

Living the Mission

BY BETSY LADNER DENSON

The League's PTA and PTO Presidents

Back to school had a whole new meaning for five members of The Junior League of Houston, Inc. this fall. **Donna Forman Perillo, Leigh Ann Pyeatt Ranslem, Martha Moody Johnson, Susan Ferguson McConn and Sabrina Sapien Elias** are tackling one of the most important volunteer roles they will ever have as a parent. They are presidents of the Parent Teacher Associations (PTA)/Parent Teacher Organizations (PTO) at their children's schools.

It is appropriate to highlight the contributions of these women in an anniversary year. Eighty-five years ago, the Junior League of Houston was founded to promote voluntarism, develop the potential of women and improve communities through the effective action and leadership of trained volunteers. The League's PTA/PTO presidents live this mission through their work in the Greater Houston Area public school system. And each woman says she wouldn't be qualified for the role without the experience and expertise acquired through the Junior League.

Each president had long been involved with their respective schools in a volunteer capacity. Each felt up to the task. Even so, it still took a little deliberation for most of them before they accepted such a big undertaking.

"I agreed to serve for many reasons," says Frostwood Elementary PTA President Leigh Ann Ranslem. "First of all the timing is good. Both my daughters, Anna and Ellen, will be in elementary school together for two more years. I completed my active J LH service this year, so I decided that I could take on a larger job at the school. Secondly, PTA president is a wonderful job where you have the ability to be involved in all aspects of the school. As a former teacher, I appreciate the need

for cooperation between the staff and parents in order to best prepare our students with an outstanding education."

The women know that their role will come with its own set of challenges. They also know that they can draw on their past League experience to meet them. For Massey Ranch Elementary PTA President Sabrina Elias, serving as head waitress in the Tea Room provided her with the necessary skills to lead effectively. "I had learned to delegate responsibilities to the volunteer waitresses just as I have to delegate and coordinate many parents as PTA president," she says. "It's just a bigger community that I am organizing."

For Briargrove Elementary PTO President Susan McConn, the skills she absorbed through her administrative placements have been invaluable. "As assistant to the Membership Vice President, I learned parliamentary procedures and how to run an effective meeting," she says. "My work as Assistant Provisional Chairman and Food Bank Chairman prepared me to effectively manage people. And then there are the millions of things I've learned from the League that were not specific to my job but that I have just observed as a member. In my non-League life, whenever I'm faced with a problem or decision, I always ask myself, 'How do we do it at the League?' And I know that the answer to the question will always be a policy that has been studied from every angle and has withstood the test of time and experience."

Far from making them insular, though, the League lens the women use allows them to accommodate and assimilate a broad range of perspectives.

"Part of the League experience is learning to work with a variety of people to accomplish shared goals," says Memorial Drive Elementary

PTA President Donna Perillo. "Nothing prepares you for leadership more than learning to value and appreciate differences – in contributions, backgrounds and ideas."

"My League experience helped me to cultivate an open door policy to volunteers," seconds Bunker Hill Elementary PTA President Martha Johnson. "Volunteers are a precious resource and they deserve to be treated as such. I'll take all the help I can get!" Some of that help comes from networking with each other. Again drawing from their League experiences, a small group of area PTA/PTO presidents met for lunch last spring and will meet again in the fall. "The League does a great job creating connections between volunteers to support each other – through committees, councils and sustaining advisors," says Donna. "It seemed natural that we should all get together and extend that support network outside of the League."

And while these presidents are all too aware of the issues facing many schools at home and across the nation – from funding challenges to language barriers to varying degrees of parental involvement – they are passionate about the quality of education at their schools and want to continue to ensure that excellence.

"The PTA represents the voice of all children," says Sabrina. "I am a firm believer that we as parents can make a difference in every child's life."

"The Junior League always pushed me to do things that made me grow as an individual," says Martha. "Now I always look for that in a volunteer opportunity – the ability to make a big impact. Being president of the PTA is an awesome responsibility and an incredible privilege. I just want to give it everything I've got." 🍌



"A leader has the vision and conviction that a dream can be achieved. She inspires the power and energy to get it done."