

WEST HARRIS COUNTY, TEXAS BRANCH AAUW HISTORY

Born on the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of our nation, 1976, to fireworks and parades, to the singing of "God Bless America" and "America the Beautiful", West Harris County Branch came into being, forty-two members strong.

Gerry Carlton, thinking that many women did not want to drive long distances to meetings, wanted to found a branch of American Association of University Women in the west Houston community. So AAUW West Harris County Branch was chartered, with Arlene Baker as the first president.

The first project of the fledgling branch was a Fourth of July parade. Members their husbands and children spent days decorating a float, then rode or walked into the parade with others in the local community. Later that afternoon, members sold plants and patriotic t-shirts at a July Fourth fair to start the branch treasury.

Soon the new branch focused on matters more urgent to the AAUW agenda. It was the time of the Equal Rights Amendment. Branch members coordinated their efforts to lobby legislators, to educate the community through the media and meetings and to raise funds. Although the ERA was defeated, the new branch bonded into a strong, viable group.

Those early years were busy ones. As part of the Association of African Educators program, the branch hosted visiting teachers from Cameroon and Mauritius. The women visited several cities across the United States and in Houston they toured public schools, college, and local industries. One of the women was a vegetarian (at a time when that was somewhat unusual in the U.S.) and branch members cooked meals for her so that she could feel comfortable.

Another branch activity during those years was involvement with the intensive English Students Program at the University of Houston. Students came to Houston from all over the world to learn English in order to gain admission to American universities. Over a period of several years, branch members invited them into their homes, provided information, support and mentoring as needed, and hosted a group picnic each summer where the students and branch members had the opportunity to meet and interact.

In 1978 the branch launched what developed into a three-year study of undocumented aliens in the United States. The group met monthly, finally adopting a position paper that was presented to the 1981 Texas Division Convention and subsequently to the Association. Although the Association did not adopt it at that time, years later they did address the issue and took a position regarding undocumented aliens.

In 1981 and 1982 the branch held a Career Night at a local high school. Individuals in careers from engineering to architecture to classical music met with both female and male students to discuss prerequisites for their professions. This was a precursor to the Expanding Your Horizons Conference that began a decade later.

From 1991 to 1994, as part of the Spring Branch Independent School District's Partners in Education, the branch participated in a program geared to keeping unwed mothers from dropping out of school. Branch members tutored, helped the young mothers learn study skills, and mentored individual girls.

Spearheaded by Barbara Hopkins, branch president, and energized and directed by Susan Boone, an Education Foundation Eleanor Roosevelt grant recipient, the branch sponsored its first Expanding Your Horizons (EYH) in 1993. EYH was a one-day conference to introduce middle school girls to careers in math, science and technology through a series of hands-on workshops led by women professionals. Each year a different branch member chaired the Steering Committee that organized and conducted the EYH Conference. Workshops for teachers, parents and counselors were also included. Attendance the year was 200. Twenty-two years later, the EYH conference easily reached capacity of 400 middle girls. EYH celebrated its final conference in 2019. In those 27 years, many organized are offering opportunities for girls to experience hands-on STEM workshops. Efforts to continue support for gender equity in education and the workforce, in February 2020, the branch began working with Michele G. Taylor, Ed.D., Assistant Dean of the Graduate School of Texas Southern University, presented the Start Smart program to TSU students.

Throughout the years, West Harris County Branch members have participated in a variety of study groups. The original book group has expanded into six groups; annually there are several Great Decisions discussion groups. Special interest groups include cultural arts, Vicarious Voyagers, Girls Night Out, birding, film appreciation, genealogy, two gourmet dining groups, Garden Divas, and several bridge groups. Over the years branch groups have studied a variety of topics including women's issues, managing resources for tomorrow, families facing change, taking hold of technology, and women's networking.

During its entire history, West Harris County Branch has supported and has actively raised funds for the Education Foundation and the Legal Advocacy fund. Annually, through the Baker-Telfer Scholarship Award, three outstanding women high school graduates entering the fields of math or science are awarded scholarship toward their college tuition.

Today West Harris County Branch has approximately 258 members and is still growing.