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Friends of Lorine Niedecker earn Tourism Counts honor

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The Fort Atkinson Area Chamber of Commerce presented the Friends of Lorine Niedecker with its “Tourism Counts” Award during the organization’s fall open house Tuesday. Above, chamber tourism manager Olivia Ault, left, presents the award to Friends of Lorine Niedecker member Amy Lutzke, center, and President Ann Engelman.

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The Fort Atkinson Area Chamber of Commerce on Tuesday recognized the efforts of an organization that has worked tirelessly to spread the word about one of Fort Atkinson’s — and the poetry world’s — most hidden treasures.

The Friends of Lorine Niedecker was presented the “Tourism Counts” award during the chamber’s fall open house at the Soulful Toad.

The award goes to an individual, business or organization that, by its leadership and efforts, has made a difference in promoting and developing tourism in the area. Chamber tourism manager Olivia Ault said the name of the award reflects the local Tourism Commission's desire to impress upon the community that tourism does count in the bigger economic picture, and that it does impact the vitality of the city.

"This year's recipients have raised the profile of Fort Atkinson's most famous poet with the creation of an annual festival, a permanent exhibit at the Hoard Historical Museum, art installations at each public school building, and a poetry corner in downtown Fort Atkinson, all of which draw visitors to our community," Ault said in presenting the award.

The Friends of Lorine Niedecker was formed after the 2003 centennial celebration of the late Blackhawk Island poet's life. This three-day event in Milwaukee and Fort Atkinson created a strong interest in increasing Niedecker's visibility in her hometown and native state.

As president of the organization, Ann Engelman has been a key piece of the success of the Friends of Lorine Niedecker, Ault pointed out.

She shared how former museum director Sue Hartwick recalled Engelman convincing her to present a paper on Niedecker at the '03 centennial.

"It's hard to say no to Ann," Hartwick stated. "The museum had just opened an exhibit room dedicated to Niedecker on the occasion of her 100th birthday. Hundreds of people attended the three-day conference from all over the world. It was a real eye-opener for me. Under Ann's leadership, the Friends of Lorine Niedecker have kept this type of exciting interest alive with the Niedecker Poetry Conference held here in Fort Atkinson every fall since 2009."

Ault also read a remark by another devotee, Amy Lutzke, reference librarian at the Dwight Foster Public Library in Fort Atkinson.

"Literature and art have long been human endeavors that enhance the lives of a community," Lutzke wrote. "Lorine's poetry belongs to everyone in Fort Atkinson, yet her words are a draw to a diverse group of people from around the globe who admire her poetry and are fascinated with her life here."

"The Friends of Lorine Niedecker maintain and manage the poet's body of work, and the group has successfully placed the poet's Blackhawk Island cabin home on the National Register of Historic Places," Ault said. "All of these accomplishments have aided in the development of tourism in Fort Atkinson."

Engelman accepted the award on behalf of the nonprofit organization.

“Fish, fowl, flood. Waterlily mud ... my Life,” Engelman said, quoting arguably the most familiar line of verse from the late poet Niedecker. “I didn’t expect this (award). I was told that I needed to be with my husband from 5 until 7 (p.m.) today, and when I walked into the (Café) Carpe, I got a corsage, and I didn’t know what was happening. So what a surprise.

“But who would know that a little-known poet who was born and raised on the other side of the tracks in Fort Atkinson would become a destination and also an economic driver,” Engelman said, adding that the second part of the statewide Niedecker poetry festival took place last weekend in Fort Atkinson.

Writers from around the world — China, Ohio, Seattle and New York — were here and now are ambassadors for Fort Atkinson who “love coming to our town,” Engelman said.

“Not to be ignored, thank you, (state Sen.) (Steve) Nass and Rep. (Cody) Horlacher for introducing a bill that designated May 12, Lorine’s birthday, as the state holiday — Lorine Niedecker Day — so we appreciate that,” Engelman said. “Our businesses have been supportive of us, especially for all of you who have gone up Main Street and seen Scotty’s Eat-Mor who’s had their own versions of both of those (Niedecker Sherman Avenue murals) poems on the board. And also to the Daily Jefferson County Union, which just has our back all the time and has helped us in the promotion of Lorine’s life and also of her work.”

She said it was an honor as a nonprofit to be recognized by all of Fort Atkinson’s business leaders at Tuesday’s chamber event.

“The destination of our poetry corner ... I believe we are the only one in the state to have a poetry corner,” Engelman indicated. “We know that it brings people. In fact, we did hear that on Saturday that Creamery 201 had a big wedding, and the entire wedding party went across the street to have their picture taken in front of the poetry wall.

“So I thank you for your recognition,” she concluded. “This means a great deal. We have worked very hard over the last 10 years and will continue to do so, and continue to make Fort Atkinson a destination place worthy of coming to.”

Rep. Horlacher then presented Engelman with a Legislative citation in honor of her and her group’s tireless efforts to promote and preserve the legacy of Lorine Niedecker.

“This is actually kind of special because, as Ann said, Sen. Nass and I put forth a resolution for Lorine Niedecker Day,” Horlacher said. “There is Wisconsin Eye coverage of me reciting a poem out there somewhere. So I’m sure you guys are all going to go check that out.

“But what a cool thing to have right here in Fort Atkinson, and put us on the map for that (Lorine Niedecker Day) and many other things,” he added.

In reading the joint citation, the representative acknowledged that the Friends of Lorine Niedecker has played an important tourism role in Fort Atkinson since 2003, and has “raised the profile of Fort Atkinson’s most famous poet with the creation of an annual festival, a permanent exhibit at the Hoard Historical Museum, art installations in each public school building, and poetry corner in downtown Fort Atkinson – all of which draw visitors to our community.”

Moreover, he said, the Friends of Lorine Niedecker has successfully placed the poet’s Blackhawk Island cabin home on the National Register of Historic Places, ensuring its future protection.

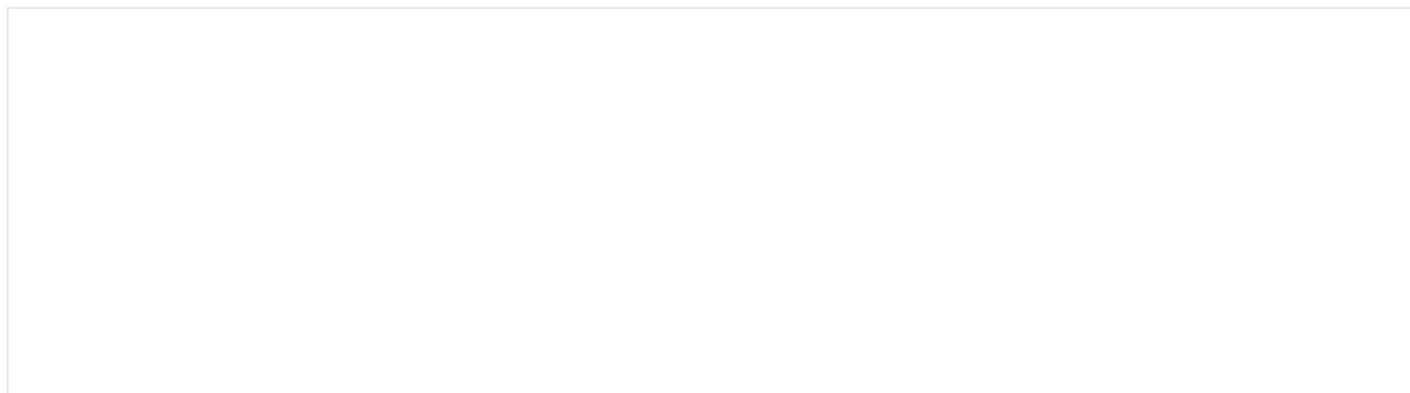
Additionally, Horlacher said, the Friends “maintain and manage the poet’s body of work which draws students, writers, artists, biographers to our local library and museum for research and inspiration.”

In accepting her award, Engelman thanked the representative and senator, but otherwise was left speechless.

Lorine Niedecker has been called a “poet of place” because her imagery is so grounded in the area where she lived. Acclaimed poet Basil Bunting called her “the Emily Dickinson of this century.”

A former Hoard’s Dairyman proofreader and Fort Memorial Hospital cleaning lady, she worked closely with her early mentor, Louis Zukofsky, founder of the Objectivist Movement, and was concerned with capturing the simple rhythms of the world around her.

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