



Office of the Chicago City
Clerk



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Office of the City Clerk

City Council Document Tracking Sheet

Meeting Date:	2/15/2012
Sponsor(s):	Harris, Michelle A. (8)
Type:	Ordinance
Title:	Honorary street designation as "Edward G. Gardner Way"
Committee(s) Assignment:	Committee on Transportation and Public Way

BE IT ORDAINED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF CHICAGO;

SECTION 1. Pursuant to an ordinance heretofore passed by the City Council which allows erection of honorary street-name signs, the Commissioner of Transportation shall take the necessary action for standardization of East 87th Street as "Edward G. Gardner Way," installing signs on the existing poles at 1000 E. 87th Street on the north and south side of 87th Street.

SECTION 2. This ordinance shall take effect upon its passage and publication.

Michelle Harris

Michelle A. Harris
Alderman, 8th Ward

Born February 25, 1925, in Chicago, IL; married Bettian; children: Gary, Guy, Tracey, Terri
Education: Chicago Teachers' College, bachelor's degree; University of Chicago, master's degree.

Military/Wartime Service: Served in U.S. Army during World War II; reached rank of sergeant.

Career

Chicago Public Schools, teacher and assistant principal, 1945-64; beauty supply salesman, part time, late 1950s; began manufacturing hair care products in Chicago home and established Soft Sheen Products Co., late 1950s; Soft Sheen Products, Chicago, chairman, 1964-98; Garden Investment Partners, Chicago, president, 1998-.

Life's Work

The co-founder, with his wife Bettian, of Soft Sheen Products, a Chicago company that revolutionized black hair care, Edward Gardner helped build the operation from a home-based business into a corporation with international reach. In addition to his success as a business executive, Gardner emerged as a community leader in the last decades of the twentieth century. He was a central figure in the effort that elected Harold Washington, Chicago's first African-American mayor, and as he passed the day-to-day operation of Soft Sheen on to his children, he became involved in community enterprises ranging from the anticrime program Black on Black Love, to the restoration of a historic theater, The New Regal Theater.

Edward George Gardner was born on February 25, 1925, in Chicago, Illinois. He grew up in Chicago and joined the United States Army during World War II. Back in Chicago after the war, he earned a bachelor's degree at the Chicago Teachers' College and a master's at the city's top private institution, the University of Chicago, which admitted very few blacks at the time. Gardner taught high school and served as an assistant principal in Chicago for 21 years, from 1945 to 1964.

To make extra money on the side, Gardner sold beauty supplies part time. He and his wife Bettian traveled to hair salons that served a black clientele and observed a huge void in the marketplace, just waiting to be filled by products aimed at African Americans. They noted how successful Chicago's Johnson Products Co. had been with its new Ultra Sheen hair straightener, and they remembered the money that had been made in the hair care field by the country's first black female millionaire, Madame C. J. Walker.

Tested Products on Family Dog

Various dates from 1957 to 1964 have been given for the founding of Edward and Bettian Gardner's Soft Sheen Products firm—probably because the enterprise evolved gradually from a series of experiments in the basement of the Gardners' small South Side home. Gardner's daughter Terri and her dog Cinnamon served as product testers in the early years, with occasionally disastrous results: Terri's hands and hair were colored mauve for several weeks at one point. Dinner had to wait until the pots and pans that were being used to mix chemicals

could be washed and rinsed off. Ten-year-old Gary Gardner, Soft Sheen's future president, mixed Soft Sheen Hair and Scalp Conditioner and demonstrated it at trade shows.

Starting out by selling products out of their home, the Gardners drew on their knowledge of and close communication with Chicago's beauty salon owners—a practice they continued to stress even after Soft Sheen became an operation with millions of dollars in annual sales. "All Chicagoans from those beauticians on 47th Street, 63rd Street, 79th Street and West Madison Street that got this business started.... They gave me the love and inspiration to want to do more. And that is the reason we try to do so much," Gardner later told an Operation PUSH awards banquet in an address quoted by *Jet*. "One thing Mr. Gardner has always stressed was not to forsake salon owners," his daughter Denise told *Black Enterprise*. "We marry ourselves to them and we literally take professional vows."

Soft Sheen grew slowly. By 1976, annual sales totaled \$200,000—a long way up from Gardner's basement, but well behind Johnson Products and its \$40.1 million in sales. That year, however, external events dented Johnson's momentum, and Gardner quickly took advantage of the situation. Federal Trade Commission officials began requiring new warning labels on hair straighteners containing *lyc*, a *lot* of bad publicity that affected both Johnson Products and Gardner's Soft Sheen. While Johnson quietly acquiesced to the regulation, Soft Sheen quickly pulled its existing product line off the shelves and introduced new lines that avoided the warning requirement. "We knew the direction the market was going," Gardner's son Gary told *Forbes*, "and we acted fast."

The new visibility of Soft Sheen in the marketplace coincided with the rise in popularity of the Jheri Curl style, and in 1981 Soft Sheen launched its Care Free Curl product line. That allowed salon owners to finish the *curl* styling process in two hours (rather than eight), increasing customer turnover and creating a need for a whole *phalanx* of Care Free Curl-associated products. By 1982 Soft Sheen sales topped \$55 million, and the following year the company took up a long residence on the *Black Enterprise* 100 list of top African-American-owned companies. In 1989 it was named the magazine's Company of the Year.

By the 1980s, Soft Sheen was a true family operation. In addition to Gary Gardner, who rose to the position of president, Bettiann Gardner served as vice-chairman and as publisher of the *cosmetics* magazine *Shoptalk*; son Guy Gardner headed the Bottlenworks firm, which supplied materials to Soft Sheen; daughter Terri Gardner did marketing work for the company; and daughter Tracey Gardner became vice-president of science and technology. Edward Gardner himself began to devote more and more time to his interests in the Chicago community.

Involved in Politics

The first of these was the mayoral campaign of Harold Washington, elected Chicago's first African-American mayor in 1983 but at first a reluctant candidate. Many observers thought that Washington had little chance to win in a city that didn't have a black majority, and Washington himself refused to enter the race unless 200,000 African Americans registered to vote. That was where Gardner came in. Soft Sheen temporarily devoted its advertising budget to voter-

registration radio spots featuring Terri Gardner's "Come Alive on October 5" slogan that reminded listeners of the registration deadline.

"My family has always been involved in trying to make life better for the African-American community," Gardner told *Chicago Weekend*. "We thought it was our responsibility as a successful black company, where we gained most of (our) income right here in Chicago, to give back...to help the black community realize its strength and power." Washington rode a surge of black registration to a primary victory over two white opponents and then to the mayor's office, and Gardner became involved in other political campaigns.

Another cause to which Gardner lent his time and effort was the struggle to control Chicago's spiraling rate of violent crime. After a Soft Sheen employee was shot during a robbery attempt in 1983, Gardner placed newspaper advertisements denouncing black-on-black crime. A 1993 ad, placed in response to a street gang slaying of a 15-month-old baby, read in part (as quoted in the *Chicago Sun-Times*): "It's time for these young men [gang members] to begin to act like men. Carrying a gun does not make you a man. Assuming the responsibilities of a man by doing the positive things in life are what make you a man." Through his Soft Sheen Foundation, Gardner founded Black on Black Love, a community umbrella group that administered such programs as an arts and crafts center in Chicago's notorious Robert Taylor Homes housing project and a bank employment-training program, mentoring and working with the female ex-offenders through Black on Black Love's My Sister Keeper program.

Revived Historic Theater

Gardner also plunged into the revitalization of the city's South Side, sinking \$4 million into the renovation of the Regal Theater. A 1920s architectural jewel in Moorish style that had been unused for years at its 79th Street location, the Regal (formerly the Avalon Theater) had been Chicago's answer to the Apollo Theater in New York's Harlem neighborhood; a concert showcase for top-flight African-American acts, in its heyday it had played host to the likes of Duke Ellington and Jackie Wilson. "The black community is hungry for places to go for entertainment," Gardner told the *Chicago Tribune*. "But such places must be 'quality.' We think that with the beauty of the architecture and the quality of the shows, we can provide that kind of place."

By the end of the 1980s, Gardner had also purchased a stake in the National Basketball Association's Chicago Bulls, and he and Bettmann had become, in the words of *Black Enterprise*, "part of the fabric of the Windy City." Soft Sheen also sponsored a 30-city tour by singers Anita Baker and Luther Vandross, becoming the first black-owned company to sponsor a major concert tour. In the 1990s, however, several factors combined to put the brakes on the company's performance. Soft-curl styles declined in popularity, and Soft Sheen faced competition from white-owned hair-care giants such as Revlon. Soft Sheen tried to move into international markets, but growth slowed dramatically.

After several corporate shake-ups, Soft Sheen was sold to the French cosmetics firm L'Oreal in 1998. Gardner, a businessman to the end, told the *New York Times* that "selling the company to me is just a phase, just like starting the company." But the 73-year-old Gardner gave the people

of Chicago one last gift: as part of the sales deal, he extracted from L'Oreal a promise to keep the company's headquarters located on his beloved South Side. An \$8-million renovation of an old Johnson Products building opened in 2002. Gardner remained active in retirement as president of Garden Investment Partners, and many Chicagoans agreed that he was, in the words of Seaway National Bank chairman Jacoby Dickens (quoted in *Jet*), "one of the great business and community leaders of our time."

Awards

Selected: *Black Enterprise* magazine, Company of the Year award for Soft Sheen, 1989; Golden Pyramid Award, 1999.

Further Reading

Periodicals

- *Black Enterprise*, June 1989, p. 223; May 1996, p. 24.
- *Chicago Sun-Times*, November 3, 1987, p. 24; May 13, 1993, p. 58; December 19, 1993, p. 41; November 28, 1994, p. 14; July 11, 2002, p. 14.
- *Chicago Tribune*, May 15, 1987, p. 1.
- *Chicago Weekend*, November 28, 2002, p. 3.
- *Forbes*, March 9, 1987, p. 124.
- *Jet*, August 20, 1990, p. 28; May 24, 1999, p. 12.
- *New York Times*, August 11, 1998, p. D1.
- *Wall Street Journal*, April 3, 1992, p. 1.

On-line

- "Bettiann Gardner," *The History Makers*, www.thehistorymakers.com (May 2, 2004).
- "Ed Gardner," *The History Makers*, www.thehistorymakers.com (May 2, 2004).

—James M. Manheim

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