

# Nicholls leaves on a high note



**Bud Nicholls is the 2022 winner of the Paris Gibson Award for service to the Great Falls community. For more than 40 years, Nicholls directed the Great Falls Municipal Band. TRACI ROSENBAUM/GREAT FALLS TRIBUNE**

## Award comes to director after 40 years with the Great Falls Municipal Band

**Traci Rosenbaum**

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There hasn't been a time when music wasn't a part of Bud Nicholls' life.

His grandmother was a piano player. She provided music at the dedication after Ulm Bridge was built. When that bridge wore out, she played for the new one, too. After the second one, she received a plaque from the governor that said, "To Mary Nicholls, built better to last longer." She was 105 when she died.

Nicholls' father owned Nicholls Music starting in 1947, and Nicholls remembers growing up with the business. He is the third generation of his family to be in the Great Falls Municipal Band, where he played trumpet.

And for the past 40-plus years, Nicholls has directed that band, earning him the 2022 Paris Gibson Award for service to the Great Falls community.

To be eligible for the Paris Gibson award, a nominee must be a current Great Falls resident who has provided significant impact to the city of Great Falls, provided leadership for the community through volunteerism and performed selfless action for the better-

ment of the community.

Nominees are chosen by past Paris Gibson Award winners.

Nicholls said he didn't know he was nominated, but his wife, Linda Fuller, got a heads-up before the actual ceremony.

"It was nice. I don't know that I thought that I deserved that big an award because I'm doing what I like to do," he said. "Every summer that's what we did. You know, the Municipal Band was such an integral part of me growing up and playing in it and being involved in it that directing it was just probably just because I got old enough or something."

Nicholls, 82, finally passed on the band's baton last year. It has taken the work of five to seven people to fill his shoes.

The Municipal band, formerly the Black Eagle Band, has been around since 1896. When former Gov. Edwin Norris adopted the state song, "Montana," in 1910, the band was the first to play it for the public at the fairgrounds in Helena.

When composer John Philip Sousa came to Great Falls in the mid-1920s, the band — including Nicholls' dad —

played for him.

Nicholls joined the band in 1955 when you had to be in a musicians' union to participate. He said he had a shot at being the band's director in 1975, but he wasn't able to do it. In 1980, he finally gave in and took over.

The city of Great Falls funded the band for a while, but Nicholls said that stopped eight or 10 years ago. After that, its fate was up in the air.

"All of a sudden," said Nicholls, "I had about three or four people phone up just saying, 'Don't quit, we'll make sure you get funded,' and they gave us more money than we ever got from the city."

Since that time, the band has been completely donor-funded. Of course, Nicholls' monetary portion of the Paris Gibson Award went right back into the band.

Up to 50 people play in the band at any given time, Nicholls said, including Great Falls Symphony players, local players and high school kids. On Wednesday nights in the summer, they draw big crowds to the Gibson Park bandshell with their upbeat performances.

"We've got some high school kids that are just incredible," Nicholls said, adding that many former players went on the careers in music. "I always told

**See NICHOLLS, Page 2A**

# Nicholls

Continued from Page 1A

them if this is what you like to do, then go for it. You know, you can always find a way to make a living. Don't tell yourself to do something you don't want to do."

In addition to the band, Nicholls made his living through music.

He said he had taught music in Brady, Fort Benton, Belt, Seattle and

Great Falls.

"Music was the only thing I ever liked to do or anything that I was half-way good at that I could do something with," Nicholls said.

It must've worked because Nicholls said he put his five kids through college that way.

These days, John Gemberling and Dusty Molyneaux are the band's two associate directors, and the conducting torch is being passed to multiple different people.

"I'm the director emeritus now, of the band," Nicholls joked. "It's just fun, and it's fun for me to be able to share some of this with the new guys, too."

*Criminal justice reporter Traci Rosenbaum reports on law enforcement issues for the Tribune. Have ideas or questions for Traci on her beat? Reach her at [trosenbaum@greatfalls-tribune.com](mailto:trosenbaum@greatfalls-tribune.com).*

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