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\*\* Alderman \*\*  
**Michele Smith**  
Chicago's 43rd Ward



## Remembering Dawn Clark Netsch In The 43rd Ward

Dear Friends,

We stand on her shoulders. Dawn Clark Netsch, who passed away Tuesday at age 86, was the dean of Chicago women in government and politics. But she is remembered most closely here in the 43rd Ward. Dawn lived here virtually all of her career, since 1974, in a striking house on Hudson designed by her husband, famed architect Walter Netsch.

I asked the former aldermen of the Ward for some remembrances.

During the 50's and 60's, Dawn joined the nascent Illinois government reform movement. Former Alderman Bill Singer recalls: "Dawn was always the intellectual and substantive leader of the reform movement, starting with her work for Gov. Adlai Stevenson. She and Walter were there for me at the very beginning of my career, my 1969 aldermanic race, which was the first reform success on the North Side. I can always remember Dawn sternly giving me the best advice in the world."

With machine power at its height in the 1960s, former 43rd Ward Alderman Marty Oberman recalls: "I remember vigorous discussion among a group of us in the 1960s about who should challenge the Democratic incumbent for committeeman. We couldn't agree, split the race, and the incumbent won. That was a learning experience for all of us."

Dawn won election as a delegate to the 1970 Illinois Constitutional Convention, and created crucial reforms, particularly the line item veto. In 1972 she won in an upset against a machine incumbent as State Senator from Old Town. During her 18 years in the Illinois Senate, she was known as an expert in state finances, argued against the death penalty, and fought for women's and gay rights, sponsoring the Equal Rights Amendment.

Former 43rd Ward Alderman Chuck Bernardini recalls: "Dawn pioneered what is now the expectation and tradition in Lincoln Park of independent, reform-minded, elected officials. She did so while also building bridges where possible to get things

done. Dawn had fought the Machine - and State Sen. Richard M. Daley - in Springfield, referring to him once as "dirty little Richard." But one Saturday in 1980, Dawn invited a number of independent activists to her Old Town home to meet him. She had decided to support him for State's Attorney against Ald. Ed Burke. That was good enough for us and many of us signed on to support candidate Daley, who promised vigorous election law reform efforts as State's Attorney (he kept his promise). Daley won, beginning an alliance with reform groups in Chicago, brokered in no small degree by Dawn Netsch, who was principled and pragmatic, not dogmatic."

In 1990, she was elected State Comptroller, the first woman in Illinois to win a statewide race. In 1994 Dawn ran as the first Democratic woman nominated for governor of Illinois, losing to Jim Edgar. Dawn remained engaged in political life, advising candidates at the state and national level and worked on two state ethics commissions until her death.

Dawn was a funny and straight-talking woman. Former 43rd Ward Alderman Edwin Eisendrath remembers: "Nearly thirty years ago, at an event at the old Academy of Sciences, Walter Netsch met my not-yet-wife Jennifer and after talking to her for a couple of minutes said, 'you really are too pretty to be this smart.' Before my jaw could drop, Dawn, in a way we all remember and love, began, 'Now really Walter...'. Dawn, as we all remember, had a way of expressing herself." I can just imagine her smoky voice, scolding.

Former 43rd Ward Alderman Vi Daley concluded, "Dawn was an amazing woman, years ahead of her time, always looking for solutions and a problem solver. Admired by so many, a great friend, neighbor and supporter. Dawn will be greatly missed." I drove her home a couple of times from political events, because, for all her accomplishments, Dawn Clark Netsch never learned to drive a car.

Thank you, Dawn, for all you did.

Sincerely,



Michele Smith  
43rd Ward Alderman

P.S. For more details of Dawn Clark Netsch's life, see [her oral history with the Chicago History Museum](#) or [her biography](#).

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