

HOUSTON history

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The Spirit of Houston 1977 NATIONAL WOMEN'S CONFERENCE



Center for Public History
College of Liberal Arts
and Social Sciences

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR – Celebrating the Spirit of Houston



Dr. Caitlyn Jones, Guest Editor.

Conference,” it read. “It was the largest political conference of women in the United States since the Women’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848.”

Joy surged through my body when I read these words. For the last two years, I had been working on *Sharing Stories from 1977*, a digital humanities project at the University of Houston (UH) Center for Public History that spotlights the National Women’s Conference (NWC). But I often felt like our team was going at it alone. Even the feminist writer Gloria Steinem, who helped plan the convention, called it, “the most important event nobody knows about.” Seeing the marker, I realized Houston had not forgotten.

I soon learned former Houston mayor Annise Parker, the city’s second woman mayor and the first openly lesbian mayor of a major U.S. city, commissioned the plaque in 2015. As a young Rice University student, she attended the 1977 conference as a volunteer for the League of Women Voters. Parker remembered how the spirit of Houston swept through the halls. “There are folks like me who were overwhelmed by just the number of women and the strength of the women who were in that room, and it had an impact.”

Decades later, Parker found herself seated next to Gloria Steinem at a fundraiser. Steinem was disappointed when she learned there was nothing commemorating the event. “It’s a shame we’ve lost that history,” Parker remembered Steinem saying. “You would think there would at least be a plaque or something.” Suddenly, it clicked. The mayor could fix that. Parker and her cultural affairs team wrote the text for the marker and contacted the Hobby Center’s owners, who affixed it to the building’s exterior where it waits for curious passers-by.

I was walking to my car in downtown Houston on a humid afternoon in 2020 when I first saw it. Glinting off the red brick of the Hobby Center, was the only physical marker of the history that happened there in November 1977. “The Sam Houston Coliseum, now the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts, was the site of the first National Women’s

Although an important first step in preserving this history, the marker provides only a glimpse into the NWC’s impact on national politics. The conference was the first time — and to date the only time — the U.S. government asked women directly what they wanted and put forth money to get an answer. And unlike Seneca Falls, the NWC was not exclusive to educated, upper-class white women and their allies. Roughly 2,000 elected delegates from every state and territory descended onto Houston, alongside a crowd of roughly 18,000 people, to debate issues that reverberate in today’s political atmosphere.

It was where the phrase “women of color” was first used to amplify the discrimination faced by Black, Hispanic, Asian American and Pacific Islander, and Indigenous women. It was where lesbians and women with disabilities fused their own civil rights movements with the larger women’s rights movement. It was where rural women brought to light gender discrimination in agriculture laws, and urban women fought for universal childcare. It was even where conservative women showcased their political power organizing in opposition to abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment. In short, the NWC gave the nation a glimpse of what the United States would look like under a matriarchy.

As you will read in this magazine, the work of Houston women made this dynamic moment possible. We take you into tension-filled back rooms where volunteers frantically prepared for the thousands of people pouring into the city’s hotels and convention center. We highlight famous figures like Houston-born Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, who electrified the crowd with her commanding call for unity, and unknown names such as UH student athlete Sylvia Ortiz, who carried a symbolic torch of freedom onto the convention floor and became the face of a movement.

Through photographs and archival materials, we show how women from across the country used posters, clothing, pins, and printing presses to transform Houston into a political arena. And finally, we illuminate the Houston women representing the Texas delegation and hear from past and present officeholders on how this legacy of leadership shaped their lives.

This magazine is dedicated to the people who made the spirit of Houston happen. You carved a path for a new generation still striving for equality and you are not forgotten. **HH**



A plaque at the Hobby Performing Arts Center commemorates the 1977 National Women’s Conference.

Photo courtesy of Caitlyn Jones.

The Spirit of Houston 1977 National Women's Conference

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Houston Women's Advocate Nikki Van Hightower, far right, addresses a crowd in front of the Sam Houston Coliseum alongside torch runners and NWC presiding officer Bella Abzug to kick off the four-day convention.

Photo courtesy of Janice Rubin.

WHY HOUSTON?

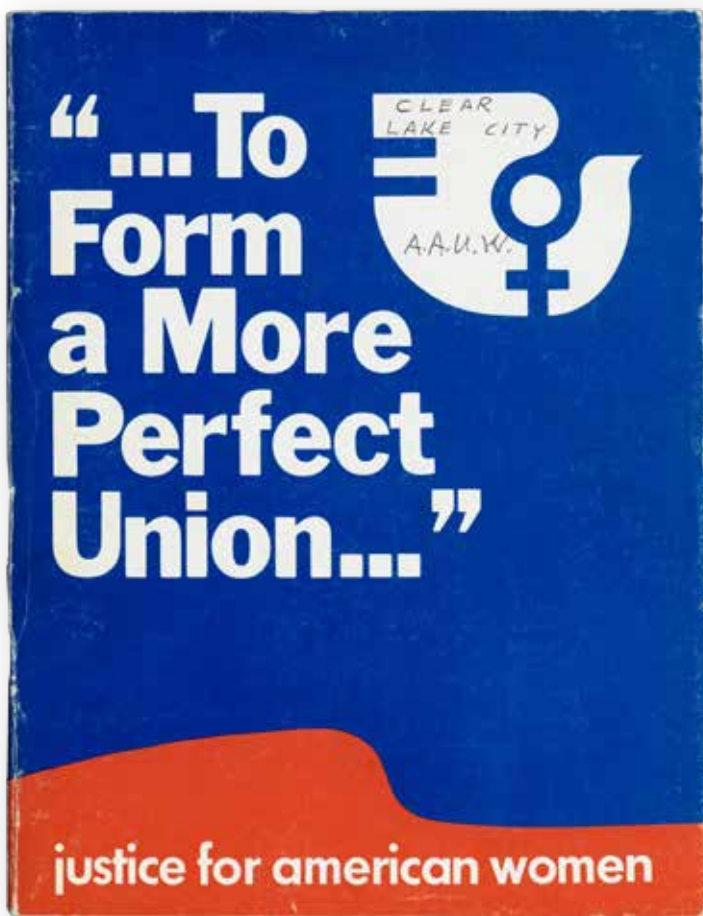
HOW THE NATIONAL WOMEN'S CONFERENCE CAME TO THE BAYOU CITY

By Caitlyn Jones

When organizers of the National Women's Conference (NWC) announced in October 1976 that Houston, Texas, would host its historic gathering, a question soon emerged: Why Houston? The federally funded conference was a domestic iteration of the global International Women's Year (IWY) put forward by the United Nations. Many Americans thought the NWC would take place somewhere like Washington, DC, the seat of national power, or an East Coast locale like New York City, where media coverage of the feminist movement proliferated. Yet, the members of the presidential commission organizing

the gathering wanted something different. If the NWC was to be truly representative of American women, then they needed to host it in a place that represented the full American experience.

Unbeknownst to the public, Houston women had been working for years to prove that their city was the future of American feminism. They used Houston's strengths — its close relationship with the federal government, its focus on tourism as an economic engine, and its reputation as a center of progress — to create a groundswell of local activity that attracted the attention of NWC planners and set the stage for a national debate over the future of American women in a place that claimed to be a truly American city.¹



The cover of the 1976 report from the presidential commission for International Women's Year uses language from the Declaration of Independence to frame the fight for women's equality as an American ideal. This patriotic framework inspired commissioners to select a host city for the NWC that represented American values.

Photo courtesy of the Marjorie Randal National Women's Conference Collection. All archival images courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries, unless otherwise noted.

"The Most American City"

In the 1970s, Houston was both a curiosity and point of consternation that made for colorful stories in print, radio, and television media. James Sterba, a *New York Times* correspondent covering Houston, traced the city's transformation from a "steamy little southeast Texas swamp town" to a "brash, booming adolescent" promoting unlimited growth and unfettered capitalism. Most who wrote about Houston agreed: the city symbolized money, and that money was made of oil. The oil crises that punctured the decade meant that the city had become the domestic energy hub for the country, which needed an answer to its import dependency. "If Houston is the oil center of America," writer James Conway argued, "it is de facto the most American city."²

Being the most American city meant having wealth and political connections, but Houston was not immune to the American problem of race. After NASA's Manned Spacecraft Center arrived in the 1960s, the local chamber of commerce rebranded Houston as "Space City, U.S.A.," a slogan that reinforced the city's desire to look toward the future and

divorce itself from its checkered past as a Jim Crow locale with a sizable Ku Klux Klan presence.³ Houston's civil rights movement emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, often led by vocal student groups at Texas Southern University and the University of Houston who organized boycotts, pickets, and sit-ins to advocate for racial justice.⁴ Fearing violence, bad publicity, and a hit to their pocketbooks, business owners quietly desegregated their lunch counters and storefronts and worked with city leaders to orchestrate a media blackout where news of integration remained out of the newspapers and off the airwaves.⁵

Even as Houston's powerbrokers attempted to manufacture a discreet integration process, cultural and physical violence pierced the veil of peace. Interstate highway projects destroyed Black and Hispanic enclaves within the city limits, and police brutality became an ongoing issue.⁶ These incidents sowed distrust between institutions and communities of color, but they also served as a catalyst for multiracial coalition building, a strategy Houston feminists later tried to replicate in their own struggle for equality.

For Houston women, the gender revolution was most visible on the tennis courts. The 1973 Battle of the Sexes tennis match held in the Astrodome was deeply enmeshed in the gender politics of the time, with "women's libber" Billie Jean King taking on self-described "male chauvinist pig" Bobby Riggs, but it was also tied to the city's penchant for money-making. Television became a profitable tool for sports by the 1970s, and the Astrodome's "carnival-like" environment made for good viewing.⁷

Even if the city's business elite were only concerned with profit margins, they became part of a massive cohort witnessing a historic moment. Thousands packed the stands or tuned in at home to watch King, an athlete at the top of her game, hammer an exhausted Riggs set after set to claim victory. King's victory proved, in the words of historian Susan Ware, that "women did not choke."⁸ By 1977, local feminists



Shirtless men carried tennis star Billie Jean King into the Astrodome ahead of the 1973 Battle of the Sexes match against former Wimbledon champion Bobby Riggs, who wore a jacket with the slogan "Sugar Daddy."

Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



Students picket outside Foley's Department Store in downtown Houston to protest segregation in March of 1960.

Photo courtesy of the Foley's Collections.

found themselves in a similar position to King. In planning the NWC, they were determined to prove to the nation that Houston women did not choke under pressure.

Choosing Houston

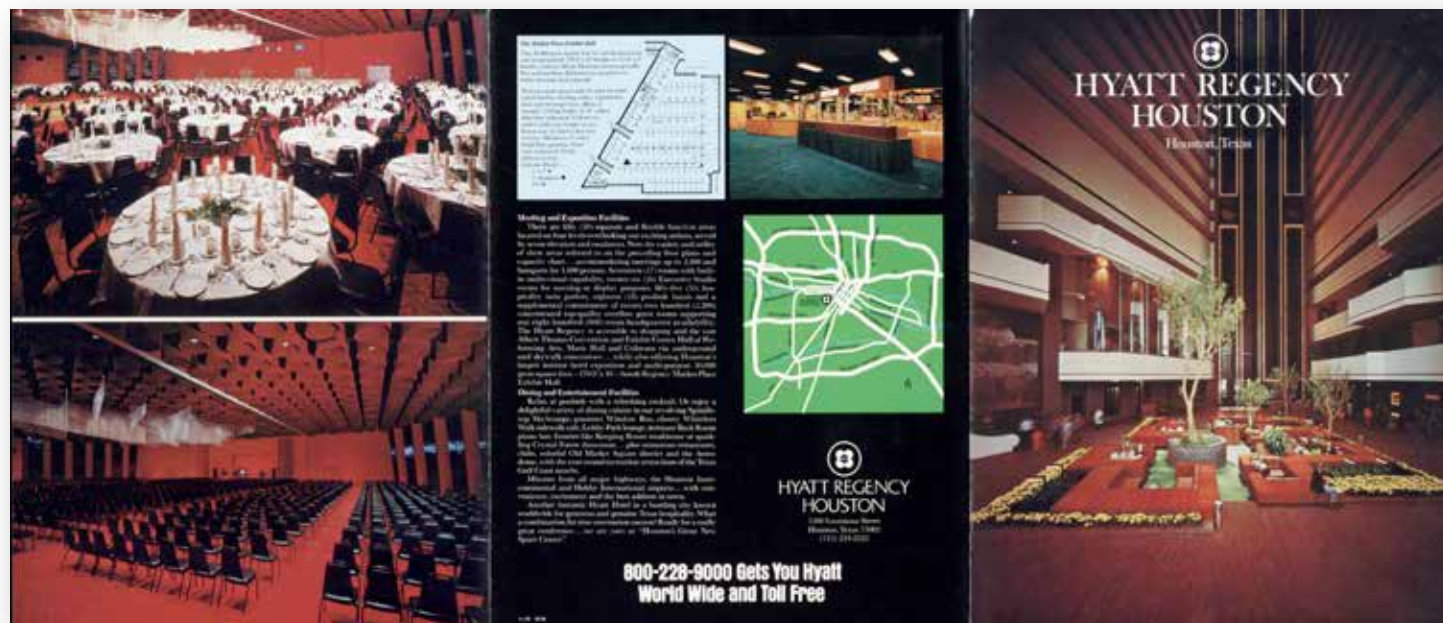
Even with Houston's glossy press coverage, its selection as the site of the National Women's Conference was not a foregone conclusion. Once Congress enacted funding for the NWC in December 1975, staff members for the presidential commission began the search for a city that could accommodate thousands of attendees and generally supported the goals of the women's movement. However, backlash to International Women's Year from conservative groups meant the NWC could not be seen as a rubber-stamp

convention. It needed to be held in a place where communities of competing interests could voice opposing opinions in front of national media.⁹

Logistical demands like space and infrastructure were crucial in the decision-making process for the NWC, but commissioners also wanted the site to hold political meaning. First, they wanted to challenge the popular image of the women's movement as an elite northeastern fad, so staffers eschewed major metropolitan areas along the East Coast. Further, a likely conference date in late 1977 made weather a factor. Cities like Denver, with its high altitude and heavy snowfall, fell out of contention quickly. And finally, commissioners stressed that the conference must take place in a state that had ratified the ERA. This knocked much of the Deep South off the list and disqualified locales like Salt Lake City, Kansas City, and Las Vegas.¹⁰

In their discussions, commissioners also based their opinions on experiences at past conferences. The success of the IWY Tribune, a space for non-delegates to meet during the Mexico City World Conference on Women in 1975, prompted the commission to look for cities with extra theater and exhibit spaces where visitors and observers could connect outside of the official plenary sessions.¹¹ Additionally, several of the commissioners had already been to Houston as the city had hosted three major women's conventions prior to 1977: the 1971 National Chicana Conference, the 1973 inaugural conference of the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC), and the annual meeting of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1974.

By the summer of 1976, commission staff member Hillary Whitaker sent out queries to 64 convention bureaus in ERA-ratified states. Fifty cities responded, and commissioners narrowed the list down to three: Atlantic City, Detroit, and



A Hyatt Regency brochure from the 1970s showcases the décor and meeting space of its downtown Houston hotel, which functioned as the official hotel for the National Women's Conference and the on-site headquarters for staff members and commissioners.

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

1976, persuading commissioners to pick Houston as the NWC site. Highlighting the organization's role in putting together the 1973 NWPC and 1974 NOW national conferences, Barnes wrote, "Our members understand the effort a convention entails and have experience in assisting in their preparation." She also boasted of recent legislative gains for women in Texas and confessed, "We quite chauvinistically feel that Houston has led the state in obtaining equal rights for men and women." The letter also came with a pledge: Houston's feminists would mobilize their networks and gear all their organizational efforts "to help make the convention an unqualified success."²⁰

The Women's Advocate

Barnes's promise of mass volunteer support impressed national commissioners and staff, but many places had eager NOW and NWPC chapters at the ready.²¹ Houston, though, had something other cities did not: a paid women's advocate position in the city government, the first of its kind for large metropolitan areas.

The position emerged as the result of feminist political pressure on the 1973 mayoral campaign trail. When Fred Hofheinz won the election, he tried to work with local feminists to address women's needs in the city. At the top of the list was the creation of an office dedicated to "accomplishing positive affirmative action goals for women."²² This generalized job description meant that the priorities of the women's advocate were at the discretion of whoever Hofheinz appointed, and first up was Poppy Northcutt.

Northcutt was a well-known figure in the Houston community who gained national fame in the late 1960s as the first woman engineer in NASA's Mission Control Center. A leader in both Houston NOW and the Harris County Women's Political Caucus, she was known in feminist circles for her dry humor and blunt nature, which endeared her to activists and politicians alike. During her time in the position, Northcutt tripled the number of women in the Houston police department, lobbied for a state law that made cities



Poppy Northcutt, the first women's advocate in the city government, discusses the position during a 1977 news interview with reporter Roberta Hammond. Image courtesy of the KUHT Film and Video Collection.



Nikki Van Hightower, the women's advocate for the City of Houston, is featured in a special issue of Houston Breakthrough, a feminist monthly newspaper.

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

pay for rape kit testing instead of the survivor, and loosened dress code restrictions for city employees so that women could wear pant suits.

After eighteen months as women's advocate, Northcutt stepped down from her post in October 1975. By May of 1976, Hofheinz appointed Nikki Van Hightower to fill the vacancy. Van Hightower had lived in Houston briefly in the 1960s as she worked on her bachelor's and master's degrees at the University of Houston but left to complete a Ph.D. in political science at New York University, where she wrote her dissertation on women's political involvement. She had only been back in the city for two years when she was hired as the women's advocate. She suspected her selection was because she had not yet established a "reputation" that garnered political enemies.²³

That soon changed. Van Hightower tried to build on Northcutt's work, compiling reports on city employment practices and fielding discrimination complaints. However, she quickly found out that the women's advocate had limited power to enforce disciplinary action related

to the complaints. She also learned that city employees were told by their division heads not to give her data needed for her reports.²⁴

Undeterred, Van Hightower leaned into the “advocate” part of her title and became a familiar face in the community. She spoke frequently to local and national organizations about women’s issues and often made news. Van Hightower’s national visibility factored heavily into the commission’s NWC site decision. “One of the major reasons the Commission chose Houston,” conference coordinator Hilary Whittaker wrote to Hofheinz in October 1976, “was that you have an effective Women’s Advocate in Nikki Van Hightower, whom several Commissioners and staff have heard speak.”²⁵

Yet, Van Hightower’s visibility threatened to derail the NWC just months before it began. From its inception, the women’s advocate office faced opposition from locals, but the pushback came to a head in March 1977 after just seven people complained to city council about Van Hightower’s open support of the ERA and reproductive freedom during a rally for International Women’s Day she attended on her day off.²⁶ The complainants viewed her comments as an abuse of her city position and an attack on “the home, the family, and the moral fiber of the United States.” In response, city council voted to first reduce Van Hightower’s salary from nearly \$18,000 per year to \$1 per year, then to abolish the position altogether.²⁷

Outrage ensued. Within hours of city council action, an intersectional alliance of local organizations — including mainstream women’s outfits like NOW and the League of Women Voters, labor groups like the Coalition of Labor Union Women and the Texas Nurses Association, religious bodies like Church Women United and the First Unitarian Church, Black organizations like Delta Sigma Theta and Black Women for Social Change, and Hispanic groups like the League of United Latin American Citizens and Chicana Association for Reform and Advocacy — formed in support of the women’s advocate. They printed flyers, signs, and bumper stickers declaring, “We Need Nikki!” and held rallies vowing to vote current council members out of office. Telegrams poured in from local, state, and federal legislators (including Houstonian Barbara Jordan) admonishing city leaders. Nearly 100 speakers — both for and against the women’s advocate — packed City Hall during council meetings to voice their opinion.²⁸ The controversy even made national news, a development that caused quite a headache for NWC commissioners.

By April, the commission began receiving letters urging members to boycott Houston and change the location of the national conference. State delegations as well as national organizations like NOW viewed the city council’s treatment of Van Hightower as “deplorable” and challenged the commission to “put our money where our mouth is” by speaking in terms city leaders would understand: “economic clout.”²⁹

Staff members bristled at the pushback, informing commissioners that there were no other viable options for the



Hundreds of women — both for and against the women’s advocate position — address the all-male city council during a public meeting in March 1977.

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

conference at such a late planning stage. Commissioner and sociologist Alice Rossi summed up a no-win situation: “If we want to find a place in this country where they have no discrimination against women, we’ll be hard pressed.” Van Hightower herself agreed, writing in a May 1977 letter to the commission that “there is no place totally free from sexism.”³⁰ By then, her job had been saved by Mayor Hofheinz, who moved the women’s advocate position into his own cabinet and rescued it temporarily from the council’s budgetary ax.³¹ As the sweltering summer neared in Houston, Van Hightower retained her position in city government, and planning for the NWC lurched forward — though not without controversy.

If the women’s advocate debacle showcased the strength of feminist organizing in Houston, it also elevated local resistance. Conservative women in Houston had been active since at least the 1950s, at first uniting in shared opposition to communist ideologies in public schools and later moving toward a shared abhorrence of abortion by the 1970s.³²

This political cartoon by Mark Stinson depicts Houston Mayor Fred Hofheinz rescuing women's advocate Nikki Van Hightower, who is being burned at the stake by city council members. The cartoon ran in Houston Breakthrough after Hofheinz turned the women's advocate position into a staff position under his cabinet.

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



Like their feminist counterparts, these women joined local affiliates of national and state organizations like Right to Life and Women Who Want to Be Women, but also created their own grassroots groups such as Life Advocates and Happiness of Women.

Because International Women's Year coincided with the Van Hightower controversy, conservative women used the opportunity to protest both. To them, Van Hightower was

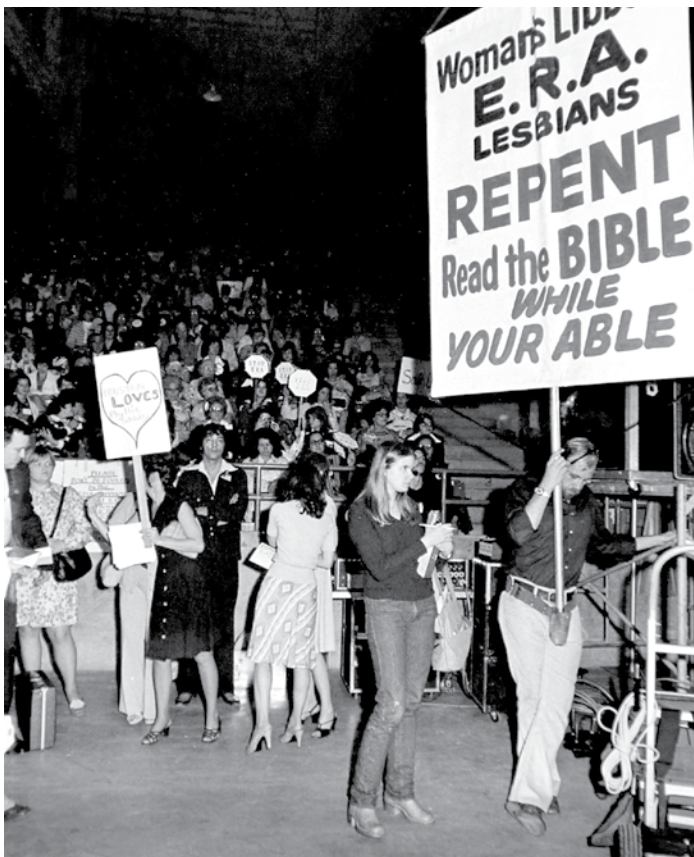
an extension of IWY, reflecting the dissolution of family life through an encouragement of abortion, homosexuality, and an Equal Rights Amendment that they believed would remove protections for women. Dissent on the ground mirrored ongoing opposition to the NWC at the national level. Commissioners faced attacks from members of Congress and organizations like Eagle Forum and the IWY Citizens' Review Committee, who contended that conservative women were being excluded from state delegations.³³

Paradoxically, local resistance strengthened the commission's position that the city was the perfect place to host such an event. From their point of view, Houston provided a central location where feminist and anti-feminists could come together in dialogue and every woman could have her say. It was an arena that could accommodate multiple viewpoints on the American problems of gender, race, and class. It was a place where debates about equality animated the city's past and would continue to shape its future. So, if Houston was truly the most American city, there was no better place to host a national women's conference that touted and tested American values of liberty and justice for all. ++

Caitlyn Jones, Ph.D., is a public historian focusing on memory and social movements. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Houston and currently works as a National Park Service Mellon Fellow at the Belmont-Paul Women's Equality National Monument in Washington, DC.

Women protest the Equal Rights Amendment, its advocates, and lesbian women at the "Pro-Family" counterrally at the Astro Arena. The event occurred on the same weekend as the NWC to draw press attention away from International Women's Year.

Photo courtesy of Janice Rubin.



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

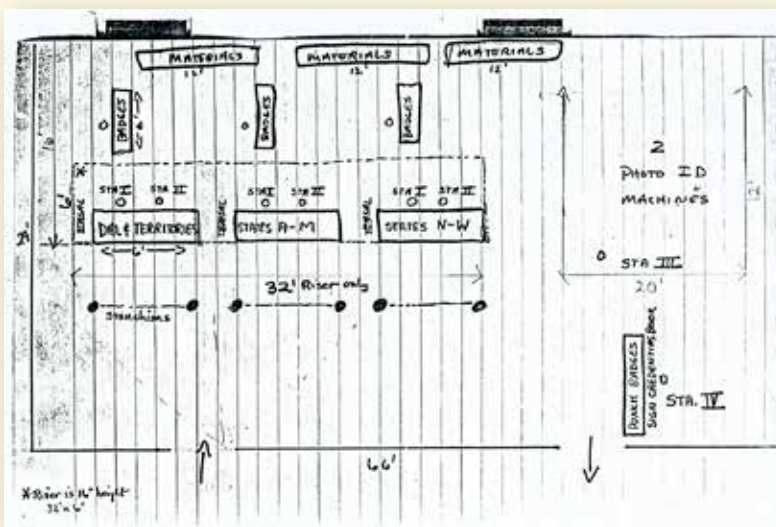
by training 150 volunteers to act as a security team. This group, which included twenty women serving as sergeants-at-arms, was responsible for monitoring the conference and dealing with potential altercations. Fortunately, thanks to the efforts of the organizers and the security force, no serious breaches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

The First National Women's Conference



An Official Report to the President, the Congress and the People of the United States

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.

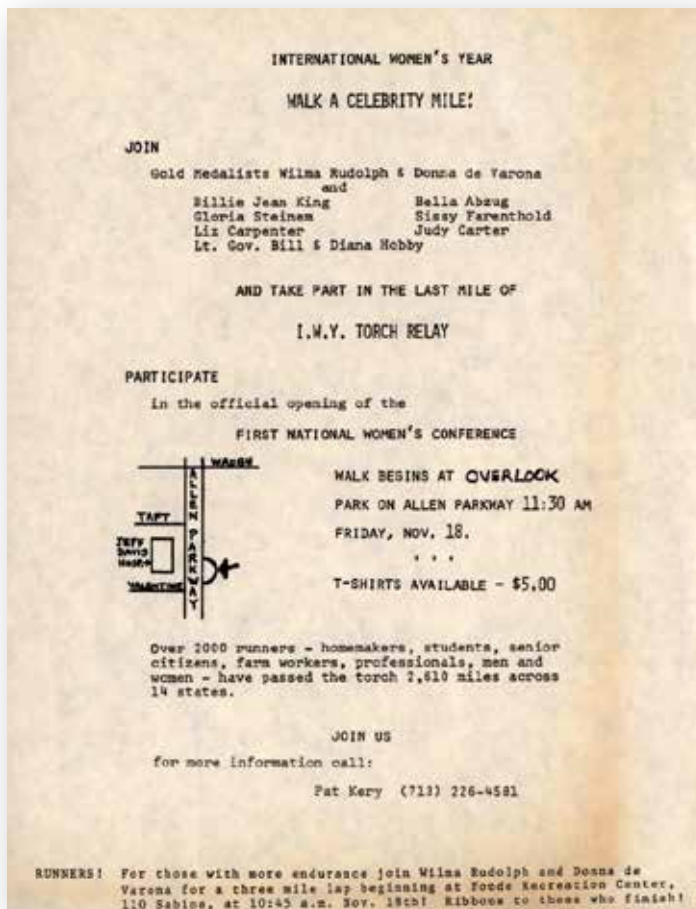
“WALK A CELEBRITY MILE!”: This call to action circulated around Houston in 1977 on a poster advertising the final stretch of the torch relay for the National Women’s Conference (NWC). It encouraged local residents to join in the final leg of a 2,610-mile journey from Seneca Falls, New York, to Houston, 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



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.

All photos courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries, unless otherwise noted.

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

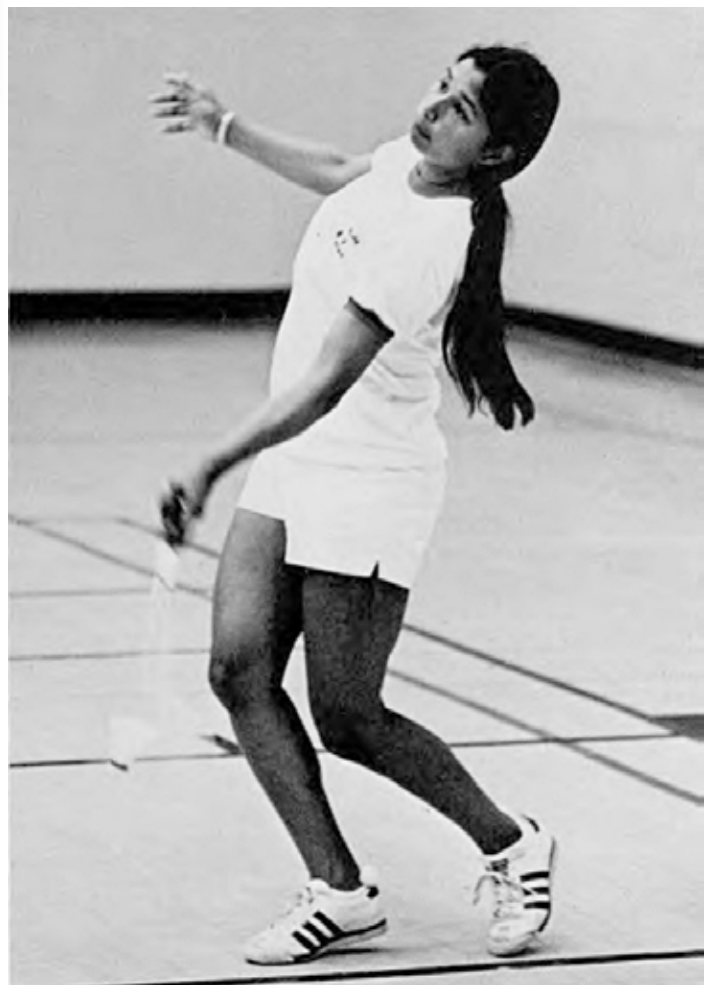
When Ortiz was a student athlete, Dr. Sue Garrison served as director of women’s athletics, opening doors for female athletes long before Title IX. Garrison came to UH in 1945 as the school’s first director of women’s physical education, and by the sixties and seventies, she was helping lead the expansion 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

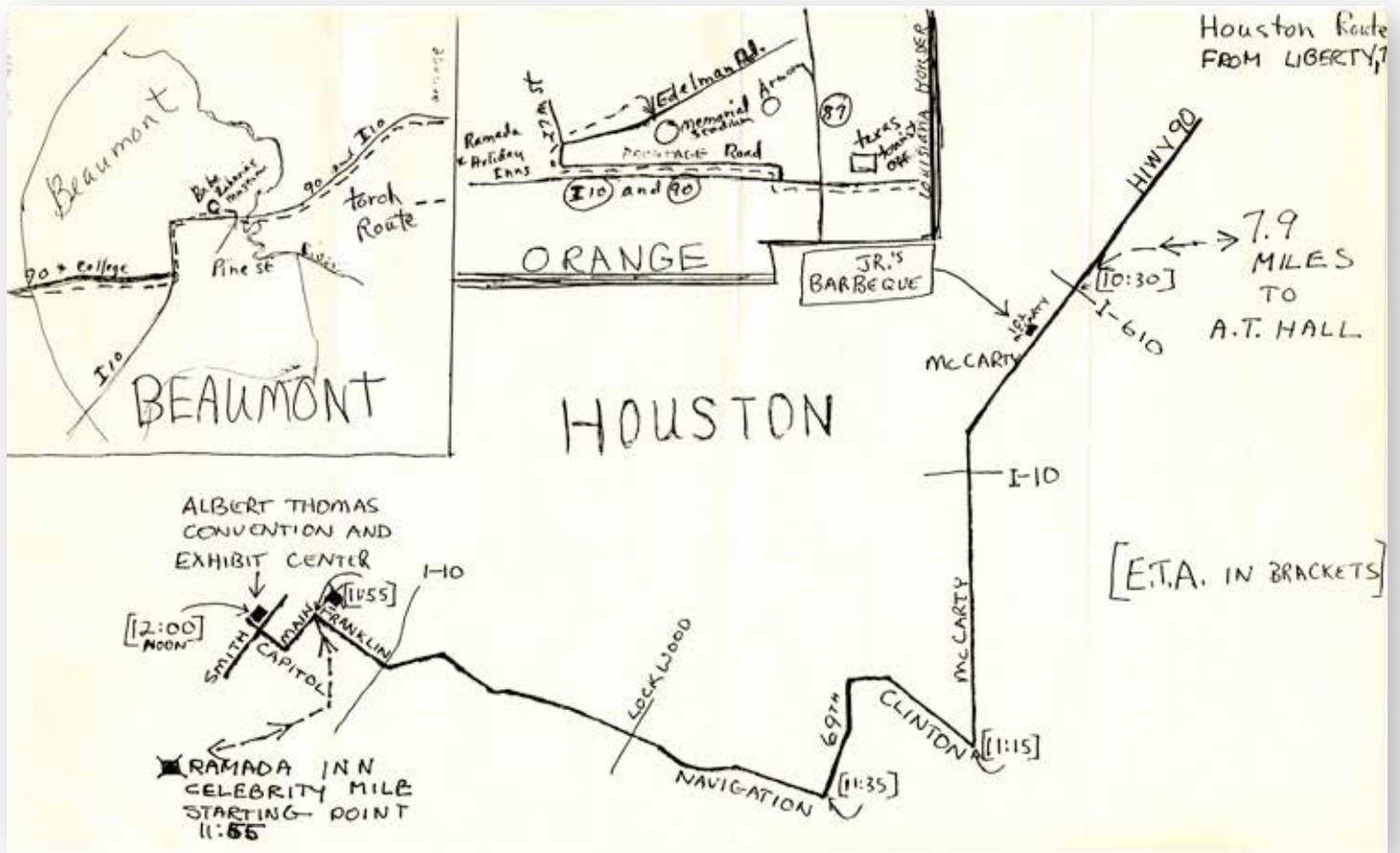
From its onset, the relay was meant to be a showstopper. The organizers of the NWC had only a small part of their budget to invest in a creative introduction to the conference. A North to South trans-state marathon ended up being the most affordable option with estimated costs between \$15,000 and \$20,000. 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, Peggy 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 

Miranda Ruzinsky is a Ph.D. student in history at the University of Houston, focusing on American female Jewish history. She is also a Lydia Mendoza Fellow in the Center for Mexican American and Latino/a Studies and the Center for Public History.



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

Photo courtesy of Sandra Davidson.



Houston delegate Sylvia Garcia (front right) joins other Pro-plan and ERA supporters from the Texas delegation such as future Governor Ann Richards (left) and Houston Women's Advocate Nikki Van Hightower (top right) at the National Women's Conference. Photo courtesy of Sylvia Garcia.

Meet Houston's NWC Delegates

Introduction by Nancy Beck Young and Leandra Zarnow — Biographies edited by Mary Seume

Sharing Stories from 1977: Putting the National Women's Conference on the Map tells the story of what happened in Houston, Texas, in November 1977 when the National Women's Conference (NWC) deliberated what women wanted from the federal government. Congress created the NWC in response to the United Nations' International Women's Year initiative and the first World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975. The United States was behind internationally as most other nations had pre-conferences to assess women's domestic status. The country sought to be a world leader in the areas of human rights and needed a big response. The NWC was that reply. As mandated by the NWC law, almost 2,000 delegates and alternates from wide-ranging backgrounds were elected from the 50 states and 6 territories in lead-up meetings prior to the Houston Conference. This resulted in a representative body that was more diverse than Congress was then or is today. Delegates approved a 26-plank platform including concerns seen as "women's issues"—reproductive health and childcare—and

those outside this domain—from sexual preference and minority rights to arts, business, and international affairs.

Sharing Stories from 1977 seeks to capture this range while highlighting the NWC as a historic gathering. It creates an intergenerational digital space where students publish peer reviewed scholarship such as biographical essays, thematic essays, oral histories, and comparative demographic data. The first phase of the project, focusing on biographical and demographic stories about delegates and alternates, will be complete in 2027. The project has bigger ambitions, though. We aim to tell the story of all the other 150,000 NWC participants: journalists who covered the conference, torch relay runners, international dignitaries, paid staff, and state and territorial meeting participants who did not attend the Houston meeting.

What follows are excerpts from biographies written and edited by students about the ten Houston delegates to the NWC. To read more about these women, go to www.sharingstories1977.uh.edu.



Photo Courtesy of Marjorie Randal National Women's Conference Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Linda "Pokey" Anderson

*Original Biography
by Elliot Williams*

Linda "Pokey" Anderson was born in 1949 in Duluth, Minnesota. Her father's job required her family to move frequently until they eventually settled in Washington, DC. Anderson attended Eckerd College in Florida, where she became politically active in feminist groups on campus. She graduated in 1972 with a bachelor's degree in sociology and anthropology.

After graduation, Anderson moved to Houston and became active in local politics. In 1975, she and several other gay individuals formed the Houston Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus. Anderson was also co-chair of the board of directors for the National Gay Task Force. During her time with the organization, she was part of the first LGBTQ delegation to visit the White House. While there, they discussed gay rights with Midge Costanza, one of President Jimmy Carter's top advisors.

In 1977, Anderson was elected with 871 votes to the Texas delegation for the National Women's Conference held in Houston, Texas. She was a representative of the lesbian caucus at the conference and fought for a sexual preference plank, which called for an end to discrimination against gay Americans, to be included in the National Plan of Action.

Anderson was ahead of the feminist movement when it came to intersectionality. In a letter she wrote in 1977, Anderson discussed how marginalized communities have been neglected by the feminist movement. She argued both for recognition of "our rich diversity" and for the overlooked groups to stick together when faced with opposition.

Linda "Pokey" Anderson was able to achieve a great deal, both within and outside the political sphere. Her work with women's rights groups and queer organizations, locally and nationally, was essential to the success, recognition, and appreciation of queer people in the United States. ■



Photo courtesy of Sisters of '77 documentary.

Melva Becnel

*Original Biography
by Lindsay Amaral*

Melva Becnel was born in Houston, Texas, on January 26, 1939. Becnel attended Houston public schools and graduated from Phyllis Wheatley High School. She earned her bachelor's degree from Fisk University in Tennessee and took over

her family's real estate firm with her brother. Eventually, she decided to pursue a law degree from Texas Southern University and became an attorney.

In 1977, Becnel was chosen to serve on the Texas Coordinating Committee for International Women's Year, a group tasked with planning a state meeting before the National Women's Conference later that year. Becnel helped plan workshops for the state meeting and was also an alternate on the nominating committee, which put forth a slate of potential delegates for attendees to vote on. She was elected as one of the Texas delegates, with 719 votes.

In Houston, Becnel voiced support for many of the recommendations the national committee proposed and joined the minority women's caucus. She recalled in a 2005 documentary about the conference that Black women were initially hesitant about attending since the women's rights movement often did not prioritize the needs of the Black community. "I had to overcome that as well," she said, "But I knew it was important to participate, to see what was going on, and to try to close that gap and move that gulf."

Becnel held memberships with an array of voluntary organizations, including the National Women of Achievement, Phi Alpha Delta, the Houston area Urban League, and the Young Women's Christian Association. Becnel also held positions in local and state government. For fourteen years, she worked as a legislative aide to State Representative Ronald R. Wilson (D-Houston) and served as a board member for the Texas Housing Authority. ■



The conference goers were not all of one mind. This woman wears a "Majority" ribbon indicating her and others' opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment.

Photo by Dorothy Marder, courtesy of the Swarthmore College Peace Collection.



Pernila "Penny" Brown

*Original Biography
by Lindsay Amaral*

Pernila "Penny" Brown was born on February 5, 1946. She attended high school in Mississippi and pursued her bachelor's degree at the University of Pennsylvania. After completing her undergraduate education in 1967, Brown went on to law school and earned her degree from Harvard University in 1971. She spent the next few years working with tenant rights groups in the Boston area.

Photo courtesy of *Houston Breakthrough*, Houston and Texas Feminist and Lesbian Newsletters, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

By 1977, Brown was living in Houston, Texas, where she was an attorney and a member of the State Bar of Texas. Houston Mayor Fred Hofheinz appointed Brown as the city's Civil Service Director in 1976, which made her the first woman to head the Civil Service Commission and the first Black woman to direct any city department. Brown also served on the executive board of the Houston chapter of the United Negro College Fund and as the vice president of the Houston Legal Foundation.

Brown got involved with the International Women's Year program when she joined the Texas Coordinating Committee and helped plan the Texas state women's meeting in June 1977. At the meeting, her name was put forth by the state nominating committee to represent Texas at the National Women's Conference later that year in Houston. Brown won the nomination with 676 votes and attended the NWC as a state delegate. During the convention, she voiced support for the Equal Rights Amendment and reproductive freedom for women. ■



Mary Castillo

*Original Biography
by Lindsay Amaral*

Mary Lidia Castillo was born on July 20, 1935, in Victoria, Texas, to Seferino and Anita Moreno Castillo. She grew up in Galveston, Texas, in a political family; her father served as president of his local dock-workers union and her brother Leonel would go on to become the first Mexican American elected to citywide office in

Photo courtesy of
Mary Castillo obituary.

Houston. After graduating from high school, Castillo joined the US Army and served during the Korean War. She then worked for Metro Transit Authority and earned a master's degree in education from Texas Southern University. Castillo worked as a counselor at Texas Southern. She married John Castillo on October 24, 1969, and she had one son, Edward.

Castillo was also involved in a number of political and civic organizations, including the American Legion Auxiliary, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the Hispanic International University Board, and the Neighborhood Day Care Center Association. She served as chair of the Political Association of Spanish Speaking Organizations and as a member of the Education Committee on the Southwest Association of Chicanos in Higher Education.

In 1977, Castillo joined the Texas Coordinating Committee for International Women's Year, a group tasked with planning a state meeting ahead of the National Women's Conference. She assisted with outreach efforts for the state meeting in June and was elected as a state delegate with 866 votes from meeting attendees. At the national event in Houston, Castillo joined the Chicana caucus and supported a number of causes including passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, reproductive freedom, and lesbian rights.

In 1996, she campaigned alongside her husband when he ran for Houston City Council. She passed away on September 10, 2012, in Houston. ■

The convention floor reverberated with excitement and anticipation for the changes such a conference might bring.

Photo courtesy of Janice Rubin.





Hortense Dixon

*Original Biography
by Andrea Peters*

Hortense Selena Williams Dixon was born in Houston, Texas, on January 29, 1926. She graduated from Prairie View A&M University with her undergraduate degree in 1946 and received her master's degree from the University of Colorado two years later. By 1970, Dixon earned her doctorate from Texas Tech University, becoming the school's first Black Ph.D. graduate.

Dixon began her professorship at Texas Southern University in

1951 as an educator of home economics. In 1975, she took a break from higher education and began working for the city of Houston as Mayor Fred Hofheinz's executive assistant. She held several board positions for organizations such as Houston Operation Big Vote, Houston Council on Human Relations, the United Fund, and the Conference of Minority Public Administrators. This experience as an educator and an organizer led to her eventual position at the National Women's Conference.

When the National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year selected Houston as the home for the convention, Dixon landed a position as vice-chair of the Houston Committee to help plan the event at the local level. There, she voiced concern about the handling of federal funding for the conference and developed a financial plan to increase transparency for both local and national organizers. She then launched another initiative to publicize the goals of the conference and recruit volunteers. Dixon's efforts played a significant role in the planning of the conference, and she continued her advocacy on the voting floor as one of fifty-eight Texas delegates.

Later in life, Dixon served on several advisory boards and cofounded National Women of Achievement, Inc. Hortense Dixon died on April 19, 1988, at age 62. ■



Sylvia Garcia

*Original Biography
by Joselynne Estrada*

Sylvia Garcia was born on September 6, 1950, in San Diego, Texas. Garcia earned a scholarship after high school to attend Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas, graduating in 1972 with a bachelor's degree in social work and political science. That same year, she moved

to Houston, Texas, and got a job as a state social worker. She began attending Texas Southern University in 1975 to earn her law degree.

Throughout the 1970s, Garcia was involved in a variety of social and political movements. She was a member of the National Welfare Rights Organization and the Coalition for Barrier Free Living. She also joined the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC) and became friends with future Houston Mayor Kathy Whitmire after the two met at the NWPC National Convention in Houston in 1973. Four years later, she served as a Texas delegate at the National Women's Conference, receiving 921 votes at the state meeting. At the convention, she supported quality healthcare for women, reproductive freedom, equal education opportunities, lesbian rights, and passage of the Equal Rights Amendment.

After the NWC, Garcia entered politics and served in local, state, and national office where she continued to advocate for many of the issues she supported in 1977. Since her election to the US House of Representatives in 2018, she has helped pass a bill that made revenge pornography a crime, fought against legislation that would limit abortion services, pushed for equal rights for the LGBTQ+ community, championed immigration reform, and promoted affordable health care plans. She has received awards from organizations such as the Houston LGBTQ+ Political Caucus and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund. Guided by the quote "Educate a woman, empower the world," Garcia has been successful in her political occupations and will continue to strive for equality. ■



Delegates cheer as Coretta Scott King outlines the Minority Rights plank calling for equality for women of color, which received near unanimous support.

Photo courtesy of Janice Rubin.



Photo courtesy of Sharon Macha obituary.

Sharon Macha

*Original Biography
by Lindsay Amaral*

Sharon Macha identified as a Houstonian, Republican, and feminist. She was born November 22, 1942, and grew up in Oklahoma. She graduated from the University of Oklahoma in 1964 with a bachelor's degree in physics and moved to Houston. There she became one of the first women working in the geophysics industry and got involved in local political groups.

Macha joined the Texas Women's Political Caucus and chaired the Harris County chapter. In 1975, she and other members of the group hosted Gloria Steinem on a statewide speaking tour to raise funds for the organization. Macha also participated in the Houston chapter of the National Organization for Women and the Harris County Republican Women's Task Force.

In 1977, Macha served as the secretary to the Texas delegation at the National Women's Conference (NWC) in Houston, Texas, that November. Macha received 845 votes in the balloting for delegates to Houston. She self-identified as a fiscal conservative but supported ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment and reproductive freedom. On the first day of the conference, Macha made headlines when she demanded a public apology from Harris County GOP Chairman Jerry Smith after he called NWC delegates "a gaggle of outcasts, misfits, and rejects." She told reporters, "To attack the convention as a whole is one thing but to personally attack the delegates is unbelievable."

After the conference, Macha remained active in the Republic Party but worried about its rightward turn. Macha maintained a presence in local, state, and national politics even as party lines have shifted. In 1997, the National Women's Political Caucus inducted her into the "Long Haul of Fame" for her years of service to women's political issues. Sharon Macha died February 27, 2024, in Houston. ■

Women demonstrated their support for causes they prioritized through buttons, ribbons, and other ephemera.

Photo by Dorothy Marder, courtesy of the Swarthmore College Peace Collection.



Photo courtesy of Marie Oser obituary.

Marie Oser

*Original Biography
by Qasim Zaman*

Marie Oser was born on July 9, 1938, and grew up in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and Goshen, Indiana. A 1960 graduate of the University of Michigan, she taught history in Ann Arbor before moving to Houston with her husband in 1966.

During her time as a teacher, Oser witnessed instances of

child abuse that led to her political awakening, so she and her husband got involved in the local school district. They cofounded Citizens for Good Schools, which pushed for the desegregation of Houston public schools and improved educational programs. Oser took over the Head Start program and revamped early childhood education in Houston.

In 1973, Oser founded a service organization called Texas Child Care '76 that aimed to improve childcare systems as the country reflected on its policies during the 1976 bicentennial celebration. To achieve this goal, Oser wanted to emphasize the needs of preschool children and strengthen childcare programs. She held forums for parents to provide information on childcare and implemented important standards for preschools within Texas that still stand.

In 1977 Oser attended the National Women's Conference as an elected delegate from Texas after receiving 723 votes. While press coverage focused primarily on controversial planks like abortion, sexual preference, and the Equal Rights Amendment, Oser was concerned with resolutions on

child abuse, childcare, and education. Each of these planks advocated for federal funding and state programs to improve services and offer support for mothers and families.

In an interview with the *Christian Science Monitor*, Oser called the conference "an awakening ... to the importance of the investment we make in our children." Her peers often referred to her as a pioneer in the field of childcare because of her decades of service. ■





Photo courtesy of the Josephine Harris Stewart Papers, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Josephine Stewart

*Original Biography
by Kristan Petrick*

Josephine Stewart was born on June 9, 1924, in Cincinnati, Ohio. After high school, she enrolled at the University of Cincinnati, where she pursued a bachelor's degree in education. In 1945, she enlisted in the Women's Army Corps and worked as an occupational coun-

selor with an interest in group work.

When her service ended in 1946, she decided to pursue graduate studies. Three years later, she graduated from the University of Pittsburgh with a master's degree in social work. Later, in 1960, Stewart got her advanced clinical practice certificate from the University of Pennsylvania.

In 1975, Stewart moved to Houston to become the first social worker at Houston Methodist Hospital. An important facet of her work was to protect the rights of gay Houstonians when they received mental health services. Outside of work, she aligned with feminist organizations as she advocated for equity and health. In 1975, as a member of the Texas chapter of the National Organization for Women, she wrote letters to her state senators in protest of new restrictions imposed on women and in support of Title IX. Socially, she was a member of the Lesbians Over Age Fifty (LOAF) and politically, she joined Houston's Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus.

In 1977, Stewart attended the National Women's Conference as a state delegate representing Texas. She voted with fellow members of the National Organization for Women on resolutions calling for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment and reproductive freedom. She was also in favor of a plank that advocated for a ban on discrimination based on sexual preference. Stewart's main areas of concern were women's safety and equality. As such, she was also interested in planks that pushed for programs for domestic violence and rape survivors.

After the conference, Stewart fought discrimination against gay and lesbian patients by putting forth guidelines for hospitals that created a welcoming atmosphere for everyone. In 1990, Stewart retired from Houston Methodist and passed away from lung cancer later that year on September 26 at age 66. ■



Photo courtesy of Nikki Van Hightower Papers, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries

Nikki Van Hightower

*Original Biography
by Natasha Eades, Jackie Wostrel,
and Jazmeen Skeete*

Nikki Van Hightower was born on August 14, 1939, in Billings, Montana. After graduating high school in Billings, she briefly attended the University of Tulsa, and in 1963, enrolled at Washington University to pursue teaching. During the final stretch of her undergraduate program, Van Hightower transferred to the University of Houston.

She became interested in political science and decided to pursue graduate studies, earning her master's degree in 1968. Van Hightower continued her education at New York University, where she wrote her doctoral dissertation on women in politics.

Van Hightower returned to Texas in 1974 to teach at UH. While there, she was hired as the women's advocate within the local government, serving as a liaison between women's rights groups and city officials. Houston was selected as the site of the National Women's Conference partly because of this unique women's advocate position. However, Van Hightower's position came under siege in March 1977 when city council members threatened to fire her because of her outspoken support of the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion. Houston Mayor Fred Hofheinz saved the position by moving it to his cabinet, and Van Hightower acted as the city liaison during the planning of the NWC.

Van Hightower also served on the Texas Coordinating Committee for the state meeting and helped develop proposed policies for attendees to vote on. During this gathering, she received 778 votes to be a Texas delegate and represented the state at the national convention. In addition to supporting the ERA and reproductive freedom at the NWC, Van Hightower was also concerned with the elimination of gender discrimination and inequality in city employment practices.

Van Hightower returned to teaching after years of being involved in city and state government. She has taught political science at Texas A&M University, Lee College, the University of Texas School of Public Health, and the New York Institute of Technology. Nikki Van Hightower currently lives in College Station, Texas, and continues to advocate for women's rights. **HH**

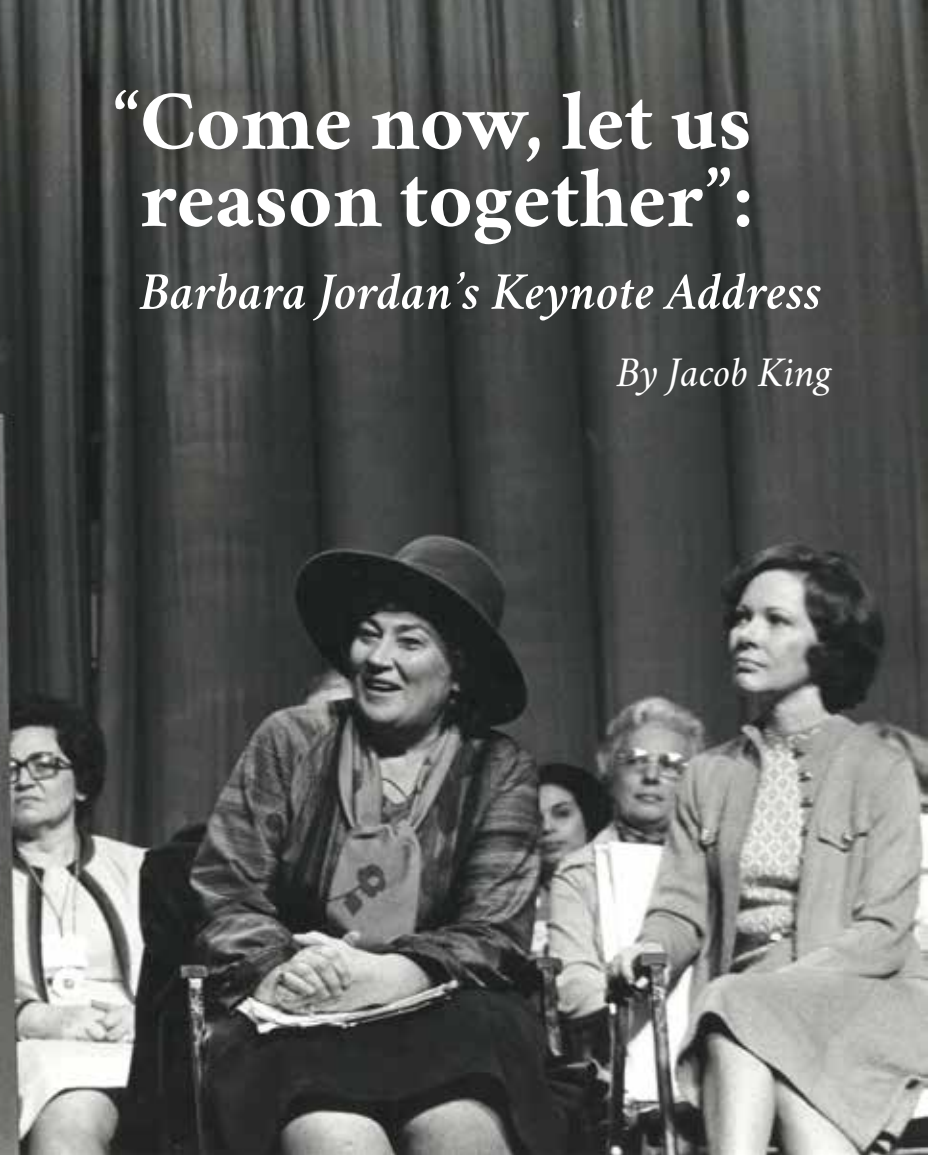


For more stories about other women in the NWC, visit:
www.sharingstories1977.uh.edu

“Come now, let us reason together”:

Barbara Jordan’s Keynote Address

By Jacob King



Congresswoman Barbara Jordan delivers a rousing message at the National Women's Conference in 1977, flanked on the right by Bella Abzug and First Lady Rosalynn Carter.

Photo by Dorothy Marder, courtesy of the Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

On November 19, 1977, in Houston, Texas, U.S. Rep. Barbara Jordan (D-TX) approached the National Women's Conference (NWC) podium. In front of a simple banner bearing the word "WOMAN," Jordan delivered a powerful keynote speech that electrified a crowd of thousands of women who held differing viewpoints. With the onset of political polarization and realignment in the 1970s, unification in America seemed like a distant possibility. Yet, Jordan's speech positioned the conference as an important democratic exercise. She urged women to work together to find common ground and compared the goals of the gathering to stanzas from "America the Beautiful."¹ This promise of compromise and coalition around progressive ideals made Jordan's keynote address an essential beginning for the conference and cemented her status as one of Houston's hometown heroes.

Before speaking at the NWC, Jordan made a name for herself in the 1960s and 1970s as a barrier-breaking and effective politician. Barbara Charline Jordan was born in Houston's Fifth Ward on February 21, 1936, and earned her bachelor's degree at Texas Southern University in 1956.

Following her graduation from Boston University's law school, she returned to practice law in Houston. After unsuccessful bids for the Texas House of Representatives in 1962 and 1964, Jordan was elected to the Texas Senate in 1966, making her the first African American woman ever elected to that office and the first African American senator since the Reconstruction era.² In 1972, she earned a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives and used this position to advocate for civil rights on a national level.

During her years in Congress, Jordan's commanding oratory and her unyielding belief in principles of justice reached a national audience. One of her most renowned



Barbara Jordan, shown here at age 15, grew up in Houston's Fifth Ward where she attended Phillis Wheatley High School.

Photo from the Barbara Jordan Papers, courtesy of Texas Southern University.

speeches came when she served as a member of the House Judiciary Committee during the impeachment of President Richard Nixon. Jordan delivered an address during the televised hearings that used the Constitution and the history of the nation to illustrate the limits of presidential power. She intoned, “My faith in the Constitution is whole; it is complete; it is total. And I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution.” This speech, along with dozens of other addresses on the importance of equality for women and people of color, put Jordan on the national radar as an energetic speaker who could ignite audiences.³

As a member of Congress, Jordan co-sponsored legislation calling for a National Women’s Conference and traveled the country in the summer of 1977 to give speeches in support of the gathering. NWC presiding officer Bella Abzug took note of Jordan’s popularity and invited her to deliver the opening



Barbara Jordan’s 1962 campaign poster implores voters to pay their poll tax to cast a ballot. Although Jordan lost Texas House elections in 1962 and 1964, she was elected to the Texas Senate in 1966, the same year the Supreme Court banned poll taxes in all elections.

Photo from the Barbara Jordan Papers, courtesy of Texas Southern University.

keynote in Houston in August 1977.⁴ By the time of the conference, the political polarization of the 1970s had become apparent in Houston and the country. While delegates and participants prepared for the NWC, anti-ERA and anti-abortion activists also mobilized to put together a counterrally the same weekend. Abzug and other NWC organizers hoped that Jordan’s presence in her hometown, along with her strong and measured words, would unite the crowd.

Barbara Jordan took the podium the morning of Saturday, November 19, during the first plenary sessions to deliver the opening keynote of the NWC. More than an exciting way to start the conference, the speech presented a call to action for women to organize and fight for equal treatment. “This conference is one more effort by women for total recognition and inclusion,” Jordan emphasized. “Its success or failure is our responsibility, and no time must be lost in searching for scapegoats.” The congresswoman believed in the conference’s ability to spark change



Barbara Jordan exchanges greetings with former president Lyndon B. Johnson in 1970 at the University of Texas at Austin. Jordan admired Johnson’s political style and considered him one of her mentors.

Photo from the Barbara Jordan Papers, courtesy of Texas Southern University.



At the 1976 Democratic National Convention, Barbara Jordan became the first Black woman to deliver the keynote at a major party convention. She called on the American people to form a national community to lead the country forward.

Photo by Warren K. Leffler, U.S. News and World Report, courtesy of Library of Congress and Wikimedia Commons.



Jamal Cyrus and Charisse Perlina Weston's artwork The Meditative Space: Barbara Jordan Monument incorporates documents from Jordan's archives at Texas Southern University and the Houston Public Library's African American Houston History Research Center, where the monument is located. The space encourages visitors to think about Jordan's dedication to racial justice and American ideals.

Photo by Alex Barber courtesy of the Houston Mayor's Office of Cultural Affairs. The work is part of the City of Houston's Civic Art Collection.

and pushed for delegates to engage in open dialogue. "Five million dollars from the United States Treasury was appropriated for this conference. If we do nothing positive, constructive, and healing, we will have wasted more than money: we will have negated an opportunity to make a difference," she warned. "Not making a difference is a cost we cannot afford."⁵

Jordan's speech succeeded with its intention to unify the audience for several reasons. First, Jordan used the speech to call for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), but she did not vilify anti-ERA groups. Additionally, she employed symbolic imagery drawn from popular culture to emphasize the importance of the moment. For instance, she declared, "Wonder Woman is not a delegate. The Bionic Woman is not a delegate. Representative Americans are delegates." Jordan used this rhetorical strategy to emphasize the power of everyday Americans to decide the conference's outcome.⁶

Similarly, Jordan evoked the biblical verse from the book of Isaiah, "Come now, let us reason together," to emphasize the strength that could be found in gaining ideas from each other. Her use of scripture stood in contrast to the words of many anti-NWC protestors who used Christian ideas to frame the conference as immoral. Jordan addressed these tensions in her speech. "We should not allow ourselves to be brainwashed by people who predict chaos for us and failure for us," she explained. "Tell them they lie and move on!"⁷

Jordan developed a second theme in her speech: the call for a domestic human rights program. By connecting gender equality with human rights, Jordan conveyed to the audience how the meaning of this conference speaks to a much larger

global struggle. She also positioned the struggle for women's rights as an example of the American value of individual rights. "Women are human; no one disagrees with that," she proclaimed. "When our rights are limited or violated, a domestic human rights effort is required." Jordan's contention that human rights violations go against the American civic ethos echoed her words during the Nixon impeachment and were an important message in the wake of the American Revolution's Bicentennial that occurred a year earlier.⁸

Jordan made a loud call to unify all women, regardless of their differences, in the fight against misogyny. "Delegates to this conference are *à priori*, not of a single mind," she announced. "Of course not. No one person nor no one subgroup can have the right answer." Yet, as a lawmaker who often entered rooms as the only person representing both Black Americans and women, Jordan understood the importance of everyone having a seat at the table.

Thus, Jordan balanced her calls for liberal public policy interventions with celebrations of the diversity of the conference delegates with a resounding message: "This Conference is inclusive; everyone is here."⁹

When Jordan delivered her final words, "What will you reap? What will you sow?" the auditorium erupted into a boisterous standing ovation. On December 5, 1977, Abzug thanked Jordan in a letter, writing, "Your participation as a keynoter contributed to the success of this historic event. I believe we all have a sense of accomplishment and pride in the Houston meeting, and we could not have done it without your active help."¹⁰

The address gripped conference attendees, regardless of political orientation. Delores Etchart, a conservative anti-ERA delegate from Montana stated, "I could listen to Barbara Jordan all day even if I don't agree with everything she says. I especially thought Barbara Jordan condensed in a few words the point of our meeting and our responsibility



A skilled and commanding orator, Jordan captured the attention of the House Judiciary Committee and the nation as she spoke on the Constitution, calling for Richard Nixon's impeachment in 1974.

Photo courtesy of U.S. House of Representatives Photography Office and Wikimedia Commons.



President Gerald R. Ford signs a proclamation on Women's Equality Day 1974. Standing left to right: Representatives Yvonne Brathwaite Burke (D-CA), Barbara Jordan (D-TX), Elizabeth Holtzman (D-NY), Marjorie S. Holt (R-MD), Leonor K. Sullivan (D-MO), Cardiss Collins (D-IL), Corinne C. Boggs (D-LA), Margaret M. Heckler (R-MA), Bella S. Abzug (D-NY), and Shirley Chisholm (D-NY).

Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

as delegates—the right to debate and argue but the need to come to a consensus.” Mary Molina, an attendee from Los Angeles, felt that Jordan’s words exemplified the “hopes, dreams, fears and frustrations portrayed by delegates from every state, from every socioeconomic background, from every minority, and every persuasion, sexual, religious and otherwise.” Even women who did not attend the conference were moved by Jordan’s words and many wrote letters to her office asking for copies of her speeches.¹¹

Jordan’s speech played a significant role in setting the tone of the conference and unifying the diverse delegates throughout the country. Her words struck a chord because of her eloquent public speaking style, effective use of imagery, and her rousing appeal to the everyday American woman. To Susan Ashville of North Carolina, Barbara Jordan was one of many in Houston who used her “powerful voice” to change the lives of American women. “The power there is going to be felt all over this country,” she told her local newspaper, “and the country will be better for it.”¹² **HH**

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Incoming President Jimmy Carter, a strong supporter of equal rights, meets with Barbara Jordan in 1977.

Photo by Dev O'Neill courtesy of the House of Representatives Archives, Barbara Jordan Archives, and Wikimedia Commons.



Participants at the NWC used their crafting skills to create buttons and pins, as well as other graphics, to visually communicate their ideas and beliefs.

Photo courtesy of the Dorothy Marder Papers, Peace Collection, Swarthmore College.

FROM BUTTONS TO BANNERS: VISUAL MESSAGING AT THE NWC

By Mackenzie Vance

As more than 20,000 attendees flocked to the 1977 National Women's Conference (NWC), they did so with excitement and a desire to speak their minds.¹ In a crowd that large, the odds of spending any time at the microphone were slim; yet, the point of the conference was to be heard. So, conference participants did what anyone at a mass gathering would do. They made signs, buttons, and hats that expressed their views in a single phrase or picture. Participants used their skills with a sewing machine, paint, or permanent markers — practices they learned inside the domestic bubble — to break into the political sphere and bring their ideas to life. This visual cacophony of thoughts and ideas tells us just as much about the conference as the spirited debates and fiery speeches on the floor of the Sam Houston Coliseum.

Even before the conference's opening gavel, Houston women took the lead in setting the visual tone for the NWC. Marion Coleman, a local printshop owner who ran House

of Coleman, gained a reputation in the 1970s for producing signs, posters, and other materials in support of local feminist causes. When it came time to design and print programs for the conference, House of Coleman was tapped for the project. Coleman and her team created a glossy 78-page program filled with schedules and event information for attendees alongside historical photographs of suffrage parades from the Smithsonian Institute. NWC presiding officer and peace advocate Bella Abzug became outraged by the program's back cover featuring a 1915 war poster aimed at women reading, "If you want to fight, join the Marines."² She demanded the covers be ripped off, but staff members talked Abzug down, and the delegates received the programs with the back cover intact. Though the process was not always smooth, Coleman left her mark on the conference through her expertise in design.



Before the 1973 Supreme Court decision in Roe v Wade made abortion accessible across the country, many women resorted to self-induced abortions to end a pregnancy. The coat hanger, which was used by some women, symbolized those procedures and the resulting deaths.

Photo courtesy of the Dorothy Marder Papers, Peace Collection, Swarthmore College.

When the conference began on November 18, 1977, women from across the country brought their unique passions and ideals to display in front of television cameras and photographers. By visually representing their beliefs, conference participants sought support and community with likeminded feminists and antifeminists both in Houston and with the national audience watching at home. For some of these women, it was the first time they had expressed their ideas in a group that large. The excitement they felt not only in gathering but in taking a step forward as a movement is reflected in their protest and advocacy materials.

One of the biggest debates of the conference centered on passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). At the time of the conference, the ERA remained three states shy of ratification and a question lingered about whether efforts should continue to push it over the finish line. For some women, putting pressure on states to ratify the ERA was their most important message, and they carried signs with the phrase “ERA YES!” The delegates from Texas even attached an “ERA YES!” sticker to their section marker signs. While this simple slogan was popular, other participants expanded on the idea. One delegate from Maryland, Betty Hamburger, sported a hard hat with the message “Pro God, Pro Family, Pro ERA.”³ In creating and wearing this hat, Hamburger showed a desire to display her support for the ERA and to refute the idea that the ERA and family were antithetical.

Though the majority of NWC attendees backed the ERA, support for the amendment was not universal. Some women feared that the ERA was too radical, and passage would prevent any further progress. Photos of the conference show a number of women wearing ribbons attached to their name badges emblazoned with the word “Majority” to express their anti-ERA sentiment.⁴ By utilizing the word “Majority,” women pushed back against the assumption that all the delegates identified as feminists or favored the ERA. They

also created an environment where those who were skeptical about the amendment could express concern or dissent without being ostracized by supporters.

Another controversial topic at the conference was abortion. With *Roe v. Wade* decided only four years before the conference, the majority of the delegates possessed recent memory of a time when abortion access lacked legal protection. This living memory still haunted many delegates. Photos of the conference show a multitude of small posters bearing the image of a crossed out coat hanger, a visceral image expressing the desire for women to have access to safe abortions rather than resorting to dangerous, homespun procedures. Another photo shows a group of three women in the balcony holding up a large, handwritten banner reading, “If men got pregnant abortion would be sacred.”⁵ There is no doubt that even from the balcony, the entirety of the arena could see the sign, which appears to span roughly twelve feet across a railing. It is easy enough to throw a small poster and few buttons into your suitcase, but these three women took time and effort to bring this message to the convention.

A third divisive topic came in the form of the sexual preference plank that called for legal rights for lesbian women. A photo from the conference shows a woman holding a home-made and perhaps hastily drawn sign expressing her desire to keep gay rights out of the conference planks. The sign — drawn on a poster the size of a standard piece of paper — features a simple image of a door. Under the drawing are the words “Keep ‘em in the Closet.”⁶

Yet, other images reveal strong support for the sexual preference plank. Signs with phrases like “Lesbian Rights, Lesbian Mothers, Lesbian Sisters” drew visibility to the lives of lesbians and their fight to be treated equally as parents, activists, and citizens. In the end, the sexual preference plank passed to an eruption of applause. Gay rights advocate and Texas delegate Pokey Anderson released 1,000 balloons printed with the phrase “We are everywhere.” She



Betty Hamburger, a delegate from Maryland, wears a hard hat proclaiming her belief that one can support both the ERA and the ideals of God and family, although some thought they were mutually exclusive.

Photo courtesy of the Dorothy Marder Papers, Peace Collection, Swarthmore College.



A sign proclaims abortion would be "sacred" if men could get pregnant, highlighting the gender discrepancies in how laws were applied to women and their bodies compared to men.

Photo courtesy of National Archives and Record Administration.



Although many women at the NWC supported the Equal Rights Amendment, others did not. Women who opposed the ERA wore ribbons with the word "Majority" on them to argue that not all women favored the amendment.

Photo courtesy of Janice Rubin.

later described the scene as "pandemonium." "Women were crying," she recalled. "Women were dancing on chairs."⁷ This outburst of celebration at the end of three days of tireless work solidified the visibility of lesbians in the women's rights movement.

As demonstrated by the balloons, not all the objects brought for display to the conference were obvious choices like banners, posters, or hats. Some of the delegates were more creative. One of the labels often used to mark feminists of this period was "bra burner," a myth that came about when a newspaper article on the 1968 Miss America protest labeled the event as a "bra burning" for an attention-grabbing headline. Organizers of the protest affirmed no bras were burned, but it was too late. The title stuck. Two conference delegates wanted to erase this misinformation, so they came to the conference ready to correct the record. During discussion of the Equal Rights Amendment, they held up bras with the phrase "We Didn't Burn Them" written on them.⁸ Unfortunately, these creative and compelling signs did not do much to dispel the myth of the bra burners and the label still exists today, but this photographic evidence speaks to their desire to clear the record.

The University of Houston archive holds a piece of the NWC's handmade history. The archive contains two home-made aprons, which feature the words "Houston Texas" inside the Venus symbol representing women and the phrase "Feminist Capitol of the World" below it.⁹ On one apron, the letters are in a dark orange and the other in a vibrant red, perhaps as a nod to the school colors of the University of Texas and the University of Houston. It appears the creators deployed a personal sewing machine to stitch the body of the canvas aprons and used fabric markers and ribbon to accessorize them. All of the materials for these aprons could have been purchased at any local sewing store. Unfortunately, the identities of the aprons' creators are unknown, but they had some working knowledge of Texas lore, appeared happy to see feminism in Texas, and wanted to signal its success in the state to the rest of the country.

This sampling of items represents just a fraction of the materials brought into the conference during those four days. While a wealth of information is stored in the visual archive, the pieces examined here demonstrate that women in the convention hall were determined to be heard in whatever form they could muster. Anyone who has ever practiced handy crafts like sewing will tell you that it is a labor of love. By making these items, women expressed their deeply held positions on the issues up for discussion in Houston. Attendees who saw and read these signs, buttons, and apparel took those messages back with them as they continued their activism in their own homes and communities. **HH**

Mackenzie Vance is an MA student studying public history at the University of Houston. She is passionate about using photographs and images as a tool to study the past.

Women used many different items to convey their messages and stories, including textiles. This apron celebrated Houston's success as the convention host and its role in the feminist movement.

Photo courtesy of Houston History.



After much debate, conference delegates passed a plank calling for an end to discrimination based on sexual orientation and laws that prohibited same-sex relationships.

Photo courtesy of the Dorothy Marder Papers, Peace Collection, Swarthmore College.



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. Hilda 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	702
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.

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

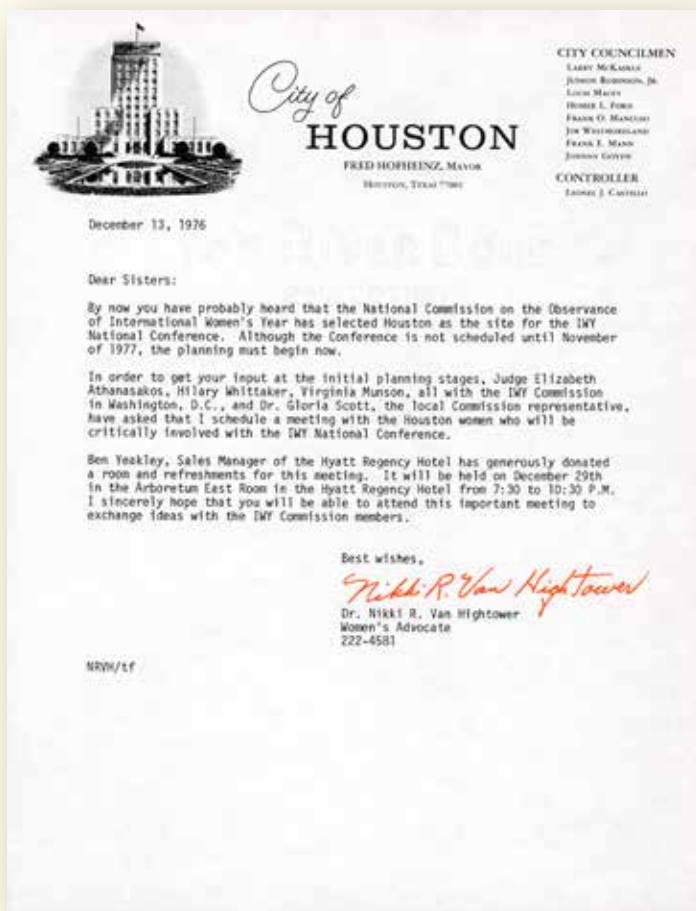
"Although the Conference is not scheduled until November of 1977, the planning must begin now," she wrote, inviting local stakeholders to meet with the IWY Commission members to collaborate on the initial planning phase.⁵ Van Hightower's letter highlights the conference's early coordination efforts and 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.

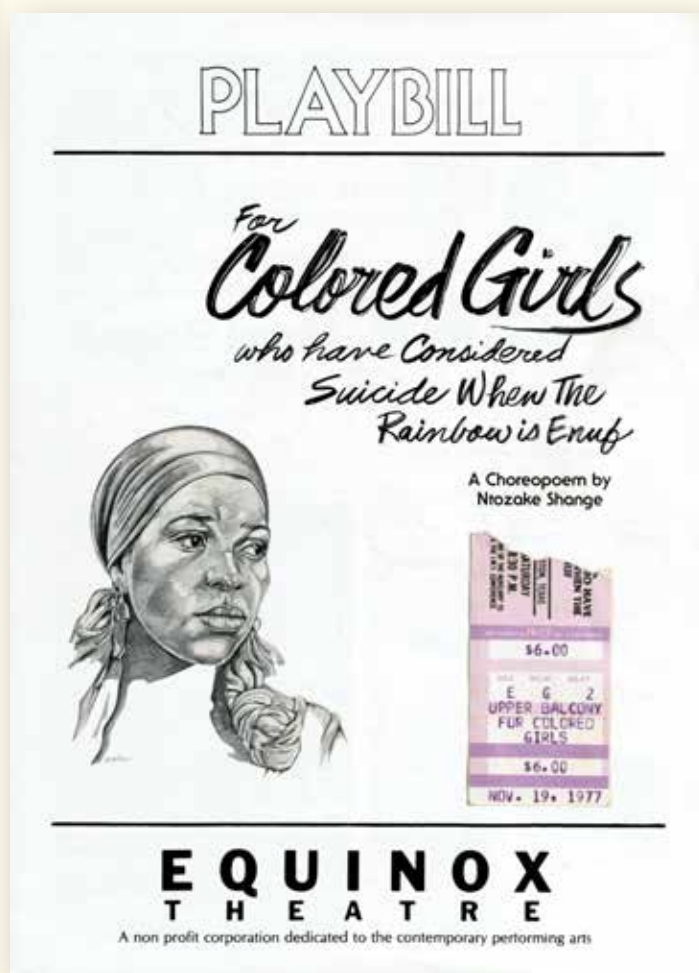
Not all women felt represented at the NWC, however. A self-described "pro-family" faction comprised of women

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

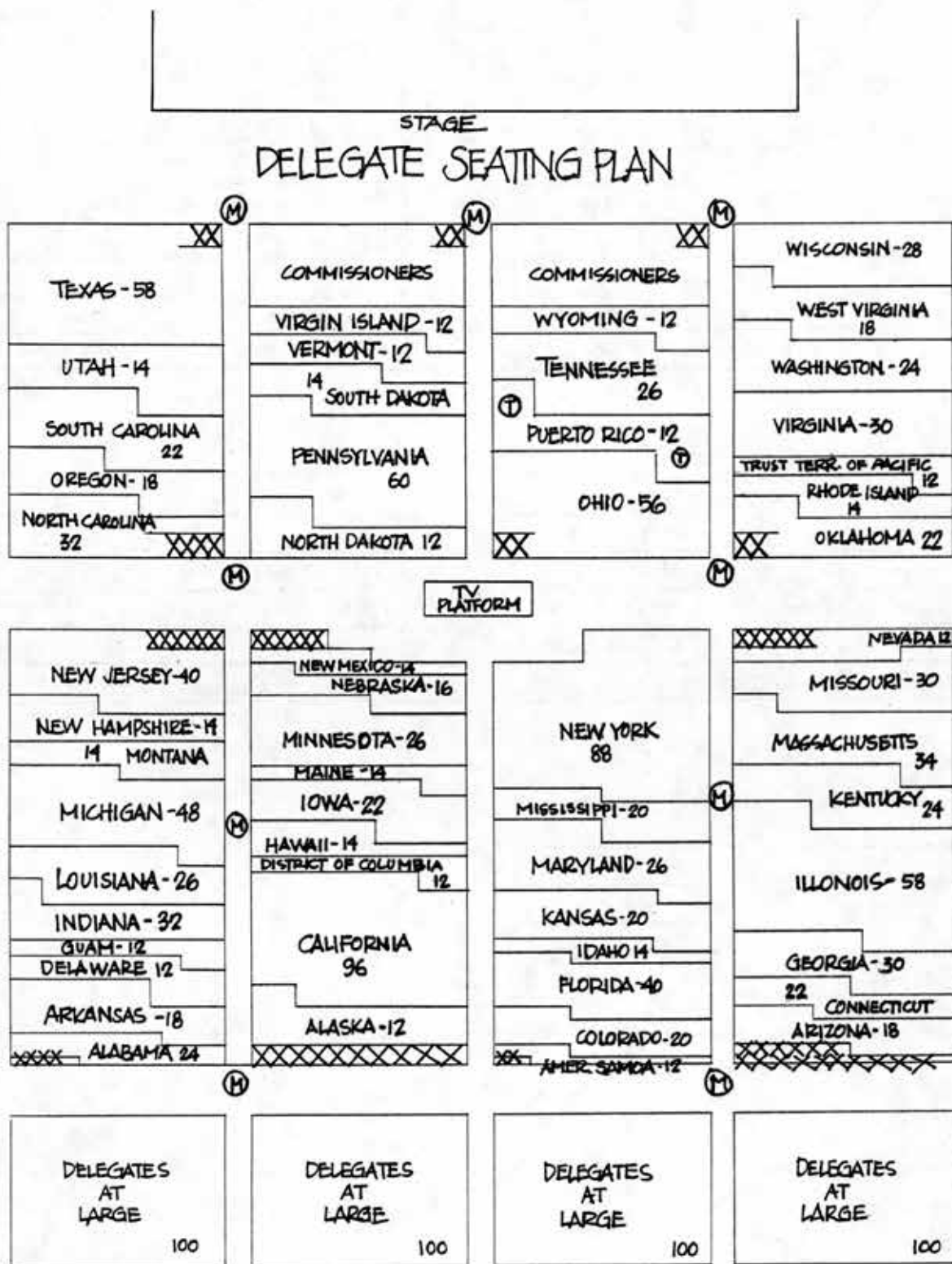
"Bella Abzug has said the Houston IWY meeting will be history-making. Let's be a part of history!" wrote Carolyn Anderson in an October 1977 issue of *The American Party*,¹⁰ calling on readers to join a counter-rally and pass resolutions of their own.

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..



X- DENOTES SEAT FOR MICROPHONE MONITORS, TELLERS, CREDENTIALS MONITOR, SECURITY
 (M)- DENOTES MICROPHONE
 (T)- DENOTES TRANSLATOR SEAT



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

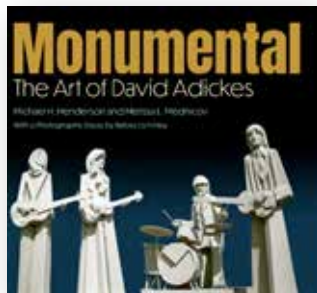
Not every resolution proposed at the NWC made it into the National Plan of Action. Marilyn Kay Patterson, a delegate from New Hampshire, advocated for the inclusion of a mental health resolution. Her collection not only contains her speech proposing the resolution but also includes a follow-up letter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

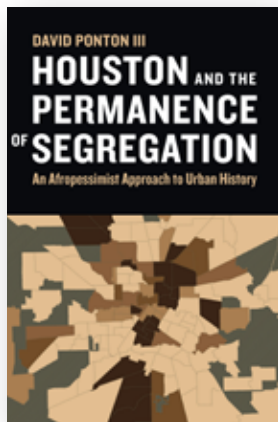
Looking forward, UH Special Collections aims to increase the accessibility and awareness of NWC materials through digitization initiatives, online resource guides, and curated exhibits. To view items in the current collection, go to <https://digitalcollections.lib.uh.edu/>.

BOOKS



Monumental: The Art of David Adickes by Michael Henderson and Melissa Mednicov with contributions by Rebecca Finley and foreword by Ronald E. Shields (Texas A&M Press, 2025). *Monumental* is the first thorough examination of David Adickes's work, despite his

having created many beloved and iconic works of art. From the sixty-seven-foot-tall statue of Sam Houston that stands on I-45 outside Huntsville, Texas, to the *Virtuoso*, *The Beatles*, and statues of the U.S. Presidents overlooking a freeway coming into downtown, Adickes's artistic and cultural contributions have become symbols of Houston. *Monumental* looks at Adickes's early life, his artistic journey, and the inevitable challenges faced when creating public art. Henderson chairs the Department of Art and Mednicov is an associate professor of art history at Sam Houston State University.



Houston and the Permanence of Segregation: An Afropessimist Approach to Urban History by David Ponton III (University of Texas Press, 2024). Ponton contends that the 1950s U.S. Supreme Court decisions that appeared to overturn Jim Crow instead ushered in "decades of capture" that constrained people "by gender and race, by faith in the law, by antiblack violence, and even by the narrative structures of conventional histories."

Combining Black studies and Afropessimism with urban history, Ponton explores how Black Houstonians came to view injustice as a sign of progress. Although Houston is among the nation's most diverse cities, it remains segregated and Ponton's study demonstrates why that occurred. David Ponton III is an assistant professor in the School of Interdisciplinary Global Studies at the University of South Florida.

Why Willie Mae Thornton Matters by Lynnée Denise (University of Texas Press, 2023). Many Houstonians know Willie Mae "Big Momma" Thornton for her bluesy recording of "Hound Dog" for Houston's Peacock Records. But Denise looks at Thornton's difficult life through a Black, queer, feminist lens to see an innovative artist with a lengthy career. The essays connect Thornton's performances in Sammy Green's Hot Harlem Revue to the vocals that made "Hound



Dog" a hit amidst racism in the recording industry. The book discusses Thornton's choice to wear men's suits as "a sly, Little Richard-like queering of the Chitlin Circuit" and the author's choice to reclaim Thornton's given name, Willie Mae, over "Big Mama" – a nickname given to her by a white man. Denise is an artist, writer, DJ, doctoral student, and professor.

ANNOUNCEMENTS



Ryan Banda receives the Harris County Historical Society Award for Excellence from Charles Fitch. Seated at left is Ryan's mentor, Vince Lee.

The 2024 Harris County Historical Society Award for Excellence in public history work was presented to Ryan Banda for her exhibit, *Marvin's Angels: A Beacon of Hope in Houston and Beyond*. To mark its centennial in 2023, the Harris County Historical Society created an endowment at the University of Houston that will fund a \$1,500 scholarship annually to a student demonstrating excellence in creating a public history project about Harris County. UH archivist Vince Lee mentored Ryan as she developed an exhibit about the legacy and humanitarian efforts of KTRK-TV 13 news reporter Marvin Zindler. Marvin's Angels provided free aid and specialized services to those in need locally and globally.



The Houston Fire Museum recently completed a four-year, \$5.7 million renovation and reopened to the public. Originally built in 1899 when fire vehicles were horse-drawn, “Old 7’s” remained active until 1969. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, is a Recorded Texas Landmark, and received a Good Brick Award from Preservation Houston for the restoration.



Summer Internship in Public History and Digital Humanities trained undergraduate students in a ten-week collaboration with the UH Center for Public History (CPH) and the Digital Humanities Core Facility with financial support provided by the Hewlett Packard Enterprise Data Science Institute, UH Libraries, and the Cougar Initiative to Engage. Through real-world projects, community discussions, skills workshops, and guest speakers, SIPHDH interns learned how their humanities skills in research, analysis, and building arguments can be enhanced and translated into new spaces for new audiences through modern technologies and digital methodologies. Interns also learned to consider the people and context behind data and design, and how to engage responsibly and ethically in building, visualizing, and communicating arguments to diverse peoples and communities. Projects included SYRIOS, Sharing Stories from 1977, *Houston History* magazine, the Morales Family Collection, Mapping Multicultural Houston, and the 1771 Project.



Houston History interns, left to right with editor Debbie Harwell: Braden Dodson, Valeria Gonzalez, Winnie Wong, Cindy Rivas Alfaro, and Cameron Wright.



Public Historians at Work Season Three is now available from the Center for Public History (CPH). The podcast is one way CPH seeks to ignite an understanding of our diverse pasts by collaborating with and training historically minded students, practitioners,

and the public through community-driven programming and scholarship. Topics this season include the US Latino Digital Humanities Center, the Algorithms and Power System Architecture project, Curating Latino cARTographs, Data Science and UX in the SYRIOS project, as well as others on immigrant experiences.

Visit <https://publichistoriansatwork.buzzsprout.com/>.

IN MEMORIAM

Tanya Debose, a tireless activist, organizer, and advocate for preserving African American history and community, passed in January 2024. Born in Houston, Tanya grew up in Northeast Houston and graduated from Smiley High School and Lamar University.

Her great-grandparents were among the early founders of Independence Heights, where she grew up attending church services and visiting key spots in the neighborhood. She remained connected to the community, most recently serving as executive director of the Independence Heights Redevelopment Council. Tanya fought against further encroachment on the community by Texas Department of Transportation for the I-45 expansion and founded the Preserving Communities of Color Initiative to preserve these communities by transforming them into inclusive communities and cultural destinations. She organized a consortium of Texas heritage councils to protect African American history and culture, the local Black Towns Matter movement, and the Texas Creole Trail marking migration from Louisiana into East Texas and Houston.

Tanya was a beacon in Houston’s historical community, preserving the past and striving to prevent future injustice, and she will be sorely missed. We send our deepest sympathies to her family and friends.



Why Houston? How the National Women's Conference Came to the Bayou City

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