

A Couple Dedicated to the Underserved

HONORING A LIFE WELL-LIVED



Donald and Gerri Sykes

Donald and Gerri Sykes were lifelong advocates for human services and champions for the underserved. Natives of Milwaukee, the couple dedicated their personal and professional careers to ensuring no one was left behind. When Donald was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 2013, Gerri's focus shifted as she became his caregiver until he lost his battle with the disease in 2017.

Signs of Alzheimer's

"Hind sight is always 20/20, and once he was diagnosed, many little things all made sense," Gerri shared. "Several things caught my attention. I went to borrow money from his wallet and he had five \$100 bills. I wondered why he had so much cash on him. I took all the money to see if he would notice and he never said a word. Donald had also been paying all the bills. Once I opened a bill and saw that it had not only not been paid, but we were paying high finance charges. When I confronted him, he just said that it was fine and we had the money, so not to worry."

"Also, Donald had been going to his doctor's appointments alone and always came home with a clean bill of health. Once I started going with him, I realized the doctor wasn't asking him any questions or listening to, what I thought, were warning signs of dementia. I immediately switched doctors and went to a geriatric specialist."

A Caregiver Message

"I'm grateful Donald had a relatively short journey with Alzheimer's, but it takes a tremendous toll on caregivers," Gerri shared. "I want others to know that they are not alone on this journey. It's so important to know that there are resources out there to support you. The Alzheimer's Association provided support for us when we needed it most. Donald and I both participated in Alzheimer's Association support groups, which were very beneficial. And one of his favorite things was the Alzheimer's Association Memories in the Making Program. We grew up during the era of 'beatniks,' and artistic self-expression. Donald fancied himself a beatnik – he did a little bit of art, poetry and painting. It gave him great joy. Donald also attended several adult day programs, which he really enjoyed, and provided a break for me."

"The other piece of advice I would offer is to take care of yourself," Gerri said. "It's important you have some alone time where you're not acting as the caregiver. People always offered to help me out and I took advantage of it. It was helpful to be very specific when friends offered. For instance, I may ask someone to stay with Donald for two hours while I went out. People can't read your mind, so tell them what would be most helpful."



**Memories in the Making
Donald and his son**

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Honoring Donald's Legacy

"I am thrilled to be an Honorary Co-Chair for the Alzheimer's Association Gala," Gerri said. "This cause is near and dear to my heart and I want to advocate for others like Donald. He led a wonderful life and was dedicated to his career. He felt deeply that people should have a better life. He was working to make sure people could get jobs and training for jobs."

Donald Sykes was a lifelong champion of human services and workforce. He was a trailblazer and a champion for the poor. His impact on Milwaukee and nationwide was felt by many. His career included:

- **Milwaukee Area Workforce Investment Board** where he served as CEO for seven years. His goal was to focus on Milwaukee County workforce investment programs, development and training. He once said, "I'm here to figure out how to create a workforce that meets the needs of existing companies in Milwaukee."
- **Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Office of Community Relations** where he served as a Director under the Clinton Administration. He managed the development of a nationally recognized employment program and welfare and anti-poverty demonstration programs.
- **Social Development Commission** which he led for two decades (1968 - 1988), building Milwaukee County's largest anti-poverty agency. Their mission was to empower people with the resources to move beyond poverty.

Carrying the Torch

Gerri continues as a community leader and advocate in Milwaukee. She is passionate about protecting the public and promoting progress. For nearly a decade she was a first grade teacher and then for over two decades worked for the State of Wisconsin as a licensing regulation specialist. In her work she helped to make sure facilities, such as nursing homes and daycares, followed all state regulations.

She continues to be dedicated to service and faith. She is a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha, Inc., The Links, Inc. and The Girl Friends, Inc. and has held offices and served on various committees in all organizations over the years. She is also an active member of St. Mark AME Church.



Walk to End Alzheimer's



Great Wall of China

