



City of Alexandria
Office of Historic Alexandria
Alexandria Legacies
Oral History Program



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Title: *Interview with Vola Lawson, retired Alexandria City Manager*

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Interviewer: *Alice Reid*

Transcriber: *Alice Reid*

Abstract: Vola Lawson, who was Alexandria’s city manager for 15 years until 2000, began her love affair with the city as a young bride, living in Parkfairfax in the mid-1960s. She and her husband David hadn’t planned to stay long. They had their eye on suburban Maryland for their home. But tenant issues at Parkfairfax sucked them into community activism that eventually translated into a city job for Vola Lawson and a long and distinguished career of public service. Beginning as a city community outreach director, she moved on to become assistant city manager for housing. In 1985 she was appointed city manager. Now retired, she lives once again in the Parkfairfax neighborhood where she remains active and involved in the community.

This transcript has been edited by the interviewee and may not reflect the audio-recording exactly.

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Vola Lawson in the City Manager's Office
 (Photo Courtesy of Vola Lawson)

Introductions

Alice Reid:	Can you please state your full name for the record?
Vola Lawson:	My name is Vola Therrell Lawson, and I was born in Atlanta, Ga., on September 14, 1934, and you have my permission to conduct this interview.

Growing Up in Atlanta with Grandparents Who Made a Difference

A.R.:	I was very interested to know that when you were growing up, you lived with your grandparents in Atlanta in the neighborhood where most of the important black churches were, and that your grandfather was a fan of many of Atlanta's black leaders of the day. Can you tell me a little bit about that upbringing and how it shaped you for your adult life?
Vola Lawson:	<p>The most influential people on my life were my grandparents, and much of my beliefs about justice and equality came from them. I was born in 1934 right in the heart of the depression, and when my father came out of college in 1931, there were no jobs. He worked bagging groceries, and once he had two jobs, one pumping gas. And so after I was born, we lived with my grandparents there in Atlanta. They lived at 882 Park Street in what is now known as the "Old Fourth Ward," which is kind of the mother of the American civil rights movement.</p> <p>My grandfather was elected for, I guess, almost 30 years to the Atlanta Board of Education. He was the representative of that whole fourth ward.</p>

	<p>I was the first of what would be five children, born fairly close together. So my mother was kind of busy with these babies. But my grandparents were old, and they had all the time in the world for me. When I was about 4 years old, my father got a job in West Point, Ga., and the whole family prepared to move. But I asked if I could stay with my grandparents, and I did. So I had them all to myself, and my grandfather taught me to read. He was a great believer in phonics. He took me into the Board of Education and had me read and explained how important he thought phonics were, and the Atlanta Public Schools adopted the phonics program.</p> <p>He also was in charge of a search committee that hired the first woman superintendent—Ira Jerrold—for a major American school system. And he was a strong supporter of that. Although I grew up in the deep South, my grandparents were very much enlightened and progressive people. And so I attribute much of who I am and what I became to my grandparents. They taught me, “You ought to be able to do anything. It doesn’t matter if you’re a little girl.”</p>
<p>Learning About Race in the South</p>	
<p>A.R.:</p>	<p>Were you introduced, as a young person, to some of the black leaders in that fourth ward?</p>
<p>Vola Lawson:</p>	<p>My grandfather had terrific relationships with them. The black higher education institutions were in this fourth ward, as was Martin Luther King’s church, and it was not Martin Luther King, Jr., but his father that my grandfather knew. They called him Daddy King. When some of the educators from Morehouse or other black higher education institutions would come by and be sitting out on the front porch with my grandfather having iced tea, my grandmother would let me take a little plate of cookies out to them.</p> <p>Segregation was the law of the land, My family always opposed the Talmadges, but they were the rulers of the land in Georgia back then, and by law there was no integration at all. Black and white children could not go to school together.</p> <p>But I also remember vividly one time—I may have been 7 or 8—going with my grandfather to a new black elementary school. They were delivering cartons of books there. And my grandfather had them opened, and he was looking. Well, the books that black elementary school children got were the cast-off books from white elementary schools. And he would look at them, and some had pages torn out, and he’d just throw them over into the corner. “That won’t do!” he said.</p> <p>But it was a lesson, a life lesson for me. Here it was this new school opening, and the books they were getting were books that the white elementary school children no longer needed.</p>

A.R.:	Do you remember during those meetings on the porch at your grandparents listening to any discussions? I mean, did they ever talk about the tensions of segregation and education—those sorts of things? Were you aware of that?
Vola Lawson:	I was aware that my grandfather and these black ministers, or education leaders, seemed very comfortable with each other and that was unbelievably strange for Georgia back in the 1940s.
The Road to Alexandria	
A.R.:	Let's fast forward a bit. How did you end up in Washington?
Vola Lawson:	<p>I wanted to go to Radcliff. I'd done very well in high school. And I'd done very well on my, what were called, "college boards" then, and I had won a national and state writing contest. And so I applied to four schools. And I got into all of them, and my first choice was Radcliff. But the best they could give me was like 25 percent off my tuition. My parents just said, "we just can't afford it." And so instead, my freshman year I went to Stetson University. And they paid everything, my room, my board....The offer was just so good that my parents said, "That really is what you should do." And I really hated it because I didn't have a single course that I thought was as rigorous as Columbus High School, which was the college preparatory high school that I went to....</p> <p>And so I came to Washington and was going to George Washington University and that's where I met David [Lawson]. David had finished Dartmouth and had come down to work on his doctorate.</p> <p>When I first came here I lived with my aunt and uncle out in Chevy Chase, Maryland—and I loved it. It was beautiful and green, and my cousins were out there. And when David and I first married, that's what I'd said, "You know, once you finish this long process with your internship and dissertation, I'd like to come back to Chevy Chase." And that was kind of our plan.</p> <p>In the interim, we moved into Parkfairfax in Alexandria, and almost before we knew it, we began to put down roots. And so we never got back to Chevy Chase. We fell in love with Alexandria. David is buried in Ivy Hill [Cemetery], and one day I'll be there too.</p>
Putting Down Roots	
A.R.:	So, community organization. Did it come naturally to you? This was—was it 1960?
Vola Lawson:	We moved here in 1965. And the first organizing we did was, we organized Parkfairfax Civic Association, and David was president. He came to the city and asked them to establish a landlord-tenant relations board, and so they did. I got active in the League of Women Voters. At that time I went to Blessed Sacrament [Catholic Church] and I—we—

	<p>worked to help bring in an organization called Alive. And I was the president of FISH, which was a group of 20-something churches in this area, and we helped young people. David and I had a family in Arlandria—[in a program] called Helping Friends. We helped them with issues with the children or how to budget or various things like that.</p> <p>And I began to get involved in political campaigns. And then I went to work for the city in 1971 as the assistant director of the Economic Opportunities Commission, and my job was very much like President Obama’s [community organizing in Chicago]. I was in charge of community organizing. We organized various groups in Arlandria, Lynhaven.</p>
A.R.:	<p>And so, in a way, the [19]60s, being a time of real involvement for young people, and what you had observed from your grandfather—your grandparents—in Atlanta, kind of came together for you and David.</p>
Vola Lawson:	<p>Oh, yes, and David also...David also was extremely concerned about making the playing field level about justice.</p>
A.R.:	<p>Tell me a little bit about Parkfairfax when you first lived there.</p>
Vola Lawson:	<p>Parkfairfax had been built by Metropolitan Life. They started in late [19]41, early [19]42, and it was really a beautifully maintained place, and lots and lots of people had lived there. President Ford lived there. Dean Rusk lived there. Richard Nixon had lived there, and it was full of young professionals. So for organizing purposes, it was really great, because these were people who were willing to get involved. Many of them went on to serve on City Council or boards or commissions.</p> <p>And so in the late 1960s, maybe [19]68 or something like that, Metropolitan Life leased the buildings to Arlen Properties. We would find out that they had a reputation for running slum properties in New York. And so having gone from Metropolitan—having maintained it so well—to suddenly: the grass wasn’t being cut regularly, the flowers weren’t being planted. They weren’t changing the screening on the boilers. Ash was coming out and ruining people’s cars. There were a number of issues that we could organize around, because people were used to it being run well, and all of a sudden it was being run so poorly,</p>
A.R.:	<p>And the residents were people who understood how to get things done, right?</p>
Vola Lawson:	<p>Yes, yes. There were tons of young people there who were in law school, people who were doing residencies. It was a young group of professionals. Eventually the civic association met with Metropolitan Life, and they terminated their arrangement with Arlen. And so they began to take care of it again. And then Guiseppe Cecchi came in and bought it and converted it into a condo. And it is sort of cyclical. We lived there when our children were little babies. And I’m back there now</p>

	when they're long grown and David is dead. So it really is kind of a circle. It all begins and ends at Parkfairfax.
A Volunteer Becomes a Professional	
A.R.:	So how did you come to get the job with the city doing community outreach? What prompted that?
Vola Lawson:	Actually, different people called and said—people who'd lived in Parkfairfax—and said, "There's a job being advertised for assistant director for community outreach, and it sounds like something that you would be interested in." And so I applied for the job, and I was hired in June of 1971.
A.R.:	So you became a working mother.
Vola Lawson:	I became a working mother. My younger son Peter was in kindergarten, getting ready to go to first grade, and David was four and a half years older,
A.R.:	In 1971, did you encounter any skepticism from the people who interviewed you about your position as a working mother?
Vola Lawson:	The person who interviewed me was the only black professional with the city of Alexandria. He was the director of the Economic Opportunities Commission, and I think probably more than maybe most people at that time, he was able to see that women and minorities could do jobs quite well. Bill Parker was the one who hired me. He was from New York and a really nice guy.
A.R.:	So what did your job entail? What did you have to do?
Vola Lawson:	I think we had five community organizers. And we worked with people in low-income neighborhoods, helping them learn how to organize, and to seek solutions to their problems, to be aware of the programs the city had—in case there were programs that the city needed—to become advocates, organizers and advocates for low income people.
A.R.:	And where was the first neighborhood that had been identified as needing community organization?
Vola Lawson:	It was the old 16 th census tract, which was the historic black neighborhood downtown, now Parker-Gray.
A.R.:	Any others?
Vola Lawson:	Yes: the Dip, which was the urban renewal area, and the northern part of Del Ray, Lynhaven, Arlandria, and Mount Jefferson. Lynhaven and Arlandria had terrible problems with flooding, and there was redlining going on in Del Ray that had been brought to our attention. One of the things that [U.S. Representative] Jim Moran (D-Va.) first got involved with was the redlining in Del Ray.

Stopping the Floods	
A.R.:	Was there one of those neighborhoods that required more of your attention than the others?
Vola Lawson:	<p>Probably at that time the most problematic I think was Arlandria because of the flooding. I can remember working all through the night. The flooding was so bad because there was only one large culvert going under the railroad tracks, and when trees and debris came down Four Mile Run and blocked it, it was like a tidal wave that came back. People were evacuated from second story windows in row boats down in Arlandria. The land sloped down, and it was horrendous. And Mount Vernon School became the evacuation point. And sometimes they'd be there for a couple of days or so before the water receded.</p> <p>And then of course, after it receded it was horrible because of the filth and debris and everything else. Real public health issues were there too. So I would say clearly that was our most problematic neighborhood.</p>
A.R.:	And how was the problem solved?
Vola Lawson:	The city and the Army Corps of Engineers did a \$60 million project—in 1970s dollars—to open up that railroad bridge. And now there are three huge culverts, where once there had just been one very inadequate culvert, and that's what solved the flooding problem in Arlandria.
A.R.:	And what did you have to do to organize the people? Clearly, they had a purpose for organization, but what sorts of things did they need to facilitate that?
Vola Lawson:	<p>Well we wanted to do several things. One, we wanted to put pressure on the city, to keep going forward with the matching funding to take care of this thing. It took a number of years to do that and for them to understand that those culverts had to be increased. Also, we organized a mental health group out there, of women who were on public assistance. And one of the things that workers had observed, that I had observed—was that sometimes they were treating their children very harshly: beatings, or slappings, or yellings or what have you. These children were like victims of victims.</p> <p>People learn what they live. And to try to break the cycle of abusive behavior with children, we had Dr. Peggy Errington from the Mental Health Center. And we met on Wednesday mornings at different women's homes. There were about six or seven women. And I would go out, or the organizer for that area of the city would go out, with Dr. Errington, and people would bring chips, and somebody would bring cans of tuna fish, and it would end up that we'd have a little lunch together, which we thought was a good way of helping to bond as we tried to send the message that there are different ways—there are better ways—to deal with your children, and also with your life situation.</p>

	<p>And we helped plug some of them into an effort called Helping Friends that FISH was involved with. Helping Friends provided volunteers to help families with budgeting, or with children’s problems at school. Sometimes a volunteer would even go with a parent to the school. So we were organizing around those kinds of things—around the flooding, around the issues of the isolation of poverty and family dynamics.</p>
<p>Next Stop, Housing Issues</p>	
<p>A.R.:</p>	<p>So how long did you do that job?</p>
<p>Vola Lawson:</p>	<p>I did that from [19]71 until [19]75, and in [19]75 I was named Community Development Block Grant Coordinator. In August of [19]75, President Ford signed into law this new Community Development Block Grant and gave money for the first time to localities. Before that time, the only housing in the city was public housing, through the Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority. And so we got \$1,735,000 and we were able to do a variety of things. And also we got separate funding to help finish the Dip Urban Renewal Project, because President Nixon had frozen the funds for several years.</p> <p>We were able to finally pick it up and complete the urban renewal project, which HUD said at that time was one of the only urban renewal projects in America that had not been about black removal and making the neighborhood more economically attractive—but with the people gone. And so everybody who lived there had a chance to come back, either to buy a home or to go into one of the subsidized rental projects. Then in 1980, I was made Assistant City Manager for Housing.</p>
<p>A.R.:</p>	<p>As far as the Dip was concerned, what was the biggest challenge there? To convince people that this was going to help them?</p>
<p>Vola Lawson:</p>	<p>Yes, and I think, fortunately, I brought to the job credibility. A lot of these people knew me from working out in the target neighborhoods, and knew me from being involved in civil rights and similar movements. And so I think that was very important, because they were very distrustful, and understandably so. They’d been told it was going to come about, and then it was just frozen for several years.</p>
<p>Moving on to Downtown Urban Renewal</p>	
<p>Vola Lawson:</p>	<p>What really helped me, I think, become qualified to be city manager was that in addition to the Dip urban renewal, I was given the closeout of the Gadsby Urban Renewal project—which was several hundred million dollars. It’s 12 blocks—the commercial part of downtown Alexandria. Originally it was going up to Washington Street. And it was going back into the neighborhoods. Fortunately that didn’t happen. But the Gadsby project really became King Street. I think if we were doing it today—and</p>

	<p>hindsight's always better—it would have been different. There wouldn't have been as much destruction of some of these old historic buildings. But you didn't have the federal programs back then. Rehabilitation was just not that important in those days. City Hall was part of it and Market Square and all the blocks across the street where you have the Hotel Monaco, the courthouse, Tavern Square, all of that was part of it.</p>
A.R.:	<p>Was the Courthouse the last? When you say closeout of the Gadsby's [Urban Renewal Project], you mean finish it?</p>
Vola Lawson:	<p>Yes, finish it. I had to deal with the federal government. I had to deal with the private developers, and the citizens groups and the court, exactly. By the time we got to the Courthouse, there were some lessons that we had learned. For instance, the streetscape—across the street from City Hall is not very pedestrian friendly. It's not really in keeping with a lot of Old Town. And so thanks to historic preservation advocates, based in Old Town, they did not want that to happen again. They didn't want the Courthouse to go all the way out to King Street. They wanted to have shops along there, and as you know the Courthouse is pushed back in there, and I think that's very wise.</p>
A.R.:	<p>Did you learn much during that experience that stood you in good stead later as city manager? I'm thinking about the financial part of that job, closing out the Gadsby project.</p>
Vola Lawson:	<p>I'd always done very well in math. I love math. And so I had some latent talent there. But I'd learned an awful lot from the developers and from the federal government. It was a protracted and very profitable learning experience.</p>
<p>Becoming City Manager</p>	
A.R.:	<p>So then, what was the next step?</p>
Vola Lawson:	<p>It's very interesting, because in 1985, in February, [City Manager] Doug Harmon announces he's leaving to go to Fort Worth. Jim Moran announces that he's going to run [for mayor] as an independent against [incumbent mayor] Chuck Beatley. And so they're going to have to go about finding a new city manager. And Chuck Beatley came over to me—at this point we were housed in the back of the Kay Building—and said that he wanted me to be the acting city manager. And I said, "I really appreciate that." He said, "I think this is the best-run department in the city. You've done a great job, with the Dip and with the Gadsby Urban Renewal Project." And I said, "You know, I'm very glad you thought of me, but I'm not interested. I love what I'm doing here with this housing program, and I'm not going to apply to be city manager, so I don't see that that's a good idea."</p> <p>There were two deputies at that time, one he'd had experience with before, and he said things had come to a standstill. And so I thanked him</p>

	<p>very much, and I went home that night and told my husband. And my husband said, "I think you're making a mistake. I think you ought to do it." And I thought about that, and I thought, "Well, I don't."</p> <p>So the next morning when I go to work, the mayor, Chuck Beatley, is waiting for me. And he said, "I talked to some members of Council, and I really think, because this is a very difficult time—we're going into an election campaign—we want things to run smoothly. And we think you can do that. And have you thought any more about it?" And I said, "As a matter of fact, I talked to my husband, who thinks I ought to do it. But I'm still not at all sure. And I'm not going to apply for the job." And he said, "Just take it one day at a time, if you'll agree."</p> <p>And so the following Saturday was a Council public hearing, and he proposed it, and the Council unanimously went along with it. And so this was in February 1985 that I became the acting city manager. And they decided they would have a national advertising campaign for the permanent job. They went to a professional public administration search firm.</p>
A.R.:	This is in February? And the election would be coming up in May? And who was on the Council at the time?
Vola Lawson:	Chuck Beatley was mayor. Don Casey was on. Marlee Inman was on, Patsy Ticer was on. Lionel Hope was on. Bob Calhoun was on. Connie Ring was on.
A.R.:	And so you start the job. You move from the back of the Kay Building.
Vola Lawson:	I moved from the Kay Building into City Hall.
A.R.:	Where the two deputies are still hanging out!
Vola Lawson:	Still there.
A.R.:	And what was their reaction?
Vola Lawson:	Probably as surprised as I was.
A.R.:	And were they cooperative?
Vola Lawson:	Somewhat. But we all got over that.
A.R.:	And the election happened in May. And who became the mayor?
Vola Lawson:	Chuck Beatley lost to Jim Moran. Don Casey lost, and Del Pepper came on in Don Casey's seat. But the political balance on the Council did not change. It was the same in September 1985 when I was appointed city manager as it had been the previous spring when I was appointed acting city manager. There were three Republicans, three Democrats, and Jim Moran, who was a Democrat but had run as an independent against Chuck.
A.R.:	What was it like being a woman city manager? That was unusual wasn't

	it?
Vola Lawson:	I was the third woman in America to be city manager of a city with a population of 100,000 or more. For years, when I'd go to the annual city manager's conference, there were just no women, or blacks, at that time. Now there are more minorities—I mean, even than women—who are involved in public administration. But I can tell you those conferences were kind of lonely those first few years.
A Police Department in Need of Reform	
A.R.:	And you were city manager for 15 years. Can you talk about the changes that occurred in Alexandria over that time, with regard to how the city was governed, the socioeconomic makeup of the city?
Vola Lawson:	When we moved here in 1965, Alexandria was a sleepy Southern town, very much a stronghold of the Byrd machine. And it was wonderful to live here during the next several decades because during this period of time, the city really changed into one of the most progressive places in the state of Virginia. It went for Barack Obama by—what—72 percent? And when I was appointed manager in September 1985, one of the big issues in the campaign in May of 1985 had been the Police Department troubles, allegations and what have you. The then-police chief, Charlie Strobel, and members of the Police Department were suing each other. In fact, the city lost its insurance because of all the various suits that were going on. And I would say that was the biggest problem I had at that time—trying to get a hold on the Police Department and get some competent leadership over there.
A.R.:	And did some of the suits have to do with personnel, or racial issues?
Vola Lawson:	They had to do with personnel. They had to do with allegations of improprieties.
A.R.:	Financial improprieties?
Vola Lawson:	Financial improprieties, changing test scores, with regard to promoting cronyism and what have you. It was very much a “good ole boy” system. And it was interesting because when I was involved with the Urban League back in the [19]60s, we picketed City Hall because it flew the Confederate flag. We picketed the ABC store on King Street because it wouldn't hire blacks, and we picketed the Diamond Cab Company because it wouldn't hire, or pick up, blacks. And one time we were picketing the ABC Store on King Street, and some of these reprobates of a Saturday afternoon, all liquored up, came out of the Casablanca and some of the other dives on King Street back in those days, and there were about six or seven of us picketing. And they came over, and they really made obscene comments, and one of the picketers was a young priest who slipped away to go call the police.

	<p>When the police came, they were laughing along with the people who were harassing us. They were clearly very much good ole boys. They saw us as agitators or troublemakers or what have you.</p> <p>So it was really a time of profound change in the Police Department. Today the police force in Alexandria I think may be the best in the country. It is fully integrated—women, minorities—very professional, most of them with college degrees.</p>
A.R.:	What was the reaction to your appointment in the Police Department?
Vola Lawson:	Some of them remembered me from the picketing, so I was not, I would say, a welcome choice in some circles.
A.R.:	And wasn't the chief himself under a cloud?
Vola Lawson:	<p>In February of [19]86 we were down in Richmond for the General Assembly legislative day for localities to come down and meet with their representatives. And we were on our way to dinner when we pulled up in the parking lot, and television cameras, print journalists came rushing over. "Your police chief has just been indicted on eight counts back in Alexandria!" And I never got that dinner. So we got in the car and drove immediately back to Alexandria. The chief hired Plato Cacheris to represent him, and he was acquitted on those charges.</p> <p>The biggest problem, though, was not really whether or not he was guilty of those charges. As far as running a police department, he simply was not competent. And the department was full of cronyism. It was just not a professionally run department. And it took several years to really get on top of that.</p> <p>Eventually we hired Charlie Samarra, who's retired now, and he was really one of the finest police chiefs, a real professional, really committed to justice and fairness and professionalism. I don't know any department in the city that saw as profound a change as the Police Department. But it wasn't easy getting there.</p>
A.R.:	After Chief Strobel left, how did the search for his replacement work out? Did it run smoothly?
Vola Lawson:	Not really. One of the people who was offered the job and accepted it turned out to have been also negotiating somewhere else. And fortunately, I think my guardian angel was watching over me when he chose the other offer. He ended up being indicted in a corruption scandal in that community along with the local city manager, who also lost his job. We then gave the job to Gary Leonard, who lasted two or three years. After he left, I hired Charlie Samarra. And the Police Department today is unrecognizable from what was here back in the [19]50s and [19]60s or even the early [19]80s.
A.R.:	So after the Police Department what was your biggest challenge?

Financial Challenges	
Vola Lawson:	Once Charlie Samarra came on board, the biggest challenge was probably financial, because in the early [19]90s, the commercial real estate bottom fell out. And for three years, the tax base was worth less than it had been the year before. Even in the Great Depression back in the [19]30s, that was only true of two years. So those were very difficult years.
A.R.:	So how did you deal with that kind of fiscal crisis, particularly with local elections occurring every three years? Those always add a little element.
Vola Lawson:	That's right. But I think you have to set priorities. And I think the Council realized that. And so did the department heads. And the answer wasn't to tax our way out of the problem, but to try and run the government with the funds available. We went back and scrutinized everything and tried to hold on to the programs that really most defined what the government was about. But not everything stayed in the budget. We had a lot of meetings out in the community to make sure that what we were doing would have community support. Priorities we were setting were informed by the real needs, or perceived needs, of the community. And so in that sense, sure, I think the departments and some constituent groups wanted things that weren't going to be in the budget, but I think there seemed to be general consensus that the most important functions of the government would continue: public safety, schools, human services. But no local government can ever meet all the perceived needs in a community. What you have to do is try to achieve a balance that's fair and responsible.
A Changing City	
A.R.:	What do you think are the major changes—demographically—that have occurred in Alexandria, and how did you and the city respond to them?
Vola Lawson:	When we moved here in the [19]60s, the minority population was African American. That was it. And then in the [19]70s, you had Asians coming in because of the upheaval going on over in Asia. And then the Hispanics began to come in, I would say, probably in the early [19]80s. And today they're the largest, other than the African American, community. I authorized over-hiring in the Police Department by 10 for Spanish-speaking officers. For many that's the face of the government. Many Hispanics came from countries where, they told us, they feared the police. And certainly you can't have a language barrier and expect that you're going to be effective in dealing with these people. And also we hired Spanish-speaking outreach workers in the community action programs to work out in the immigrant communities. The Economic Opportunities Commission still exists today, and it's working now with the low-income Hispanic community. There are

	people who are bilingual who are out there working with them to try to make sure they know about the programs the city offers.
A.R.:	Was there ever any kind of concern in the city about, “Oh my goodness. We’ve got all these Hispanics moving into our city!” Was there ever any kind of unrest?
Vola Lawson:	No. In fact, in addition to the city government back in the [19]80s and particularly the [19]90s, the local United Way also was very concerned and had a task force about, you know, THIS is what’s happening. They’re moving into the community, and what can we do to help integrate them into the community? Because it’s not only for the immigrant groups, but it was an advantage to the city. You don’t want people to feel they’re on their own little reservation within the city. So the city worked in partnership with the United Way, and city agencies really made an effort by hiring Spanish-speaking staff to reach out and work with them. I think you have to understand what the causes of poverty and isolation are. The goal ought to be to improve their lives. I always loved the saying, “Give me a fish, and I’ll eat for a day. Teach me to fish, and I can eat for a lifetime.” We ought to be about helping people self-actualize, become part of the mainstream.
Changing the Fabric of City Hall	
A.R.:	You met challenges in the financial sector, in the Police Department, in a changing city. What about in City Hall itself?
Vola Lawson:	It was a challenge to continue to educate and motivate the city workforce and to make it represent the city of Alexandria. And I think that was another important accomplishment. I believe that the government ought to mirror the people that it serves. This is a very diverse community. Fred Day told me that he can remember coming into City Hall and not seeing a black face on the first floor or almost anywhere else at all. Now we have a very integrated workforce. We’re looking for highly competent people: women, men, minorities, nonminorities. I never believed it’s a question of, Oh, I either want somebody who’s competent, or I want a woman or a minority. I think you can set high standards and still find women and minorities.
A.R.:	So the workforce became more diverse as a reflection of the city. How else did it change?
Vola Lawson:	When I became city manager, you had people who finished high school and came to work for the city. And I guess in those days there was nothing wrong with that. But I felt that we deserved a professional workforce.
A.R.:	So how do you make that happen?

Vola Lawson:	<p>Well, I guess, several ways. But first, I put together various panels of people—perhaps somebody from general services, somebody from Fairfax general services, someone from outside, an excellent development person—who were highly competent and with varied backgrounds to help me pick a very highly professional workforce.</p> <p>I always detested, “Oh that’s good enough for government work.” I wanted these people to be the best that we could find. And one of the best examples of that was David Suddeth, whom I hired as my personnel director, who had 25 years of very high-ranking experience in personnel in a very well-known Fortune 500 company. He brought that perspective and did an outstanding job as personnel director for the city.</p>
A.R.:	Did that put some pressure on the compensation packages that you were able to offer city workers?
Vola Lawson:	<p>Well, what we did was, we wanted not to be at the top or at the bottom. We wanted to be in the middle of what other governments were offering. And so in the case of Suddeth, he had retired. Normally we’d have never been able to touch somebody of that competence. But he had retired. And we were able to bring him on at a local government salary.</p>
The Walk to Stop Breast Cancer	
A.R.:	Anything else you’d like to talk about that preceded your retirement from the city manager’s job? Any particular challenges or anything you’re particularly proud of?
Vola Lawson:	<p>I’m very proud of starting the Walk to Stop Breast Cancer. I’m a breast cancer survivor. I had a double mastectomy in 1996. A mammogram saved my life. I was always very good about self-examination. But I’d just had a complete physical and had my mammogram a month later and was called back for an enlargement. And they said, “You have breast cancer.” And after a double mastectomy, while I was recuperating, I really thought, “You know, a mammogram saved my life, But there are a lot of women who can’t afford it.”</p> <p>So when I went back to work, I called together the Office on Women, the Office on Aging, the hospital, and the Public Health Department. And we decided that we wanted to raise community awareness about the importance of mammography. We wanted to reach out to poor women of this community who couldn’t afford it, who had no insurance.</p> <p>And so we had the first Walk to Fight Breast Cancer that fall. We only had less than three months to get it together, so we only had about 400 walkers. Since then we have helped over 5,000 poor women in this city with mammography and follow-up procedures. And we have an annual walk in October to fight breast cancer, and now we usually have anywhere between 2,500 and 3,000 people who come. We decided on a walk rather than a run because we felt it would be more inclusive. We</p>

	<p>have some people there who are up in their eighties and nineties, who walk, women heavily pregnant, women with little babies in strollers. And Jack—my little Jack Russell terrier—and myself are always there. People bring their dogs.</p>
A.R.:	<p>How far do people walk?</p>
Vola Lawson:	<p>You can walk five miles, or you can walk a block. I have very bad knees, so if I do a block, I've done pretty well, but it's not a competitive thing. It's really just a wonderful chance to be together with other people in the community who care and want to help women get mammograms. So the fact now that more than 5,000 women have benefitted, makes that close to my heart.</p>



Vola Lawson
(Photo Courtesy Vola Lawson)

An Active Retirement

A.R.:	<p>Talk a little bit more about what else you've done since you retired.</p>
Vola Lawson:	<p>After I retired, I was on the Campagna Center Board. We do Head Start, early Head Start, before and after school. And with Elizabeth Ann Campagna, I wrote the Campagna Center's first Head Start grant, a long time ago. And so when I retired, I've done just exactly what I thought I'd be doing—the things that I care very deeply about: early childhood education, breast cancer prevention. I'm on the Animal Welfare League board that runs the Vola Lawson Animal Shelter. I've just come off of</p>

	<p>my church's vestry and was church treasurer over at Grace Episcopal. I chair the Virginia Commission on Local Government. These are all things that I care deeply about. So other than the fact that I'd always hoped to be able to do it with David, who died in 2002, my life is good. It's very full. My sons are grown. I have grandchildren now. So God has blessed me. I feel I've had a good life.</p>
A.R.:	<p>Well, I think you've had an inspirational life, truly, and thank you very much. [End]</p>