

# Women celebrate mind, body, spirit at conference

By SUE MAYFIELD GEIGER

Correspondent

Something magical happens when women come together.

Galveston Chamber of Commerce President Gina Spagnola had seen it happen before. And she was familiar with the Texas Conference for Women, a gathering at which women of all backgrounds network and find expertise on everything from health issues to managing money.

Spagnola thought: "Hey, why don't we do that here?"

So, a few years ago, Spagnola turned to Dr. Ben Raimer, senior vice president for health policy and legislative affairs at the University of Texas Medical Branch, who also was chairman of the chamber at the time.

"The more I worked with Dr. Raimer, the more I learned about UTMB and the more excited I got about the things that were happening with breast cancer research and other medical issues concerning women," Spagnola said.

Many of Spagnola's friends ventured off the island for treatment, she said. A conference would offer a way to showcase the cutting-edge therapies that were going on right in their own backyard at the medical branch.

Now in its fourth year, "Celebrating Women: Mind, Body, Spirit" has become one of the chamber's largest fundraisers and has grown into a popular regional event.

Coinciding with National Women's History Month, March is the perfect month in which to celebrate, said B.J. Herz, event chairwoman.

More than 700 people attended last year's conference. Herz expects more than 1,000 people to attend this year's event, which is March 31 at the Moody Gardens Convention Center.

## Replenish, rejuvenate

"We're mothers, grandmothers, sisters, working women, trying to be all things to all people and we often need replenishing and rejuvenating," Spagnola said. "So, this conference allows that to happen."

In 2009, the conference served as a place of refuge for many women whose lives and jobs were affected by Hurricane Ike, a catastrophic storm that struck in September 2008.

"Eat Pray Love" author Elizabeth Gilbert, whose New York Times bestseller about her personal journey was made into a movie last year starring Julia Roberts, is the featured speaker at the conference.

Spagnola and Herz said they initially wondered about the odds of booking Gilbert, who was heavily in demand.

But, Christy Benson, chamber vice president went to work, made the right contacts and

## At a glance

**WHAT:** "Celebrating Women: Mind, Body, Spirit" conference

**WHEN:** 8:15 a.m. to 5 p.m. March 31 (7:30 a.m. registration)

**WHERE:** Moody Gardens Convention Center in Galveston

**COST:** All-day ticket, \$125, which includes lunch, refreshments, access to the vendor area and tote bag with all materials.

**INFO:** 409-763-5326, [www.galvestonchamber.com](http://www.galvestonchamber.com)

Gilbert agreed.

Gilbert's book, which has sold more than 8 million copies, is still being read by women who are searching for meaning in their lives.

Spagnola praises chamber staff for support, but gives special kudos to Herz, who calls herself a "community meddler with a vision."

Other noteworthy speakers include: Laura Contreras-Rowe, author of "Aim High: Extraordinary Stories of Hispanic & Latina Women," a collection of 33 life-changing stories of Hispanic and Latina women from around the country.

## Serious, light-hearted

Also speaking will be body language consultant, Jan Hargrave; human trafficking expert Constance Rossiter; financial planning specialists Diane Perrin and Wendy Farner; and Dr. Marc Shabot and Dr. Colleen Silva, both of the medical branch, who will speak about colon cancer and breast health, respectively.

Topics at the conference range from the serious to the light-hearted, meant to appeal to all women, Herz said.

The conference also offers time to peruse vendor booths showcasing jewelry, clothing, candles, spas, gourmet food, healthcare and financial programs and more.

Health and fitness breaks will include brief demonstrations of cardio kickboxing, fitness pole dancing, running, yoga, Pilates, and Zumba dance.

A cell phone bank will be available to collect old cell phones and accessories that will be recycled and made available with 911 service only for elderly, disabled, economically disadvantaged and persons in crisis.

Chamber committee members, decked out in white shirts, long ties, jeans, and wild shoes, will open the show performing the "Ellen Dance" on stage.

"This conference will definitely help women feel empowered," Spagnola said. "They will be inspired, but also challenged, and most of all, they will have fun."

Underwriting by The Moody Foundation, contributors and volunteers have made the conference possible, Herz said.

# YEARN explore LIVE

## Author Gilbert explains life after soul-changing experience

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Elizabeth Gilbert, author of "Eat Pray Love," which was also made into a movie last year starring Julia Roberts, will be the main speaker at the Celebrating Women Conference in Galveston on March 31.

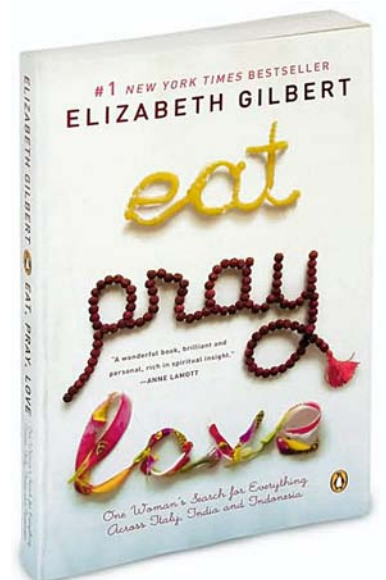
The book encompasses Gilbert's journey of self while spending several months in Italy, India and Bali where she embraced spirituality and found unexpected love. Now residing in New Jersey with husband Felipe, Gilbert is at work on a new novel.

**Q: Why do you think this book resonated so much with women?**

**A:** Books like mine are large-scale examples of an urge that a lot of women have. They wonder: "Where is my stillness, where is the nurturing that I can only find alone, after so much giving?"

**Q: Did you ever dream that this book would be such a big hit?**

**A:** I never dreamed it would be so widely read. I think part of the reason is because all these questions, fears, issues and desires



that I was feeling were very specific to me. As it turns out, my private struggles and questions are shared by like 10 million people, if not more, and this is sort of the question of the age. These are the questions that women are asking all over the world.

**Q: What you want women to know about discovering their own journey in life?**

**A:** One woman told me the last time she had



COURTESY PHOTO/Deborah Lopez

felt free and excited was when she went figure skating as a kid. So she went and bought herself a pair of skates and started taking lessons after 25 years. It does not matter that she won't win a championship; it's enough that she found two mornings a week when she could reconnect with some part of herself that was pure joy, and then go back to carpooling and responsibilities. She didn't want to leave all that behind; she just wanted something that was hers.

**Q: What did you think about the overall translation from print to film?**

**A:** I thought the movie was lush. I told them, by all means, change whatever you need to change to make it work for film. I thought Julia Roberts was gorgeous and some of the nicest acting I've ever seen from her.

**Q: Do you think Roberts' "star power" distracted from the story, making it more about Roberts and less about you?**

**A:** Actually, the movie would not have occurred without her star power. She read the book and wanted to make it into a movie. She is one of the few women in Hollywood who has the power to manifest

something like that, so without her, I don't think it would have occurred.

**Q: Of the three parts of the book, which do you think more closely reflected what you were searching for?**

**A:** Each one of them brought me wonderful things, like Bali brought me my life partner, and I did so much healing in Italy, like eating and resting and enjoying my way back to health after what had been a real dark, starving time. But I think India was the most important part, because it really is sort of the hinge upon which the rest of my life unfolded. I can really put my life into two categories: before and after India.

**Q: Do you still meditate?**

**A:** I do, but not as diligently as I wish — it's still very difficult for me, and I still struggle with it. Yes, our brains have 60,000 to 80,000 thoughts a day.

I'm lucky if it's only that! Pema Chödrön (American Buddhist monk) talks about how there is this misunderstanding about meditation — that people are attracted to it because they think that their mind is going to quiet down and they will be

at peace. But what happens is your mind is like a pond that stays churned by thoughts. Then you go into meditation and those waves diminish and the pond becomes clear. Only then can you see the skeletons and old tires at the bottom of the pond that you really don't want to look at. That's why it's good to do meditation with teachers because you are going down into some deep stuff that you want to avoid.

I still sometimes don't like looking into that pond. But I know it's good for me.

**Q: What did you think about the expanding role given your ex-husband in the beginning of the film?**

**A:** I thought it was beautifully done and it worked for the film. But he was not a character in the book and that was a deliberate choice of mine, because I did not want to write a "tell-all" memoir.

**Q: How is Felipe (Gilbert's husband) handling all the attention?**

**A:** He's wonderful and has been such a guardian of sanity and privacy throughout this whole thing. He's enormously proud of me, but he prefers to stay out of (the limelight). He says to me, 'Darling,

I'm Brazilian, and I don't need to be on television to know that I exist.' We've come through all the notoriety without any collateral damage.

**Q: What's next for you?**

**A:** I'm working on a novel — fiction. I can't say much except that it's about botany.

**Q: Has this whole experience given you insight into helping others?**

**A:** Yes. I was useless in those years before I wrote the book. I was depressed and there is a tremendous amount of selfishness in the narcissism of depression. It was a community service for me to get my life squared away and get out of my own way and become somebody who could engage and give and respond and be part of the world. It is hard to give from a place of depression and anxiety because you don't have anything to give.

**Q: Who would you want to say to: Look at me now?**

**A:** The me that was crying on the bathroom floor when I was 30 years old thinking that my life was over. I would say to her: "Life is just starting!"