Celebrating Citizenship in Houston

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A lot has changed since the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Houston and Texas certainly have. In his Inaugural address of 1961, President Kennedy called on Americans to, “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” Many took up his call with the Peace Corps and by volunteering for service. Organizations like VISTA and Teach for America are part of that legacy.

Houston has taken up the call for service in an organized fashion. This month the City of Houston and surrounding regions celebrated Citizenship Month. The citywide initiative has grown from two events with 100 participants five years ago to hundreds of organizations and thousands of participants with activities and events held all over the Greater Houston metropolitan region. In the words of Mayor Parker, Citizenship Month represents, “a celebration of our city’s strong commitment to civic leadership, good citizenship and community engagement.”

The Citizenship Month theme, “Celebrating the Many Faces of Houston,” recognizes that Houston is one of the most diverse and international cities in the country. Events were organized by a broad based committee of volunteers from the Houston Public Library, every higher education institution in Houston, community-based organizations, faith-based organizations and corporations. Events included art exhibits, voter registration and get-out-the-vote efforts, tree plantings, bayou clean-up efforts, food and clothing collections, neighborhood improvement projects and international cultural festivals – just to name a few.

Why is this initiative important for Houston and why should you participate? Cities are best served when their residents actively participate in issues which affect their lives, improve living conditions and build connections with others. Individuals gain by volunteerism – by helping others, we help ourselves. More importantly, democracy is best served by an educated and engaged citizenry.

As a global city, Houston attracts the best and brightest from all over the world and is home to more consulates than any city in America other than Washington, D.C. and New York City. Immigrants arrive here seeking freedoms and opportunity that many U.S. citizens take for granted.
Yet, the U.S. ranked 139th in voter participation of 172 world democracies in 2007. Roughly one in 10 Americans contacted a public official between 2009 and 2010. Among 14,000 American college seniors surveyed in 2006 and 2007, the average score on a civic literacy exam was barely above 50 percent, an “F”.

Texas does even worse than the country as a whole. According to the Texas Civic Health Index, Texas lags in voter turnout in midterm and presidential elections and has low rates of civic involvement, “such as donating, volunteering and belonging to groups....” Moreover, Texas ranks 49th in the nation among adults who report they contacted or visited a public official.

Houston can change that situation through expanding volunteerism and community service. Citizenship Month showcases Houston’s civic organizations and provides an opportunity for community service. Together, Houstonians are working hard to make Houston a great city. We have a world-class symphony, ballet, theaters, museums, art galleries and award-winning cuisine blending a rich confluence of cultures. Houston is garnering the recognition we deserve as a great place to work and to live. The city is blossoming with expanded hike and bike trails; the Bike Share Program; the transformation of Buffalo Bayou with trails, parks and bridges; the expansion of METRO Rail, and much more. We have much more to do.

To learn more about Citizenship Month, please visit the website at www.citizenshipmonth.org.

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