

From the Beginning: Head Start Leadership in Midland, Texas, in 1965

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As the director of the first Head Start program in Midland, Texas, Hazel Smith provided leadership for a liberal Democratic initiative in education in a conservative Republican setting. With an extensive and varied background in education, Mrs. Smith planned and implemented the first Head Start program in Midland in the summer of 1965. Sponsored by a community organization (the Children's Education League) and held in a local elementary school, the first Head Start program served 128 children in a racially integrated program, even though the local schools were still segregated and would remain so until court-ordered bussing in 1968. From an interview with Mrs. Smith, now 90 years old, and newspaper accounts from 1965, a picture of the ground-breaking program emerges as one that, in spite of obstacles, was very successful.

In Dallas, Maria Elena Martinez, a young Mexican American woman early in her career as a teacher at a Catholic school, was a teacher in a Head Start program that served primarily African American students from housing projects. Ms. Martinez went on to be active in the Raza Unida political party and a pioneer in bilingual education in Texas. Far removed from the economic prosperity of Midland and Dallas, Brooks County, Texas, also had a Head Start program in the 1960s. One child, Elsa Hinojosa, who attended the second year of the program in 1966, went on to a successful academic career at the University of Texas and is now a high school principal. She credits Head Start with her ambition to be a teacher and with allowing her to take advantage of the opportunities education provided her.

With Head Start now well established as an valuable component of the early childhood education for children from poverty, looking at its beginning forty years ago as well individuals who were products of the program demonstrates the value of sound leadership as an element of defining both immediate and long-term success.

Background of Project Head Start

In late 1964, President Lyndon Johnson and his antipoverty czar Sargent Shriver convened a committee of academics and civil rights activists to plan an intensive program for low-income pre-school aged children to be part of their War on Poverty. The inspiration for the program that was created and later named "Head Start" is the source of some disagreement among historians. Shriver noted that, in the course of his work with the Kennedy family philanthropy for the mentally retarded, he learned of Susan Gray's Early Training Project in Tennessee for retarded children from poverty that had shown good results. Edward Zigler, member of the committee that

created Head Start and later Director of the Office of Child Development under President Nixon, mentioned a Ford Foundation sponsored ten-week program for four year olds in New Haven, Connecticut, that served as a model for the program (Zigler 1992, 5-9). Many Texans, however, believe that Head Start was inspired by the success of the Little Schools of 400, a 1950s project of the League of Latin American Citizens that provided intensive English instruction for Spanish-dominant children the summer before they started to first grade (before the state-supported kindergartens existed) (Kreneck).

Whatever the inspiration, Project Head Start was off to a quick start after the initial committee formation in late 1964. When the committee began its work, the primary objective of the program was early academic enrichment, but Zigler insisted that more was needed: parental support and a health component (Zigler 1979, xxiv). That the program was conceived, developed, and implemented within matter of months seems almost impossible, but most observers believe that the decision to move ahead so quickly was purely political. During the planning stages, Shriver asked Jerome Bruner how many children he thought they could successfully service during the first summer. Bruner said that it would be "extraordinary" if they could serve as many as 2500 (Zigler 1992, 21-23). The program opened the first summer with 2500 projects and 530,000 children, at a cost of \$112 million (Zigler 1979, 69). Shriver invited First Lady Bird Johnson to be the honorary chairperson of Project Head Start, which implemented eight-week summer programs designed to help break the cycle of poverty by providing services to meet the emotional, social, health, nutritional, and psychological needs of preschool children of low-income families. Reviewing the summer's accomplishments in a Rose Garden speech in August of 1965, President Johnson observed, "This summer some hope entered the lives of more than 500,000 children, and those half million youngsters need that hope the most. Before this summer, they were on the road to despair. . .but today. . .these children are now ready to take their places beside their more fortunate classmates in regular school" (Zigler 1992, 54).

In the years since its inception forty years ago, Head Start seems to have led a "charmed life," surviving political and economic changes that have threatened most federal programs designed to improve social conditions for people living in poverty. Zigler, who served on the initial committee and later oversaw the administration of the program under Nixon, is often identified as the "father" of Head Start. Zigler believes that the most debated issue surrounding the program: "Is it worth it?" is a hard question to answer

objectively. The Westinghouse Report, published in 1969, concluded that Head Start had no discernible cognitive effect on children and gave ammunition to opponents of Head Start who wanted to repeal the legislation that created it (Kagan 2002, 548). Since the Nixon years, however, there has not been a significant threat to the continuation of the Head Start program, although funding levels have varied with the administration in power. The dual purpose that surrounded the conceptualization of Head Start has ultimately led to its continued success: academic preparation combined with civil rights or societal improvement (along with its strong parental involvement component) have put Head Start in the position of providing a program that fits into a variety of political agendas. Head Start continues to be locally administered by community-based non-profit organizations and school systems.

Leadership for the 1960s

When the *New York Times* published an article last fall about the use of standardized testing for Head Start children (Reimer 2003), the location they cited as an example was the program in Midland, Texas. With the Midland school district now a “minority majority” district, that they would sponsor a Head Start program is no surprise. Forty years ago, however, when Head Start began, the situation was very different in Midland for minority children from poor families than it is today.

In 1964, when Head Start legislation was authorized through the Economic Opportunity Act, Midland was on the down side of the oil boom of the 1950s that had resulted in the population virtually tripling during the decade (21,713 in 1950; 62,625 in 1960). People had moved to Midland from all over the nation to reap the financial benefits of the Permian Basin oil industry that had begun with the discovery of “Santa Rita # 1” in 1923 and became firmly established with the expansion of oil and gas exploration after World War II. As thousands of men, including former President George Bush, moved their families from other parts of the nation to Midland, not only did housing become scarce and schools crowded, the political climate of Midland was changed by the influx of people with varied backgrounds and experiences. Unlike most of Texas in the 1960s, Midland County was strongly Republican, having voted for the Republican candidate for president in every election since 1952 (a tradition that continues into the 21st century). When native Texan Lyndon Johnson swept the rest of the nation in a landslide victory in the 1964 presidential election, Midland supported Goldwater. It is likely that many Midlanders did not see the need for the War on Poverty and Great Society programs that Johnson proposed. In fact, schools in Midland were still segregated, with separate schools for African

American children, and would remain so until the intervention of a federal judge in 1968.

Like most of the other Head Start programs nationwide that began in the summer of 1965, the Midland Head Start program was not sponsored by the public schools but by a civic organization. In Midland, the Children’s Education League was formed in early 1965, presumably for the purpose of applying for a grant to operate the summer program for pre-school aged children of “underprivileged families” (the politically correct terminology of time). Led in 1965 by Mrs. Tom McCurdy, the Children’s Education League drew ideological and possibly financial support from the local Catholic Church for the grant application. Since all Head Start grantees were required to obtain at least twenty percent of their operating cost from “in-kind” contributions, the fact that the program was housed in a Midland ISD elementary school building perhaps represents the district’s contribution to the program.

In the spring of 1965, when one Midland ISD elementary school principal heard about the summer program being planned, he recommended the elementary supervisor currently serving his campus and three others on the south side of Midland to be the first director of the Head Start program in Midland, Hazel Griffin Smith. At that time 51 years old with more than twenty years of teaching experience, Mrs. Smith had taught children of all ages and all backgrounds. After graduating from high school at 16 during the Depression, she attended John Tarleton Agricultural College (now Tarleton State University) in Stephenville for two years before beginning her teaching career in a small country town in central Texas. Before the decade ended, she would attend and earn a degree from Texas State College for Women (now Texas Women’s University) in Denton, teach several years, and meet her future husband, fellow teacher Woodrow Smith. As most women of the time, Mrs. Smith left teaching when she married in 1940 and moved with her husband to far east Texas where he worked during the war for Phillips Petroleum Company. During her ten years in the piney woods area of Texas, Mrs. Smith would return to teaching at McLeod, where her husband would later be superintendent. In 1951, the Smiths returned to west Texas, eventually moving to Midland in 1955, attracted by what were then the highest teacher’s salaries in Texas and greater opportunities for their family than small towns could offer.

In both 1955 and 1957, Hazel Smith was a second grade teacher on the original faculty of a newly built elementary school in Midland—first, Jane Long Elementary, on what was then Midland’s far west side; then, Fannin Elementary, in the upper middle class “new” area of Midland where George and Barbara Bush lived until they moved to Houston in 1959. After spending a few years teaching remedial reading at Midland High School, Mrs. Smith became

an elementary supervisor in 1961. Because she worked at the schools that served some of Midland's poorest children, Mrs. Smith was a good choice to be Head Start's first director.

Assisted by eight teachers (seven white women and one African American woman) and many volunteers (primarily African American women), Hazel Smith planned and implemented the first Head Start Program in Midland, held at David Crockett Elementary School. The program served 128 students, eight more than the initial quota. Although Midland schools were still segregated at the time, the children who attended the first Head Start program represented the population of Midland at the time: white, Hispanic, and African American. While the total budget for the program was \$18,010, the grant from the federal government was \$14,990. Teachers were paid \$120 per week for the eight-week program (June 14 through August 6), with Mrs. Smith making \$140 per week.

In an interview with the local newspaper after the program began, Mrs. Smith reported that the Head Start teachers "are well pleased with results they have obtained thus far and feel they have achieved most of their initial objectives." She reported that their average attendance was 111 students, with many of the children having perfect attendance. She further commented about the children, "The first few days we could detect a feeling of fear in their faces, but after a while, they were anxious to come. We think we have developed a curiosity in the students."

While the summer program was in session, two evaluators identified as representing the University of Texas conducted a site visit and commented that the program compared "very favorably" with others in the state. The evaluators, Richard Flores and Mrs. David Hisbrook, were both employees of the Edgewood School District in San Antonio during the regular school year. Flores pointed out that the Midland program "seems to be one of the best organized" of those he had observed and had more volunteers than most of the programs he and Mrs. Hisbrook had visited.

In an interview prior to the beginning of the program, Mrs. Smith noted that the greatest need of the program was for "volunteer drivers to transport to children." She reported that a bus had initially been obtained on loan from a church, but that the plans had not worked out. That transportation would potentially be a barrier to minority students' participation in school programs in Midland is certainly ironic in light of the court-ordered desegregation that would begin in 1968 and mandate cross-town bussing of almost all school children for more than a decade. As it turned out, however, the Midland school district stepped in and provided the needed transportation for the children to attend the program.

From the perspective of the twenty-first century, Hazel Smith, now 90 years old, remembers

her work with Head Start as among her most memorable accomplishments as a teacher. Not only was she able to touch the lives of individual children; she was also part of the changing history of American education. For the children in Midland who attended, Head Start provided their first desegregated educational experience and demonstrated that children and adults of different races and cultures could work together successfully. Mrs. Smith believes that the adults who volunteered for the program benefited in some ways as much as the children, with their self-esteem enhanced by identification with the program in ways that likely changed not only their futures but those of their families.

Leadership in Education and Politics

More than three hundred miles east of Midland, a young Mexican American woman, a recent graduate of North Texas State University and a teacher at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic school in Dallas, was selected to be a teacher in the parish's Head Start program in 1965. Maria Elena Martinez had grown up in the Dallas area, on her family's farm in Collin County, near the small town of Wylie. Maria Elena's father had bought the farm with his VA benefits after World War II and hoped to make a living from it, but soon found that he had to have another job to support his growing family. While her father worked in construction, Maria Elena, her mother, and her five siblings worked in the fields to keep the farm going.

Maria Elena remembers her first school experience as a traumatic one. Although her family's home was closer to the school in Wylie, she rode the bus ten miles to attend school in Garland. She recalls that she was the only one in her first grade class that spoke no English, since only Spanish was spoken in her home. She says that her entire first grade year seemed to her like a movie, and she only an observer of the activities, since she understood little of what was said. She doesn't recall the teacher's name or any of the students from that year. Her most vivid memory of the year is a painful one. She had worn the new coat her mother had made for her to school and left it on the playground. Later that day, someone came to her classroom to inquire if anyone knew to whom the coat belonged. She still recalls being frozen, unable to speak and claim her prized coat and being devastated as the person left the room, taking her coat away. She remembers crying that night as she told her mother what had happened.

The next year, school improved for Maria Elena. Her parents were able to transfer her to Wylie, so she attended school closer to home. Her sister Josefina, a year younger, also started to school, and the sisters were in first grade together. She remembers having a kind and loving teacher, Laura Bell Smith, who knew her family and encouraged her. Throughout the remainder of her school career, spent

at Wylie except for a few years at a Catholic school in Garland, Maria Elena (now called Mary Helen) was a successful and popular student, involved in many school activities, even though her family was the only Mexican American family in the school. She graduated in 1961 as salutatorian of her class. Maria Elena remembers that teachers at her high school encouraged her and others in her graduating class of around 30 students, most of whose parents had not attended college, to continue their education. One couple in particular, Jean and Howard MacMillan, who were sponsors of the senior class, took students to visit area colleges—North Texas State, Texas Woman’s College, and East Texas State—to show students the campuses and help them with the application process. Because the teachers had attended North Texas, Maria Elena chose to go there. She recalls that few Mexican American girls attended North Texas, but several Mexican American young men (mostly from the Valley) were enrolled. She lived in the dorm at North Texas, worked in the cafeteria, and started her college career as an education major. Maria Elena soon found that she did not enjoy the education classes, so she changed her major to Spanish—and discovered that in those classes were all of her Mexican American classmates, so her circle of friends increased with her change of major. Maria Elena graduated from North Texas State in three years—quite an accomplishment for a student who was mute her entire first grade year.

After graduation, Maria Elena started teaching at a Catholic school in Dallas, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, on Denton Lane near Love Field in Dallas. The school served primarily Mexican American children, with one African American family attending. Maria Elena taught second grade, as well as Spanish to the eighth grade students. At the end of her first year of teaching, the nuns asked Maria Elena if she would like to work in a summer program that the church was sponsoring for the first time that summer, Head Start. Maria Elena worked with primarily African American children from the nearby housing projects during the summer program in 1965 and 1966. She remembers making home visits and assisting with providing medical and dental care for the children. Even though she had changed her major from education, Maria Elena was beginning to see the critical importance of education for young children, especially those whose families were not able to provide them the support they needed to be successful in school. During these same years, Maria Elena was becoming politically active, participating in voter registration drives and the Poor People’s March to Washington. These two interests—education and political activism—would dominate Maria Elena’s life for many years to come.

In 1968, Maria Elena Martinez moved to Austin to attend graduate school and to be closer to the center of political activity in Texas. Unable to

meet the admission requirements for the University of Texas, Maria Elena again taught in a Catholic school and worked on teacher certification. She later worked as a parent liaison in an early bilingual education program in Creedmoor, part of Del Valle ISD. In 1972, she applied to and was accepted in the Teacher Corps program at the University of Texas. This two-year program included a teaching internship, conducted in the Edgewood school district in San Antonio, one of the poorest school districts in Texas. Once again, Maria Elena was struck by the inequities in educational opportunity and began to combine her love of education with her political activism. After completing the Teacher Corps program and earning her teaching certificate and master’s degree, Maria Elena returned to Austin as a bilingual teacher. She remained with Austin ISD until her retirement in 1999, serving as an Instructional Coordinator for Bilingual Education for the last ten years. She was also involved in both the Texas and the National Association of Bilingual Educators. During her years in Austin, Maria Elena was active in the organization and promotion of the *La Raza Unida* political party and served as the state chairperson in 1978. She has devoted her retirement years to focus on spiritual healing for herself as well as the world and its inhabitants.

Leadership for the Future

Far removed from both Midland and Dallas, geographically and economically, Brooks County in south Texas was not experiencing economic prosperity in the 1960s. The oil industry would boost the economy of Brooks County and Falfurrias, the county seat, in the 1980s, but in the 1960s, the economy was based primarily on cattle raising, with the main emphasis on breeding and dairying. Cotton farming began on a small scale in the 1950s, and in the 1960s commercial truck farming also began to grow in importance and would later become one of the leading generators of revenue in the county. The population of 8,000 was predominantly Hispanic and staunchly Democratic. The one school district in the county was over 90% Hispanic. As in Midland, Head Start came to Brooks County in 1965.

Six year-old Elsa Hinojosa was eager to start to school in 1966, so the chance to get a “head start” was perfect for her. Her parents spoke some English, but Spanish was the primary language in her home. After her older sister started to school two years earlier, Elsa had enjoyed the time at home with her mother and baby sister, but she was ready to learn to read like her sister. Attending the Head Start program in Falfurrias, Texas, during the summer of 1966, started Elsa on an academic path that would take her to the University of Texas and into a leadership position in education.

From the perspective of nearly forty years later, Elsa recalls the Head Start program as

introducing her to many new things, including chocolate milk and books written in English about subjects other than religion (unlike any of the books in her home). Many of her Head Start classmates spoke only Spanish and were likely as unaccustomed as she was to the practices that structured their school day that summer—eating in the cafeteria, taking a nap, lining up to go to other places. Elsa particularly remembers sitting quietly on concrete benches next to the tennis courts for snack time. Those tennis courts, built with WPA labor during the Depression, would later be important to Elsa in ways that, as a six year-old child, she could not have known at the time.

The Director of the Brooks County Head Start Program, which was sponsored by a community agency, was Rolando Salinas. Elsa does not recall how many teachers worked for the Head Start program that summer, but that there were two classrooms of children. Elsa's teacher was Anglo and did not speak Spanish, but the teacher's aide did. Another teacher in the program that summer was Elida Wilson Aleman. Mrs. Aleman's daughter Susana would later be Elsa's teacher in high school and have an important influence on her future, again in ways that a six year-old could not imagine. Elsa did know, however, from the time she attended Head Start, that she wanted to be a teacher.

Elsa recalls that her Head Start experience changed, or began to change, the way she looked at many things in her world. For the first time, she saw women in leadership roles and acknowledged as the person "in charge." At home and at church, she had seen women doing much of the needed work and actually making decisions, but deferring to men as the "official" person in charge. She learned about going to the public library, which would grow to be an important family activity over the years to come. In fact, Elsa would teach herself to play tennis from reading a book in the library. At Head Start, also, Elsa expanded her circle of friends to include more than siblings and the children of close neighbors.

Head Start for Elsa Hinojosa was the beginning of what would be a very successful academic career. She was always a strong student, making almost all A's throughout her public school years (she had a few B's in Language in First Grade). Encouraged by a high school coach who had herself won a state championship in tennis (and applying what she had learned from the library book), both Elsa and her older sister won state championships in tennis. The Head Start teacher's daughter, Susana Aleman, as Elsa's high school government teacher, encouraged her interest in government through her class as well as participation in Student Council and Girls' State. Like her sister had two years earlier, Elsa graduated as Valedictorian from Falfurrias High School in 1978. She was awarded a scholarship to the University of Texas at Austin, where she played tennis and earned a

degree in government and a teaching certificate in three years.

After graduation from UT, Elsa began her career as a government teacher and tennis coach, first at Del Valle High School and later at Westlake High School, both in the Austin area. She would earn a master's degree at UT in 1985 and later Mid-management Certification at Texas State University. In 1998 Elsa left the classroom to become an assistant principal at Pflugerville Middle School. She became principal at Dahlstrom Middle School in Buda in 2001. Elsa is currently planning for and staffing the new high school in the Hays CISD, Lehman High School, which will open in August 2004. The lessons she learned in Head Start in 1966 have served Elsa very well and have continued to have an impact on her students and teachers in the years since.

Hazel Smith, Maria Elena Martinez, and Elsa Hinojosa, three women whose lives were touched by Project Head Start, represent the millions of American teachers and children who have participated in the program in the forty years of its existence and have benefited from the promise of hope for the future that President Johnson made in 1964.

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