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Out of the Attic

Remembering two Alexandria Trailblazers

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Image: Vola Lawson and Patsy Ticer.

During Women’s History Month, it bears remembering two women who were catalysts for change and made a significant difference in Alexandria: Former Mayor and State Sen. “Patsy” S. Ticer and former City Manager Vola Lawson. Both were trailblazers and remarkable leaders.

Ticer was the first female mayor of Alexandria before moving on to the state senate, and Lawson was Alexandria’s first female city manager. Their careers intersected, and together they changed Alexandria forever. Ticer was elected to the Alexandria City Council in 1982 and served three terms – once as vice mayor – before being elected as the first female mayor of Alexandria in 1991. She was reelected to a second term, then elected to the Virginia State Senate in 1996, and served four terms before her retirement in 2012.

As mayor, Ticer was a staunch advocate for women, children and families, especially the most vulnerable. She established an Alexandria Office of Early Childhood Program for at-risk children. She was devoted to historic preservation, affordable housing and was a passionate environmentalist. She oversaw the first extensive revision of the city’s master plan and led the city’s opposition to Jack Kent Cooke’s plan to build a new stadium for the Redskins at Potomac Yard. She championed the arts and created the city’s Commission for the Arts. She started our city’s annual birthday celebration along the waterfront.

Ticer was a leader in regional and national organizations, chairing the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments and the Transportation Planning Board. She served as President of the National Association of Regional Councils.

Lawson began her career in Alexandria in the 1960s as a community activist who was deeply committed to the rights of women and minorities at a time of turbulent race relations. She credited her grandparents for her passionate beliefs about justice and equality. Lawson once said in an interview, “My grandparents taught me, ‘You ought to be able to do anything. It doesn’t matter if you’re a little girl.’”

She took her grandparents’ advice and made it a reality for herself and countless others.

After joining the city government in 1971 as assistant director of the Economic Opportunities Commission, Lawson later became assistant city manager for housing. In 1985, she was appointed city manager and served in that role for 15 years. Throughout her tenure as city manager, Lawson remained committed to racial and social equality. She greatly increased the diversity of city staff by hiring more





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women and minorities. Lawson formed the Alexandria Commission for Women to ensure that women had an official voice in city government.

Ticer and Lawson served as mentors for many women and men in public service and repeatedly encouraged women to seek leadership roles. They were bold and popular with the people of the city. Each of them was a force of nature. Together, these two remarkable women got things done and pushed for inclusiveness and fairness. They helped transform Alexandria into the progressive city of today where the talents of all are valued. We salute these two extraordinary women of vision.

By Allison Silberberg. The writer served as mayor of Alexandria from 2016 to 2018.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

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