

THEATER | PARK COFIELD



Park Cofield attaches an arm to the hand crafted puppet of his great grandfather, Johannes Andrew Ojala, he is making a for an upcoming play he has created about his great-grandparents, Johannes and Maria, who immigrated to the United States in 1900. Cofield's love of the theater comes from his late mother, Jan, who was very active in the Curtain Call Youth Players for many years. The production is a tribute to his mother. / Staff-Kelly J. Huff

## 'A UNIVERSAL STORY'

Marietta man using community-based theater project to honor late mother

— Jennifer Hafer —  
jhafer@kennesaw.edu

The first time Park Cofield was featured on the pages of the Marietta Daily Journal, he was a student at Sedalia Park Elementary School. As part of a classroom project on ancestry, Cofield, with his mother's help, turned an old refrigerator box into a life-size replica of a Finnish sauna.

Cofield is making headlines once again, this time for an international community-based theater project he has created, "SISU is in the Heart."

"A photographer from the paper came and took a photo of me and my teacher, Luci Lovelady, standing in front of (the 'sauna') for a write up about the school," Cofield recalled. "I've been thinking about that image a lot since working on this project because it was really at that moment that I really connected to Finland on a really deep level for the first time."

"SISU" is a Finnish word that roughly translates into bravery, strength, resilience and taking action against the odds. For his original play, Cofield researched his own family ancestry and collected stories from Finnish-American families from all over the country, as well as his relatives in Finland. Each interview ended with the question, "What gives you SISU?"

Participants were asked to write their answers on the back of 64 tiny red wooden houses — one for each year of



Above: Gene Cofield holds portraits his late wife Jan's grandparents Johannes Andrew Ojala and Maria Knuuttilla Ijala, as his son creates puppets of the two. Below: Cofield uses a band saw to craft the torso of his great-grandmother.

Janet Louise Cofield's life. Cofield's mom passed away last year.

"My mom had a strong passion for her Finnish ancestry and more SISU than anyone I know," Cofield said. "Her grandparents immigrated to the U.S. in the 1900s, and her childhood was filled with stories of little red Finnish houses surrounding a lake."

Cofield said "SISU is in the Heart" was born from conversations he had with his mother in the months and years following a family trip to Finland.

"My mom had been promised a trip to Finland for her high school graduation and it never happened, so my parents said, 'Park, for your college graduation, we're all going to Finland,'" Cofield said. "In 2006, we went over and we met all of these relatives we never had, and for my mom, it was like she was home. It was there on that trip that I thought, 'I'm a theater artist, this is a story I really connect to, maybe there's something there.'"

During his trip to Finland, Cofield was struck by traditional Finnish pauper statues that serve as collection boxes outside churches.

"I remember thinking, 'I use puppetry in a lot of my work and these feel like puppets to me,'" Cofield said. "There's probably a play here where



I can tell the story of my family using these wooden statues as puppets."

That seed of an idea lay dormant for years, until an unexpected side trip took Cofield to his great-grandparents adopted hometown of Fairport Harbor, Ohio, in 2013. After meeting with representatives from the Finnish Heritage Museum, Cofield's idea of telling his family's story became something much bigger.

"This play is about this entire community of Fairport Harbor," he said, noting about 50 percent of the town's population is Finnish-American. "It's a universal story about what does it mean to call a place home and finding family and the concept of 'SISU.'"

The project will culminate this fall in dual performances, one presented in the U.S. in collaboration with the Finnish Heritage Museum and the other in Finland near the birth home of Cofield's great-grandfather.

"It's been a really emotional experience for me," Cofield said. "This is a play that is dedicated to my mom's life. I want to honor her, and I feel a real responsibility to do that. On the other side of that, I'm excited we're doing this huge project that will be an opportunity for the entire community of Fairport Harbor to come together and have a really great experience."

For more information about the play, visit [www.sisuisintheheart.com](http://www.sisuisintheheart.com).