

Night honours arts award winners

BY ANNA BOROWIECKI
Staff Writer

Unlike the Oscars, there were no dramatic slaps at the 11th annual Mayor's Celebration of the Arts awards presentations held at Campbell Park's new City Arts Space on Thursday, April 7, only tongue-in-cheek jokes from presenters.

In fact, everything went smoothly from the first pre-show notes country singer-songwriter Hailey Benedict sang, to Carol Watamaniuk's touching speech as Lifetime Achievement in the Arts Award recipient.

Watamaniuk, a bold mixed-media jewelry designer and president of the Visual Arts Studio Association (VASA), is also renowned for her love of storytelling. Jokingly, she recounted an affectionate and humorous story about being chastised for delivering long-winded speeches. Watamaniuk vowed to keep her acceptance speech short, and simply thanked the many individuals who supported her "from the bottom of my heart."

But in a short video shown immediately after the speech, friends and co-workers saluted her contributions. Heidi Alther said, "I can't think of culture without thinking of Carol," and Deirdre Allen added, "We wouldn't have the state-of-the-art facilities without Carol. She's always been there as a leader."

Watamaniuk was honoured as one of St. Albert's most influential arts advocates and a true arts champion. She initiated the first municipal cultural department in Western Canada, and developed the St. Albert Children's Theatre, as well as the Art Gallery of St. Albert's children's visual arts programs. As a city councillor with 12 years' experience, Watamaniuk continued to push for recognition of every city arts guild and fine arts program.

Brass band kickoff

The loud and energetic Brasstastics, a New Orleans-styled brass band, set the evening's tone, marching from the back of the audience to the stage. As the five-some paraded beside the audience, CTV anchor Carmen Leibel and her brother Paul Woida, a professional musician and looper, took on the tricky job of hosting.

Mayor Cathy Heron presented one of the evening's first awards for Established Artist to Ryan Arcand, a singer, dancer, and Cree speaker. In addition, he makes drums and rattles, and dedicates his life to preserving Indigenous culture.

After the ceremony, Arcand, who is originally from Good Fish Lake but has lived in St. Albert for 15 years, said, "It's very humbling. It truly is. It was heart-felt, loving, and endearing. Thank you so much. I truly appreciate it with all my heart and good luck to next year's recipients."

The Arts Champion Award this year was a tie between St. Albert Chamber Music Society and visual artist Deirdre Allen. She previously received an Arts Leadership Award.

For the last six years, Allen has served on the St. Albert Place Visual Arts Council and for 30 years has worked as the City's visual arts co-ordinator. She played a large role in instituting Art in Public Places and has raised \$203,900 for St. Albert Place Visual Arts Studio and its various guilds.

"I'm excited and humbled. I like to work behind the scenes. For me it's not about the award. But it is special to be nominated and recognized," said Allen. "I like to think of myself as someone who facilitates success. I want to do things that help people realize their dreams and be successful."

Nancy Watt, a driving force behind St. Albert Chamber Music Society, was



GLEN FREEMAN/photo

Mayor Cathy Heron, right, presents Carol Watamaniuk with a Lifetime Achievement Award for her uncompromising service to the arts community. The presentation was part of the 11th Annual Mayor's Celebration of the Arts on April 7.

unable to attend; however, Heather Dolman, the society website and communications director, accepted the award.

"[The society] had been up for an award before and this was an overall surprise," said Dolman. "It was a lovely event and wonderful to see everyone again. These are my people, and in the past, I've seen them in so many different capacities. It was lovely to see them again after an absence."

There were 27 nominees in six categories. What stood out sharply was half the recipients failed to attend the ceremonies. Jacob Kryger, a percussionist and recipient of the Emerging Artist category was in British Columbia studying for a master's degree in music.

Also absent were singer-songwriter Andrea Shipka, recipient of the Youth Artist Award, and Karen May-Healey, a St. Albert educator who empowers students in visual arts, performing arts, and spoken word poetry.

On Friday, after the hoopla had died

down, Watamaniuk said, "There was so much attention, I felt completely overwhelmed and completely appreciated."

As an arts leader whose true passion is the visual arts, Watamaniuk is especially proud of visual arts programs and exhibitions that have encouraged young artists and designers, as well as the Art in Public Places program and VASA's art program for the disabled.

Even as City funding tightens in the arts, the former politician continues to fight for them. To those in politics who make life-changing decisions, Watamaniuk encourages their "understanding of the value of a balanced community."

"Don't get me wrong. I support sports. But there are children who can't express themselves through sports, and if their pursuit in the arts is looked down upon, it's damaging to the child. Lots of kids do both. It doesn't mean one or the other, or one against the other. It just means offering a well-rounded community."

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