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Ex-Rep. Karen Clark, battler for LGBTQ community, dies

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Karen Clark, the first openly lesbian lawmaker to serve in the Minnesota Legislature and an advocate for LGBTQ rights throughout her long political career, died Tuesday. She was 80.

Clark, a Democrat, was first elected as a state representative in 1980, and served south Minneapolis for 19 terms until her retirement in 2019 as the longest-serving openly lesbian state legislator in the nation.

Clark died after a brief illness, according to a statement from the Minnesota House of Representatives.

"Karen Clark was a giant in Minnesota," DFL state Sen. Scott Dibble said Tuesday. "Probably represents one of the most important and consequential political careers we've seen in Minnesota."

In 1993, Clark played a critical role in passing an amendment to the Minnesota Human Rights Act to ban LGBT discrimination in housing, employment, public services, credit and education, according to the DFL. In 2013, she was the chief author behind legislation that legalized same-sex marriage in Minnesota.

That year, she was recognized as a "Harvey Milk Champion of Change" by President Barack Obama at the White House. Her death comes on the last day of Pride Month. Dibble called the timing sad in one respect because it came the same day the U.S. Supreme Court ruled to allow states to



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Former state Rep. Karen Clark, center, introduces her partner, Jacquelyn Zita, after a same-sex marriage measure passed the House in 2012.

bar transgender athletes from girls sports.

But he also said the timing was sweet, given that Clark had been marching for LGBTQ rights in Minneapolis since at least the 1970s.

"We wouldn't be having a Pride celebration, a Pride month, without Karen Clark," he said.

Dibble, along with U.S. Sen. Tina Smith and Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison, all called Clark a friend and mentor. They said she was a tireless champion of working class and disadvantaged people.

"Minnesota has lost one of its

greatest public servants," Ellison said in a statement.

Clark remained committed to environmental justice after retiring from the Legislature. She served on the board of the East Phillips Neighborhood Institute, which earlier this year reached an agreement with the city of Minneapolis that will allow for a long fought-for indoor urban farm.

"I'm so sad to hear that today, on the last day of Pride Month, we have lost a long time Minnesota state legislator and a fierce fighter for justice and freedom for all people: Karen Clark," Minnesota Sen. Tina Smith said in

a statement. "Karen was a progressive champion, and hugely influential in my political life as a friend and mentor."

Clark was born July 23, 1945, in Oklahoma but grew up on a sharecropping farm in Rock County, Minn. She had worked as a public health and OB-GYN nurse before launching her political career.

Rod Hamilton, a former Republican representative from Mountain Lake, told the Star Tribune in 2017, that Clark had made one of the most powerful statements he had seen on the Minnesota House floor.

He said Clark once stood up

and turned her back to then-Gov. Tim Pawlenty, a Republican, as he gave a speech that supported the Defense of Marriage Act, a federal law that defined marriage as between one man and one woman that would later be struck down.

"I have never personally witnessed anything more powerful," Hamilton said. "Whether you agreed with Karen or supported her in her position on that item, you have to admit that was one of the most powerful and effective statements ever displayed on the House floor."

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At the State Capitol, Gov. Mark Dayton, who signed the same-sex marriage bill into law, hugs bill co-sponsor Karen Clark in front of several thousand supporters on May 13, 2013. (Richard Tsong-Taatarii/The Minnesota Star Tribune)