



Alice "Diane" Houk

February 7, 1932 -- November 11, 2014

Diane Houk was born in Jacksonville, Illinois, the only child of George and Fern Dodsworth. At age 5, the family moved to Independence where she attended Bryant Elementary, Palmer Jr. High, and graduated from William Chrisman High School in 1950. During her high school years, she worked in the Englewood 5 & 10, owned by her parents, and later at their antique and gift shop, Dodsworth's Village, on 24 Highway. She was active in Girl Scouts as a child and that interest continued throughout her adult years as a leader, trainer, day camp director, board member and world conference leader.

Diane and E.T. Houk were married on August 25, 1951 and his job with Raymond International Inc. would take the couple and their two children, Beverly and Mitch, to several states and eventually many exotic countries. They lived in England from 1968-1971. Beginning in 1974, they lived in Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Iraq (during the Iraq/Iran war), Egypt, Nigeria, Venezuela and the Philippines, returning home to Independence at various intervals during their travels.

At each new foreign location, Diane would help the wives adjust to living in their new environment and even wrote an article entitled "Going Overseas" for the company's journal. She immediately participated in each new community, for example she served as Welfare Chair of American Women's Club in Bangkok, Director of the International Folk Art Fair in Kaohsiung, Taiwan and the organizer of the International Women's Club in Labuan, Malaysia.

Her love of puppetry, which started as a child, grew during her travels as she collected a wide variety of puppets and attended unique puppet shows—all presented in foreign languages. This exotic variety of marionettes and puppets would become the anchor collection for the future museum she often dreamed of starting.

Education was very important to Diane and so whenever they were stateside, she studied toward her degree, attending eight different colleges. She finally graduated from Elmhurst College in Elmhurst, IL at age 42 with a degree in Elementary Education and a minor in Library Science. She worked in the Winnetka, Illinois Public Schools while finishing her degree.

In 1977, E.T. and Diane bought a home in Manor Oaks area of Independence as a residence for her parents and a permanent home for the couple in 1987.

Volunteer work in Independence included working with the Junior Service League to present a puppet show on Independence History to fourth graders. She was active in the Missouri Arts Council and the Citizens Cultural Committee, which organized the Cultural Arts Coalition; designed the first Strawberry Festival for the Vaile Mansion, and set up Santa's Workshop for the first Christmas at the Bingham Waggoner home. She was a member of the Mary Paxton Study Class and served as chair of the Advisory Committee for the Roger T. Sermon Trust Fund.

Diane worked for the Mid-Continent Public Library, North Independence Branch from 1987 to 2001, ten of those years in the Reference Department. During these years she worked with several friends to fulfill her lifelong passion of a puppetry museum and theater for our community and served as President of the Greater Kansas City Puppetry Guild.

In the early 1990's, Goodwill Industries offered to sell the remnant stock of the Hazelle Puppet Factory to members of the Greater Kansas City Puppetry Guild. When no one took Goodwill up on that offer, they said they would donate the stock to the Guild. That was an offer Diane and a subcommittee of the Guild could not refuse. The subcommittee developed a 5 year plan to use the parts to raise the funds to establish a Puppetry Center and Museum. To do this, the subcommittee, under the leadership of Diane, hauled puppet parts to libraries and schools presenting puppet making workshops, moved, sorted and inventoried the remnants parts, first in a seed barn in Pleasant Hill and then to the Space Center storage caves.

During the seven years it took to establish the PAI, Diane worked tirelessly to raise the seed funds, find the grant funding and insure the puppets and marionettes were professionally curated and preserved. PAI officially opened its doors in Englewood in October 2001 with an exhibit of amazing marionettes designed by Robert Smith, a steering committee member.

Over the years, the goals of PAI have been to present live professional puppet theater performances each month; to provide puppet making workshops that enhance children's creativity; to provide a high class museum of puppets from a variety of artists and countries; to engage in a partnership with the Independence Public Schools' kindergarten classes; to share the joy of puppetry; and to serve as one of the anchor locations for the Englewood Arts District.

Diane Houk served as the volunteer, full time director for twelve of the fourteen years PAI has been open. Her energetic and charming leadership contributed so much to the success of the Institute. She will be deeply missed. However, the PAI board is enthusiastically committed to Diane's vision and to continuing the mission of the Puppetry Arts Institute.