



# THE ALEXANDER & SHARON RAE DURTKA

## SCHOLARSHIP



**For some forty plus years, Al and Sharon, often introduced as Mr. & Mrs. International, have been actively involved in the safeguarding and transmission of intangible culture heritage, not only in Milwaukee, Wisconsin but throughout the world. Al retired as President and CEO of the International Institute of Wisconsin and director of Holiday Folk Fair International, a multi-cultural festival for some forty years.**

He began his involvement as active volunteer in the festival, gaining insight and experience prior to becoming its director. He also gained valuable knowledge and experience from other festival directors through becoming a member of IFEA, obtaining his CFEE certification, serving on the Board of Directors and finally as Foundation Chair.

His interest in the safeguarding of cultural heritage led him to become involved in other organizations such as President of the National Folk Organization USA, Chairman of Global Ties US, USA North American Representative and Chair of the Cultural Commission of CIOFF (International Council of Folklore Festivals and Folk Art], and Commissioner on the US UNESCO Commission. He also led performing groups overseas and has made presentations at conferences and seminars throughout the USA and such places, as Estonia, Mexico, Netherlands, Poland, Russian Federation, Canada, France, Taiwan, Czechoslovakia, and Japan. Having worked extensively with Japan, he received from the Emperor the Order of the Rising Sun.

Sharon, who passed away in 2025, also had a long-time involvement with the Holiday Folk Fair having danced

as a young Girl Scout in the first event, 1945. Sharon's interest in the world was sparked by a book, *Children of the World*, which piqued her interest in experiencing people and their culture. She became a teacher and with her spirit of adventure she volunteered and immersed herself for seven years in the people and culture of Jamaica, West Indies. Later she returned to the Caribbean to earn her PHD in Nevis Saint Kitts.

For thirty plus years she served in various roles as teacher, coordinator, and supervisor with Milwaukee Public Schools. Throughout all this time, she worked with young people, lecturing and teaching in the Russian Federation, Egypt, Germany, Japan, Estonia, Canada, and Israel. In addition, she also served as the Chair, Teaching and Education Committee for CIOFF and President of Rotary Club 5010 International and several other organizations such as President of the Wisconsin Chiba Sister State Relationship.

She also wrote and edited and published numerous articles and edited books on the importance of cultural heritage. In addition, she developed teaching programs and engaged high school youth as volunteers designing the Grade 4-8 Cultural Awareness Education Day Program and the Artisan Guild Awards at the Holiday Folk Fair International.

Al and Sharon worked together as a team, working for some 40 years, volunteering at numerous events, including the Annual Iditarod Dog Race in Alaska, as finish line timers for some 10 years. In their spare time they worked to develop new venues, themes, educational materials, and encouraged emerging leaders to continue in their chosen endeavors and to further develop and enhance what had gone before them. To quote an African saying: We all stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us.