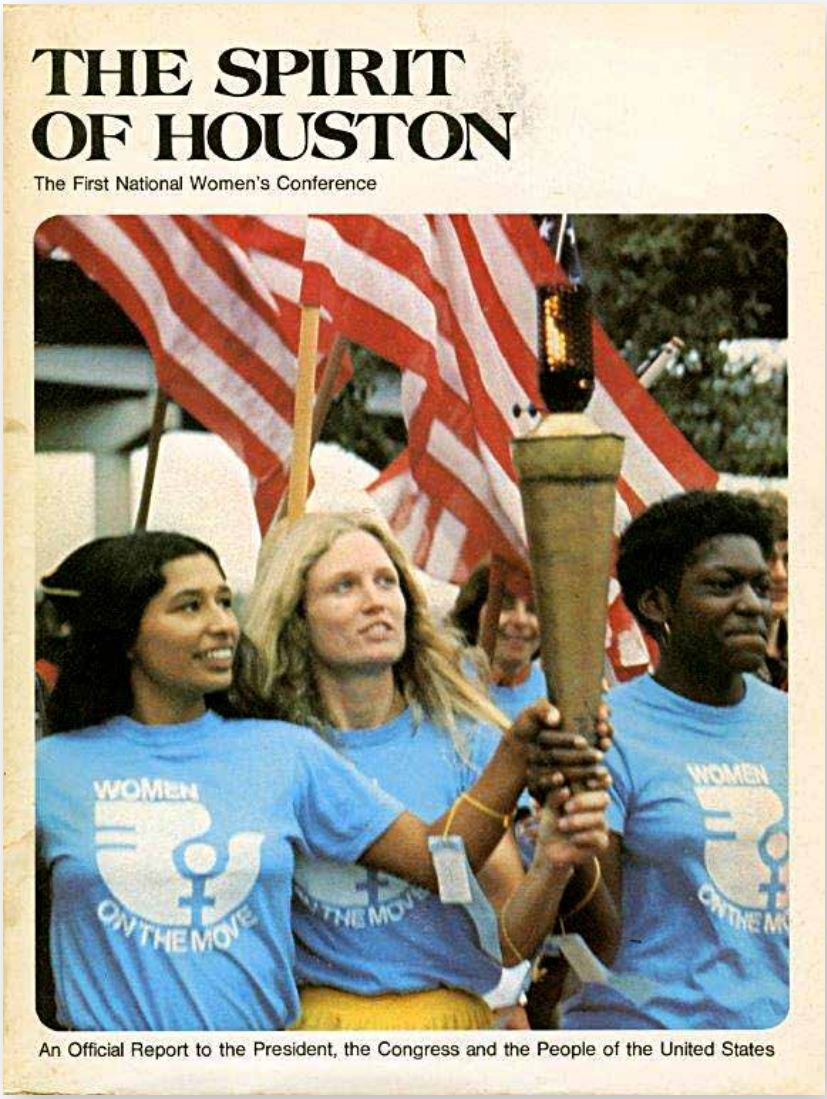


Sylvia Ortiz: *An "Everyday Woman" Who Became a Feminist Celebrity*

By Miranda Ruzinsky

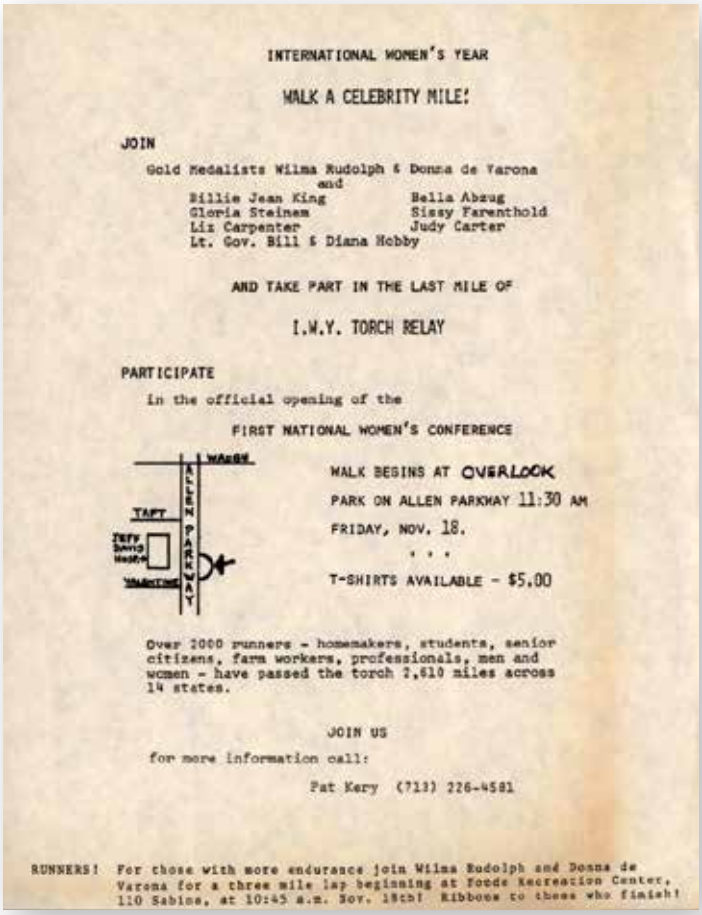
The official conference report published in 1978 for President Jimmy Carter and the public featured, left to right, Sylvia Ortiz, Peggy Kokernot, and Michelle Cearcy on the cover page. Photo by Adela Alonso, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

"WALK A CELEBRITY MILE!": This call to action circulated around Houston in 1977 on a poster advertising the final stretch of the torch relay for the National Women's Conference (NWC). It encouraged local residents to join in the final leg of a 2,610-mile journey from Seneca Falls, New York, to Houston, Texas, where runners from across the country carried a symbolic torch of freedom for women. The flyer promised appearances from famous figures like Olympians Wilma Rudolph and Donna de Varona, political figures Bella Abzug and Judy Carter, and tennis star Billie Jean King as the relay inched its way through downtown Houston towards the Sam Houston Coliseum. What the flyer could not predict was who would become the real "celebrities" of that final mile.[1]

Organizers of the relay chose three young women from the Houston area as the finishing torch runners in this unprecedented national event. These female athletes from the younger generation symbolized the youth and vigor of the feminist movement and the growing popularity of women's sports. Planners also prioritized diversity, choosing women from Houston's Black, white, and Latino communities. Michelle Cearcy, a sixteen-year-old African American track star from Phillis Wheatley High School, and Peggy Kokernot, a white marathon runner, joined Sylvia Ortiz, a Latina student athlete at the University of Houston (UH), to complete the trio.[2]

In 1977, Ortiz was a collegiate athlete in her last year of undergraduate education. She balanced her classes in physical education and health with participating in games and practices for the university's nationally ranked volleyball and badminton teams. But Ortiz was not just a player; she was an advocate for equality on the court. Her experience with the rampant gender discrimination of sports programs during this era inspired her to fight against sexism in athletics.

Both in her high school and college days, Ortiz recognized the difference in resources among the female and male sports programs. "We had a third of what they offered the men's programs," she recalled. "When I was at UH … Nothing [was] equal. We were driving vans. We'd go to tournaments in the wee hours of the morning, coaches driving us." Another UH volleyball player on the 1978 team, Darlene Meyer (now Evans), recalled that while the men played in the main sports arena, Hofheinz Pavilion, the women's facility had a "concrete floor and no air



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Local NWC organizers created and distributed this poster to encourage public participation in the final mile of the torch relay. The relay's success relied heavily on grassroots promotional efforts like this.

Photo courtesy of Nikki Van Hightower Collection, box 7, folder 12.
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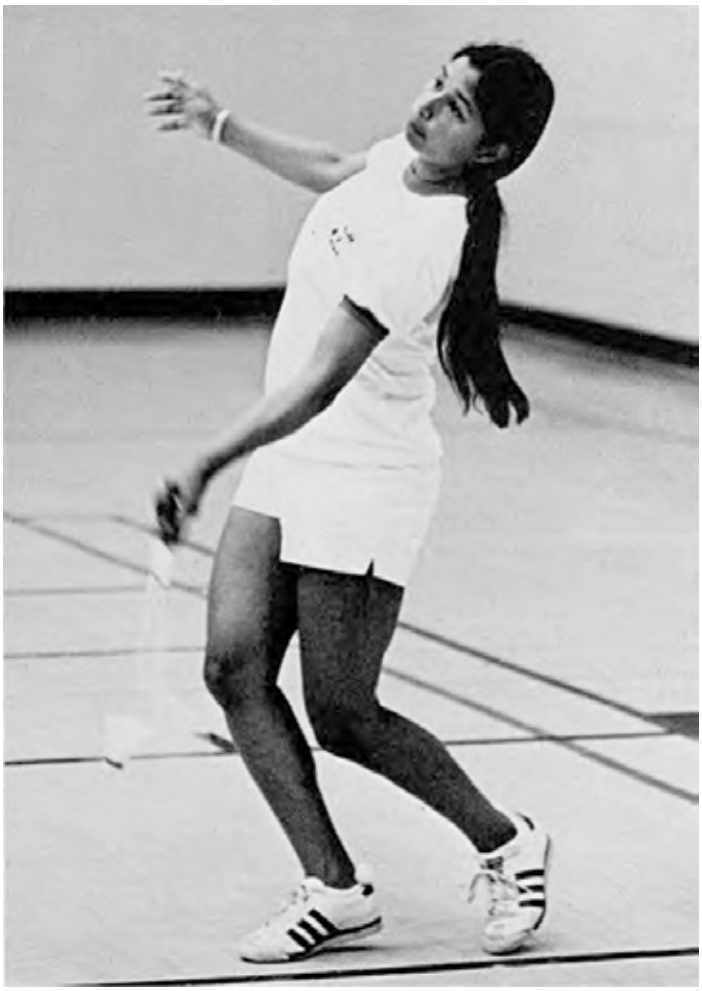
conditioning." These inequalities encouraged Ortiz to participate in campus-wide lobbying efforts to improve the UH women's athletics program, focusing on funding and better practice facilities.[3]

When Ortiz was a student athlete, Dr. Sue Garrison served as director of women's athletics, opening doors for female athletes long before Title IX. Garrison came to UH in 1945 as the school's first director of women's physical education, and by the sixties and seventies, she was helping lead the expansion of intercollegiate women's athletics on local, regional, and national levels.[4] Ortiz admired Garrison as both a coach and role model, so when Garrison called Ortiz into her office in 1977 and asked if she would run the final mile ahead of the National Women's Conference, there was no hesitation.

At that time, Ortiz had no affiliation with the feminist movement nor any knowledge about the conference. "[Garrison] called me in the office and said that…this organization … wanted a … Mexican American athlete to run the mile in this movement, which I had no clue what it was," Ortiz remembered. "I just knew they wanted me to do it, and I was going to do it because I represented the university, represented Mexican American women." Ortiz never imagined the personal and collective impact her participation in the torch relay would have.[5]

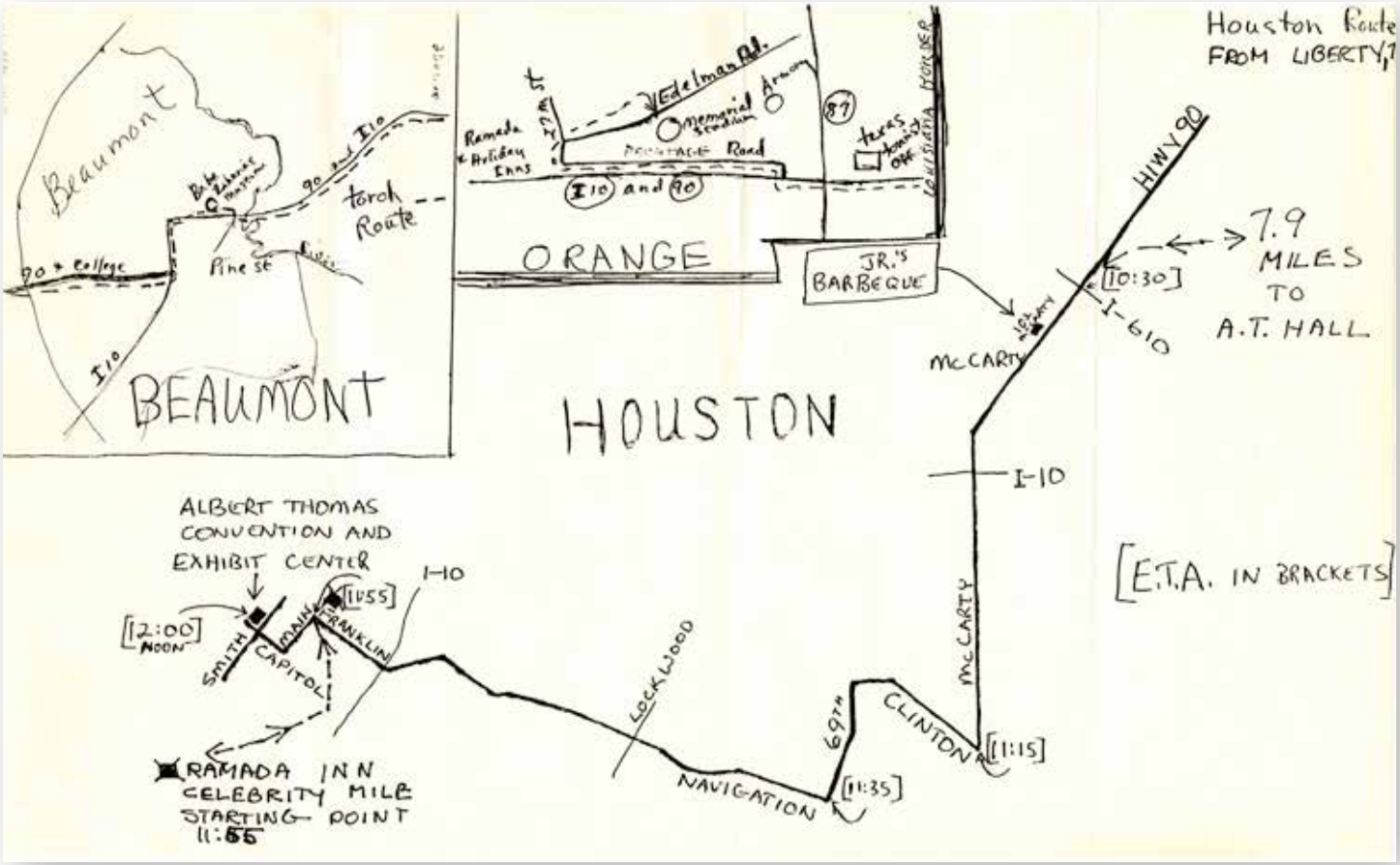
From its onset, the relay was meant to be a showstopper. The organizers of the NWC had only a small part of their budget to invest in a creative introduction to the conference. A North to South trans-state marathon ended up being the most affordable option with estimated costs between $15,000 and $20,000. Its success required extensive coordination with local, regional, and state volunteers who helped attain city permits, provide police escorts, recruit runners, and promote the event.

On September 29, 1977, the relay formally began on a clear fall day in Seneca Falls, New York, the site of the first known women's convention in the United States that took place in 1848. A descendant of one of the Seneca Falls convenors handed off the lighted Olympic-inspired torch to the first of 2,000 runners. Two months and fourteen states later, the torch was given to Ortiz, Kokernot, and Cearcy on a rainy day in mid-November. Together, they led a large crowd in the "celebrity mile" that marked the end of the torch relay and the start of the first federally funded women's political conference in U.S. history.



Sylvia Ortiz competed in the national playoffs on the UH women's badminton team in 1975. She also played for the university's volleyball team.

Photo courtesy of the *Houstonian*, University of Houston yearbook, 1975.



This early drawing details the proposed torch relay route from Orange near the Texas-Louisiana border to Houston. News cameras and photographers followed runners from a rally in Orange all the way into downtown where hundreds of reporters awaited their arrival.

Photo courtesy of Nikki Van Hightower Papers, box 7, folder 12.

Ortiz, Kokernot, and Cearcy had no contact before that day, but through their shared torch bearer experience, they created a lifelong connection. In a 2022 interview, Ortiz and Kokernot claimed to have little memory of the lead-up to the event. Their memories begin when their hands came together on the torch handle. Pictures of the relay show a female tripart in matching blue "Women on the Move" t-shirts and colorful athletic shorts bringing the torch up the steps of the Sam Houston Coliseum with American flags waving in the background.[6]

The "everyday" torch bearers were also accompanied by feminist icons of the age. Ortiz linked arms with the fiery Bella Abzug, who served as the presiding officer of the conference. On the day of the relay, Abzug shouted in the rain, "Some of us run for office. Some of us run for equality, but none of us run for cover!" Ortiz remembers the electrified feeling of inspiration as she stood in Abzug's presence. "I love that moment because I really felt like I got to know who she really was," Ortiz stated. "Fighter. No fear. All the things you look up to in somebody who's fighting for a cause in mind."[7]

Because of her role as a torch bearer, Ortiz also met tennis star and women's sports legend Billie Jean King. "I'm meeting Billie Jean King. I mean, really?" Ortiz later gushed. "I was in awe. I mean, I was just starstruck." As someone who has dedicated her career to female sports activism, Ortiz greatly appreciated participating in the run with King, a major sports figure who regularly spoke out against the unequal treatment of professional female athletes.[8]

An unexpected aspect of the "last grand mile" was the overwhelming media attention and lasting legacy of the images showing Ortiz, Cearcy, and Kokernot holding the torch together. From the get-go, NWC organizers understood the potential media influence of the relay and purposefully framed the event as a call for equality in the civil rights era. Images of the runners were supposed to tell a story of a national movement "challenging traditional notions of femininity that placed women as passive beings and positioning them instead as active, strong, confrontational citizens collectively demanding their rights." Photos of the diverse trio circulated on nightly news programs, newspapers, magazines, and even the cover photo of the official government report of the conference. These photos launched the three women into temporary stardom. Soon, the torch bearers, who admitted to having little to no involvement in the women's rights movement, became the faces of 1970s feminism.[9]

Yet in a time when women of color were pushing for more recognition in the mainstream feminist movement,

Professional tennis champion and gender equality advocate Billie Jean King, second from left, was billed as one of the famous figures to join Ortiz, Kokernot, and Cearcy in the final "celebrity mile."
Photo courtesy of Janice Rubin.

some outlets excluded Ortiz and Cearcy in their coverage. *Time* magazine, for instance, decided to use a cropped photo of the white, blonde-haired Kokernot on their front cover — a decision that has not aged well but one that Ortiz brushed aside.[10] She was aware of society's effort to embrace racial and ethnic variation, but she herself only focused on the humanity of her connections. "It never even dawned on me," she recalled. "Color was never an issue in my growing up. I mean, it wasn't about color. It was about the person. That's how we were raised. So, when I was asked [to participate], 'Okay. I'll be a Mexican for a day or whatever you want me to be.' But … that's not the way I took it … I didn't see color ever. I can't say that today, unfortunately."[11]

While Kokernot's short stint of fame helped her theater career, Ortiz's immediate trajectory into the national spotlight raised several personal concerns. At the time of the conference, Ortiz had been offered a teaching position

Kokernot and Ortiz reenact the torch relay in 2022 at the forty-fifth anniversary of the National Women's Conference. Cearcy joined them later for the festivities. Photo courtesy of Samantha de León.

From left to right, Paggy Kokernot, Dr. Nikki Van Hightower, TaKasha Francis, Dr. Annie Johnson Benifield, and Sylvia Ortiz attend the forty-fifth anniversary of the NWC on November 17, 2022. Kokernot and Ortiz wore replica "Women on the Move" shirts from the 1977 torch relay.

Photo courtesy of Sandra Davidson.

in a district known for its conservative politics. However, she remained tight-lipped about her identity as a lesbian for fear of persecution. Though she was beaming in the photos of the relay, Ortiz worried internally about the publicity at a time when negative stereotypes of lesbians and feminists were common. "I'm like, Holy Cow! I may get fired before I even get hired," Ortiz exclaimed. "So, [my feeling] was total fear … At that time, it was just bad. [Sexuality] wasn't talked about like it is today. It wasn't open at all. Everybody was in the closet. I was one of those, so it was a tough time."[12]

Despite her fears, Ortiz eventually came out as a lesbian and went on to have a successful career in women's athletics. She received her master's degree in physical education from Sam Houston State University and spent decades coaching high school volleyball. In 2017, she was inducted into Keller ISD's hall of fame. Ortiz remembered moments of fear when her students and their parents would recognize her from the conference publicity, but speaking to other women about the impact of the NWC on their lives has helped. "I've made it through," Ortiz concluded. "I feel like I could sit here today and be proud of who I am, be proud of what I've accomplished, and be able to speak about it which is far better than it used to be."[13]

Ortiz credits the strength she developed during and after the torch relay to the sisterhood she cultivated with Kokernot and Cearcy. The trio built a close connection since that rainy day more than forty years ago and fall into familiar laughter whenever they reunite and tell the story of the moment that fused their lives together. "Well, through the years, this [friendship] right here has empowered me to be who I am today and to be with Peggy and Michelle," said Ortiz. "When we're together, we could conquer the world." The trio have come together several times over the last four decades to champion the conference and its legacy. They frequently attend anniversary events and even found themselves in a feminist crowd again at the Women's March on Washington in 2017.[14]

Ortiz did not plan on becoming a "celebrity" when she agreed to run in the torch relay, but she found inspiration in the event's contagious energy of activism and female power that she hopes will resonate for women today. "Continue the fight," she encouraged. "For as many steps as we've taken forward, every time you turn around, there's one backward. Look at the [*Roe v. Wade*] reversal. How many years is that? Hopefully … women will continue to find the strength to fight for equality in whatever capacity they're in."[15] HH

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Ortiz, Cearcy, and Kokernot, shown left to right, reunite and relive their torch bearing experience in 2022.

Photo courtesy of Sandra Davidson.