

## 2026 ALUMNI ACHIEVEMENT HONOREE

### *Valerie van Heest* — CLASS OF 1978

Valerie Olson van Heest has devoted her life to interpreting Great Lakes maritime history and shipwrecks to help preserve the region's historical record. Although she began her professional career in Chicago after earning a degree in Architectural Design, her true calling grew from an early passion for scuba diving, a sport she first embraced as a teenager while attending New Trier East High School.



A pivotal moment occurred when van Heest encountered a group of divers, archaeologists, and historians who were documenting a shipwreck in Lake Michigan. Recognizing the value of her architectural drafting skills, the team invited her to participate in the project, an experience that launched a new career path. She co-founded the Underwater Archaeological Society of Chicago, and over the next decade led major projects documenting significant Chicago shipwrecks while becoming a public speaker on maritime history.

After marrying Jack van Heest and relocating to West Michigan, the couple co-founded the Michigan Shipwreck Research Association, expanding her work to include the search for long-lost vessels. Since 2000, the Association has located more than 20 historic shipwrecks and documented dozens of others in Lake Michigan. These discoveries led Valerie to write numerous articles, eight books, present hundreds of public lectures, and appear on numerous television documentaries. She also cofounded the exhibit design firm Lafferty van Heest & Associates, which has created dozens of maritime and history museum exhibits.

Her contributions have earned literary awards and national recognition, including induction into the Women Divers Hall of Fame, the Joyce C. Hayward Award for Historical Interpretation, and selection as Maritime Historian of the Year by the Detroit Marine Historical Society in 2025, the first woman to receive that honor in the organization's 56-year history.

Valerie credits Mr. Clint Carlstrom, her senior year architectural drafting teacher at New Trier, with instilling the confidence that enabled her to pursue leadership roles in the then male-dominated fields of architecture and archaeology. She also credits her New Trier education with fostering curiosity and a lifelong love of learning, qualities that allowed her to thrive well beyond the boundaries of her formal training. She is most proud of her two accomplished daughters, who also enjoy scuba diving. More information can be found at [valerievanheest.com](http://valerievanheest.com).

