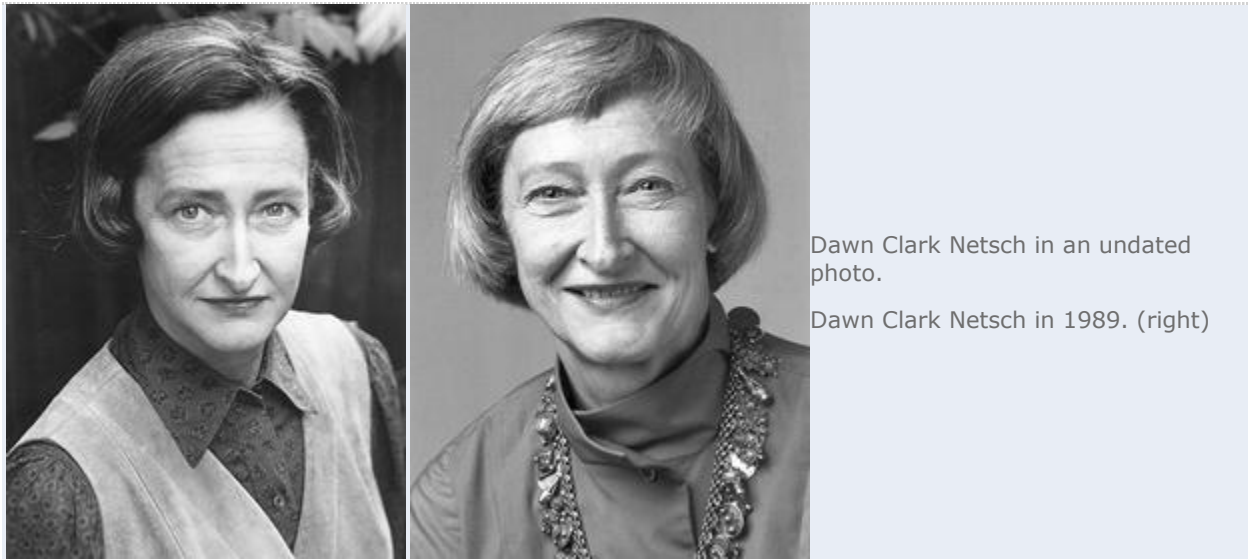


# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin.

## Netsch's career marked by series of historic firsts



Dawn Clark Netsch in an undated photo.

Dawn Clark Netsch in 1989. (right)

**MARCH 6, 2013**

BY **JERRY CRIMMINS**  
LAW BULLETIN STAFF WRITER

As a female pioneer and the first woman to hold statewide office in Illinois, [Dawn Clark Netsch](#) often advised young women in law and politics not to be self-conscious about their gender.

"Don't carry it on your shoulder or sleeve," Netsch said in a 2010 interview. "If you sense that you are being discriminated against on gender grounds, then stand up on your hind legs and don't allow it to happen.

"But don't go around assuming that every little thing that doesn't go right ... every little slight, is because you're a woman."

Netsch, who died Tuesday at age 86, taught at Northwestern University School of Law for decades, in addition to being a force in Democratic politics.

Netsch became the first female faculty member at Northwestern School of Law in 1965. She graduated first in her class there in 1952.

[Ann M. Lousin](#), a professor at The John Marshall Law School, recalled a time Netsch attended a class Lousin taught on the Illinois Constitution.

Netsch stuck around for three hours, and later told Lousin, "You know, Ann, this is the next generation of Illinois lawyers and government officeholders. We've got to train them and do it well."

One of Netsch's former students, [Steven M. Elrod](#), said she always emphasized while teaching state and local government law that "government touches everyone."

Netsch encouraged her students "to get involved in some way, shape or form in government, either by being elected to it, participating in it or challenging it," he said.

Elrod was a student in Netsch's class at Northwestern in 1981 — and it influenced him so much, he began a career in local government law.

"That's what I do today," said Elrod, referring to his work in that branch of law as the managing partner of the Chicago office of Holland & Knight LLP.

Today, Elrod also teaches that same class that changed his life. He and [Victor P. Filippini Jr.](#), a Holland & Knight partner, started co-teaching the class with Netsch in 2011.

"She believed in the words, 'The salvation of the community is the watchfulness of the citizens,'" Elrod said.

"She imparted that concept on her students. It has lived with me for the 30 years since I took her class. Her legacy is this class."

Northwestern School of Law Dean [Daniel B. Rodriguez](#) said Netsch's colleagues learned plenty from her as well.

"Dawn always reminded us that 'all politics is local,'" Rodriguez said, "and that our legal and social community can only be understood by exposure to the real world of political officials and lawyers working constructively on behalf of the common good."

Author Cynthia Grant Bowman, a Cornell Law School professor, chronicled Netsch's life in her 2010 book "Dawn Clark Netsch: A Political Life," published by Northwestern University Press.

"Dawn is a warm and charming woman of many contradictions --- a schoolmarm who drinks and smokes, a powerful woman who has never learned to drive, a feminist who thought of herself as one of the boys, a well-to-do woman who is frugal to a fault," Bowman wrote.

Netsch was born in Cincinnati Sept. 16, 1926. She came to Chicago to attend Northwestern as an undergraduate in 1944.

After college, Netsch worked for the League of Women Voters for a year and also volunteered for the successful 1948 gubernatorial campaign of Adlai Stevenson II — whom she "adored," Lousin said.

At some point, Lousin said, someone suggested Netsch go to law school, and she enrolled at Northwestern in 1949. There, she was the only woman in her 1952 graduating class.

In 1952, Netsch worked on Stevenson's unsuccessful presidential campaign. Then, she went to Washington, D.C., where she worked for the law firm of Covington & Burling LLP.

Netsch returned to Chicago in 1954 as a judicial clerk for U.S. District Court Judge Julius J. Hoffman.

"I am told she was the first woman to become a judicial clerk in federal court here," said Lousin, noting Netsch also said she believed that to be true.

In 1956, Netsch joined the Chicago law firm of Snyder, Chadwell, Keck, Kayser & Ruggles.

She met architect Walter Netsch when she asked him to use his Lake Shore Drive penthouse apartment for a political fundraiser.

"He apparently fell in love with her almost the minute they met," Lousin said. "He said, 'Would you like to go to a White Sox game with me?'"

They were married in 1963. Walter Netsch died in 2008.

She was a top aide to Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner from 1961 to 1964 and often worked until midnight.

In 1973, she began serving as a state senator. She remained in that position until 1990, when she won a race for Illinois comptroller.

In 1994, she won the Democratic primary for governor, becoming the first Illinois woman nominated by a major party for that post.

Lousin and Netsch became friends in 1970 at the Illinois Constitutional Convention, when Netsch was vice chairwoman of the revenue and finance committee and Lousin was a staff member conducting legal research.

Despite all her accomplishments, Netsch never knew how to drive — a fact that always surprised people, Lousin said.

At one point, she asked Netsch if she had ever tried.

"Once," Netsch responded. "I didn't like it."

Elrod visited Netsch at her home last week and showed her a video that students from her classes over the years had produced as a tribute to her.

"She was very touched," Elrod said.

"When a student said, for example, 'Your course inspired me, Professor Netsch, to go into a career in government law,' she would raise her fist and say, 'Right on.'"

Netsch has no immediate survivors. Her nephew, Andrew D. Kerr, said services are being arranged, but will be private.

A public memorial will be held at a later date — perhaps in April.