



Representative Bella Abzug, at the podium, is flanked by the torch relay runners (in blue), First Lady Rosalynn Carter, former first ladies Betty Ford and Lady Bird Johnson, Lynda Bird Johnson Robb, and Maya Angelou.

Photo courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration and Wikimedia Commons.

Leaving a Legacy: Houston Women in Politics after 1977

Introduction by Caitlyn Jones — Excerpts from oral histories conducted by Lena Craven and Caitlyn Jones

When the National Women's Conference (NWC) came to Houston in 1977, many local women were already on a mission: elect more women to office. Women had been elected to local school boards, but none had served in a City of Houston office. Kathryn Whitmire, a local accountant, was in the midst of a campaign to break that glass ceiling during the NWC as she mounted a bid for the controller's office, which helps steer the city's finances. A few days after the Houston conference wrapped, the celebration continued as Whitmire won her runoff race with nearly 59 percent of the vote. She later became the city's first woman mayor in 1981, a position she held for the next decade.

Other women soon followed. More women earned seats on the Houston City Council, and many made their way to the state capitol in Austin and to Congress in Washington, DC. During the 1990s, Houstonians elected the first Black, Latina, and Asian American women to city council. In

2019, Harris County voters made history again when they elected seventeen Black women to county judgeships. However, there are still barriers to break. For instance, no woman of color has ever sat in the mayor's chair. The most recent candidate for that position was Sheila Jackson Lee, a former city councilwoman and longtime U.S. Representative, who launched a failed bid in 2023 and passed away a year later.

Many Houston women who have held office have taken the time to reflect on the legacies of the National Women's Conference and the changing political landscape since 1977. Remarks from five of those women have been collected here. Some went to the Houston conference, some did not. Each had very different experiences, both in their personal and political lives. Yet, all believe that women have come far in terms of gaining political power and acknowledge that more work remains.

Meet the Officeholders

KATHRYN WHITMIRE began her political career in 1977 when she won an election for the Houston controller's office. She was then elected as mayor in 1981 and served five terms in that position, working to appoint more women and people of color to city offices, to improve the city's emergency and medical services, and to combat the growing HIV/AIDS epidemic. After she ended her political career in 1992, Whitmire taught political science and public policy at the university level. She currently lives in Hawaii.

WANDA ADAMS was elected to the Houston City Council in 2007 and served for three terms. She then earned a seat on the Houston ISD school board in 2016 and remained in that office for seven years, even serving as board president. In 2020, she was elected as a Harris County Justice of the Peace, where she often presides over eviction cases and connects people experiencing homelessness with resources. Adams was re-elected to this position in 2024 and will hold the office for another four-year term.

GRACIELA SAENZ began her career in public service as an assistant district attorney for Harris County. She launched a bid for an at-large city council seat in 1991 and became the first Latina to serve on the body, holding that position until 1998. During her time on council, she helped facilitate Houston's NAFTA relationships and became the first

Hispanic person and woman to serve as mayor pro tem. In 1997, Saenz began a campaign for mayor but lost her race. Today, she resides in Houston, where she operates her law practice and advocates for the local Hispanic community.

SYLVIA GARCIA first entered political office in 1983 as the presiding judge of the Houston municipal court system. In 1998, she was elected as the city controller and then moved to the Harris County Commissioners Court in 2003 where she served for seven years. Running as a Democrat, Garcia was elected to the Texas Senate in 2013 and went on to serve in Congress five years later as one of the first Latinas from Texas elected to the body. As a current U.S. representative, she advocates for immigration reform, the expansion of healthcare, and equal rights for women and LGBTQ communities.

ANNISE PARKER earned her first political office in 1997 when she was elected to the Houston City Council. After serving three terms, she became the city controller and held that position until 2009. That same year, Parker became the first openly gay mayor of a major U.S. city. During her three terms as mayor, she championed an anti-discrimination city ordinance and strengthened Houston's office of historic preservation. Parker ended her tenure in 2016 and is currently serving as the president and CEO of the LGBTQ+ Victory Institute.

Thoughts on the National Women's Conference

SYLVIA GARCIA: We were all excited locally and I was involved in some of the local planning. But I had been involved from the very beginning, not only in helping plan the Houston conference but the Texas meeting that led to the Houston conference ... If you look at who were delegates [in the Texas State Meeting report], there's my name, number 2. There was actually an election. We had to vote for people, and it was probably one of my first campaigns ... We were concerned — we meaning the Latinas that went to the conference — that there would not be fair representation. Well guess what? We weren't the only ones. The Black caucus felt the same way, the lesbian caucus felt the same way. So, what did we do? We coalesced and decided that we were going to go in there and we were going to vote for the Black caucus members, we were going to vote for the lesbian caucus members, and that's it ... The moral of the story is coalitions work.

For us [delegates], this was the first step, the Texas meeting. Then of course the second step was the Houston meeting. And this was the most powerful event that I've, frankly, been to. And I've been to a lot of events. The opening ceremony ... you go up [to the stage] and there's this [banner reading] "WOMAN." And then when the curtain goes up, there's Rosalynn Carter, Lady Bird Johnson, Betty Ford, Bella Abzug, Barbara Jordan. I mean, it was a "Who's Who" of women. Remember I was a law student



Sylvia Garcia discusses the prominent role women of color played in representing Texas at the NWC.

Photo courtesy of Sharing Stories from 1977.

... so I was still impressionable, right? I was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. I remember going up there and thinking, "Damn, this is great." I was just in awe of the whole thing.¹

ANNISE PARKER: I was actually a League of Women Voters volunteer while the conference was going on ... my mentors were going to be there. And they were very focused on what was happening [at the conference], particularly the inclusion

Texas Women's Meeting June 24-26			
1. OFFICIAL DELEGATION			
Delegate	No. of Votes	Delegate	No. of Votes
1. Irma Baquel	947	30. Geraldine Brown	743
2. Sylvia R. Garcia	921	31. Betty McKeel	734
3. Irene Rodriguez	916	32. Josephine H. Stewart	730
4. Maria Colace	913	33. Sanyia Stafford	729
5. Estela Salinas	912	34. Deane Armstrong	726
6. Margie Flores	900	35. Penny Willich	725
7. Patricia Vasquez	894	36. Maria Ocas	723
8. Loretta Jo Shaw	890	37. Melva Becnel	719
9. Eddie Bernice Johnson	889	38. Arthur Beatrice Williams	719
10. Linda "Pokey" Anderson	871	39. Linda M. Sipes	714
11. Luz Gutierrez	871	40. Jane Mason	714
12. Mary Castillo	866	41. Hermine Tobolowsky	702
13. Teresa Saucedo	861	42. Rita Gomez	701
14. Lupe Anguiano	854	43. Eva C. Cuadra	700
15. Cynthia Sebon	853	44. Claudia Stravato	698
16. Sharon Natche	845	45. Dr. Hortense Dixon	694
17. Janice Robinson	837	46. Norma Hickie	692
18. Maria M. Cavanne	821	47. Ruth Kirby	689
19. Nelia Rodriguez-Rendosa	813	48. Barbara B. Reagan	689
20. Sarah Weddington	813	49. Dorothy Shandera	688
21. Janna Zambren	808	50. Dolores A. Puente	685
22. Ernestine V. Gloesbrenner	805	51. Elaine Optele	682
23. Owanth P. Anderson	804	52. Penny Brown	678
24. Martha E. Bailey	796	53. Claire Cunningham	676
25. Nikki Van Wightower	778	54. Minnie Maloy	676
26. Ann Richards	773	55. W. Carolyn Maddell	676
27. Bonnie Lesley	755	56. Betty Anderson	673
28. Dr. Marie McKnight	752	57. Betty Ann Peden	673
29. Barbara Duke	750	58. Carol Hatfield	671
11. OFFICIAL ALTERNATES			
1. Mary Fleen	666	4. Millie Monte	659
2. Ruby Indira Gutierrez	666	5. Penny Brandon	658
3. Helen Wright	665		

The vote tally of Texas delegates to the NWC lists Sylvia Garcia as the second highest vote-getter in the state. She joined with nine other women representing Houston.

Image courtesy of the Marjorie Randal National Women's Conference Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

of issues pertaining to lesbians. [My job was to] staff the convention booth and talk about the League of Women Voters ... I was just a warm body to put at the booth, because they wanted to be inside the conference hall.

I had attended gay organizing events, but the scale [of the NWC] was much larger than anything I had experienced because, not surprisingly, the LGBT events were fairly small. I speak to groups all the time now about the differences organizing now and organizing then. No internet, no social media, no cell phones, no way to find each other. In many places, you could be fired for being gay ... So the political organizing meetings, the Texas Gay Conference, and things like that, tended to be pretty small. If you got 100 people in a room, that was a huge event. So the number of delegates [at the NWC] ... the amount of attention and media and kind of hoopla around this event ... I had never been in a space with that many women all at once.²

GRACIELA SAENZ: I did not attend [the NWC] because I was working a full time job, I was going to school in the

Kathy Whitmire served five two-year terms as Houston mayor from 1982 to 1992.

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



evenings, and I had three kids. And even though I saw it happening on TV, and I heard about it from friends and all, and I would have wanted to be there, there was nothing that I could do at the time to be part of it. But I remember we were hyped. ... We had some very dynamic women in leadership. Sissy Farenthold. We had Barbara Jordan. Oh my God, if you ever heard her speak, oh wow. She was one of my heroes, or I should say sheroes. So there was a good sense of accomplishment at the time, and we thought that this was the beginning and it would just spread out throughout the nation. Basically, the women that had come in would just take it all back, and it would be amazing.³

KATHRYN WHITMIRE: We were excited that it was going to be held in Houston. ...[H]aving it connected to International Women's Year and allowing Houston to be a focal point to talk about the role of women evolving in the world and in our country and in our state was very exciting. And, of course, it was held in kind of a legislative format following parliamentary procedures, and it was exciting to see a lot of people coming into town from across the country, women who had run for office or were involved in political organizations. It also became clear that people didn't always agree, and there were certainly plenty of disagreements along the way as to what our priorities should be and how we should go about accomplishing them. And I think to me, the impact of that event, from the

Wanda Adams served two terms on the Houston City Council representing District D and seven years on the Houston Independent School District board.

Photo courtesy of HARTV.





Mayor Kathy Whitmire, center with staff members, brought diversity to city government, including installing Houston's first Black police chief, Lee P. Brown, who is standing to her left.

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

way I saw it, was the high profile role that it gave to women in the public arena.⁴

Politics Then and Now

WANDA ADAMS: Back then, it was a little bit different because a lot of women weren't so much in the forefront. You had Shirley Chisholm, way back in the day, who wanted to run for president, and it was just all out of order at that time. You had Ann Richards for [Texas] governor, and all these things that were happening later. As a Black female — let me talk from that perspective — we really didn't feel back then that we had a voice for anything because when you had issues, it wasn't always tilted around African American women.

We did not start getting this empowerment until recently, within maybe the last ten years, that people now are recognizing Black females are the power of this country ... So when I look back then, and what I see now with organizations, they are considering African American females, and that we're now being included. Now we're CEOs of companies. Now we're leading great cities. We have African American women who are mayors of cities. Back then we didn't have that. We have Black women leading Fortune 500 companies. We did not have that. [As of 2020,] we have an African American as Vice President of the United States. That wasn't even considered back then in 1977.⁵

KATHRYN WHITMIRE: I was campaigning [in 1977] against a man named Steve Jones, who was a CPA who I had known for a good while. And he was categorizing me as a "women's libber"... that was kind of a negative name for anyone involved in the women's movement. I had been running in a way to present myself as a professional and was always very careful to be professionally dressed ... and to let everybody know that I had years of experience as a CPA and would be advocating for financial disclosure and good financial management of the city. So, my opponent was trying to say, "Oh

no, don't listen to any of that because she's just one of these radical women's libbers."

Houston was becoming a very progressive city at that time and was more than willing to allow a woman, who could demonstrate her credentials, to be elected for the first time to a city office. But in those days the watch word was always, "Oh well yeah, we can have a woman — if she's qualified." We don't hear as much of that anymore since so many women are so well qualified for almost everything ... At our campaign headquarters, where we [were] making calls, stuffing envelopes, building signs — we had some televisions brought in so we could all watch what was going on live at the [Houston] conference while we were working on the campaign. And then the following week ... I won by a pretty sizable majority. So, I thought that was very appropriate after having such an important conference in Houston for Houston to finally come through and elect its first woman the very next week.



Graciela Saenz became the first Latina elected to Houston City Council and the first Latina elected at-large. She served from 1992 to 1998.

Photo courtesy of Graciela Saenz.

GRACIELA SAENZ: During the time that I was going through my career and all, [I realized] the way men treated you sometimes. Even when I was on city council, this kind of patronizing type of, "There, there, you don't have to worry about that, councilmember, we'll take care of it for you." And I'm going, "No, I will take care of it, and I can handle it." There was this sense of you know, sexual harassment. It existed and we had to contend with it. And yeah, there were moments when as women we didn't want to make waves just so that we could keep our jobs. And yet we balanced everything between work, and family, and community.

SYLVIA GARCIA: Back in 1977, I'm thinking there was a gender gap. But I think the gap was there when it was a woman running against four or five men. We always had to assume the woman would get a 3 to 5 percent gender gap, but now there's more women running. There are more women on the ballot. So, I don't think now it's a gender gap anymore. It's more of a women's edge. If you look at Harris County in our most recent races, more women vote than men and women are voting for women because more women are running. Women weren't

Ms. Magazine announces Annise Parker as Houston's new mayor in the winter of 2010.

Photo courtesy of Ms. Magazine and Wikimedia Commons.



running back then, but now we are. We elected about [seventeen] African American women judges and everyone was like, “Oh my God, we elected [seventeen] African American women judges.” This last [election], I think we elected four or five Latina judges ... [Back in 1977], there wasn’t the climate [to run,] the spirit of Houston hadn’t worked yet. But now because we’re running and more women are voting, we’re being elected.



Having previously served as a Houston city councilmember and controller, Annise Parker, shown here at a campaign appearance, ran for mayor in 2009. She served three terms as mayor from 2010 to 2016.

Photo by Ed Schipul, courtesy of Flickr.

ANNISE PARKER: I get attention as the first LGBT mayor of a major American city. But I was only the 10th woman in American history to lead a top 10 U.S. city. I think there have now been 12. Six were Texas mayors in Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio. And, you know, we think of all these places and [say], “Oh, New York, so liberal.” Never had a woman mayor. “L.A., so liberal.” Never had a woman mayor. All of these other places that are more progressive politically, and yet, it’s been big cities in Texas — partly because Texas has such damn big cities — you get to the top 10 list ... I think the reason is that there’s a little bit of a frontier mentality: if you can get in there, and you can throw a punch and take a punch, we’re going to respect you. And we may even vote for you. That didn’t happen in other places. And so, the idea of not being tethered to the past, being willing to let’s see what comes next has opened new avenues ... like being more open to the idea of women mayors, or a woman governor.

What people should know about Houston and its hidden histories

ANNISE PARKER: I don’t think it’s that [Houston is] not willing to commemorate women’s history. [History is] not something that we think about [in Houston], in general. It’s that constant

forward motion. We’re a relatively young city, in the scale of U.S. cities, and were a blink-of-an-eye city in terms of most of our growth being post World War II. So, this is it. I mean, it’s all about the new and the growth and so many people who came from someplace else. They don’t know what the history of Houston is ... The older, more historic Northeastern cities, they have more to preserve, but they also come with an attitude of wanting to preserve it. And we were the “rough and ready frontier.” If it wasn’t serving your purpose, tear it down and repurpose it and keep moving forward. It’s just a part of that. I don’t think there’s anything that had to do with wanting to erase women or women’s history.

GRACIELA SAENZ: In our Hispanic community, we have a history of immigration from the early 1930s and 40s. We had Cubanos coming in the fifties, we had Puertorriqueños coming in, we had the Salvadorians, the Ecuatorianos, the Nicaragüenses coming in during the eighties, and the nineties were the Venezolanos and the Colombianos, and even the very wealthy Mexicanos. So, this history of immigration and how they came and they settled here, those stories have yet to be told.

WANDA ADAMS: We’re inclusive to making sure that every voice counts, that every voice is heard, that we don’t want to leave anybody out when it’s concerning service. So, I think that’s the message. We are a growing city, and we are a city with many, many opportunities of culture. Everyone has a place in Houston, regardless of your race, your gender, your nationality, your religious background. Everybody has a place here in Houston. And that’s why Houston, we’re so diverse, we’re so giving, we’re so loving. I think that’s the message that I would like to send out to people, representing on all three levels of government now, is to let everybody know that anyone can be what they want



Judge Wanda Adams serves as Harris County Justice of the Peace for Precinct 7 in the Houston area.

Photo courtesy of Harris County Precinct 7.



Graciela Saenz shakes hands with President Bill Clinton during a visit to discuss the North American Free Trade Agreement and Houston's role.

Photo courtesy of Graciela Saenz.

to be, and don't let your past determine your destination on where you can go.

The Path Forward

GRACIELA SAENZ: As a city, as we grow, and as we continue to be proud of how we have accomplished things, we've taken one step [forward]. There are moments when I feel we've taken three steps back. There is still, I think, a resentment in certain areas of recent immigrants that may be doing well. There is also a tendency of wanting to maintain control of this community and not knowing how to, or pitting them against other minorities, and I think that that is wrong. I think we all have to be proud of the fact that we are part of the city, and that I have the wherewithal to also be responsible for the interests of my white brothers and sisters, my Black brothers and sisters. I was born, raised here, educated here. I can speak the language, and I know the laws, and I think the leadership has to be allowed to grow in diversity.

WANDA ADAMS: I think we have evolved since [1977], and I think now we are in a place of being embraced, to know that we can accomplish anything that we want to accomplish in this world as long as we put our mind to it. And it shouldn't be about skin color, it should be about qualifications, and we know that that person can do it. So right now, hey, the little Black girls now can look up to us and say, "You know what, if she can do it, I can do it." So, when this question comes up thirty years from now, and you ask what happened in 2020 or 2019 that you think around women's empowerment, they would be able to say we had the first African American president back then, we have Stacey Abrams out there in Georgia. So now the conversation will be a little bit different compared to what it was in 1977.

ANNISE PARKER: Unfortunately, from a national standpoint, so much of the potential [of the NWC] was never realized. The

conservative women who were in that room and in that space, I think, did a masterful job of trying to spike a lot of initiatives that could have come out of there. And I also think that, this is just my own opinion, the world was changing so rapidly in so many ways. I stayed in LGBT organizing because I thought I could make the best impact there. But there was so much to fix. If we had all kept our attention on, "Here's three things that we can get done," but there were never three things. There are 100 things. You can be united in that hall, but then when you go away, and you go back to your communities, your life happens again. All those women who were there with their anti-LGBT agenda, maybe they're partly responsible for the fact that I entered politics. They weren't going to fight for my rights. I had no faith. Some of them wanted to come after me. So, you know, [I decided] I'm going to stay in this space.

SYLVIA GARCIA: The bottom line is that the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment] was so important then and it brought so many women together across this nation as we organized. Regretfully, we still haven't gotten it done. And it's amazing to me that I was fighting that fight back in '77, and here I am as a member of Congress sitting on the judiciary committee and we had a hearing on the same thing again to try to make the changes necessary to continue the fight to get the ERA.

You think about any issue relating to women whether it's health, reproductive rights, arts, rural women, poor women, there's a plank on every single topic in [the National Plan of Action]. The plan has been the basis of so many things that have happened since then, whether it's the formation of the work that Planned Parenthood does, whether it was WEAL [Women's Equity Action League], whether it was the League of Women Voters. So many other things stem from here. The challenge that I have, or the comment I would make, is that, regretfully, some of these planks are still good today. We haven't gotten it all done. We've made a lot of progress. As the old Virginia Slims cigarettes ads used to say, "We've come a long way, baby." But we haven't come far enough, and we have much work to do. **HH**



Sylvia Garcia supports Texans as part of the Home is Here Coalition calling for strengthening protections for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients and DACA-eligible youth.

Photo courtesy of Congresswoman Sylvia Garcia.