

# An avoider of personal glory is thrust into limelight

County recognizes GH woman's commitment to art

CALLIE WHITE  
of the Gateway

If you ask Karen Pew how she won the Pierce County Art Commission's 2002 Margaret K. Williams Award for Support of the Arts over a field of 22 other nominations, she'll say she didn't.

"We did; the Peninsula Youth Orchestra, it's more than me," Pew said. "It's (the orchestra) a family, and it's one of those grass-roots things."

According to Marlette Buchanan of the Art Commission, Pew received two nominations, one from her husband, Paul, and one anonymous nomination. Still, she said, a bounty of nominations does not ensure the award.

"We have people who are nominated six or seven times that have never won the award," she said. "It's very competitive."

Pew was chosen for her dedication to supplementing the musical education of peninsula youth and for beginning and overseeing a project that continues to grow.

"It comes down to how she serves the community she is in, it doesn't matter how large," Buchanan said. The awards ceremony will be held Nov. 7 at the Washington State Historical Society.

Pew is modest about her achievement, preferring to stay behind the scenes. Out of the glow of the limelight, Pew is the one that labors to make the Peninsula Youth Orchestra run like a well-oiled machine. She paves a way for musicians to get involved with kids, letting the music that springs from the encounter, not a public relations flak, speak to the community at large.

Her friends say that Pew's reluctance to grab the spotlight is typical.

"It doesn't surprise me," said Bonnie Hampton, a



Karen Pew in one music-filled corner of her home.

Gateway photo/Robert Davis

friend and a volunteer with PYO. "She is involved with art out of what it can do for the life of the community, not where can it get her in the world."

That seems to contradict Pew's own version of event: Pew founded the PYO almost five years ago out of, she said, "selfishness."

"I wanted to hear chamber music," she said.

So Pew did some research around the peninsulas, and discovered that there wasn't a single string instrument group program in the local schools. She called up a few music teachers and found out that there were about 40 kids taking private lessons for string instruments that never had played in a group.

"To me, that's like taking soccer lessons once a week by yourself and never having the chance to play with a team," Pew said. "I was surprised by how many there were."

Plus, Pew added, "I was privileged to know that there were master musicians in the community that were commuting to Tacoma and Seattle and were unable to do this in their own community."

Pew wanted to bring the excitement of music to the peninsulas. She recalled a story she heard from husband Paul Pew; he was traveling in East Germany and in an auditorium one night the East Germans began to sing the national anthem — not the one sanc-

## Want to get involved?

If you would like to be a part of the Peninsula Youth Orchestra as a player or volunteer, please call 857-8062.

tioned by the Soviet regime, either.

"Machine guns came out," she said. "But people joined in and sang; there was something electric in the air and it was there because of music."

In an attempt to bring some of that electricity to her community, Karen Pew got to work.

A few arrangements and a mountain of phone calls later, Pew was organizing small groups of children to play in ensembles with musician directors.

Immediately, Pew knew she had created something of a masterpiece.

"The atmosphere from the very beginning was wonderful," she said. "I was surprised to see how much comradery there was between students versus the normal competition you see."

The joy of making music was infectious, not just for the students, but for the teachers, who would get together to play.

"The music that was coming out of the directors when they were playing was extraordinary," Pew recalled.

Pew has remained committed to the PYO because she knows the power of music.

"Why I work hard at this is because music and art brought me safely through what could have been difficult teenage years," she said.

Music, she said, is an easy conduit for teenagers especially to access their feelings. It is also an effective means of teaching discipline and diligence.

"They learn to wait for their turn, they learn to fit their part in with the rest of the players," Pew said. "You get life skills when you experience the ups and downs in music."

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## Pew: Found safety, inspira- tion in music

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"Music is a beautiful picture of how dissonance resolves into consonance."

Pew also recalled that the best times she had in high school, along with some of the greatest opportunities, were in band. As a flute player in the Tacoma Symphony Orchestra and her school band, she was able to go to England and Scotland to play.

"All my high points in school were in music," she said.

At home, her father was the president of the Tacoma Youth Symphony Association and her mother would wake up before Pew or her siblings, who would come downstairs to the smell of breakfast and the strains of classical music.

"My mother would create this beautiful atmosphere for young people," Pew recalled.

Hampton said that Pew has made her home a deeply beautiful sanctuary for her children as well, all three of whom are extremely involved in music. She added that Pew's artistic and creative bent makes it possible for her to see the artistry in others.

"She sees potential in other people and she encourages and draws that out of other people — she doesn't expect anyone to pay attention to her," Hampton said.

Pew's early exposure to music, she said, got her "addicted."

"I knew I'd never give it up."

Today, Pew still plays flute and wind controller (a kind of synthesizer) with a band called "Not Your Dog." She said that her role is minor in the group and lauded the musicianship of the other members of the band.

Pew is also an accomplished oil painter whose landscapes and still lifes are inspired by Russian Impressionism and full of serene mysticism.

"The arts shows us the essence of a culture," she said. "The arts are one of the most important building blocks, and when you don't have arts then the future is sinking to violence and chaos because there aren't any means of expression."

Since her dream of a string orchestra has flourished, Pew envisions an even grander scheme. "I want this community to become a destination for chamber music. Not Seattle, not Tacoma. Here."

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