign visitors and non-English-speaking delegates; they signed for the deaf, typed braille for the blind." Their efforts made the conference possible despite the challenges.

Years later, Northcutt looked back at the experience and recalled that "we were very compressed for time to get everything done for this so as we were setting up at the last minute, it was just non-stop work.... I was dead on my feet by the time the conference opened."³

Security was a major concern for the organizers, especially since the conference included politicians, celebrities, and first ladies. As with any highly publicized event, participants were hyper-aware of potential opposition. Antifeminists had already entered the conference as delegates, and a counterterracally led by opponents of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was simultaneously occurring at the Astrodome, just eight miles away. To make matters worse, rumors swirled that the Ku Klux Klan was going to disrupt the conference. According to *The Detroit News*, Klan leaders claimed that "their people" had "infiltrated" IWY meetings in "most states" and planned to send Klansmen to Houston to "protect our women from all the militant lesbians who will be there."⁴

Organizers therefore had to work with federal, state, and local authorities to ensure the safety of everyone involved. This cooperation had its own challenges, since some police officers were suspicious about the conference. According to Northcutt's explanation, "[T]he police officers became disturbed because they thought there was a 'lesbian love-in'

VOLUNTEER BRIEFING SESSIONS	
Jones Auditorium, St. Joseph's Hospital, 1919 Lebranch	
Thursday, November 10, 1977 - 7:00 p.m.	
or	
Sunday, November 13, 1977 - 2:00 p.m.	
AGENDA	
Opening	Mary Keegan, Chair
Pledge of Allegiance	Mary Keegan, Chair
Welcome of Behalf of City of Houston	Nikki Van Hightower, City Liaison
Invocation	Sara Seeger, Volunteer Coordinator
Welcome to IWY National Women's Conference	Mary Keegan, Chair
Flow of Delegates, Delegates-at-Large,	Helen Cassidy, Vice Chair
Invited Guests, Public Observers, and	
Volunteers	
. What they can do	
. Who can go where, when, how	
. Passes	
Overall Conference Plan	Poppy Northcutt, Houston
. Placement of activities	Committee - Logistics
. What is held where	
Security	Barbara Cigainero
Committee Reports/Introductions	Mary Keegan, Chair
Group I	Elma Barrera, Vice Chair
. First Aid	Sister Ambrose
	Sister Carmella
	Dixie Brown
. Media	Odilia Mendes
	Brenda Loudermilk
. Speaker's Bureau	Dee Bishop
. Parliamentary Procedures	Margaret Acosta
	Linda May
Group II	Helen Cassidy, Vice Chair
. Information	Mollie Parkerson
	Tvette Calloway
	Eileen Wall
. Seneca Falls South	Joan Hanlon

Volunteers were trained by Northcutt, Cassidy, and other members of the local staff as noted on the briefing agenda.

Photo courtesy of the Marjorie Randal National Women's Conference Collection.

Women served in many roles for the conference, including police officers at the Sam Houston Coliseum.

Photo courtesy of Janice Rubin.



going on at one point. We had to calm the police officers down.”⁵ This exchange highlights the challenges of organizing such a diverse and unconventional event. In addition, the local staff took matters into their own hands

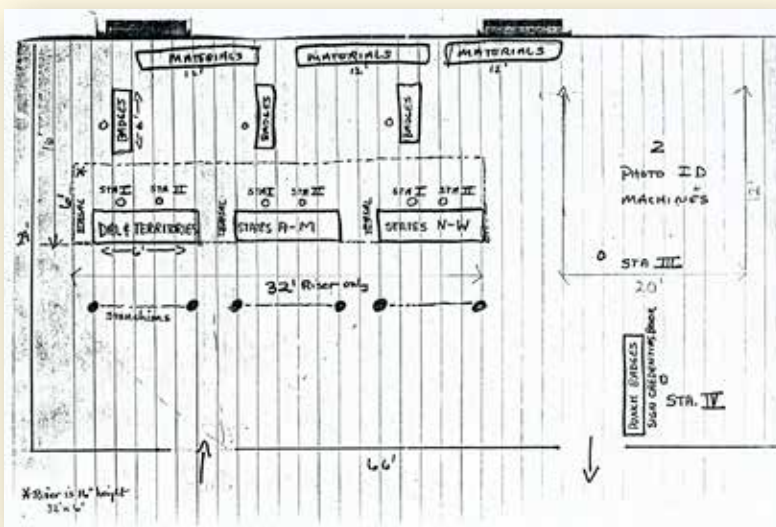
by training 150 volunteers to act as a security team. This group, which included twenty women serving as sergeants-at-arms, was responsible for monitoring the conference and dealing with potential altercations. Fortunately, thanks to the efforts of the organizers and the security force, no serious breaches occurred.

Even with all the security measures, women attending the conference remained shockingly vigilant. In addition to having concerns about obvious threats such as the rumored KKK protest, many became suspicious that saboteurs were attempting to infiltrate the conference and disrupt the proceedings. In one anecdote, Northcutt recalled how the Braille tabs on the elevators kept disappearing, and the staff could not figure out why they had to keep replacing them.

The mystery was solved when she ran into some women who were “talking about how they [had] been removing these things because they [thought] it [was] secret code being passed by the right wing as part of the conspiracy.”⁶ Though the story seems humorous in hindsight, it illustrates the depth of NWC participants’ concern for their safety and their ability to express themselves.

Problems with the hotels exacerbated this tense environment. A significant number of the guests had reserved rooms at the Sheraton and the Hyatt Regency hotels downtown. These properties proved to be so overbooked that they caught the attention of the local feminist newspaper *The Daily Breakthrough*, which commented, “Despite rumors of impending confrontations between pro-ERA and anti-ERA groups, the biggest news has been the problem trying to procure a hotel room.” The confusion occurred because hundreds of departing guests at the hotels had failed to check out before the Friday deadline. Incoming guests were greeted with a chaotic scene more reminiscent of an incompetent airport than a political conference, where “lines four persons wide looped around the lobby of the Hyatt Regency, blocking doors and fencing in mounds of luggage.”⁷ Some delegates stood in line for hours to get into their rooms, while others slept on the floor of the lobby or drove around the city searching for other places to stay.

Such errors are not unheard of in the hotel industry, but some participants were so outraged that there was talk of boycotting the Hyatt Regency. Others blamed the IWY Commission’s planning and their choice to host the conference in Houston. Looking back at the issue, one local resident remarked that “way more people showed up than they expected, [and] Houston wasn’t ... prepared.”⁸



Prior to the opening of the conference, organizers drew up diagrams detailing the registration process. Attendees would pick up materials and have their picture taken onsite for their name badges.

Photo courtesy of the Marjorie Randal National Women’s Conference Collection.



The Daily Breakthrough reported on the problems with hotel rooms. As many participants were left without a place to sleep, rumors of sabotage circulated and resulted in calls to boycott the Hyatt Regency.

Image courtesy of Houston and Texas Feminist and Lesbian Newsletters Digital Collection

Even worse, the conference's paranoid atmosphere caused more rumors of sabotage to arise. Soon gossip circulated that right-wingers had purposefully booked rooms and refused to vacate. Some people pointed fingers at the guests of the American Petroleum Institute convention, which had reserved rooms in the hotel prior to the NWC. While these claims are impossible to confirm or deny, they highlight the underlying tension of the convention. Women had travelled across the country with high hopes, ready to participate in a crowning achievement of modern feminism, and this reception was not a promising start. "Can you imagine a group of high-powered men at a convention standing in line to register for 11 hours?" one woman remarked to Sally Quinn, a journalist with the *Washington Post*. They both agreed that "Naturally the answer was, 'Of course not.'"

The NWC clearly did not go off without a hitch, but that is not surprising. Given the magnitude of planning needed to orchestrate a conference of this scale and the compressed timeline to get it all done, the work of the organizers and volunteers is impressive. The conference gave thousands of women from all walks of life the chance to learn about each other and plan for the future together. Though the

NATIONAL WOMEN'S CONFERENCE CELEBRATION
for COMMISSIONERS, DELEGATES, ALTERNATES, STAFF,
AND HOUSTON VOLUNTEERS

Seneca Falls Concert 

with

**Malvina Reynolds
Sweet Honey in the Rock
Margie Adam**

PRODUCED BY
Women in Production

BARBARA PRICE — PRODUCER
JULIE THOMPSON — ASSOCIATE PRODUCER
LENI SCHWENDINGER & BETSY TOTH — LIGHTING
MARJORIE McFEDRIES & KAREN WALLACE — SOUND
JENNIFER JAMES — STAGE MANAGER

PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE:
ELEANOR BROWN, PAT GREEN,
PETRIA MACDONNELL, FENEL THRONSON

THE HOUSTON MUSIC HALL
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 1977
9:30 PM

NWC participants celebrated the final night of the conference with a concert produced and performed entirely by women.

Image courtesy of the Marjorie Randal Collection.

conference was chaotic at times, it is still remembered as an eye-opening experience by many participants. As an observer stated, "[T]he environment was very unusual for Houston. You felt free to express yourself, and other people were on the same wavelength. It gave a safe place where people knew it was okay to have different ideas."¹⁰ This legacy far outweighed the inconvenience of long lines or overbooked hotels.

The organization of the conference demonstrates how much work goes on behind the scenes of historic events. The local staff may not be the most famous part of the NWC, but it could not have occurred without them. Planning and collaboration were crucial in the conference, and in the entirety of the women's movement. As Poppy Northcutt says, "If you're going to make change, you have to organize.... You can't just think that things will take care of themselves because they won't."¹¹ 

Maya Bouchebl is an M.A. student at the University of Houston studying public history and European history. She is also a research assistant for the 100 Years of Stories project in the Center for Public History and an intern at *Houston History*.