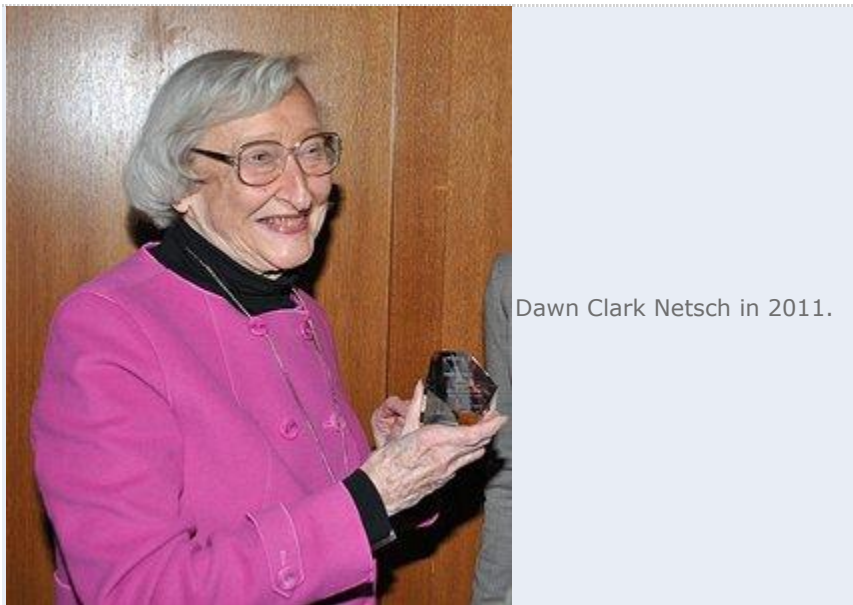


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In her own words: Netsch recalls legal and political career



Dawn Clark Netsch in 2011.

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She needed a walker to get to the table. She admitted she felt weak. She struggled a few times to catch her breath.

But as we talked about her political and teaching career last week, [Dawn Clark Netsch](#) opened up about how she views her legacy in Illinois.

"I have survived more than 50 years in government — and about the same time teaching — with a reputation, I hope, for integrity and certainly honesty, intact," she said.

Netsch, 86, died Tuesday after she revealed in January that she had amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. The disease destroys nerves, causes progressive paralysis and is eventually fatal.



File photo

In this May file photo, Dawn Clark Netsch shares a few words with Jerry Reinsdorf, owner and chairman of the Chicago White Sox and Chicago Bulls, during Northwestern University School of Law's graduation ceremony.

I interviewed Netsch — the first woman to hold statewide office and the first woman to win a major party nomination for governor in Illinois — at her Old Town home on Thursday.

I had planned to write a story about Netsch and her career in the Daily Law Bulletin's annual Law Day issue that comes out next month.

Netsch eased her way into a chair at a table where we talked for about a half-hour in the home designed by her late husband, Walter Netsch, an architect.

Slowly, and with occasional pauses, she talked about her time as a professor at her alma mater, Northwestern University School of Law. We also discussed current affairs in Illinois and her beloved Chicago White Sox.

The conversation started on the topic of her being viewed as a role model for young female lawyers and elected officials.

Netsch said she was told occasionally that she is a role model and considered that an "honor and a responsibility."

"I went through periods of rather dramatic change in the role of women in my lifetime."

And younger generations may not realize the amount of change.

"But everyone needs someone they can look to and say, 'Gee, that's the way I would like to live my life.' I guess that's really what a role model is.

"I think if I have provided that for some people, especially women who are interested in politics, government and law, then I'm delighted to be in that role."

As for her advice to young women in law and politics, she said, if there's "something you want to do, just go do it because I think whatever you do with your life, it makes a huge difference if you really love doing it and are happy doing it."

She added that young women should "be confident and should stand up for what they believe in.

"But never be arrogant."

She also urged the players in politics to listen to all sides.

"I always like to think that was one thing I was pretty good at in my political career. And I hope that my students think the same of my teaching career."

Asked how her illness has affected her, Netsch said she was "weakened."

Nevertheless, she remained on Mayor Rahm Emanuel's Ethics Reform Task Force and served as a member of the state's Campaign Finance Reform Task Force.

"I can call into meetings and I can go through the reports and make suggestions. So, I'm not 100 percent off-limits. But it's not the same degree of active participation."

As for why she went public with her illness, Netsch said:

"Being a straight-shooter, which was my campaign slogan, I thought maybe it would make more sense if I said, 'Here is my condition and the reason you won't be seeing as much of me as you did.'"

In addition, she said she believed "it's always at least a little bit of a contribution to put someone out there that is identifiable who has the disease and who can, in effect, hope to call attention to it."

We next discussed Netsch's suggestions for fixing state government in Illinois. She served a term as Illinois comptroller and in the Illinois Senate for 18 years.

A polarization of political views exists, she said.

"But even when there are reasonably polarized points of view, people can sit down and try to listen and then try to reconcile. I think it not only makes government work better, but it changes attitudes about government."

Netsch said she would restructure the way state and local governments are financed.

"I think we do not have a good fiscal package in this state. It doesn't produce well and it has a lot of unfairness built into it. I'm not talking about just raising taxes or tax and spend."

A longtime supporter of merit selection for Illinois judges, Netsch reiterated her view that judges shouldn't be elected.

"I spend time concerned about the things I have not yet achieved."

In some ways, she was ahead of her time. While a state senator in the early 1970s, Netsch sponsored a bill to eliminate legislative scholarships for Illinois students who attend state universities. The bill died and she took "grief," she said, from fellow legislators.

Last year, those scholarships were eliminated.

"You have to have a lot of patience in this business."

Before the interview began, Netsch pointed to a new black cup with a White Sox logo on a nearby shelf. She also showed me a letter dated in late January from her friend, [Jerry Reinsdorf](#), the White Sox owner and chairman.

In January, a newspaper photo of Netsch also featured her 1981 White Sox mug. After the photo ran, Reinsdorf sent her the updated cup and wished her well.

On the day of our interview, Netsch had the new mug on her shelf. She still preferred the 1981 mug, which was filled with water.

As for her love of the White Sox, the Cincinnati native said she searched for a professional baseball team to follow in the mid-1950s.

"And the White Sox were playing baseball the way I like baseball — great pitching, great defense, great base running and no reliance on the home run.

"That's the way I love it."