

Alexandria Times

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Vola Lawson: Alexandria's modern City manager

Calling Vola Lawson's career in Alexandria city government pioneering doesn't convey the magnitude of how it changed the way Alexandria runs itself. Lawson began as a volunteer with the Parkfairfax Civic Association, which led to a position in the city government in community outreach at the Economic Opportunities Commission. Her first promotion was to Community Development Block Grant Coordinator, her next was to Assistant City Manager for Housing, and in 1985, City Council selected her to be the acting city manager. She became the permanent city manager that September and served in that position for 15 years.

Born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, Lawson grew up with grandparents who impressed upon her the values of justice and equality that stayed with her for the rest of her life. Her grandfather was a longtime member of the Atlanta Board of Education, who introduced her to many prominent African American leaders in the area, including Martin Luther King, Sr. She left Atlanta for college and met David Lawson when he was working on his doctorate. As newlyweds, they moved to Parkfairfax here in Alexandria in 1965, and her lifelong love with Alexandria began.



COURTESY PHOTO

Vola Lawson in the 2000s.

There isn't enough space in this column to list all of Lawson's accomplishments, but as a city employee, she helped complete both the Dip and Gadsby's Urban Renewal projects.

"I brought to the job credibility. A lot of these people knew me from working out in target neighborhoods and knew me from being involved in civil rights and similar movements," Lawson said in an interview. "I was the third

woman in America to be city manager of a city with a population of 100,000 or more."

Upon becoming city manager, Lawson overhauled a police department that suffered from incompetence and cronyism. In the early 1990s, the bottom of the commercial real estate market fell out, which created a fiscal crisis for the city. Cutting the budget while maintaining a balance that was fair and responsible for as many residents as possible proved a big challenge.

Lawson also insisted on a more professional and more diverse city workforce. As she put it:

"I never believed it's a question of, 'Oh, I either want somebody who's competent, or I want a woman or a minority.'"

Perhaps the people who knew Lawson's stewardship of our city best were her children. Her son David remembers:

"Some may not know she was a big sports fan. She rooted every Sunday for the Washington Commanders – however, she made the unpopular decision to oppose the ... new [football] stadium on the site of Potomac rail yard. She was adamant that the property be preserved for mixed-use and would ultimately be a better source of tax revenue for the City of Alexandria."

Lawson's son Peter said:

"Vola loved and cared about Alexandrians from many different backgrounds, but was known as much for her sharp and tough mind as she was for her big heart. She was fond of the expression, 'Have an open mind, but not so open your brains fall out.'"

Lawson's son McArthur reminisces:

"Vola was a smart, tough woman. She was a good listener and knew how to make decisions. She was also compassionate and a progressive visionary who fought hard for all humans, especially women's rights."

Lawson died on Dec. 10, 2013 and is buried in Ivy Hill Cemetery in Alexandria. Alexandria's animal shelter and the lobby of city hall are both named in her honor. To this day, Alexandria is shaped by the career of Vola Lawson.

In honor of Women's History Month, we invite you to read our series on women's history in Alexandria throughout the month of March. For more on Women's History in Alexandria, please visit www.alexandriava.gov/historic-alexandria/womens-history-in-alexandria.

Out of the Attic is provided by The Office of Historic Alexandria.