



North Harris County Branch
American Association of University Women

BRANCH HERSTORY

YEARS AFTER AAUW'S FOUNDING IN 1881 AND ITS BEGINNINGS IN TEXAS IN 1908 . . .

new branches of AAUW continue to open doors for women across the country and, indeed, throughout the world. One such scenario took place in Southeast Texas in the 1970s as oil industry employees converged on booming Houston. Homes sprang up in the attractive wooded lands north of the city and, among the new residents, educated women looked for a chance to make a difference in the development of the new suburban area. Thus was chartered in March of 1974, the North Harris County Branch of the American Association of University Women.

A combination of the absence of established institutions in the unincorporated area and the "can do" pioneering spirit that pervaded the women's group since its inception gave rise to the North Harris County branch AAUW playing a key role in the creation of a much-needed public library for the FM 1960 neighborhood. Members continued to nurture the Cypress Creek Library when they organized Friends of the Library and awarded the library grants generated by its annual Tour of Homes. Another longtime recipient of AAUW support has been the unique Mercer Arboretum that the branch helped through its formative years. The property has grown from a couple's creek-side garden acreage into an important regional horticultural center.

Close to its heart in recent years has been NHC AAUW's participation in the "Expanding Your Horizons" workshop which offers 7th and 8th grade girls a look at career opportunities in math and science, an antidote for any "short-changing" in their backgrounds. It is natural, then, that branch members also reach out to post-high school job-seeking women by collecting business clothes so they can "Dress For Success." Recent years also have seen the branch assist the Legal Advocacy Fund through auctions and chain store Share Cards.

North Harris County AAUW's hugely successful Holiday Tour of Homes has been for thirty years the source of substantial funds supporting both the Association's Educational Foundation and also the community through grants facilitating local educational and cultural projects. Community grants have encouraged women and girls pursuing non-traditional careers, and tour moneys have paid schooling expenses for local women re-entering the job market. Again and again, tour-generated grants have gone toward "Dating with Respect," the highly-acclaimed program for building girls' self esteem. Literacy programs have been bolstered with tour proceeds, as have the efforts of fledgling choral and instrumental groups and the Cypress Creek Performing Arts Center.

The Holiday Tour of Homes is a story in itself - the single fund-raiser each year, brilliantly organized by selfless AAUW volunteers and routinely bringing in funds in five figures, and climbing. A recently implemented campaign of inviting sponsoring contributions has markedly enhanced tour proceeds. One distinguished member, Virginia Lyon, deserves special mention for her longtime leadership in the holiday tour, her involvement at Mercer Arboretum, and in the

early 1980s, her guiding the branch into issues related to women returning to the work force. After her term as branch president she went on to become Texas AAUW State Educational Foundation Vice President and then served as a member of AAUW's EF Board of Directors. In 2004 the branch completed its Association EF goal of endowing the \$100,000 Virginia R. Lyon American Fellowship Fund, named in her honor.

Looking back again at NHC AAUW's early years -- by 1976 members had perceived that their north-of-Houston suburban culture was actually superimposed on a rural Texas pioneer community which deserved to be recognized in writing, in words that would also provide roots for the influx of newcomers to the area. Thus began the branch's American Bicentennial project, the researching and writing of The Heritage of North Harris County. The book became a best seller in the area, and soon AAUW produced a companion slide show that was shown for decades at schools and organizations. Never intended to produce profits, the modestly priced paperback paid off four successive printings and went on to fund needs at local historical museums.

Interest groups have always been hubs of activity at North Harris County AAUW. A veritable smorgasbord of topics have appeared, and usually endured, as offerings through the years: Daytime and Prime Time Literature (constant favorites), Travelmania, Original Gourmet, Bridge, Antiques & Decorative Arts, Computerniks, Investment and Managing Resources, Horticulture, Go and See excursions and Heritage local history trips, plus a perennial "Great Decisions" series. Additionally, several members participate actively in Interbranch events, and a significant number attend State, Regional, and Association conventions and workshops.

The past decade has placed a number of feathers in NHC AAUW's cap. Repeatedly, the branch took top honors in the former Association Five Star and Texas Lone Star recognition programs, and consistently it is lauded as a top contributor to the Educational Foundation. For its Women Tech-Women in Technology Expo with North Harris College, the branch was in 2002 named a Gold Winner in the Association's new 21st Century Recognition Program. Platinum status was earned in both 2003 and 2004 for the North Harris County Community Action Grant Program. The branch newsletter, the "Nutshell," and its state-supported web page have won state honors, and AAUW publicity increasingly appears in subdivision newsletters and on prominent pages in area newspapers.

Even more satisfying to branch members is the fact that monthly NHC AAUW programs continue to enlighten, entertain, and to address the Association's mission. Education, local political and cultural issues, music and literature, health concerns, Texas history, immigration problems - all inspire the members while encouraging new membership. Social gatherings like the annual Membership Brunch - open to all - and the branch 30th Anniversary Celebration add a pleasant balance to branch life. Truly, if the "State of the Branch" were to be expressed succinctly, one might simply say, "The North Harris County Branch of the American Association of University is hale and hearty: well over 100 members strong, solvent, and with its heart in the right place. It is looking forward to many, many more active years in the Association."

Happy 100th Birthday, Texas State AAUW!