

CARRYING THE PAST INTO THE PRESENT:

Preserving the Legacy of the National Women's Conference

By Livia Lee Garza

*"There was never anything like it."*¹

This opening line from *The Spirit of Houston*, the official report of the 1977 National Women's Conference (NWC), encapsulates the unique and momentous nature of the event. Never before had so many women of diverse backgrounds from every corner of the country come together to voice their needs on a national stage, particularly under the aegis of the federal government. For four days in Houston, delegates devised and refined their National Plan of Action addressing the priorities of American women. Driven by a shared desire to "move history forward," they deliberated over a comprehensive range of resolutions covering topics from childcare to international affairs.²

Although the final report founded nationally in the increasingly conservative political landscape, echoes of the NWC can be seen throughout the women's rights movement into the present day.³ In moving history forward, the NWC and its attendees also made history. The endurance of a legacy, however, hinges on its preservation. Historical narratives are rarely static; rather, they are constructed and reconstructed over time, built upon the memories and ephemera that remain.

The University of Houston's (UH) Special Collections endeavors to preserve the NWC's legacy through its collection of materials associated with the event. The conference initially emerged as a reoccurring theme between serendipitous donations in the late 1990s and early 2000s and has since become an established collecting area for the archive. UH's growing acquisitions enable researchers and the community at large to explore the individual and overarching narratives of the conference and its attendees.

Once the National Commission of the Observance of International Women's Year (IWY) selected Houston as the NWC host city, Nikki Van Hightower commenced extensive preparations. Van Hightower, the appointed women's advocate for the City of Houston, served as the city's liaison to the conference. While Van Hightower's papers encompass more than her involvement with the NWC, they do

showcase her efforts to secure meeting spaces and coordinate between local officials and

organizers in the year leading up to the event. In a letter from December 1976, Van Hightower requested a meeting with Houston women anticipated to be "critically involved" with the NWC.⁴

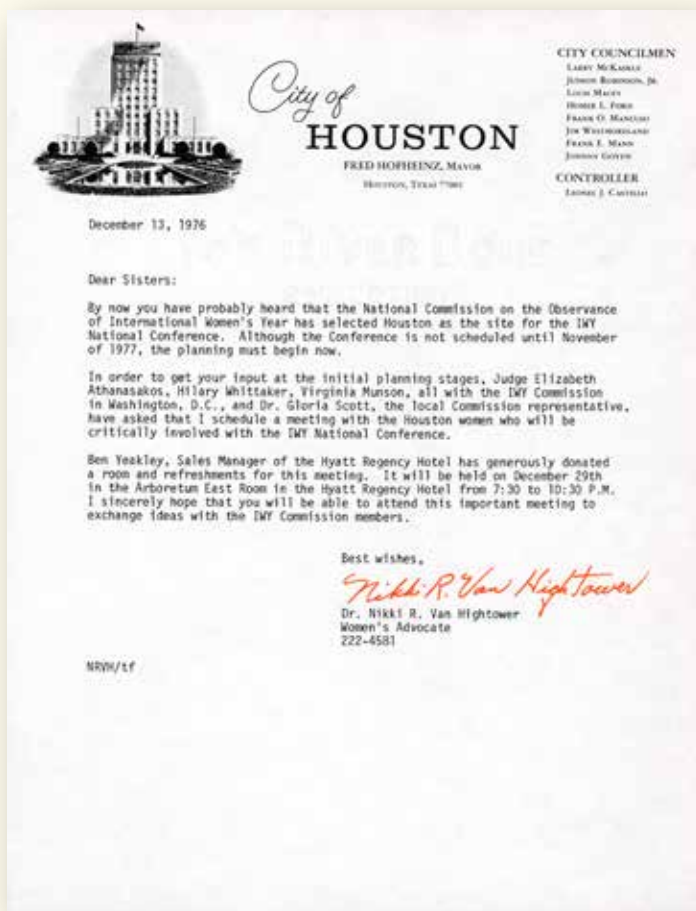
"Although the Conference is not scheduled until November of 1977, the planning must begin now," she wrote, inviting local stakeholders to meet with the IWY Commission members to collaborate on the initial planning phase.⁵ Van Hightower's letter highlights the conference's early coordination efforts and exhibits a commitment to engage the Houston community in shaping the preparations leading up to the event.

Operations during the NWC relied on the work of volunteers such as Marjorie Randal, a local advocate for women's rights and longtime member of the National Organization for Women's Bay Area chapter. Her collection not only provides insight into conference logistics but also reveals some of the recreational activities available to attendees during their time in Houston. In addition to the templates for handwritten name badges and detailed conference programs, her collection contains a theatre ticket and playbill.

On the second night of the conference, attendees had the opportunity to view *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, a "choreopoem" by Ntozake



National Women's Conference relay runners wore blue "Women on the Move" shirts as they carried the "torch of freedom" from Seneca Falls to Houston. Image courtesy of the Houston Area NOW and Other Feminist Activities Collection. All photos are from Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



Letter from Nikki Van Hightower initiating conference preparation talks.
Image courtesy of the Nikki Van Hightower Papers.

Shange addressing themes of racism and sexism, at the Equinox Theatre.⁶ Including the performance on the list of official events provides an example of how the NWC encouraged attendees to explore the local community and engage with cultural works echoing the overarching discussion topics at the conference.

Through these discussions, various special interest groups and communities sought representation in the conference proceedings. In an October 1977 letter, the American Jewish Committee solicited Linda May, a local Jewish feminist activist, to aid the public relations efforts of national Jewish women's groups during the NWC. By holding a press conference, the Jewish women's groups set out to affirm their support of the conference and dedication "to move the issue of women's rights to the greatest extent possible."⁷

With May as a coordinator for the conference, her papers also include schematics for delegate and alternate seating, noting locations for each state's delegates, technical set-up for microphones and monitors, and even planned seating for translators in the Puerto Rico delegation's section.⁸ The seating charts show how participants physically filled the space around the stage as well as the attention to creating an inclusive environment for attendees.

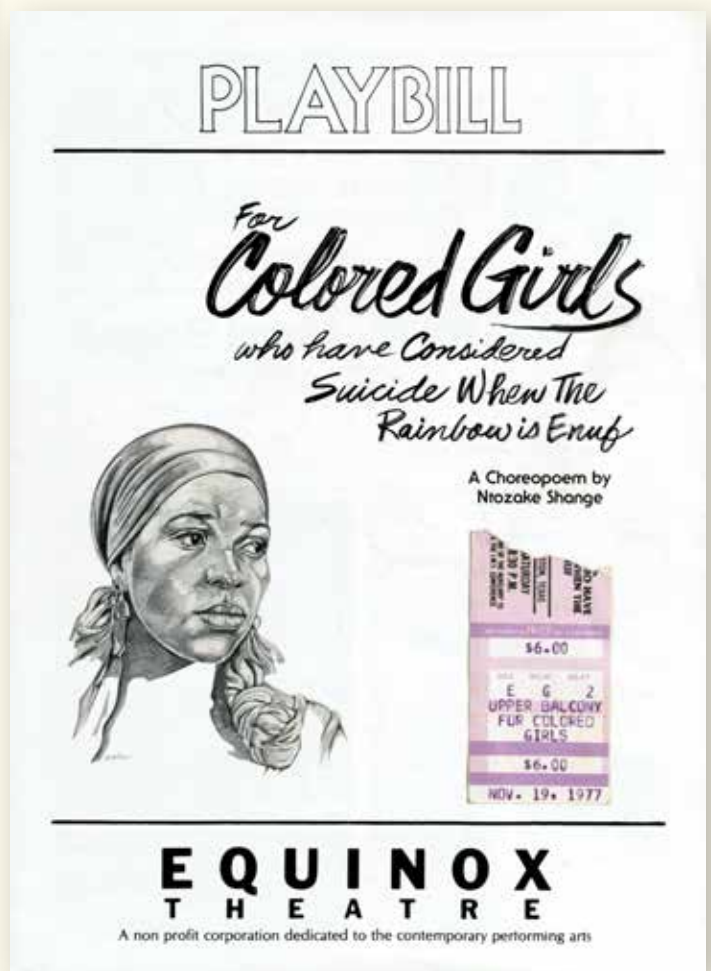
Not all women felt represented at the NWC, however. A self-described "pro-family" faction comprised of women

from anti-Equal Rights Amendment and anti-abortion groups claimed the election process had been "rigged" to limit the number of conservative delegates.⁹

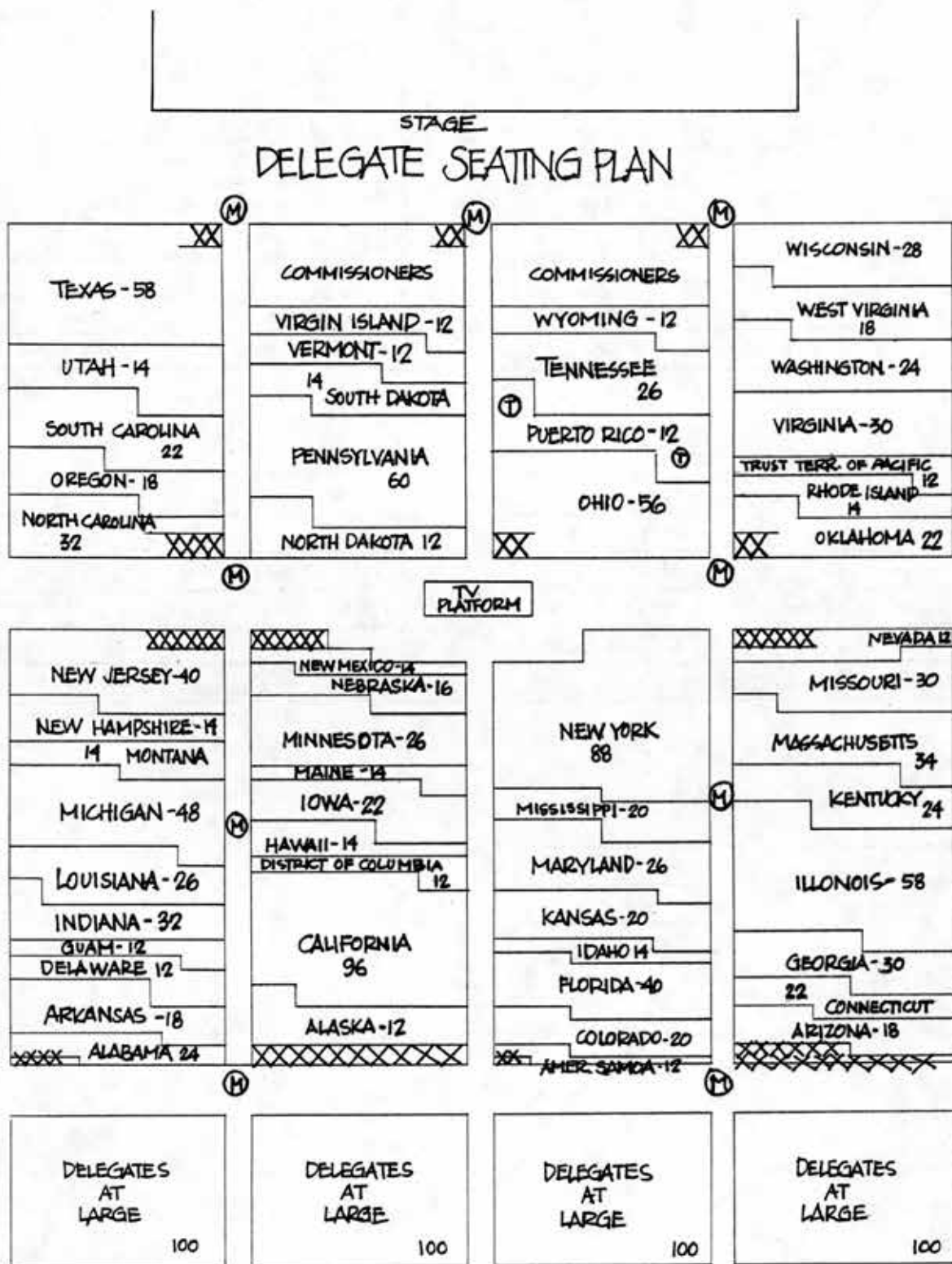
"Bella Abzug has said the Houston IWY meeting will be history-making. Let's be a part of history!" wrote Carolyn Anderson in an October 1977 issue of *The American Party*,¹⁰ calling on readers to join a counter-rally and pass resolutions of their own.

Keeping tabs on the dissent, NWC conference organizers and attendees gathered materials from this conservative faction. Collections like the Houston Area NOW and Other Feminist Activities Collection contain periodicals like *The American Party* denouncing the NWC, furnishing an additional facet on the varied perceptions and reception of the conference.

UH's archival collections contain much more than text-based documents. Among the acid-free manila folders and storage boxes, researchers can find a treasure trove of conference memorabilia, including attendee badges, photographs, ribbons, and even a blue "Women on the Move" shirt worn by torch relay runners. These items give a visual



Conference attendees had the opportunity to view a performance of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* at the Equinox Theatre.
Image courtesy of the Marjorie Randal National Women's Conference Collection..





Coretta Scott King, surrounded by members of various caucuses, reads from the proposed Minority Rights plank.
Photo courtesy of the April West-Baker National Women's Conference Collection.



The New Hampshire delegation poses for a photo before boarding their plane to Houston.
Photo courtesy of the Marilyn Kay Patterson National Women's Conference Collection.

layer to the conference, evoking its atmosphere in a way text alone cannot elicit.

Oral histories contribute further depth by recording the recollections and lived experiences of conference attendees. The Sharing Stories Challenge from Gloria Steinem: Share Your Stories from 1977 Collection contains thirty oral histories conducted during a conference honoring the fortieth anniversary of the NWC. Available online in Special Collections Audio/Video Repository, the oral histories document personal memories. UH Law Professor Emerita Laura Oren talks about witnessing purple balloons being released from the audience after the sexual preference plank passed, and Peggy Kokernot Kaplan recalls running the last leg of the NWC torch relay with Sylvia Ortiz and Michelle Cearcy.¹¹

The preservation of conference materials and oral histories provides the opportunity for researchers to gain new insights and interpretations of the event. The archive also introduces UH students to primary source materials. Classes like Issues in Feminist Research regularly visit Special Collections to analyze various documents and ephemera from before, during, and after the conference. Students not only consider the materials before them but also reflect on what narratives might be missing from the preserved historical record.

Archives, while essential resources for investigating and interrogating the past, are not exhaustive. For every attendee's story preserved, others remain unknown from their absence in the archival record. However, with the increasing visibility of the collections at UH, more attendees have come forward to donate their own NWC materials, minimizing the archival gap and enriching the historical record. Recent donations from April West-Baker and Marilyn Kay Patterson offer unique perspectives from delegates outside of Texas as well as insight into the resolutions proposed during the conference.

April West-Baker, an activist focused on equality for Asian American women, was one of the youngest delegates from Washington State to attend the conference. Her recently donated collection features photographs documenting

women of color, illustrating the diverse demographics of attendees.¹² Members of racial and ethnic caucuses worked together during the conference to consolidate their groups' individual statements into a unified Minority Rights Plank.¹³ West-Baker's photos capture the introduction of the plank on the event floor, including Coretta Scott King reading the resolution moments before it received nearly unanimous approval from conference delegates.¹⁴

Not every resolution proposed at the NWC made it into the National Plan of Action. Marilyn Kay Patterson, a delegate from New Hampshire, advocated for the inclusion of a mental health resolution. Her collection not only contains her speech proposing the resolution but also includes a follow-up letter to Gloria Steinem questioning its exclusion from the national plan.¹⁵

Conference attendees recognized their place in a long trajectory of feminist history. Leading up to the NWC, relay runners adorned in blue "Women on the Move" shirts traversed across the country carrying the "Torch of Freedom."¹⁶ Departing from Seneca Falls, the home of the first women's rights convention in 1848, the torch bearers ran toward Houston, carrying the past into the present and looking forward to the future. By preserving the history of the National Women's Conference, UH Special Collections, too, carries the past into the present, allowing us to contemplate its legacy and trace its impact across time. **HH**

Livia Garza is a volunteer for the Sharing Stories from 1977 Project. She is also a program manager at the University of Houston's Office of Undergraduate Research and Major Awards.

Looking forward, UH Special Collections aims to increase the accessibility and awareness of NWC materials through digitization initiatives, online resource guides, and curated exhibits. To view items in the current collection, go to <https://digitalcollections.lib.uh.edu/>.