

NHI AND ITS WORK: WHAT GOT IT STARTED

By Ernesto Nieto, Founder and President

There were countless lessons that I learned by watching my parents work in Houston parks and community centers throughout the 1950s and 1960s. My home neighborhood, Magnolia, was a community that was pretty tough. Located next to the Houston Turning Basin down by Navigation and 76th Street, Mom was the first Latina park director hired by Houston Parks and Recreation Department to run the newly built De Zavala Park. Dad was her most important volunteer. Later, he was given the opportunity to run a park in a cross-town neighborhood called the Bloody Fifth Ward. Whether we liked it or not, my two older brothers and I had to help in one capacity or another. In actuality, we had an amazing experience merely being spectators watching my Dad's girls' fast-pitch softball teams consistently win city titles or see mom's boys' basketball teams do the same on the hard courts. Most of the time, we played sports on park teams and also enjoyed being part of park wrestling and ping-pong tournaments.

Sometimes, what I enjoyed the most was closing the park down at ten at night on a weekday and turning off all the lights. Sitting down together to enjoy coffee, sweet bread, and converse about the day's events while sitting around the dinner table once back home was customary to my parents. Never did I imagine back then that someday in the distant future I would establish an organization that would be guided by many of the same principles, beliefs, and concepts as those that came from the sharing of ideas that began at the dinner table over a half century ago.

The establishment of the National Hispanic Institute came mostly from a witness experience of watching two masters at work rather than the result of some grandiose scheme fueled by knowledge gained from extensive readings and research. The lessons of life at De Zavala Park in Magnolia and Hennessey Park in the Fifth Ward clearly showed that young people, despite the pressures of not having a lot, having to confront the harsh realities of being faceless, are able to respond, interpret, and perceive life differently when they learn to value their roles in the lives of the communities where they reside. At the playground of these two parks, they were much more than numbers on a weekly report of students served or merely members of a park team's roster. There, they had identity and importance. They were owners. They were being trained to respect the park and assume ownership for its development and wellbeing. No better lessons could have been experienced at such an early age for so many of these young people.

Sixty years later, NHI does much of the same work, based on the life lessons of having first-hand experience in observing communities transform themselves. At NHI, leadership is a tangible concept, rooted in community life, not a hazy idea difficult to articulate. We see the impact that our learning experiences have on the mindsets of young people. Much like their predecessors from generations past, NHI youth members learn to perceive and interpret themselves not only as future professionals, but, more importantly, as individuals who represent value to others and are being equipped with the skills, competencies, and knowledge to eventually play key community roles that change lives.

We guide young people in learning to distinguish between social success and community leadership. We often advise them that making strong grades in school and getting a college degree are the prerequisites that will allow them to gain greater access to resources, acquire material goods, and increase their quality of life – particularly in their professional careers. However, they also learn that true community leaders achieve much more than social success. In fact, their leadership in the community comes not from their credentials and titles but rather more from an earned reputation of having key human qualities, being ethical and moral in the treatment of others, and their willingness to be visible in parts of the communities where they reside.

As my parents readily understood years ago, community leadership is not something that young people learn in school or college. Yet, it is undeniably crucial to their development especially in a modern day world of increasing social disconnections and more emphases on individualism. NHI was established 32 years ago realizing these trends and developments and the need for young people to authenticate themselves – their identities. If we as parents and educators intend to preserve and enhance family, tradition, culture, and community beyond the glitter of careers and material gain, then we also understand the importance behind the work of NHI and the reason for insisting that our young join us!