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Serving Chicago: Interviews with Mary Dempsey and Bernie Wong

TIMOTHY J. GILFOYLE

Mary Dempsey and Bernarda “Bernie” Wong are part of a long and deep tradition of Chicago women engaging in transformative social and municipal services. From 1994 to 2012, Dempsey served as commissioner of the Chicago Public Library system. When she started, the city’s public library system was, in the words of the *Chicago Tribune*, “the runt of the litter” among local cultural institutions. Only two libraries had Internet access, numerous branches operated out of tiny storefronts or leased trailers, and the staff was demoralized. Nearly two decades later, when she resigned as commissioner, Dempsey had spearheaded the construction of forty-four new libraries, created the nationally acclaimed One Book, One Chicago citywide reading program, and initiated innovative digital-learning initiatives such as YOUmedia. In just six years after her appointment, the Chicago Public Library system was touted by the *Chicago Tribune* as “a national showcase” and enjoyed a reputation as a powerful educational, social, and economic force in the city. Bernie Wong, the founder and president of the Chinese American Service League (CASL), is an equally influential force in Chicago. From 1979 to today, CASL evolved from a one-person enterprise with a budget of \$30,000 to a \$12 million operation with a staff and volunteer force numbering more than one thousand. By the 1990s, CASL provided a comprehensive menu of services for Chinatown residents. Wong also directed initiatives that created CASL’s \$6.7 million senior housing facility (1998) and the \$5.6 million Kam L. Liu Building (2004), a community service center that now anchors the Chinatown neighborhood.

Dempsey and Wong experienced vastly different childhoods. Bernie Wong was born in 1943 in Hong Kong,

Mary Dempsey and Bernie Wong transformed Chicago by improving social, municipal, and educational services, as well as making them more available to the public. Photographs by Dan Rest.



the youngest of Jorge and Virginia Lo's seven children. Her parents originally met in Peru, but returned to Hong Kong and then moved to the province of Canton (now called Guangdong) in mainland China when Wong was a toddler. "They had a hotel, a café, and a tailoring shop," explains Wong. "My mother was a very professional tailor." The Lo family operated several successful businesses and resided in the upper level of their hotel in the city of Canton (now called Guangzhou), directly across from the railroad station during her early childhood years. But their wealth quickly vanished when the family fled mainland China during the Communist Revolution, during which her grandfather was tortured and executed.

Dempsey was born in 1953, the third of five children of Donald Joseph Dempsey and Eileen Therese Condon. Her father was a marketing executive at Blue Cross and Blue Shield; her stay-at-home mother was trained as a nurse. Although raised in Hillside, just west of Chicago, Dempsey spent considerable time visiting both sets of grandparents, who lived on the same block of West End Avenue in Chicago's Austin neighborhood. "I grew up thinking everybody's grandparents lived on the same block and everybody went to see their grandparents every Sunday."

Despite their vastly different geographic origins and family circumstances, each came from devoted Roman Catholic families. Dempsey attended St. Domitilla School in Hillside with more than one thousand students, fifty-nine of whom were in her first grade classroom. But Dempsey was not intimidated. "My two older brothers had me all primed for school, so I was very excited to go," she recounts. "I walked right in the door and never turned around to say good-bye to my father. He never got over it. I think he was more traumatized than anybody."

Although Dempsey's parents never attended college, they emphasized the value of education. "Books were very, very important, and reading was very important, learning was very important," remembers Dempsey. "My father and mother both really stressed education, they read, and there was always music in our home." At eighteen, Dempsey left Chicago for Winona, Minnesota, where she received a scholarship and ultimately earned a bachelor of arts degree in American studies from St. Mary's College in 1975.

After emigrating from mainland China, Wong briefly resided at the Sacred Heart boarding school in Macau before moving to Hong Kong, where she and her siblings were educated at St. Mary's Canossian College. "My mother was a very religious Catholic. Any time there were any priests or nuns that came to Canton on the railroad, she would go to receive them and bring them and host



The Lo family in 1945. The youngest of seven children, Bernie (center, between her parents, Virginia and Jorge, and surrounded by her siblings) and her family lived in Canton until forced to flee mainland China during the Communist Revolution.

them at our hotel,” Wong remembers. “As I grew up, I heard many, many priests and sisters who told me how much they were helped by my mother.” Virginia Lo’s kindness was rewarded. “We grew up poor, but my mother was very determined that we all have a very good education,” explains Wong. Her mother’s relationships with the many nuns and priests who passed through Canton ultimately paid off. “All the Jesuits and the Maryknoll sisters, they just said don’t worry,” Wong remembers. “If any of your children want to come to our school, they’re welcome.” At eighteen, Wong left Hong Kong alone for Sioux City, Iowa, where she received a scholarship and earned a bachelor of arts degree in sociology from Briar Cliff College in 1966.

Wong attributes her choice of a career in social work to her mother’s influence. “My mother, on her own, was a social worker,” emphasizes Wong. “She would always, always take care of the poor. Even growing up poor, we still had people knocking on our door needing some help, whether it’s food, whether it’s training, whether it’s counseling. So I grew up watching my mom do a lot of social work from home.”

Even with their scholarships, Wong and Dempsey both worked their way through college. “With my scholarship, they gave me four years of tuition, board, and room, but I had to work for \$120 a month,” Wong recounts. “I was doing two things: working in the kitchen washing big pots and pans that I could literally put myself in and then cleaning the dean of admissions’s office. So I got to know her well.” Dempsey had similar experiences. “I worked as a tutor. I worked in the cafeteria. I dished up the food. I cleaned the dishes. I waited tables.” And her work did not end after the school year. “When I came home in the summers,” remembers Dempsey, “I either worked in offices or on the line in the factory at Motorola in Franklin Park.”

Dempsey and Wong’s undergraduate successes were rewarded with scholarships to graduate schools, the former to the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, the latter to the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis. Coincidentally, both scholarships originated from the state of Illinois and required two years of public service upon graduation. Those requirements eventually attracted both women to Chicago.

Wong first moved to Chicago in 1966 for a summer job in Chinatown. There she met Albert Wong, a chemistry student at the University of Chicago. Two years later they married, and Wong began her employment at the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services at the Damen Avenue and Taylor Street office working on adoption cases. Then she moved to East Chicago Heights (now Ford Heights), a south suburb then labeled as the nation’s poorest community, to oversee a Head Start program. Wong was so successful that she quickly became the director of social services for the village, developing a senior nutrition program, food pantry, homemaker program, and other social services.

Poetically, Dempsey’s first job was at a library. While attending Immaculate Heart of Mary High School in Westchester, she worked as a page at the local Hillside Public Library for seventy-five cents an hour. “My job was to shelve the books, check out the books, repair the books, and run the projector for the story times on Saturdays,” describes Dempsey. “It was great; I had a great, great, great time.” Then, after graduating from Illinois in 1976, Dempsey returned to the same Hillside Public Library as the community’s first professional librarian. The job proved instrumental later in her career. “It was a great job. I got to build a collection, run the story times, bring in financial literacy programs. It really gave me the first taste of how you can make a public library very, very meaningful. I loved it.”



Above: Bernie Wong upon her graduation from Briar Cliff College in 1966. She would go on to graduate school at Washington University St. Louis.

Below: Bernie and Albert Wong met in Chinatown in 1966 and were married in December of 1968.





After their initial jobs, Dempsey and Wong's career paths diverged sharply from their original directions. In 1978, the Chicago law firm of Kirkland & Ellis hired Dempsey to organize their massive antitrust cases. She quickly impressed her superiors, particularly senior partner Walter Kuhlmeier, who encouraged her to enroll in law school. Within a year, she was attending DePaul University's College of Law full-time while still working at Kirkland & Ellis. After graduating in 1982, Dempsey worked at Rubin & Proctor, Michael Reese Hospital, and Sidley Austin.

After living in Chicago for nearly a decade, Wong noticed that many social services were not being delivered to Chinese immigrants, particularly those in Chinatown. So in 1978, Wong, her husband, and ten other Chinese friends started offering basic social services on Sundays, including translating letters written in English and helping residents obtain tax rebates and public aid. A year later they formally established the Chinese American Service League (CASL) with a staff of one—Bernie Wong.

CASL had two initial challenges. First, "we had to get the confidence of community leaders," Wong remembers. "It took us a long time to sip tea with the establishment, because they don't know who we were. They figured that we were probably communists. And literally told us that." Second was the lack of funding, which necessitated the onerous process of applying for external grants. "We got a seed grant from the Chicago Community Trust and United Way, \$16,000 each," Wong remembers. "We started with a budget of \$32,000."

But CASL quickly grew. "When we first started, we thought we were going to do some English classes" and provide a few resources or counseling, explains Wong. "But from day one, people wanted jobs, to be hooked up with

Mayor Richard M. Daley and Bernie Wong at the ground-breaking ceremony in 1996 for the Chinese American Service League's senior housing building. Nearly twenty years earlier, Wong had begun to offer social service programs, including translation services and public aid assistance, for Chinese immigrants in Chicago.

other benefits, all kinds of things.” In short time CASL became distinctive for its wide range of services, aiding community members from birth to death: multilingual and multicultural childcare services; after-school and youth outreach programming; senior citizen programs; community organizing; employment services from chef training and baking to industrial labor to computer programming and financial services; classes on dancing, health care, how to use a credit card, how to obtain a mortgage, and how to pass the US citizenship exam. Not surprisingly, the staff expanded from one in 1979 to 130 in 1994 to more than 400 in 2013 with a volunteer force of more than 700. According to Wong, CASL is now the largest employer in Chinatown and the largest agency serving Chinese in the Midwest.

At Sidley Austin, Dempsey’s office was next to attorney Gery Chico, who was appointed chief of staff to Mayor Richard M. Daley. One day Chico called and asked Dempsey to serve as the commissioner of the Chicago Public Library system. Despite her initial resistance, Dempsey’s husband, Philip Corboy, encouraged her to talk with the mayor. “It was my first time ever talking to this man alone, and he was rapid-fire, nonstop,” she recounts. She was enraptured by Daley’s vision of libraries as community centers serving to bring neighborhoods together. Daley told her, “Every neighborhood needs strong schools, strong parks, strong libraries.” Dempsey was impressed. “He was articulate. He was thoughtful. He understood it. He got it completely,” recalls Dempsey. “And I barely got a word in edgewise.”



Above: The future site of the Near North Library in 1996. During her tenure as commissioner of the Chicago Public Library, Dempsey (center) oversaw the establishment of forty-four branch libraries, which frequently transformed underserved neighborhoods, acting as magnets for other city services and businesses.



The ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Near North Branch Library took place on August 6, 1997. Left to right: Mary Dempsey, Secretary of State Jesse White, Alderman Walter Burnett, Mayor Richard M. Daley, and Alderman Burt Natarus.

Running the Chicago Public Library system was no easy task. In 1994, it was a hodgepodge of eighty-six branches, many in tiny rented storefronts and trailers with outdated and deteriorating catalog systems. Budgeting was helter-skelter. Few branches had computers, and there was no strategic plan. Dempsey's first task was to rebuild the library system's human and physical infrastructure. "The plan was bring technology everywhere; develop new, clean, welcoming physical facilities; develop a strong book collection; and develop a professional program that kept people up-to-date on their skill set," explains Dempsey. In 1995, she implemented a professional development and training program for all 1,300 employees. Then the City Council approved two bond issues that raised \$170 million for neighborhood libraries. Dempsey lauds Daley: "He right away passed a bond issue to build new public libraries. He gave us more money for collections. He gave us money for technology. We received Bill Gates's first million-dollar gift before there was even a Gates Library Foundation."

The result was an unprecedented construction and renovation program. Under Dempsey's direction, forty-four new libraries were constructed in Chicago, thirteen of which were Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified. All libraries were equipped with state-of-the-art technology including free access to the Internet, more than eighty online databases, and vast book collections. In 2012, the libraries served eleven million patrons.

Wong also recognized the importance of physical infrastructure. Demands for more affordable housing for Chinatown seniors convinced Wong and CASL to build a ninety-one-unit residential facility in 1998. Six years later, CASL's new \$5.6 million, titanium-clad Kam L. Liu Building at 2141 South Tan Court opened. Designed by visionary architect and MacArthur Fellow Jeanne Gang,



Above: Bill Gates received a Chicago library card after providing a million-dollar grant in 1996. Below: Dempsey reading to children at the opening of the Near North Branch Library.





the architectural gem houses more than thirty of CASL's social service programs and embodies the impact of CASL on the Chinese community. *Chicago Tribune* architecture critic Blair Kamin noted that "a building of this quality could not have happened without the leadership of Bernie Wong."

In the early twenty-first century, CASL served more than fifteen thousand clients annually, an impressive number given that the Chinese population in Chinatown and neighboring Bridgeport numbers approximately eighteen thousand. Chicago's Chinatown is still a primary point of entry for new immigrants. "I think a lot more immigrants are coming to Chicago instead of New York or San Francisco," believes Wong, citing high prices on the coasts as part of the reason. She estimates that 98 percent of new arrivals are ethnic Chinese from various countries, the overwhelming majority of whom speak little or no English. CASL is a critical, instrumental force for these immigrants because of the dearth of Asian, and especially Chinese, organizations. "Because of that, we tend to be much more comprehensive," concludes Wong.

Above: Designed by Jeanne Gang and completed in 2004, the Kam L. Liu Building serves as CASL's home base. Below: Bernie Wong with young participants of CASL's School Age Children program in 2012.





Above: Wong with her daughter, Jaz, and two grandchildren in August 2005. Below: Bernie and Albert Wong in 2012.

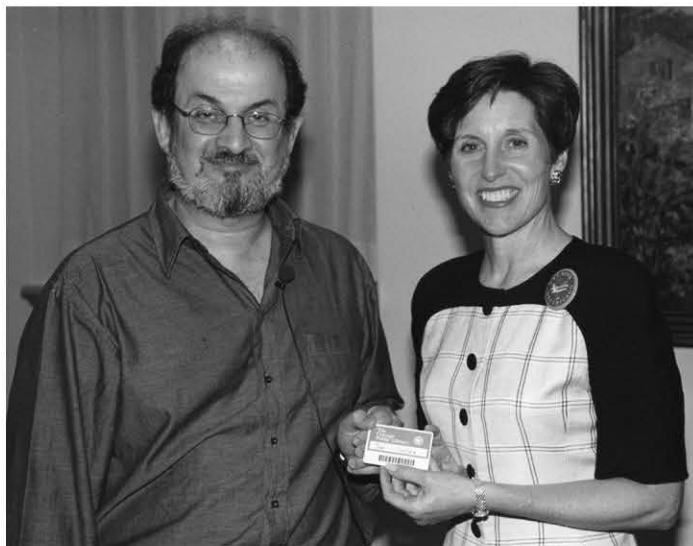
She also notes how Chinatown has changed during her time at CASL. “When we first started, a lot of Chinatown people were Cantonese,” she explains. “I remember a friend of mine who spoke only Mandarin ran into the grocery shop and wasn’t served. People either didn’t understand her or didn’t want to serve her.” But between 1980 and 2000, Chinatown’s Cantonese-speaking population dropped from 90 to 50 percent. Chinatown immigrants now speak as many as nine dialects and, according to Wong, mastering a new dialect is similar to learning an entirely new language. The most recent newcomers also display a mindset different from previous immigrants and arrive with different goals. “There are more immigrants who are ready to establish businesses,” Wong asserts. “People are now much more financially able to start developing businesses here, so that has helped the community prosper.” She continues, “We see many young folks coming back and purchasing townhouses. And the educational level is also being boosted because it’s second, third generation coming back from college.”



Similar to Wong, Dempsey recognized the need for new and innovative services, exemplified by the reading and digital learning initiatives developed during her tenure—particularly One Book, One Chicago and YOUmedia. For the latter program, “We took an old broom closet in [the Harold Washington Library] and turned it into their recording studio,” remembers Dempsey. “We wanted the kids to understand that there is a connection between the printed word and the online world, and we wanted them to understand that when you’re looking at a video game that may be set in medieval times, there may actually be some history behind that. We wanted them to understand that as you are learning how to take apart a game controller and put it back together again that there’s a certain instructional value to that.”

Dempsey’s programs not only transformed Chicago’s library system but initiated the revitalization of some neighborhoods. When the private sector saw the city investing in handsome, freestanding library buildings, new businesses, restaurants, and mixed-income housing often followed. The first branch library built under Dempsey’s watch, which opened in 1997, was on Division Street between the low-income Cabrini-Green Homes and the wealthy Gold Coast neighborhood. “We bought a liquor store, got rid of it, built the branch library, and that’s exactly what happened. The Gold Coast came, Cabrini came, and that became a really marvelous branch library because it showed that this is the place where people come together to learn and to experience the joy of learning.”

The process repeated itself in numerous Chicago neighborhoods. “We recognized that public libraries are community centers in a neighborhood, that in the process of building public libraries we got rid of a lot of liquor stores and bad motels and derelict buildings,” acknowledges Dempsey. The result was “an immediate transformation in a neighborhood and a recognition that people in the neighborhoods have value and have worth and have a right to have this information at their fingertips.” In 2005, speaking at the American Library Association’s annual meeting, Dempsey proudly proclaimed: “I’ve purchased and knocked down more liquor stores, more no-tell motels, more really crummy and dilapidated, burned-out buildings in neighborhood after neighborhood and replaced them with libraries than I’d ever thought I’d do in my life.”



Above: Mary Dempsey presented author Salman Rushdie with a library card in 2001. Below: A letter from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn commending the library’s 2006 selection of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* for *One Book, One Chicago*.


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Москва, январь 2006

Воодушевлён и впечатлён, что молодёжь и читающая публика города Чикаго возьмётся в 2006 году за "Один день Ивана Денисовича" в рамках программы "один город, одна книга".

Хотя нынешние времена располагают нас к лёгкому просмотру литературных произведений в экранной форме, ничто не может заменить чтение, ибо оно призывает нас к усилению и душевному старанию, через которое мы выходим за рамки собственного опыта — в нашем данном случае, шагая в сапогах наших замерзающих, изнурённых, голодных братьев.

С наилучшими пожеланиями вам в этом начинании,



Александр Солженицын

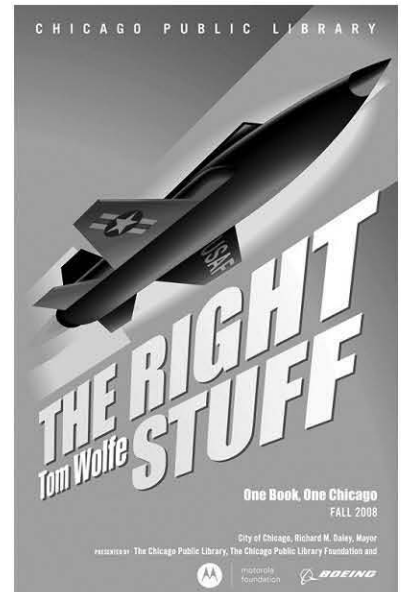
Moscow, January 2006

I am heartened and impressed that youngsters and the reading public in Chicago will in 2006 turn to *One Day of Ivan Denisovich* under the "One Book, One City" program.

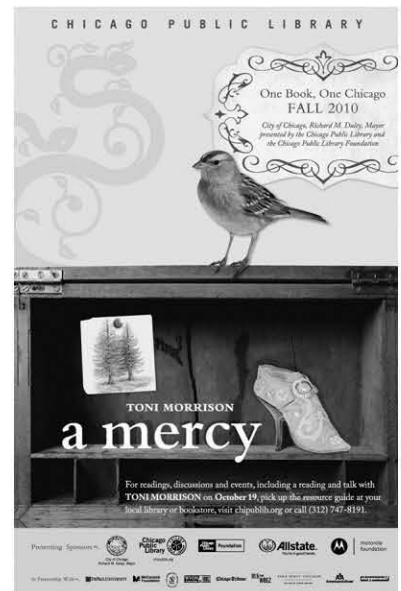
Although the current times dispose us to sit back and watch our works of literature on the screen, there is no substituting for the effort we exert in spirit by reading, by going outside our own experience; in this case, by walking in the shoes of our cold, exhausted, famished bretheren.

With all best wishes to you in this endeavor,

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn



Tom Wolfe's acclaimed book, *The Right Stuff*, was selected for *One Book, One Chicago* in 2008. Dempsey bestowed him with a framed catalog card for the book.



In 2010, Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* was chosen for *One Book, One Chicago*. To mark the occasion, Dempsey presented the author with a framed catalog card for the book.

Dempsey even impressed the police. After libraries opened on Division Street and North Lincoln Avenue, new police stations followed. Chicago Police Superintendent Terry Hillard compared Dempsey and her personnel to the Marines: “You guys go in first, before the police department does. You made it safe for us to go in here.” Dempsey concurs. “We built the Near North branch in Cabrini probably a good eight years before they built a new police station in there.”



Above: Wong visiting Adult Day Service clients in 2012. Below: Wong with US senators Dick Durbin and Barack Obama in 2006.





By the 1990s, Wong was one of the most visible Asian Americans in Chicago. She was the first Asian American named to the boards of the Chicago Public Library and the United Way. She chaired the mayor's Advisory Committee on Asian American Affairs, was named one of *Today's Chicago Woman* magazine's "100 Chicago Women Shaping Chicago's Future," and was selected United Way's Executive of the Year for 1989. Wong's activism by then extended far beyond Chinatown; she served on a wide range of metropolitan, state, and national committees, including the Chicago Commission on Human Relations, the board of the National Asian Pacific Center on Aging, the board of the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, the Council for the Illinois Department on Aging, and the Chinese Immigrant Services Agency Network International.

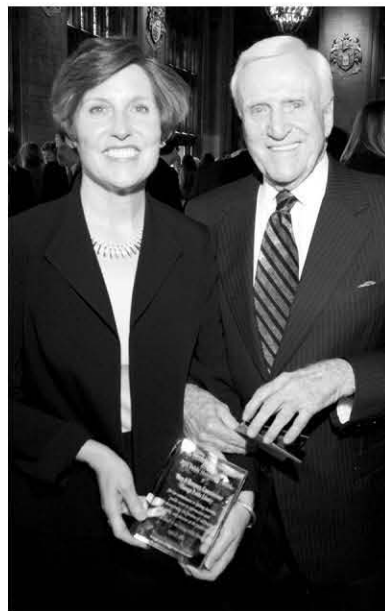
In March 2011, Wong watched as Governor Pat Quinn signed the Illinois DREAM Act, which makes scholarships, college savings, and prepaid tuition programs available to the children of immigrants.

Since leaving the commissioner's post, Dempsey has been active in the Philip H. Corboy Foundation, established in 1982 and named after her husband, who passed away in 2012, to support education, justice, and human dignity programs in Chicago. The foundation provides scholarships and grants to individuals and institutions that promote the core principles of social justice and equality for all. Dempsey has also chaired the boards of the Urban Libraries Council, the Mercy Home Leader Council in Ridgeland, and was the first woman to chair the DePaul University Board of Trustees (2008–11). She and Corboy made the largest single gifts ever to the law schools at DePaul University and Loyola University Chicago, creating the Mary Dempsey and Philip Corboy Endowed Scholarship at the former and the Philip H. Corboy Law Center at the latter.

Both Dempsey's and Wong's conceptions of a lifetime of service are rooted in the Chicago neighborhood. "The key thing with CASL is that we are very, very tied into the community," emphasizes Wong. "We hire staff from the community. I live in the community. I make sure that I talk to many of the establishments as different organizations develop, working and partnering with them. We always tend to know what the community needs." Dempsey's vision also reflects her Chicago neighborhood roots. "A library was the place of lifelong learning, the place where you could have access to anything," she emphasizes. "If we had the opportunity to give people, in their neighborhood, that access to the whole world, whether it was in print or online, then that was our responsibility, and that's what we needed to do."

ILLUSTRATIONS | 68, event photography provided by the Chicago History Museum's Office of Institutional Advancement; 69–71, courtesy of Bernie Wong; 72, top: Chicago Public Library, Special Collections and Preservation Division, CPL Archives, Near North 1.1, bottom: Chicago Public Library, Special Collections and Preservation Division, CPL Archives, Near North 1.5; 73, top: Chicago Public Library, Special Collections and Preservation Division, CPL Archives, Unprocessed; 74, top and bottom: courtesy of Chinese American Service League; 75, top and bottom: courtesy of Bernie Wong; 76, top: Chicago Public Library, Special Collections and Preservation Division, CPL Archives, Unprocessed, bottom: Chicago Public Library; 77, courtesy of Chicago Public Library; 78–79, courtesy of Bernie Wong; 80, Steve Leonard/Illinois Humanities Council.

FOR FURTHER READING | The careers and contributions of Mary Dempsey and Bernie Wong have been covered extensively in the Chicago and national media. On Dempsey, see James Warren, "With This Library System, Government Isn't All Bad," *New York Times*, January 27, 2012; Anne Jordan, "Loyal to the Library: But Willing to Loan out her Management Skills," *Governing*, May 12, 2006; *St. Mary's University Magazine*, summer 1999; and articles in *Crain's Chicago Business*, March 24, 1997 and February 18, 2005. On Wong, see John Stebbins, "Activist Aims to Crack the Chinatown 'Wall,'" *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 19, 1988; Bob Herguth, "Bernarda (Bernie) Wong," *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 12, 1989; Delia O'Hara, "Chinatown's Visionary: Service Group's Leader Keeps Focus Broad," *Chicago Sun-Times*, November 13, 1994; Jane Adler, "Family Ties," *Chicago Tribune*, October 8, 2000; Kerrie Kennedy, "Chinatown Returns to Center Stage," *Chicago Tribune*, January 20, 2002; Blair Kamin, "Chinatown Profits from a Fresh Spin on Architecture," *Chicago Tribune*, July 4, 2004; and Jenniffer Weigel, "Bernarda 'Bernie' Wong, Chinese American Service League Founder," *Chicago Tribune*, July 21, 2013.



Mary Dempsey with husband Philip Corboy after receiving the Illinois Humanities Council's Public Humanities Award on behalf of the Chicago Public Library System in 2006.