

CHICAGO

Joanne Alter, Gender Trailblazer In Chicago Politics, Dies

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Joanne Alter, a trailblazing woman in Chicago politics, died Sunday in her Chicago home. She was 81.

Her son, *Newsweek* columnist Jonathan Alter, released the following obituary:

Joanne H. Alter, who broke the gender barrier in Chicago area politics, died on Sunday, November 9, in her Near North Side home after a long illness. She was 81.

Alter, a "lakefront liberal" reformer, was the first woman Democrat elected to public office in Cook County, and a pioneer for women interested in social action and public service. She later co-founded Working in the Schools (WITS), the largest tutoring program for at-risk youth in Chicago.

Alter "was a gale force of nature," said her son Jonathan, a *Newsweek* columnist. "At a time when most women took a back seat to men in politics and civic life, she was usually in the front row or up on the stage directing the action."

Describing her as "the Jackie Robinson of women in Chicago politics" her son noted that her last act was casting her vote on Nov. 4 for Barack Obama.

"Long before 'glass ceiling' made it into the lexicon, she showed by example how to smash it," said her daughter, Jennifer Alter Warden, president of Baird & Warner Residential Sales. "While she was an inspiration to women, the truth is she believed in merit, and would help anyone with potential to fulfill their dreams."

Before the 1972 election, Alter went before the late Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley, and told him it was time he opened the Democratic Party to women. As founder of the Illinois Women's Political Caucus, she offered him a list of 32 qualified women candidates that did not include herself. Daley, moving to defuse the gender issue, responded by slating Alter to run for Trustee of the Metropolitan Sanitary District (now Commissioner of the Water Reclamation District).

Under the slogan "Clean Water," Alter ran the first explicitly environmentalist political campaign in Cook County. She garnered more than a million votes in the 1972 general election, leading the Democratic ticket. She was reelected twice.

"Joanne Alter changed the face of politics," said Elizabeth Brackett, correspondent for the NewsHour with Jim Lehrer and WTTW's Chicago Tonight, who managed Alter's 1972 campaign. "Not only did she tell women they could and should participate in electoral politics, she told men they had to move over. Her courage, integrity and quick, creative mind imbued her life long quest for a more just society."

At the Sanitary District, Alter quickly earned a reputation as a scrupulously honest watchdog who often angered her colleagues by criticizing their perks and big-spending. While she supported the giant Deep Tunnel construction, then the costliest public works project in the United States, she used Sanitary District board meetings to ask scores of probing questions that provided accountability.

"Mrs. Alter has just saved the taxpayers \$9 million in tax levies because she wouldn't settle for a quick answer," the Chicago Tribune said in a November 15, 1981, editorial that was typical of the public support she received.

"She did her homework, she understood issues far beyond her job and she had a broader vision, acting locally while thinking globally before that phrase had been invented," said Mike Flannery, political editor of CBS 2, who covered Alter for years at the Chicago Sun-Times and WBBM. "In the 1970s, you had to choose sides and she went with the outgunned side -- the reformers -- and that took guts. It was hard enough for a man to go up against the Machine but it was doubly hard for a woman."

"They couldn't deal with a 'girl from the kitchen' making big budget decisions," she told her son for a column he wrote about her in Newsweek in March. When described as "tough" she considered it a compliment even when it wasn't meant that way.

Alter twice ran for other offices -- Lieutenant Governor in 1976 and Cook County Clerk in 1990 -- but was unsuccessful.

Nationally, she served two terms on the Democratic National Committee and worked closely with woman politicians from other states like Ella Grasso and Bella Abzug. Born Joanne Hammerman in Chicago and raised in Glencoe, Alter was the daughter of a prosperous manufacturer of children's clothing. She was one of the only Jewish students and only Democrats at New Trier High School in the early 1940s. "I always wanted to help the underdog, the one who was different," she told the Jewish Women's Archive, attributing

her interest in social change to hearing the stories of her mother, who had fled pogroms in Czarist Russia.

As a student at Mount Holyoke College in 1949, she shepherded Eleanor Roosevelt around campus for two days, an experience that she said changed her life. After graduating from Mount Holyoke, where she later served on the board of trustees, Alter toured war-torn Europe alone, a rare journey for a young woman in those years.

In 1952, she married James Alter, who ran a family-owned refrigeration and air conditioning wholesaler, and they raised four children on Chicago's north side. Among the guests in the Alter home over the years were Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Oprah Winfrey, John F. Kennedy Jr., Dan Rather and Kevin Costner, as well as Democratic politicians like Gov. Adlai Stevenson, Mayor Harold Washington, Judge Abner Mikva, Sens. Paul Simon and Richard Durbin, and Rep. Rahm Emanuel. In 2003, she and her husband hosted an early fundraiser for Barack Obama's 2004 Senate campaign.

In 1968, President Johnson appointed Alter as a delegate to the United Nations Conference on the Status of Women, held in Accra, Ghana. When she returned, she was determined to advance the cause of women in the United States as well. She founded the Illinois Women's Political Caucus and set about encouraging women to run for office.

Five days before she died, she was too weak to walk but insisted on being wheeled into her polling place so she could vote for Obama for president.

Alter received the Jefferson Award, the Amistad Award, and the National Women's Leadership Council Award, among many others. In 2006, the Water Reclamation District dedicated a bronze monument in her honor on the south bank of the Chicago River, just across from Centennial Fountain, which she had championed when in office.

Besides her husband, her son, Jonathan, of Montclair, New Jersey, and her daughter, Jennifer, of Chicago, Alter is survived by another daughter, Jamie Alter Lynton, of Los Angeles, another son, Dr. Harrison Alter, of Berkeley, Calif., and 11 grandchildren.