

OUR CULTURAL EXEMPLAR by Richard Kurin

UNDER SECRETARY FOR HISTORY, ART, AND CULTURE
Smithsonian Institution

Diana Parker will retire this year as director of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, a post she has held for the past twenty-five years. During that time, with talent, grace, and a wonderful team, she has brought more than twenty thousand tradition-bearers to the National Mall to demonstrate their knowledge, artistry, skill, and wisdom for roughly twenty-five million Festival visitors. These cultural exemplars have represented the full breadth of musical traditions, folk arts and crafts, occupations, culinary skills, and celebratory traditions from every region of the United States and from more than one hundred nations across the globe. No one has involved more artists and a larger, broader public in the appreciation of our diverse national and human living cultural heritage than Diana Parker and the Folklife Festival staff.

Diana's path to the Smithsonian and the Festival combined an interest in grassroots expression and a commitment to human rights. She was born in Kentucky to a family involved in the civil rights movement. Her dad was a preacher and musician; her mom a homemaker. They moved across the South, living in small towns in Tennessee and eventually settling in Texas. Diana earned a Rotary Fellowship in college, enabling her to study ethnology in South Africa at the University of Cape Town where she became active in the student anti-apartheid movement and hosted Robert Kennedy's historic campus visit. Returning stateside, she entered the museum world, making her way to the Smithsonian in 1973. She worked with renowned anthropologist Sol Tax to develop the Museum of Man, and with Jim Hightower to advocate federal support for folklore and grassroots cultural expression.

At the Smithsonian, she shifted to the Festival of American Folklife—an innovation of Smithsonian Secretary S. Dillon Ripley to “liven up” the museum and help preserve the nation's and the world's living cultural heritage. She worked for the Festival's founding director Ralph Rinzler, a famed impresario, musician, and scholar.

The accomplished Bess Lomax Hawes, who later started the folk arts program at the National Endowment for the Arts, became her mentor. Diana coordinated programs on regional America for the mammoth, three-month-long 1976 Festival marking the bicentennial of the United States. During these years, she worked with scores of the nation's leading folklorists and ethnomusicologists and literally thousands of folk artists, helping to define the Smithsonian's engagement with scholars and tradition-bearers and to devise its systems for Festival production. That work became a model for many other cultural presentations across the country and around the world in ensuing decades.

After 1976, Ralph Rinzler increasingly relied upon Diana to organize, produce, and run the Festival. When Ralph became assistant secretary of the Smithsonian in 1984, he entrusted Diana with his legacy, and she became Festival director.

The Festival's impact has been profound. Its very production has entailed the documentation of cultural traditions in film, video, recordings, notes, and photographs, out of which has grown the Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections at the Smithsonian—now deemed a national treasure by the Save America's Treasures program. The Festival has supported ethnographic fieldwork and analysis by thousands of academic researchers, cultural workers, and especially community scholars from all parts of the globe. Festival research has spawned several dozen monographs and compilations, hundreds of scholarly articles and presentations, dozens of documentary recordings and films, numerous educational kits and, increasingly, Web-based features documenting folklife traditions and the practice of public cultural representation. The Festival has played a key role in generating academic departments, programs in public agencies, policies, laws, and even an international treaty—UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding



of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, now ratified by more than one hundred nations.

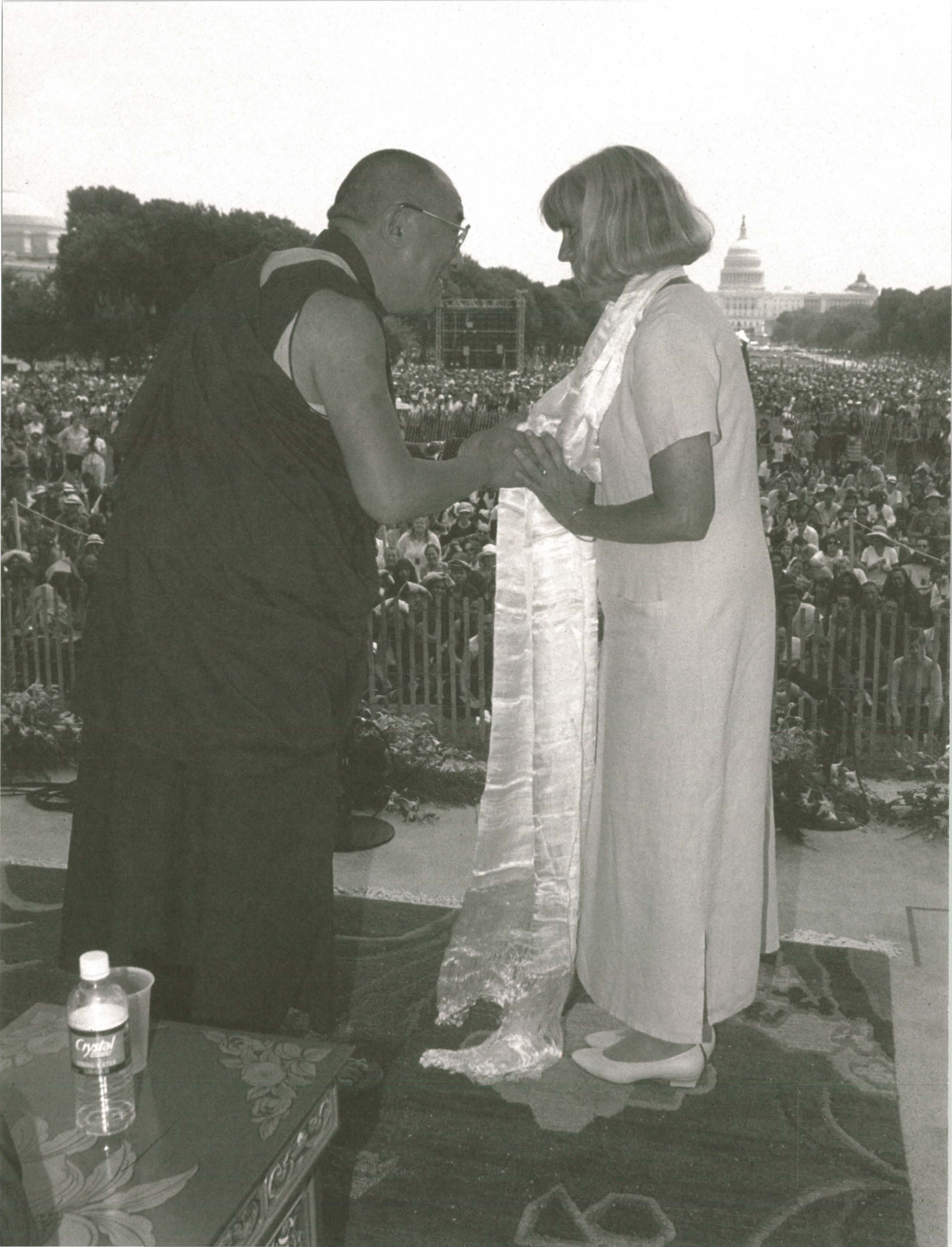
As Festival director, Diana has met with presidents, ministers, governors, Congressional leaders, agency officials, corporate sponsors, private donors, scholars, educators, cultural leaders, artists, and many others to develop the ideas, raise the funds, and mobilize support for Festival programs. She has had to explain the purposes of the Festival and gain the confidence of so many different people in so many different situations—from Native Hawaiians in a community meeting to women singers on a hilltop in Cape Verde, from brainstorming meetings with Iowa officials to creative sessions with Yo-Yo Ma, from a governor's cabinet meeting to an audience with the Dalai Lama.

Diana has hired staff—and been particularly attentive to issues of diversity, providing a tremendous opportunity to bring people from all backgrounds to the Smithsonian. She has been an exceptional mentor to women. Indeed, a list of her assistants over the decades reads like a “who’s who” of the folklore and festival worlds. She has helped select Festival participants based upon great experience, expert knowledge, and a keen aesthetic ear. She has led the effort to navigate the bureaucratic worlds of the Smithsonian, the National Park Service, the U.S. State

Marie McDonald, a Hawaiian lei maker and National Heritage Fellow, ties a haku lei around Diana Parker's head at the 1989 Folklife Festival program on Hawai'i.
Photo stolen from Diana Parker's office

Department, and numerous other international, national, state, and even local agencies to accomplish the thousands of things needed each and every year. Who else has had to contend with building and transporting a wooden church from Transylvania to the Mall (and then ensuring that it meets federal accessibility codes), protecting researchers in Haiti during a revolution, floating an iceberg from Alaska to Washington, D.C., and clearing the way for Tennessee moonshiners to demonstrate their folk chemistry by building a still within spitting distance of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms?

The results have been stunning. The Festival has inspired visitors to learn about varied traditions and cultures, bringing not only personal growth for many, but also increases in cultural tourism vital to local economies and the continuity of local traditions. In some cases, such as with Hawai'i, Mali, Tibetan culture, and more recently Northern Ireland, Festival programs have encouraged and aided the healing and the social betterment of communities and societies “back home.”



Diana exemplifies who we are and what we do. She is our cultural exemplar and has continually brought out the best in us.

Diana's work has also extended beyond the Festival, as she produced and co-produced numerous other mega-events for national celebrations that placed people and their culture front and center. Repeatedly she has taken a lead role in developing public programs for presidential inaugural activities and even several Olympics. For instance, as co-producer of the Southern Crossroads Festival for the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, Diana was on hand when the bomb went off in Centennial Park, and then worked through the night to ensure that all Festival participants were safely accounted for. Diana co-produced the ceremony and festival on the Mall marking the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian, bringing together the largest and most diverse assemblage of Native people in history to celebrate not only the museum, but also the continuity of long-lived cultures. She co-produced the national reunion to mark the dedication of the World War II Memorial, enabling members of the "greatest generation" to convey their experiences—in their own words, songs, and stories—to a younger generation.

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monies of Festival participants. Wrote one:

Being part of the Folklife Festival was for me a peak experience. So much sharing, so many tales and adventures. Meeting the dancers, musicians, diplomats and just plain people at the Festival on equal grounds was a once in a lifetime experience. I left the Festival with gratefulness and humility. Thank you, thank you Smithsonian, thank you America.

The "thanks" in this one letter could be magnified by the thousands to join numerous other accolades embroidered in cloth, carved in wood, and voiced for Diana's work. But in her unassuming, modest way she would shun the credit. She has been a consummate team player, always putting the spotlight on the folks who most deserve the attention.

As her partner for the past two decades, and as a member of that fabulous team of dedicated and wonderfully talented professionals, I and my colleagues, along with thousands of Festival participants, volunteers, supporters, collaborators, and a grateful public, wish Diana the very best in the coming years as she increasingly and deservedly spends more time with her loving family and her beautiful grandchildren. I remain confident that come Festival time next year, we will—and indeed always will—find her with us on the National Mall.

Richard Kurin is the Smithsonian Institution's Under Secretary for History, Art, and Culture. He served as director of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage from 1988 to 2008.

His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama, greets Diana Parker just before addressing fifty thousand people attending the program on Tibetan culture at the 2000 Folklife Festival. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution