



History of the Northwest Michigan Arts & Culture Network

The Northwest Michigan Arts & Culture Network (“the Network”) was formed in 2015 as an arts services organization to connect, support and advocate for those that create and drive arts and culture in northern Michigan. Originally incubated through fiscal sponsor Networks Northwest in Traverse City, the organization obtained 501c3 status in 2018.

***Mission:** The mission of the Northwest Michigan Arts & Culture Network is to harness the collective power of the creative sector to cultivate vibrant communities by strengthening the regional ecosystem that supports arts and culture.*

***Vision:** The Northwest Michigan Arts & Culture Network envisions communities that are resilient, dynamic, connected and growing, with a public that highly values arts, culture and the creative process as a means for entertainment, creative expression, viable careers, lifelong learning, open dialog, creating spaces and contributing to a robust economy. By harnessing the collective power of the arts, vibrant communities will be cultivated that reflect a strong cultural ecosystem with distinct characteristics demonstrating that Northwest Lower Michigan is a caring place where artists and people of all backgrounds, disciplines, interests and skill sets can lead an economically viable, fulfilled quality of life.*

Our Story: The Northwest Michigan Arts & Culture Network began convening in October 2015 as a grassroots regional endeavor linking individual artists, nonprofit arts and cultural organizations, creative entrepreneurs, community stakeholders and creative projects within Northwest Michigan’s ten primarily rural, underserved counties - Antrim, Benzie, Charlevoix, Emmet, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska, Leelanau, Manistee, Missaukee and Wexford (*also known as Michigan’s ‘Prosperity Region 2’*). It serves as a catalyst and connector to regional resources, relationships and opportunities not broadly known or inaccessible.

We believe that a healthy arts and culture ‘ecosystem’ – the interconnected organizations, individuals, and social and economic behaviors supporting the sector - creates conditions that allow arts, culture and the creative sector to thrive. We also believe by using a network approach to capacity building, those working together offer greater impact.

The Need: Geography, ruralization, seasonality and economic disparity create isolation and disconnects throughout northern Michigan, limiting access to resources, expertise and opportunities. Arts, culture and the creative sector are especially impacted by these regional forces as well as the funding challenges shared by many arts endeavors across the state. Individual artists and organizations often function in isolation from peers, best practices, economic opportunities and access to resources.



The impetus to create the Network grew from the above challenges as well as a significant service gap created in 2005 following dissolution of the Traverse Area Arts Council, which also served as the region's MCACA regranting agency. For ten years, there was no regional resource or umbrella entity to convene, connect or advocate for arts and culture and/or engage individual artists, arts and cultural organizations or creative businesses as a collective without conflict of interest. Dissolution resulted in lost access to arts funding, lost engagement with community leaders and economic drivers, reduced access to and funding for backbone services, and related under-resourcing. Volunteers tried to fill the void, but effectiveness was limited. The ecosystem supporting arts and culture became increasingly fragile and disconnected.

The MCACA regrant program was the only remaining regional link, especially in the Grand Traverse region. While regrant administration had shifted to the Traverse City-based foundation, Rotary Charities in 2008, all minigrant services including meeting match requirements was subcontracted to the regrant coordinator. The coordinator, using minigrants as a platform, played a significant role in maintaining ties with artists and organizations as well as offering technical services, engaging stakeholders and advocating for arts and culture. With less access to resources or a central arts council, the coordinator's role demanded greater regional convening, advocacy and service functions. These forces and stakeholder interest led to the Network's formation and the regrant coordinator assuming a dual role as network convener.

Growing the Network: Following are key benchmarks during the Network's short timeline:

- Northwest Michigan Arts & Culture Network forms October 2015 under the fiscal sponsorship of Networks Northwest, which also partners to aid with staff expertise, facilities and technology support.
- The first Northwest Michigan Arts & Culture Summit, a major regional convening to examine network opportunities, best practices and feasibility, was held at Interlochen Center for the Arts, February 2016, with a slate of state speakers and high turnout. Subsequent annual summits were held in Mays of 2017, 2018 and 2019, with each further building network engagement, professional development and shaping network priorities.
- Focus groups, strategic planning, surveys, systems training, and summit work sessions conducted 2017-18 identified six priorities: Connecting, Learning, Promotion, Advocacy, Artist Support and Access to Funding; and informs programming, structure and direction.
- Internal Revenue Service recognizes Network as 501c3 tax exempt organization, 2018.
- Michigan Council for Arts & Cultural Affairs designates Northwest Michigan Arts & Culture Network as Region 2 regrant agency, 2019.