

Dagne Olsen, lawmaker, frequent volunteer, dies

■ Friends, family say she was tireless fighter for causes

By Sue Elynn Scoletta
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From her Manvel, N.D., church and farm community to Bismarck to Washington, D.C., Dagne Olsen left indelible marks.

Friends and family recalled them Saturday after death claimed the seven-term North Dakota lawmaker and tireless fighter for causes ranging from people with disabilities to community development and better education. She was 61.

Olsen died in the early morning hours at her rural Manvel farm home, from complications of ailments including a liver disease that led her to undergo a liver transplant in 1991.

"She just went in her sleep," said her husband, Duane Olsen. On Friday, he added, they had been to a grandson's birthday party in Fargo. "She had a good last day."

Lawmaker, volunteer

Friends recalled a lifetime of good days Dagne Olsen spent as farm wife, school teacher, community volunteer and dedicated Republican legislator. Her voice in the Legislature spanned 14 years, during which she honed a reputation for commitment and drive.

"Dagne just never gave up—never," said Rep. Alice Olson, R-Cavalier. "She worked her heart out for the people of her district and for what she thought was right. She really fought diligently for schools and for people with illnesses or disabilities."

Olsen served on the Education Committee and Social Services Committee and during the 1993 session chaired the Government and Veteran's Affairs Committee. She also was known for her opposition to abortion, which she sponsored several bills to abolish.

Olsen was not afraid to take on unpopular issues and shrugged off criticism when colleagues disagreed with her.

"I don't try to be controversial," she said in 1989. "But if I am, that's fine. Someone has to do it."

It was 1980 when Dagne Olsen



Dagne Olsen died at home early Saturday.

was first elected to represent District 19, which includes most of rural Grand Forks County. By then, she already had a long list of accomplishments for volunteer services.

■ In 1964, she won the governor's leadership award for community development for work to expand and improve Manvel.

■ In 1978, she was recognized as Grand Forks Woman of the Year, largely due to her work on behalf of people with mental retardation and other disabilities. Olsen was instrumental in organizing the Upper Red River Valley chapter of the Association for Retarded Citizens (now called The Arc) and served three terms as its president.

■ She served two terms as president of the United Hospital Auxiliary.

"From when we were first married, she was always getting involved in something," recalled Duane Olsen. "I think it started with a 4-H Club. She had a blue-ribbon club the first year. There's a whole wall at home full of the awards and certificates she's won."

Wife, mother, friend

Through it all, Dagne Olsen was a full-time mother and farm wife and kept the farm books.

"She was never still," said Duane Olsen.

Nor did legislative service dampen her volunteer activities.

Always active on behalf of people with disabilities, she served as a national ARC vice president. Presidents Reagan and Bush both appointed her to the national President's Commission on Mental Retardation, where she chaired the

Full Citizenship and Justice Committee.

"The Arc will miss Dagne very much and so will I," said Dianne Sheppard, executive director of the Upper Valley chapter. "She was my mentor and my friend."

Dagne Olsen also served on the state board of the American Diabetes Foundation and after her 1991 liver transplant served as president of the Dakota Transplant Association.

"She was always going somewhere to help somebody," Duane Olsen said. In her final days, he added, she was struggling with a decision to withdraw her candidacy for another term—a candidacy she won narrowly in the June primary.

"Her health had really begun to deteriorate since," he said. "But she didn't want to retire. She never wanted to quit."

That was echoed by Alice Olson. "I just saw her on Thursday," Olson said. "She told me that she was going to have to notify the secretary of state. But she hated the idea of quitting. Dagne always wanted to be making a difference."

Life and family

Dagne Borg was born March 19, 1933, to Glen and Esther Borg in Dalton, Minn. She graduated from Park River (N.D.) High School and UND.

On June 25, 1955, Dagne Borg married Duane D. Olsen in Grand Forks. They moved to the Olsen family farm near Manvel, where she lived until her death.

Early in her marriage, Dagne Olsen taught school at Gilby and Midway High School at Inkster, N.D.

Survivors include her husband; sons, Douglas, Seabrook, Md., and Richard, Manvel; daughter, Deanna Farnham, Fargo; twin brother, David Borg, Allentown, Pa., brother, Marcus Borg of Portland, Ore.; and two grandchildren.

■ **Services:** 11 a.m. Wednesday in United Lutheran Church, Grand Forks.

■ **Visitation:** From 4 to 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, with a 7:30 p.m. prayer service, in Amundson Funeral Home and for one hour before services in the church. Memorials are suggested to Trinity Lutheran Church, Manvel, The Arc, the North Dakota Chapter of the American Diabetes Association or to the Dakota Transplant Association.