

The Deborah Sawyer DIVERSITY A W A R D



The late Deb Sawyer was an example of what can be achieved regardless of obstacles that are faced.

Despite all odds, a dream was lived out with great success. Deborah Sawyer, the late founder and CEO of Environmental Design International Inc. (EDI), inspired many along her journey in the engineering field. She left a legacy behind for many to look upon as an example of what can be achieved regardless of the obstacles that are faced.

Sawyer began her career as an environmental scientist for the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency. Later, she joined a private firm where she rose up the ranks, becoming the senior vice president for a large national engineering consulting firm. It was in this role that she successfully developed a profitable Solid, Toxic, and Hazardous Waste (STHW) Management Division. But Sawyer's dream was ahead. In 1991, regardless of the economic and business uncertainties, she started EDI, a regional leader in civil engineering, land survey, environmental consulting and industrial hygiene. In her success in defying the odds, she proved that good business sense and protecting the environment are not mutually exclusive.

"Mayor Ardis is an exceptional leader whose life is shaped by his desire and willingness to help underserved communities and disadvantaged businesses. His effort on behalf minority students, women and minority businesses sets the high standards for others to seek. We are deeply grateful for his service and dedication to worthy causes in our Peoria community and beyond."

– DR. AMIR AL-KHAFAJI

The 2024 Deborah Sawyer Diversity Award

is presented to

Hon. Jim Ardis,
Mayor, Peoria 2005-21
OSF Healthcare Foundation
2020 - present



Jim Ardis has been a Strategic Philanthropy Officer at OSF HealthCare Foundation in Peoria since 2020. Previously, Jim served his community for 22 years as an elected official in the City of Peoria. He was first elected as a council member-at-large in 1999 and re-elected in 2003. In 2005, Jim was elected Mayor of Peoria and served 4 consecutive terms from 2005-2021 and became the longest consecutive term Mayor in Peoria history.

During his 22 years of service, Ardis lead the Council in achieving many notable initiatives including establishment of the Downtown Warehouse District, building of the University of Illinois College of Medicine Peoria Cancer Research Center, Peoria Riverfront Museum and Caterpillar Visitor's Center, Louisville Slugger Sports Complex, OSF Milestone Project, JUMP Simulation and Education Center, relocation of the OSF Ministry Headquarters to downtown Peoria and the OSF Cancer Institute and Breakthrough Treatment Center.

Notable during his 4-terms were the establishment of the Peoria Race Relations Commission that was the stimulus for the Peoria Unity Luncheons (minority conferences that attracted over 200 attendees), creating of pocket parks in underserved areas of the community, holding yearly Christmas parties that provided gifts for more than 250 disadvantaged youths per year. Ardis started the Mayor's Summer Jobs program within Peoria Public Works that provided well paying summer jobs for hundreds of minority students. Ardis brought together a group of local leaders to create the "Peoria Promise" in 2008. The Peoria Promise has raised nearly \$8 million for this 100% Donor Funded Tuition Reimbursement Program. Over 5,000 students have been awarded tuition funds since 2008 and 48% are first in family to attend College. 76% of the program's students are low income and 64% are Asian, African American, Latino or other minority. The goal of the program is to provide local business a more skilled workforce by increasing the number of graduates who complete a college or vocational program.

Ardis established the Peoria Sustainability Commission with the mission "To transform Peoria into a community that promotes social equity, green economy and a healthy environment through policy development, incentives, and initiatives to sustain a quality way of life." Dr. Al-Khafaji served as the Chairman and in collaboration with ICAT, was very effective in addressing the three main areas of sustainability: social, economic and ecological. Jim worked to identify needy students in the community by working with local pastors, ministers and high school counselors. He traveled with Dr. Al-Khafaji to visit high school students to deliver scholarship checks and was heavily involved with Dr. Al-Khafaji in the ICAT Diversity Summits and the Executive Summits.

Jim was the recipient of the ICAT Sustainability Award, which honors exceptional individuals for extraordinary leadership and original work in developing, employing and supporting the principals of sustainability.

Jim was born and raised in Peoria, received a wonderful primary and secondary education in the Peoria Catholic school system and received his BS in Industrial Technology from Illinois State University in 1982. He is extremely proud of improvements Peoria has made in promoting Diversity during his lifetime and actively participates in practices to continue that progress.