

To: Grand Rapids Arts & Culture Commission
420 North Pokegama Avenue
Grand Rapids, MN 55744

Email: Tom Pagel, City Administrator
tpagel@ci.grand-rapids.mn.us

Date: March 8, 2021

Re: **NOMINATION OF Lee & Mary Jo Jess for 2021 Mayor's Arts Award**

The 2021 Mayor's Arts Award is granted to an area business or individual(s) that made a significant impact on the arts in the Grand Rapids area. That includes supporting and promoting local arts organizations, programs and individual artists through funding, advocacy and community outreach. An outstanding candidate for this recognition would be Lee and Mary Jo Jess.

Lee and Mary Jo arrived in Grand Rapids in 1967 and immediately set about making serious marks in our arts community. They became involved with the then-new summer arts festival "Mississippi Melodie Showboat", a variety music event launched in 1965 that featured community performers arriving to the stage on the banks of the Mississippi River singing from a paddlewheel boat. The Jess's performed on the Showboat Stage frequently over the following fifty-some years, and Mary Jo went on to become a key member of the "Paddle Wheelers" to continue productions when the founder Lois Gildemeister was forced to bow out of directing.

In 1982, Lee Jess joined with Ernie Jacobson to create Tall Timber Days. This early August, three-day event continues to this day celebrating the lumber traditions that began in our area in the 1800's. Infusing the arts into the festival, with musical performers including the Applechords and other musicians, woodcarvers, chainsaw artists, arts and craft vendors and a wide array of food vendors, the celebration concludes with a Sunday afternoon parade attended by thousands.

Meanwhile, Mary Jo has directed church choirs at both Zion Lutheran Church and Community Presbyterian Church (where she continues to direct while Lee sings in the choir).

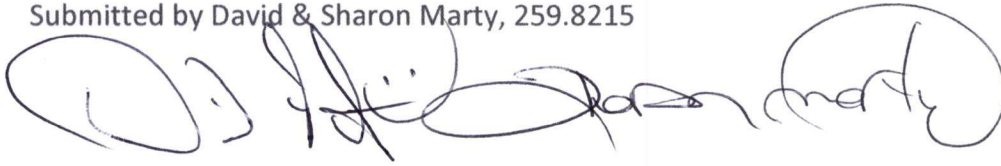
Lee and Mary Jo have been very active with the Grand Rapids Players through the years (see attached). Mary Jo has been involved with two major productions of "The Music Man", FOUR productions of "Amahl and the Night Visitors", a memorable production of "Chicago" and a stunning production of "Mama Mia", and many MANY more.

One of the gifts of the Jess's is that they have never been content to wait for projects to come along. Mary Jo was frequently invited to participate and help create fun and fund-raising collaborations for the stage including "Nonsense", "Forever Plaid" and "Forever...Patsy" and more.

And the Jess contribution is not limited to performances and special events. Lee and Mary Jo have been active financial donors, underwriters and sponsors for many performances and events in Grand Rapids, especially through the Reif Center. Notably, Mary Jo was Co-Chair of the Reif Renovation Committee that met every Monday morning at 7 AM for more than two years to raise funds and realize the \$10.4 Million upgrade.

We are indebted to Lee and Mary Jo Jess, and they richly deserve to be recognized with the 2021 Mayor's Arts Award.

Submitted by David & Sharon Marty, 259.8215

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David & Sharon Marty", written in a cursive style. The signature is positioned below the typed name and phone number.



Grand Rapids Players proudly supports the nomination of Dr. Lee and Mary Jo Jess for the 2021 Mayor's Arts Award.

Lee and Mary Jo have continually provided both artistic and financial support for numerous arts endeavors since their arrival in Grand Rapids in the mid 1960's.

Specifically, their contributions to our organization are too many to recount. From performing to directing to board positions and financial support, their belief in our mission in the world of theatre arts has been truly strengthened through their presence.

Grand Rapids Players first met them when they joined the cast in *The Moon is Blue* in 1965. Soon after, Mary Jo became a familiar face and not just as an artistic director but a musical director as well! She continued with us, predominantly as a music/artistic director, in widely-acclaimed productions that included *The Sound of Music*, *Damn Yankees*, *Chicago*, *Music Man*, and *Mama Mia!*, all the while Lee joining her with support where needed. But she did play some stellar roles in *Nunsense*, *Patsy Cline*, and *Chicago*, as of late. Together Lee and Mary Jo also created fund-raising collaboration opportunities between Grand Rapids Players and Reif Arts Council.

Lee and Mary Jo Jess believe in quality, collaboration, commitment and community in all that they do. We, in the greater Grand Rapids area, are richer for their presence and contributions to the arts.

Thank you for this opportunity,

Grand Rapids Players Executive Board and Director

Danielle Wilkes
Katy Lyak

John Deak
Stacy Jayne

Therese Conroy

Tom & Nancy Saxhaug

1301 Lakewood Lane
Grand Rapids MN 55744

March 10, 2021

Dear Awards Committee,

One cannot think of Lee and Mary Jo Jess without also associating words like “arts” or “cultural” or “community.” There is no other couple more deserving of the Mayor’s Arts Award in Grand Rapids.

We have known Lee and Mary Jo almost 50 years now. We’ve been privileged to sing with them in the Community Presbyterian Choir and the Grand Rapids Madrigals (Nancy). We’ve been active with Lee in community events (Tom). We’ve all been in Community Theatre together, most notably for 3 productions of the Nunsense musicals in the 1990’s.

Watching Mary Jo direct the choir is a joy and a revelation. She is unflappable. When a choir member was consistently out of key, rather than suggest the person drop out of choir, she offered to work with them before choir each week. It’s all about equal access and opportunity for Mary Jo, not who is most talented. We need more of that in all area of our lives.

I hope the awards committee will strongly consider honoring Lee and Mary Jo for the energy they have put into our community, and for strengthening the arts in Grand Rapids and the surrounding area.

Sincerely yours,

Tom & Nancy Saxhaug

VISIT GRAND RAPIDS IT'S IN MINNESOTA'S NATURE



Letter of Support: Lee & Mary Jo Jess for 2021 Mayor's Arts Award

March 10, 2021


This letter of support is for the Mayor's Arts Award nomination for Lee and Mary Jo Jess submitted by David Marty.

Since Lee and Mary Jo arrived in Grand Rapids in 1968 they have shown support of the art and culture of the community. They have been involved with many art/culture events such as: summer arts festival "Mississippi Melodie Showboat", and Tall Timber Days. Both have been volunteers for the Grand Rapids Players and church choirs. Lee and Mary Jo have been active financial donors, underwriters and sponsors for many performances and events in Grand Rapids, especially through the Reif Center.

Lee and Mary Jo Jess have celebrated their love of the arts by purchasing local art and displaying it in their home, their business Dr. Jess Dental and giving it away as gifts. They have also underwritten exhibits at MacRostie Arts Center. They have always shown support for public art in the downtown business district as well as the river trail.

I ask that you consider Lee and Mary Jo Jess as the 2021 Mayor's Arts Award recipients.

Thank you,



Megan Christianson
Executive Director
Visit Grand Rapids



March 8, 2021

Grand Rapids Arts & Culture Commission
420 North Pokegama
Grand Rapids, MN 55744
Attn: Tom Pagel

Dear Mr. Pagel:

It is my pleasure to submit this letter in support of a recent nomination for the Mayor's Art Award 2021. Nominees, Lee and Mary Jo Jess, are long-time avid art supporters in our community.

As the director of the Reif Arts Council and Myles Reif Performing Arts Center, I have had the pleasure of interacting with Lee and Mary Jo through live performing arts events and arts education events in Grand Rapids. They have been incredibly generous supporters of their time and resources for the benefit of arts and culture. The Reif has been on the receiving end of their generosity and deep knowledge of the arts through many hours of serving on the committee for the renovation of the Myles Reif PAC and by attending countless events in the theater.

Lee and Mary Jo never ask for recognition or thanks for their involvement with the Reif Arts Council and Reif Center. They are true supporters of the arts in our community and we are truly thankful.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Shantel Dow". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Shantel Nelson Dow
Executive Director

Mary Jo and Lee Jess are great supporters of live theater performances; Mary Jo has directed many and both have performed. The Presbyterian Church values Mary Jo's choral direction and her lovely voice even when she was singing dressed as a Catholic Nun. Oh how the community loved that performance at the Reif Center! On another note, how many families have two full size Grand Pianos in their living room? It was delightful to experience the sound as we visited their home. And not to be outdone, Dr. Lee's patients may have to listen to a drill while in the dentist chair; but, we also have the wonderful experience of seeing local, original art work on the walls. We as a community are truly privileged to have such a talented couple, who appreciate and support the Arts and Artists, and are so willing share their own artistic talents for our enjoyment. Thank you.

Congratulations to Mary Jo and Lee Jess from Mary and Mike Ives



March 12, 2021

Dear Grand Rapids Arts & Culture Commission:

Please consider awarding Mary Jo Jess, Lee Jess, and the Dr. Lee Jess Dental Practice this year's Mayor's Arts Award.

Not only have Mary Jo and Dr. Lee contributed aggressively in a financial way to the arts in our local community, but they have also provided leadership regarding so many community events and arts experiences. Our local Showboat, the Grand Rapids Players, and the Reif Arts Council to name a few.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution has been their willingness to participate and perform on our various community stages. By doing this, they have provided this most valuable gift. The gift of an outstanding example to countless people of all ages from our Grand Rapids local community and beyond.

Mary Jo and Lee have provided a strong positive effect on the arts in the Grand Rapids area. Their generosity and leadership will have a lasting impact on our city.

Respectfully,

Dan Margo, M.D.
Itasca Surgical Clinic
Lakewood Surgery Center

Letter of Support: Lee & Mary Jo Jess, Nominees for the 2021 Mayor's Art Award

March 12, 2021

Dear GRAAC Members,

I would like to offer a strong "second" to the nomination of Lee & Mary Jo Jess for the 2021 Mayor's Arts Award.

Lee and Mary Jo are truly an inspiration for their commitment to the arts in Grand Rapids. Not only have they been generous donors and underwriters of several local arts organizations, but volunteers, and participants as well. Their contributions have shaped the cultural and artistic fabric of our community for nearly 50 years and we are all richer for it.

In creating the Tall Timber Days Festival, Lee Jess (along with Ernie Jacobson) helped reestablish a sense of pride in our historic roots as a forestry town. We continue to celebrate this proud history each year through theatrical lumberjack shows and regionally produced artisan crafts. After 30 years of involvement his energy for this event remains. Similarly, Mary Jo's work with the long-running Mississippi Melodie Showboat also helped reconnect us to that heritage through dance and song. These events put Grand Rapids on the map as an arts destination.

The Jess's have been at the center of an exceptional music tradition at Community Presbyterian Church (CPC), Mary Jo serving as music staff for several decades. She leads the adult Chancel Choir with great skill and passion, and Lee sings with the ensemble.

Furthermore, their participation with the Grand Rapids Player's and Reif Center have culminated with several of the most celebrated local productions of the last 30 years including The Sound of Music, Nunsense, Forever Plaid, Chicago, Music Man, and – most recently – Mamma Mia. Mary Jo's service as co-chair of the Reif Renovation Committee helped propel the organization to the completion of a \$10 million expansion in 2016. She was a fierce volunteer, donating countless hours over several years.

I have personally admired this couple for a lifetime. Their time and energy for the arts is always graciously given, and they never seek praise or recognition. I consider myself lucky to have worked with Mary Jo on her productions of Mamma Mia, Chicago, and Showboat. What spirit she has! I like to call her Grand Rapids' First Lady of Song, not just because she is a beautiful songstress herself, but because of how she nurtures the gift in others. I've watched her coach singers to new notes, and performers into roles they weren't sure they could play. She is always more than a director – she is a coach, advocate, and champion of others.

Lee and Mary Jo would be humbled by this award, but they deeply deserve it.

Sincerely,
Katie Benes

Grand Rapids Arts & Culture Commission
420 North Pokegama Avenue
Grand Rapids, MN 55744

March 7, 2021

Re: NOMINATION OF Lee & Mary Jo Jess for 2021 Mayor's Arts Award

To Whom It May Concern:

In the almost 30 years that I have lived in Grand Rapids two of the people I think of first when combining the ideas of the arts and the community are Lee and Mary Jo Jess. Their dedication to the advancement, production and support of a variety of types of arts has been constant and inspiring. I have worked with them in productions ranging from Tall Timber Days and Showboat to the Grand Rapids Players and the Reif Center. Not only do they bring enthusiasm to every project they are involved with, they bring expertise and a focus on excellence. To say our community is indebted to their leadership and drive would be an understatement.

It is my pleasure to write this letter of support for their nomination of this award. They are both highly deserving of our recognition and thanks.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Scott Shrimpton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending from the end.

Scott Shrimpton