

[grandforksherald.com](https://www.grandforksherald.com)

Northwest Minnesota Arts Council announces annual awards for area artists | Grand Forks Herald

Written By: Pamela D. Knudson |

5-6 minutes

The Northwest Minnesota Arts Council has announced recipients of its annual awards.

They are Rob Burkel, of Thief River Falls, the Northwest Artist of the Year; Bruce Piersol, of Red Lake Falls, Minn., the Arts Advocate of the Year; and Joe Wavra, of Red Lake Falls, the 2020 Northwest Minnesota Star Artist of the Year.

Artists in a seven-county area -- Kittson, Marshall, Norman, Pennington, Polk, Red Lake and Roseau -- are eligible to receive the awards.

Burkel, who has served as Thief River Falls Area Community Theater's (TRFACT) board president, has directed, produced and acted in numerous theatrical

productions in the area. He also has been a cast member in the theater's Radio Readers Theater and is a Lincoln High School speech team coach and one-act play director.

A member of the Northwest Regional Library Board, Burkel has been instrumental in bringing the Fargo-Moorhead Opera to Thief River Falls the past two years.



“(He) is the backbone of our local theater,” said TRFACT Director Jane Anderson, in a news release. “His decades of hard work, phenomenal talent and dedication to theater arts make him truly deserving of this award. In every capacity, Rob is an asset to the theater.”

His greatest contribution to the theater "is his ability to act and bring characters to life," Anderson said.

The Northwest Artist of the Year Award is given to recognize artists who stand out in terms of artistry. The awardee receives \$500. Funding for the award is provided by the McKnight Foundation.

As Arts Advocate of the Year, Piersol, a long-time school band director, is recognized for leading his bands as they marched on the streets and football fields, as well as performances of concert, jazz and ensemble music in school and public settings.

As a teacher, he was dedicated to connecting his students to the community as much as possible, said Mara Hanel, NWMAC director, in a news release.

“He arranged for his students to play around town at the senior center, upstairs at the courthouse and at community events, including Summerfest,” Hanel said.

Piersol, who is retired, continues his involvement in music by playing in the University of Minnesota Crookston Community Band, coordinating and singing in a Red Lake Falls community choir and organizing and playing in the brass quintet, Windblown.

“Bruce brings music to people who otherwise might not be able to get out and enjoy it,” said Briana Ingraham, NWMAC board chairwoman. “He has done so much to ensure people of all ages are exposed to and enjoy music.”

The Arts Advocate of the Year Award is presented to recognize area arts advocates who have distinguished themselves as volunteers. The awardee receives \$500. Funding for the award is provided by the McKnight Foundation.

As Star Artist of the Year, Wavra is recognized for his lifetime achievement in wood carving. A self-taught chain-saw carver and owner of Klondike Carvings, he has had no formal training, Hanel said.

Wavra, who started carving 15 years ago with small hand tools and progressed to chainsaws, has been a full-time carver for five years.

A prolific and community-minded artist, Wavra has created many carvings for communities in the region, including benches on trails in Red Lake Falls and sculptures and trolls throughout Thief River Falls. He has been one of the organizers of Summer Fest.

“He’s always willing to donate carvings to fundraising events for families in need or community events,” Ingraham said.

Red Lake Falls Mayor Allen Bertilrud said Wavra’s artwork “has added a unique beauty to our little town -- making art accessible to the young, the old and everyone in between. He draws on our cultural history and memorializes it for the next generation. He has done so much over his long career to bring our past, our heritage and our northwest Minnesota wildlife to life in his sculptures.”

The Northwest Star Artist Award, a lifetime achievement award, is given to recognize artists who stand out in terms of artistry. The awardee receives \$5,000, which is provided

by the McKnight Foundation.