



'Straight shooter' Dawn Clark Netsch dies at 86

Former Illinois Comptroller Dawn Clark Netsch, a longtime state senator and the first woman to win the Democratic nomination for governor, has died. She was 86. Netsch, an attorney, served as a delegate at the 1970 Illinois Constitutional Convention and was elected to the state Senate in 1972. She was elected Illinois comptroller in 1990, and became the first woman to win a major party nomination when Democrats picked her to run for governor in 1994. Netsch was defeated in the general election by Republican Jim Edgar.

Liam Ford Tribune reporter

As word spread that her health was worsening, [Dawn Clark Netsch](#) got a call last week from an old colleague in politics.

It was Saul Shorr, the media consultant who made a famous campaign ad of Netsch winning a game of eight ball to sell her image as a "straight shooter." The ad was credited with helping her win an upset victory in 1994 and become the first woman in Illinois to clinch the Democratic nomination for governor.

"He called to talk. I was sitting there, listening to her talking about that commercial," said Cindi Canary, a longtime friend who worked with Netsch on political reform. "It absolutely captured her personality. You knew where she stood. She was incredibly proud of that ad -- and of that shot, which she actually made."

The ad conveyed "her playfulness, her eccentric, in the best possible way, spirit. This was a woman who liked to have fun. She had enjoyed her food, she enjoyed her baseball."

Netsch died shortly after midnight Tuesday from complications from Lou Gehrig's disease. Also known as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS, the disease affects nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord that control muscle movement. There is no known cure, and the disease can lead to near-total paralysis. Netsch was 86.

Her nephew, Andrew Kerr, said he had visited Netsch Monday night along with other relatives and found her, as usual, following current events and politics in particular.

"She was watching the news and thinking about what was going on," Kerr said. "And thinking about ways to solve the Illinois pension crisis."



Professor Dawn Clark Netsch answers a student's question after classroom discussion.

Netsch served as a delegate at the 1970 Illinois Constitutional Convention and was elected to the state Senate in 1972. She was elected Illinois comptroller in 1990. Netsch was defeated in the governor's race by Republican [Jim Edgar](#). Most recently, she had served on the board overseeing the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform, a good-government group Canary once headed.

"She was this amazing compass and mentor about sticking to your values," said Canary, who met Netsch during the 1994 campaign. "So many things that she advanced when she was in the state Senate and her political life -- including equality for the LGBT community, the integrity of the political process, the independence of the judiciary -- are things that she never gave up on.

"She was really a rare person in politics who can go with the flow and the give and take and the drama of the moment, but never let go of who she was and her integrity," Canary added.

As passionate as she was about politics, Netsch was also known for her love of the White Sox.

"She loved to sit there with a beer in one hand and a scorecard in the other. She always kept score when she was at a game," Kerr said. "If she had been one of the boys, she would have been one of the boys in the smoke-filled room."

Kerr said his aunt loved to laugh and loved to argue.

"She helped us, her nephews and niece, learn how to argue so we could make an argument that was issues-based and not person-based. There's a lot of people in Washington who could learn from her.

"She was in politics for the better part of 60-plus years and nobody ever questioned her ethics," he said. "She never lost the ability to have fun at her own expense. She took her ideals very passionately but she didn't take herself very seriously."

Born in Cincinnati, Netsch graduated from [Northwestern University's](#) law school at the top of her class in 1952. She got her first taste in politics working on Adlai Stevenson's first presidential campaign, then worked as an attorney in private practice before joining the staff of Gov. [Otto Kerner](#).

In 1970, she was elected as a delegate at the Illinois Constitutional Convention. Two years later, she was elected to the state Senate as a Democrat. In 1990, she beat Sue Suter to become Illinois comptroller. Four years later, she beat a crowded field to win the Democratic nomination for governor but was trounced by Edgar, getting just a third of the vote.

During the campaign, Netsch proposed increasing the state income tax rate from 3 percent to 4.25 percent to pay for education and reduce property taxes, a plan that was attacked by Edgar, though he would later push a similar plan.

Kerr remembers his aunt being wooed by the architect Walter Netsch in the early 1960s. They had met in 1962 when Dawn Clark Netsch was organizing a Democratic fundraiser and someone mentioned that Walter Netsch had moved into an apartment on Lake Shore Drive.

She knocked on his door "and then it started and went from there," Kerr said.

Walter Netsch would invite her to softball games and picnics in the backyard of Kerr's parents' home in Evanston. The picnics often featured corn on the cob. "She loved Illinois sweet corn," Kerr said.

Canary said Netsch remained engaged in her final days.

"Right up until the very end, she was the most giving person in terms of her time and her counsel. . .All of her law students at the law school, young people, she was just open to anyone who had a spark and wanted to do it. She was there to encourage that. It didn't matter at all if you were somebody or if you were nobody. Anybody who had a spark, she would be there to counsel, to cheer on, to pick you up when you fell down."

In the last two years, Netsch was part of an ethics task force that Canary chaired, and even when her illness made it hard for her to get out, Netsch was still involved in her work, Canary said.

"She was really an integral part of that, and I don't think she missed a single task force meeting," she said. "As that wrapped up, and as she grew increasingly unable to navigate the city, she was still able to navigate the telephone. Last week, we were talking. She was engaged and trying to make a difference."